

'We're blood brothers': Eastern Illinois guards Shareef Smith, Deang Deang eye return to Madison

Madison Memorial alum Shareef Smith, left, and East alum Deang Deang will take the floor for Eastern Illinois against Wisconsin at the Kohl Center Friday night.

Nearly every player on the University of Wisconsin men's basketball roster followed a similar path to Madison. They were high school superstars, recruited by many Division I programs before accepting scholarship offers from UW, where they will stay for four or five years, ideally increasing their playing time each season.

But that's not reality for many other college basketball players, particularly those competing at smaller Division I schools in what are known as "mid-major" conferences. Many players make a stop or two before landing scholarships, some playing a couple years at a junior college, or "juco."

That's the case for Deang Deang and Shareef Smith, two of the most dynamic Madison high school players of the last 10 years. This season, both are on the roster for the Eastern Illinois Panthers, who play the Badgers in the season's home opener at the Kohl Center Friday night.

Deang and Smith made their way to Eastern Illinois, located in tiny Charleston, via Highland Community College in Freeport, Illinois.

In 2015, as a 6-foot-4 junior, Deang led Madison East to its first WIAA state tournament in 25 years with a combination of smothering defense and a smooth offensive style that gave opponents fits. Smith was a year ahead of Deang at Memorial, where he developed a reputation as a fearless point guard with a knack for game-winning shots.

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"My senior year, I got Big 8 Conference Player of the Year and literally the next year, Deang ended up getting Big 8 player of the year," Smith said. "Eventually, we ended up teaming up in junior college at Highland (in 2016). I had to sit out a year and he got to play that year. The next year, he ended up getting hurt when I was playing. So we never really got to play together, which we planned on."

Still, the two developed a strong friendship at Highland.

“We’re like blood brothers,” Deang said. “Juco is kind of a struggle, so if I had \$10 in my pocket, I’m giving him \$5 automatically because we’re both going through something kind of difficult.”

After helping to lead Highland to the 2017 NJCAA tournament, Deang was hoping for a big sophomore season with Smith back in the lineup, but he suffered a horizontal stress fracture across his tibia in preseason drills.

“That’s when my life changed,” Deang said. “I had to sit out a whole year, probably the roughest year of my life. I wasn’t sure I’d ever walk again.”

And he leaned on Smith. Literally.

“I couldn’t move and we were roommates, so I would grab my crutch and hit the wall at 4 a.m. and yell ‘Reef! Wake up! I have to go to the bathroom!’” Deang said. “It would be a whole process for him to help me get up and crutch over to the bathroom and then he’d help me get back to bed. You think about how many people would do that.”

They were finally able to get on the court at the same time in the 2018 Roy Boone Summer League, which attracted former Madison high school standouts and UW alums.

“We played against some really great talent and we just noticed that together, we were clicking on all cylinders,” Smith said. “It showed what we could do together.”

Smith moved on to Eastern last year, where he started all 32 games, averaging 8.5 points and 3.8 assists. Meanwhile, at Highland, Deang also started every game, averaging 13.3 points and 5 assists. And he was attracting the attention of Division I programs like Minnesota and Gonzaga.

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“I’m getting recruited by some bigger schools, but then I’ve got Shareef telling me, ‘We need you here!’” Deang said. “I can’t really turn down somebody that has been through that struggle with you.”

Eastern Illinois plays in the Ohio Valley Conference, which is certainly unheralded. But the conference produced Murray State’s Ja Morant, the most dynamic player in college basketball last year. The Panthers finished 14-18 and in the middle of the standings. They began the 2019-20 campaign Tuesday night with Texas Tech, which lost to Virginia in the 2019 NCAA finals. Deang played 25 minutes, scoring 9 with 5 assists, while Smith played 17 minutes with 6 points and 1 assist.

Memorial head coach Steve Collins is proud to have coached Smith and against Deang in the Big 8, a league that consistently produces Division I basketball talent. He provided a brief scouting report based on their high school careers.

“Crazy quick,” he said of Smith. “He’s not a real big kid (5-foot-10, 180 pounds), so he was able to use that quickness to alleviate some of the issues he had with size.”

About Deang: “Long, lanky athletic, does a little bit of everything. High school basketball is always about matchups and he was always a really hard matchup. You couldn’t put a small guard on him, but you couldn’t put a big on him because he’d go around him.”

Collins’ advice to both players was to enjoy the moment and take time to “take a mental picture” of the night.

Over the phone from Charleston after practice last week, Deang made it clear how seriously he’s taking Friday’s opportunity.

“Other than the national championship, if there’s one game I want to play, it’s against Wisconsin at the Kohl Center,” he said. Most people don’t know my struggle, so just seeing how I overcame the obstacles, it’s going to be special just for people to see me play basketball again.”