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UIS' Sims getting better by the minutes

By **MARCIA MARTINEZ** (marcia.martinez@sj-r.com)

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The new year has been good to University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars junior Justin Sims.

The 6-foot-6 reserve forward has made the most of his minutes during the past few men's basketball games after a so-so December.

Sims has been a regular contributor off a bench that's averaging 31 points per game. He is tied with teammate Ryan Thornton for fourth on the team in scoring at 8.6 points per game, and he's third in rebounding with 4.3 per game.

The Alton High School graduate poured in 18 points and grabbed eight rebounds against 10th-ranked Kentucky Wesleyan on Jan. 16. Both were season highs for Sims.

"He's getting more playing time and scoring the basketball for us," UIS coach Kevin Gamble said.

Sims' first season at UIS can be broken down into thirds. He scored in double figures in two of the first three games, then his production dipped for several weeks.

"At the beginning of the season, I would be so aggressive and I'd pick up two quick fouls and it would take away from my minutes," Sims said. "It took me a while to get used to the foul calls.

"I picked up a lot of cheap fouls early in the season. I'm getting a better hang of it now. Now, I'm letting the game come to me and not being so aggressive on defense."

His offensive contributions picked up again when he scored 16 second-half points to lead UIS to a come-from-behind-win over Lewis on Jan. 9.

In the past week and a half, Sims has had three double-digit scoring games. The only hiccup he had during the four-game road swing UIS just completed was last Saturday against Missouri-St. Louis. Sims got into foul trouble, attempted only two shots and didn't score.

He was a shooter and a scorer at Lewis and Clark Community College last season. But Sims has taken on a slightly different role at UIS. Play in the post has replaced Sims' role on the perimeter.

Sims was Lewis and Clark's Most Valuable Player as a sophomore and earned a spot on the National Junior College Athletic Association All-America third team. He averaged around 17 points per game and drained more than 74 3-pointers for Lewis and Clark. He has seven 3s for the Stars. Sims said he shot 48 percent from behind the 3-point arc last season.

"(UIS teammate Richard Oruche) is going to take his shots, so I have to take a backseat a little bit," Sims said. "At first it was hard to adjust, but now I'm getting the hang of it."

In a home game tonight against Northern Kentucky, Sims will have to focus on the defensive end. He will team with 6-7 senior forward DeAndre Miranda and 6-7 junior forward Carl Hayes in guarding senior center David Palmer. Palmer, a 6-9 transfer from Iowa, averages a team-leading 17.6 points for Northern Kentucky.

"Miranda, Sims and Hayes are going to have their work cut out with (Palmer)," Gamble said. "Their offense revolves around him."

Marcia Martinez can be reached at 788-1547.

UIS MEN'S BASKETBALL

OPPONENT: Northern Kentucky

WHERE: The Recreation and Athletic Center, UIS campus

WHEN: 7:45 p.m. Thursday

RECORDS: University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars (8-8 overall, 5-6 in the Great Lakes Valley Conference); Northern Kentucky Norse (10-9, 3-7)

COACHES: Kevin Gamble (127-73 in eighth year at UIS); Dave Bezold (110-59 in sixth year at Northern Kentucky)

NOTABLE: Gamble and 6-foot-9 Northern Kentucky senior center David Palmer share something in common. Both played at the University of Iowa. Palmer played two seasons for the Hawkeyes after beginning his career at Seton Hall. . . . Palmer only averaged 4.1 points per game at Iowa last season but scored 21 points against Wisconsin and 19 against Purdue. He averages a team-leading 17.6 points for Northern Kentucky. . . . Five Northern Kentucky players are averaging between 9.9 and 8.3 points per game. . . . UIS picked up its first road win Saturday with a 70-68 victory over Missouri-St. Louis. The Stars are back at home after a 1-3 trip. . . . The Norse won last year's GLVC Tournament and have won three straight GLVC East Division titles. . . . Northern Kentucky — picked to finish second in the GLVC East Division — has lost five of its last seven games. The Norse fell to Bellarmine 74-69 Saturday in a

nationally televised game. Two days before that defeat, Northern Kentucky beat 16th-ranked Kentucky Wesleyan 67-62 . . . Richard Oruche leads UIS in scoring at 20.8 points a game. Other top scorers are Zach Lewis (11.1), Brandon Farmer (10.3), Ryan Thornton (8.6) and Justin Sims (8.6). . . . DeAndre Miranda leads UIS with 6.2 rebounds per game. Oruche is second with 6.0 per game. . . . A women's game between UIS (2-16, 0-11) and Northern Kentucky (13-6, 7-3) tips off at 5:30 p.m. The Stars have lost 14 straight games.

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