

Southern Illinois opens regular season with 66-52 win over California (Pa.)

Salukis will host UMass at 7 p.m. Wednesday with the winner advancing to New York

[box score](#)

CARBONDALE, Ill. – Southern Illinois overcame a sluggish first half to beat Division II California (Pa.), 66-52, Tuesday night in the opening round of the 2K Sports Classic at SIU Arena.

The Salukis (1-0) will host UMass (1-0) at 7 p.m. on Wednesday night, with the winner advancing to Madison Square Garden to play Duke on Nov. 20. The Minutemen defeated Arkansas-Monticello earlier Tuesday.

The Vulcans built an 18-10 lead midway through the first half to put a bit of a scare into the home crowd of 7,376.

"I think the new guys are a little excited," said Saluki point guard Bryan Mullins. "You know, first real game -- just missing shots. And then we settled too much for open threes and didn't get the ball inside."

Fans' worries were short-lived, however, as SIU held the visitors to just one field goal during the next 10 minutes. SIU clawed its way to a 25-25 halftime tie, behind a pair of buckets by Anthony Booker, and 3-pointers by Justin Bocot and Kevin Dillard.

"We had 14-straight shutouts in a row in the first half," said Saluki head coach Chris Lowery about his team's defense. "We just missed shots. It was on us. We stopped them, but we didn't value the ball, and we had a lot of miscues."

After shooting 28.1 percent in the first half, SIU lit it up in the second half by converting 54.8 percent.

Dillard and Bryan Mullins sparked the attack by combining for 17 assists on the night, while SIU's most consistent offensive threat was forward Carlton Fay, who recorded his first career double-double with 16 points and 11 rebounds. Both totals were career highs for the sophomore.

"(Kevin) and Bryan got us going with their energy and enthusiasm," Lowery said. "Kevin came in right away with some phenomenal passes and solid defense."

The Salukis used a 10-3 second-half run to claim their biggest lead of the game, 58-43, with 5:18 remaining. On one play, Dillard was trapped behind the basket on a fast break and threw a breath-taking behind the back pass to Nick Evans for an easy lay up.

"(Nick) ran the floor," Dillard said. "Whenever big men run the floor, you have to reward them."

Mullins said he thinks the team is happy just to get the first-game jitters out of the way.

"Our defense was pretty much where we want it to be," he said. "Offensively, we just have to relax and play. We took a little too quick of shots, so it's just composure and poise and we'll be fine."

The Salukis won their season opener for the 11th-straight year.

