

Epenesa, Smith power Edwardsville to big win over East St. Louis

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
February 6 2016 6:42 AM



EDWARDSVILLE – Edwardsville basketball **coach Mike Waldo** knew going into Friday night's Southwestern Conference contest at Lucco-Jackson Gym with East St. Louis that the Flyers weren't going to be an easy team to play against.

“East St. Louis is a hard team to play against,” Waldo said after the Tigers got a **30-point performance from A.J. Epenesa** against a Flyer defense that was going to do everything they could to stop him. “They've got a lot of athletes; I thought they did a good job on their defense tonight. I know A.J. scored a lot of points, but they made it hard on him.”

None of Epenesa's points came very easily, but he made every one of them count, especially in a stretch that saw the Tigers pull away from the Flyers enough to give them a big 63-54 win that put them at 17-4 overall and unbeaten at 9-0 in the Southwestern Conference with five games to go.

“He (Epenesa) was doubled a lot and they came from a lot of different places,” Waldo said. “I thought their defensive scheme was good, and they're hard to play against. I thought we did a good job in our defense; our guys kept them away from the basket and making them shoot some long shots.”

Flyer coach **Phillip Gilbert** also acknowledged Epenesa's dominance. “He's a load,” Gilbert said. “He's strong, physical, athletic; the total package when it comes to being a power forward. He stepped up and did his job.”

East St. Louis did stay close with Edwardsville especially in the first half, the Flyers never really able to get a significant lead on the Tigers; their first-half shooting enabling them to get a small lead on the Tigers, though not every shot the Flyers sent to the basket found the range. “We needed to step up with confidence in our shots,” Gilbert said. “Some of them didn't fall; a lot of them fell, but the big ones that mattered, they didn't go down tonight.”

Flyer pressure did create several turnovers that that the Tigers had in the first half, which Waldo did acknowledge the Flyer defense does create. “They're going to make you turn the ball over,” Waldo said, “because their pressure is good and they've got athletes. Their pressure is sound too; they don't give away easy things, so you're going to turn the ball over against them.”



Edwardsville's Mark Smith also turned in a great game in Waldo's eyes, shaking off a collision to the floor that opened up a cut over one of his eyes but continuing to play in the game.

“I thought Mark Smith had a great ball game,” Waldo said. “He took a hard spill early and had a cut over his eye; he popped up and played the whole game, so good for him. I thought that was a good showing of desire and toughness for him and I thought he played great.

“He did a very good job of distributing the ball and getting us into offense.”

Smith wound up with 17 points on the night, with **Oliver Stephen** adding eight points. The Flyers (9-11 overall, 5-4 SWC), were led by Arthur Carter and Patrick Baxter with nine points each, with Kerion Chairs also scoring nine points on the night.

The Tigers travel to Creve Coeur, Mo., Tuesday night for a game against DeSmet, with trips to Granite City on Feb. 9 and Collinsville Feb. 16.



