

SIUE Cruises Past Eastern Illinois 68-57, Heads to OVC Quarterfinals

by Joe Pott

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EVANSVILLE, Ind. – SIUE men's basketball nearly led wire to wire Wednesday, knocking off Eastern Illinois 68-57 in the first round of the Ohio Valley Conference tournament. The sixth-seeded Cougars will advance to the quarterfinal round for the second consecutive year. SIUE will meet the No. 3 seed and regular co-champion Morehead State Thursday night.

SIUE improved to 17-15. Eastern Illinois ends its season at 14-18.

"Our guys went out there and executed the game plan," SIUE Head Coach [Brian Barone](#) said. "They fought together."

[Ray'Sean Taylor](#) scored a game-high 25 points, including 18 in the first half to lead SIUE.

"Over the last few games, I could really see him moving," Barone said of Taylor. "His body has been responding. His mind is really putting him in position. He knew it was tournament time."

[Damarco Minor](#) collected his fourth straight double-double scoring 16 points and hauling in a career-high tying 14 rebounds. Minor now has double-doubles in four consecutive games.

"They're just smacking him around," Barone added. "He's getting drilled and keeps getting up and goes and gets the ball. His leadership and his mindset took over."

[Shamar Wright](#) scored 14 points and [Lamar Wright](#) added 11 points.

The Cougars used a pair of 8-0 runs to take control in the first half. The first broke a 4-4 tie and gave SIUE the lead for good. The second pushed SIUE out to a 27-15 lead.

A [Ray'Sean Taylor](#) three at the halftime buzzer gave SIUE at 29-22 advantage at the break.

"We did a great job from the start defensively," Barone said. "A great job in holding them to 22 in the first half."

Eastern Illinois made a push to start the second half, opening the period on an 7-0 run. The Panthers trimmed the Cougars lead down to six (53-47) on a Tiger Booker layup with 7:40 left, but SIUE responded with the next five points to push the lead back out to 11.

"I looked out when they cut it to six and I had a sense of calm because I have a bunch of guys who have been here, and they have done it," Barone said. "Within a few plays it was back to 11."

Minor and Taylor each sank a pair of free throws in the final 45 seconds to seal the SIUE win.

The Cougars and Eagles will tipoff in the final game of the day Thursday, with the start slated for 9 p.m.

"We have an opportunity to match up well against them," Barone said. "They're going to be well-prepared. They're a well-coached team."