

Epenesa has another big game as Edwardsville pounds O'Fallon 63-43 on road

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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O'FALLON - Anytime when a team can score the first couple of points to start out a game is always a good sign, to score the first 12 points of the game on the road is absolutely huge.

The Edwardsville Tigers defeated the **O'Fallon Panthers** 63-43 in O'Fallon on Friday night.

With the victory the Tigers improve to 11-3 and 6-0 in the Southwestern Conference.

The loss drops the Panthers to 2-12 and 0-6 in the SWC.

A.J. Epenesa compiled a game-high 22 points and 13 rebounds for the Tigers.

"It's good to go out there and get a lead and keep them from coming back." Epenesa said. "We've been working on trying to come out strong."

Mark Smith added 12 while **Oliver Stephen** and **Sammy Green** chipped in eight and seven points respectively.

"Our guys did a very good job defensively the whole game, Edwardsville head coach Mike Waldo said. "**Colley, Strohmeier, and Green** did a very job in our defense. We got some good off the ball help from A.J., Oliver, and Mark."

For long spells during the game the Panther defense couldn't cope with Epenesa's massive presence in the paint, even when they doubled him up the six foot, five inch junior would still bang his way in to score.

Then, when the Panthers would help too much on him, Epenesa would kick out to an open guard on the perimeter to set up a wide-open shot.

"A.J. does a good job of scoring when he's got the opportunity and making a pass when he's not open," Waldo said. "He does an excellent job of that."

The junior varsity game was perhaps more interesting than the varsity game because it spanned three overtimes, which forced the varsity game to eventually tip-off at 8:20 p.m. instead of 7:30 p.m. O'Fallon won the junior varsity contest 72-66.

Epenesa and the rest of the varsity Tigers got caught up in the moment and cheered on from the bleachers during the three overtimes.

"It's fun to watch, they were playing hard and we went out there to support our young guys," Epenesa said. "They put in a lot of time and hard work in to help us get better, so the least we could do was go out there and cheer for them for all three overtimes."

Edwardsville got out to a 12-0 lead within the first three and a half minutes of the varsity game.

Smith nailed a trey and threw down a dunk in transition, while Epenesa emerged early on inside the paint.

“Once we start picking it up in the very beginning the confidence starts rising,” Epenesa said.

Sammy Green came off the bench and nailed a three-pointer to add to the early barrage by the Tigers.

He finished with seven points and two assists.

“We’re really clicking,” Green said. “Our chemistry is getting better by the day and I think we have something special going on right now.”

Sophomore Jake Hodge finally scored the Panthers first point coming out of their second timeout of the first quarter and would score seven points to will his team back into it down 18-9 going into the second quarter.

Epenesa went back to work and showed off his jumping ability for a basket that was the end product of an ally-oop that brought delight to the Edwardsville faithful to put the Tigers up 24-14.

Quickly the Panthers cut the deficit to 24-18 near halftime, which turned out to be the closets they reach the Tigers.

Fresh off knocking down three free throws to beat East St. Louis, Strohmeier drained a key three-pointer, his only offensive output of the game, made it a 27-18 game at halftime.

The Tigers roared out of the locker room and went on an 8-0 run that included two straight triples from Stephen to make it a 17-point game at 35-18.

After Smith sank two free throws with three seconds to go until the fourth quarter, O’Fallon’s Lucas Hackmann nailed a half-court shot, just inside the timeline, which produced the loudest roar of the night from the O’Fallon crowd.

The three-pointer made it a 42-27 ballgame going into the fourth quarter and appeared to have lit a spark under the Panthers.

In the first four minutes of the final term they went on a 13-6 run and cut the lead to 48-40, but that was all they could muster from there on out.

The Tigers proceeded to get to the foul line and made most of their shots and ended up making 12 of 14 shots from the charity stripe for the game.

Colley and Zach Doornink each got an and-one in the process.

Edwardsville ended the game by outscoring O'Fallon 15-3.