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NIU transfer Fakuade is long arm of the law for Prairie Stars

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Michael Fakuade is taking his star turn in leading the University of Illinois Springfield Prairie Stars men's basketball team.

The 6-foot-7 junior forward has stepped into the spotlight this season after transferring from Northern Illinois University.

Fakuade ranks third in NCAA Division II in blocked shots with an average of 3.4 per game. He's behind Philadelphia University junior center Temi Adebayo (4.1) and St Andrews senior center Marcus Connor (3.7).

"The first thing I noticed when I got here is he's got long arms," UIS first-year coach Ben Wierzba said. "He's got a good build to him, but when you get on the court you notice how long his arms are.

"That's an advantage he uses on the offensive glass and on the defensive end blocking shots. He can cover long distances in a short period. With his reach, he can get there.

"He gets off the floor really quick. If he misses a shot, he can bounce back up before somebody else, and his arms are long enough that he can get a tip or get a block."

Early injury

A preseason injury forced Fakuade, who played at Chicago Von Steuben High School, to wait to display his athletic talent.

He missed the first four games of the season due to a "small" ankle fracture and wore a cast for four weeks. It didn't take long for him to move to the front of the pack and lead UIS in both scoring and rebounding.

He leads the Great Lakes Valley Conference in rebounding at 8.9 boards per game. He averages 12.3 points per game, ranking him 22nd in the GLVC.

"He has been a great teammate," Wierzba said. "He's a little too unselfish sometimes because he looks for his teammates. He's been a great leader. Since he got here, he's taken some of the young guys under his wing."

In his UIS debut, Fakuade scored 17 points and grabbed 16 rebounds in an eight-point loss to Lincoln in Jefferson City, Mo.

"He hadn't practiced much and you could tell right away," Wierzba said.

The political science major stood out in a non-conference game against Findlay (Ohio), which at the time was ranked No. 2 in the Division II national poll. Fakuade poured in a career-high 19 points and had six blocks in the road matchup.

He has seven double-doubles and is a welcome addition.

Pointing the way

It was UIS sophomore teammate Chigozie Umeadi who helped lead Fakuade to UIS.

"Gozie pretty much did the recruiting," Fakuade said. "I've known him since high school playing AAU basketball. He told me about the program and pretty much brought me here."

Fakuade contacted the Stars' coaching staff last May. By summer, UIS assistant coach Jeremy Herring had set him up with a lifting workout. Fakuade, who transferred from NIU because it wasn't the right fit, reported to UIS in August.

He seems to have found the right fit at UIS.

For the first time in his basketball career, Fakuade is a statistical leader in many categories, particularly scoring and rebounding. He averaged around three points and three rebounds during both seasons at NIU.

"I didn't expect it was going to be like this," Fakuade said. "It's a new role for me. I'm glad to have it.

"Midway through the season, I realized I couldn't be in foul trouble and I had to do more on the court for us to compete and be able to stay in games."

The regular season is winding down for the Stars, 6-15 overall, 2-12 in the GLVC. Four games remain on the schedule. UIS travels Thursday to Quincy for a rematch of an 85-77 overtime loss on Sunday.

It has been an arduous season for the Stars. They've won just two of their last 12 games.

"We're starting to pick it up on defense," Fakuade said. "We've just got to learn how to close games out.

"We haven't really got any signature wins. Any signature win would be good, but we've still got a lot to improve on."

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