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Prairie Stars finish strong

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After struggling through the season, the University of Illinois Springfield men's basketball team needed something to hang its hat on.

UIS found it in the final two games of the season. The Prairie Stars' season came full circle Saturday as they won 78-70 in the finale against the Lewis Flyers at The Recreation and Athletic Center.

On the heels of an 85-79 win over Wisconsin-Parkside on Thursday, the victory gave UIS (8-17 overall, 4-14 in the GLVC) back-to-back victories for the first time since winning their first two games of the season.

"It was a team effort," UIS coach Ben Wierzba said. "Right down the line, I'm just so proud of those guys that they stayed with it. They kept competing the whole year."

The difference is the Stars made plays — big plays — in the final two games of the season.

UIS led by as many as 11 points in the second half against Lewis. Despite playing without its leading scorer, Lewis mounted a comeback and got within 61-58 on a layup by Matt Toth with 4 minutes left.

Back-to-back three-point plays by junior forward Michael Fakuade and junior guard Jermaine Love-Roberts sparked the Stars and gave them a 69-60 lead with 2:37 left.

"We made some plays and we made some shots down the stretch," Wierzba said. "We got some defensive stops. We got rebounds when we needed to. We just had guys stepping up."

Fakuade dominated with 22 points, eight rebounds and four blocks. Brandon Farmer contributed 16 points and seven assists on Senior Day. Fellow senior Kendall Burrage had 12 points.

Costly injury

The contest took a bad turn for Lewis when its top scorer exited the game 9 seconds after tip-off. It appeared that Love-Roberts

poked Lewis senior guard Dennis Thomas Jr. in the eye. Love-Roberts was whistled for the foul and Thomas, the GLVC Player of The Week who averages 17.3 points per game, left the gymnasium and never returned. Lewis coach Scott Trost did not have an update on Thomas after the game.

It was evident the Flyers (16-13, 9-9) were a different team without him.

“Dennis is a huge part of what we do and he’s the one kid we’ve got who is capable of making plays and getting to the basket, but I don’t want to take anything away from Springfield,” Trost said. “I thought they played better and harder than we did. We made crucial mistakes at crucial times.”

UIS trailed for the majority of the first half. Keith Smith converted two free throws to give UIS a 26-25 edge 3 minutes before halftime. The Stars led the rest of the way.

The Stars never quite got over the hump in Wierzba’s first season, but they took a step in the right direction by winning their final two games.

“We’ve been through it all this season and we just wanted to send the seniors out on a good note,” said UIS sophomore Chigozie Umeadi, who played despite needing two stitches to close a cut suffered in Thursday’s game. “It’s tough getting a brand-new coach and learning a brand-new system, but down the stretch toward the end of the year we really started to buy in. Everybody started to realize what they could do.”

UIS junior Lester Hart was also injured Thursday when he collided with Umeadi. He did not play against Lewis after receiving 12 stitches to repair a cut to his mouth.

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