

SIUE Advances To OVC Tournament Championship – Seeks NCAA Tournament Berth

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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EDWARDSVILLE – It's pretty simple for the SIUE men's soccer team at this stage in the season.

Win the Ohio Valley Conference Tournament, and that would be enough to clinch a spot in the Division I NCAA Tournament.

Step one of that process was completed Wednesday night at Ralph Korte Stadium as the No. 1-seeded Cougars hosted the No. 4-seeded Lindenwood University Lions in the OVC Tournament semifinals.

After an intense stalemate in the first half, junior forward Ignacio ‘Nacho’ Abeal put the game on his back and scored twice in the final 20 minutes to lift SIUE to the conference tournament championship game this Saturday.

The Cougars will host No. 2-seeded Incarnate Word, 1-0 winners over No. 6 seed Eastern Illinois University in the first semifinal Wednesday afternoon. The championship game between the Cardinals and Cougars will be on Saturday, Nov. 11 at 6 p.m. at Ralph Korte Stadium.

SIUE beat IC 3-0 earlier this season in Edwardsville by a score of 3-0 back on Oct. 12.

The Lions had the first real threat on goal Wednesday night when freshman defender Mekhi Wright’s shot went flying over the crossbar in the 10th minute.

For much of the opening half hour, the Cougars maintained high possession and moved the ball around efficiently, leading to a couple of good chances.

Abeal hit the post in the 21st minute and then had a shot go high five minutes later. Lindenwood nearly scored just before halftime, but the headed attempt from an incoming corner kick just went wide.



For SIUE head coach Cale Wassermann, he knew that the longer the game stayed scoreless, the better it played into Lindenwood's hand.

"It's a nightmare," he said about Lindenwood's defensive prowess for the first 70 minutes.

"To be honest, we didn't create a lot of chances in the first half, but I felt we had control. But that's a scary thing to feel because is a very dangerous team on set pieces and counters, they have talented players. One moment can change the game and we were never fully comfortable until that second goal, and I credit our guys to keep pushing for it."

The game against Lindenwood is always a close one. The last time the two met was a narrow 1-0 victory in St. Charles, Mo. The time before that was a 2-2 draw back on Oct. 5 in Edwardsville.

“They’re a gritty, team, they have talented players, and they are well coached,” Wasserman said about the Lions.

The visitors still couldn’t gather up any real offensive chances in the second half, instead, it was all Cougars.



All the attention will of course go to the goal scorer, but if it wasn't for senior midfielder Sam Layton's excellent pass into space, Abeal would've never been in on goal.

'Nacho' broke the tie in the 70th minute when he ran onto Layton's through pass, beat a defender, cut in on his right foot, and put his shot side-netting past Lindenwood freshman keeper Enzo Gil.

The speedy forward put the game to bed in the 88th minute when he doubled SIUE's lead after receiving a short pass from senior midfielder Andres Delascio.

Wasserman was thrilled with Abeal's performance.

"We moved a couple of guys around. Nacho played 45 to 60 minutes on the right side and we had just moved him over to the left," Wasserman said.

"He was able to get body position and get behind . He's so pacey, that once he got that first touch, I knew we had a chance, but what a finish. Both of his finishes were quality. He's a guy that puts his heart into every game and he hasn't got the recent reward of goals. I'm really happy for Nacho and he won the game for us in those moments," Wasserman said.

This win came right after the Cougars were ranked at No. 24 in the most recent United Soccer Coaches poll released on Tuesday. The result also kept them as the only undefeated team remaining in Division I with a 15-0-3 record this season.

Still, Wasserman knows the job is not done.

"All the preparation, all the pre-season, 14-15 wins, it's all great, but it's done and now it's all about 90 minutes. We got ranked this week and we said, the rankings or on paper, but to execute for 90 minutes, you have to prove people right in that regard."