

Southern Illinois wins wild one over UMass, 80-73

Salukis rally from 15-point deficit to advance to New York and play Duke on Nov. 20.

[box score](#)

CARBONDALE, Ill. – Saluki Basketball is back.

Southern Illinois unleashed a furious second-half comeback to beat UMass, 80-73, Wednesday night, rallying from a 15-point deficit to advance to the semifinals of the 2K Sports Classic.

Everything fans have come to expect of the program in recent years -- tenacious defense, clutch shooting, unselfish play -- were all rolled into 20 minutes of spectacular second-half basketball, as SIU delighted a crowd of 5,571 at SIU Arena.

The Salukis (2-0) will play Duke (2-0) at Madison Square Garden in New York next Thursday in a nationally televised game on ESPN2.

"You see why not a lot of teams want to come to Carbondale to play," said UMass head coach Derek Kellogg. "That's a great basketball team."

SIU played a less-than-stellar first half, missing all eight of its 3-point attempts, while UMass guards Ricky Harris and Anthony Gurley combined for 22 points to lead their team to a 39-28 halftime lead.

The tide turned quickly in the second half when Carlton Fay made a pair of baskets and Kevin Dillard hit a 3-pointer as the Salukis cut the lead to 39-35 with a 7-0 run.

It was the beginning of the best 20 minutes of basketball the program has played since the 2006-07 Sweet 16 season. Suddenly, players were locking down their man on defense -- UMass turned the ball over 10 times. Guys started hitting clutch shots -- SIU was 9-of-14 from 3-point range in the second half. And players shared the basketball -- SIU finished with 23 assists, including 13 by Bryan Mullins.

"They really just erupted," said head coach Chris Lowery about his team. "I think the energy was terrific. Our kids played really hard, and we made plays on both sides of the ball."

The decisive stretch of the game began at the three-minute mark with the score tied, 67-67. Fay buried a 3-pointer from the left corner, and after a UMass miss, he made a running jumper that gave Southern its biggest lead to that point, 72-67.

"Fay was the best player on the floor in the second half," said Kellogg of the sophomore forward, who was named the regional MVP after finishing as the team's top scorer for the second-straight night.

It was the beginning of a 10-0 run in which the Saluki Nation raised the decibel level to an ear-splitting volume.

Southern's depth appeared to be the decisive factor in the game. Last year, SIU rotated eight players, but this season they've used an 11-man rotation.

"Watching them this year and some of their games last season, you see that they're able to turn up the heat in the second half and use their bench and their depth to really wear teams down," Kellogg said. "I was actually proud of our guys that they played as long as they did and never really gave up. I thought they fought hard. With about four minutes left in the game, Tony Gaffney started cramping up, and we started running out of gas."

Although Fay was named MVP, the honor easily could have gone to Mullins, who had a career-high in assists and added 16 points and four steals.

"What is so impressive is that he handled the ball so many times, and he made the right decisions and ran our team to perfection," Lowery said. "He guarded their guys and just played like what we expect from our seniors to play."

The Saluki win overshadowed a terrific performance by Harris, who scored 24 points, shooting 4-of-9 from 3-

point range. Teammate Chris Lowe, and all-conference guard, added 17 points, but he also had 10 turnovers and no assists.

"When you have a senior point guard who is thought of as an all-league player and your senior leader, you put the ball in his hands and let him try to make plays and make decisions," Kellogg said. "I'll live with him getting in the middle of the lane, and I'll put the game in his hands just about every night out if we have to."

Southern Illinois and Duke will meet for just the fourth time when they square off next week. SIU beat the Blue Devils during at Madison Square Garden during its NIT Championship run in 1967. Duke has beaten Southern twice, most recently a 105-70 thrashing in the 1993 NCAA Tournament -- a game in which Lowery was the Salukis' starting point guard.

Lowery said his team eagerly awaits the challenge of playing the nation's No. 8-ranked team in such a historic building.

"Madison Square Garden is a basketball Mecca," he said. "It's the best basketball arena in the world, and for our guys to be able to experience that and to have a first-round matchup against Duke is terrific. We're looking forward to it, but it's not a vacation for us. We have to go at it like a business trip."