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Panther Sports News

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CHARLESTON, IL--At 7-0 feet, you'd think it would be easy for Eastern Illinois University's Kevin Duckworth (Dolton-Thornridge) to get some recognition on the basketball court.

True, the opposition has been well aware of his imposing hulk since he cracked the Panthers starting lineup as a freshman. But recognition for his basketball talents has not been forthcoming.

However as Duckworth enters the last lap of his junior season his well-balanced stats are starting to gain notice, both in and out of the Mid-Continent.

Last week he was named the AMCU's 'co-player of the week' after averaging 15 points on 67% shooting, getting ten blocks and averaging ten rebounds in three games.

"I really haven't gotten much recognition in the league but when it's over if I'm one of the top scorers and rebounders and lead in blocks, then I'll get the attention which I believe I deserve," he says.

Questions about his reported 300 pound weight have abated after the first couple seasons, mainly because a slimmer and stronger Duckworth is pounding up and down the floor playing 30-35 minutes during the last dozen games.

Duckworth credits his improved endurance to "running in the offseason. "We ran and ran, and then I played quite a bit in the preseason scrimmages and that's paying off. I don't feel tired. I hate coming out . . . I want to play 40 minutes.

"I'm playing smarter on defense too, so I don't get in foul trouble so quickly . . . and that obviously keeps me in the game longer. I want to lead the conference in blocks, and don't want to be in the top ten in fouls . . . no where near it. I don't want to break my own record (3.6 fouls p/game in the AMCU)."

This winter Duckworth also points with pride to improved rebounding. "I concentrated early with scoring but now if I'm not in double figures in both scoring and rebounding, then I'm not happy with my play."

He's currently averaging 13.5 points, 7.8 rebounds and is shooting 52% from the field, ranking in the top ten in league stats in all three categories.

He has blocked 38 shots, a league leading 1.8 per game, and with an extra strong finish plus a full three post-season conference tournament games, could challenge the league mark of 57 set two years ago by Southwest Missouri's Ricky Johnson.

Before the end of the season he should join EIU's 1000 point career club as he's just a little over 100 away, and with another 400 plus season has a good chance to conclude his career among the Panthers all-time top five scorers.

His recent splurge can be traced directly to an impressive 13 point, 13 rebound effort in a 72-67 victory at Evansville that "got me started", he claims.

"The rest of the players told me they needed more scoring from me, and Coach (Rick) Samuels said that if I got more than ten rebounds we'd win. Well, I did and we did . . . I realized what is expected of me and that I have to go out and do it every night."

It's not coincidence that the Panthers overall record has improved, too. EIU has won nine of the last 12 games.

"Everyone is playing hard, particularly in practice where we just kill each other. In fact it's rougher in practice than a game. If they'd ref the practice the whole team would foul out. But it gets us used to physical play."

Although everything is on the upswing, a Duckworth frustration, shared by virtually every big man, is the desire to step away from the masses and shoot from outcourt.

"Coach wants me inside all the time but I can hit it from outside, and I'm not talking way out . . . just the free throw line. I shot some from there in high school, and I really think I can be effective both inside and out."

For now, though, the power game is where it's at for Duckworth and Co. as the Panthers brace for three league home games that will determine whether or not a conference title is in the offing.