

# **Tigers' senior A.J. Epenesa primed for his curtain call in high school athletics**

by John Hough, Sports Writer  
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**EDWARDSVILLE** - Many people around the area will hear the name **Epenesa** all



season long.

It's a name that the **Edwardsville** community have known and loved for the past four years and so will the **Iowa Hawkeyes** for the next four of seasons.

**A.J. Epenesa** is one of the top college football recruits in America and he'll surely be the next big man on campus, literally at 6'5", 255 lbs.

He is the number one ranked defensive end, ranked in the top 30 for best overall, and arguably one of the best athletes in the country, starring in not only football, but basketball and track and field for the Tigers. He was state champion in the discus in the IHSA meet this past spring.

Despite, his impressive credentials, Epenesa is a name that isn't too common to a lot of others and there's a history of the name not getting spelled right.

"I have to get used to it," Epenesa said with a laugh. "It happens every single year, every article someone spells it wrong. It's whatever."

At his height and physical appearance, he is an easy person to recognize in public and some may find it hard to believe that he's only 17 with the way he's built.

If you can't identify him on the field then another way is to glance at his upper right arm and you'll see an eye-popping, black tattoo that covers his shoulder and deltoid.

Epenesa has a Samoan background on his father's side of the family and the tattoo honors his family heritage that he's proud of.

"It has a lot of culture and things in there. I take part in my culture and I take a lot of pride into my culture. There are a lot of people who criticize it like, you don't need a tattoo, but my dad has a tattoo and my family does too. It's something we do and it's apart of our culture."

2016 hasn't been much of a fun year for most of the world, but it's been something else for Epenesa.

On January 17, he verbally committed to Iowa, the school where his **father, Eppy Epenesa**, played as well by walking onto the team.

Knowing where he'll be playing at in the next level is undoubtedly a big weight off his shoulders, however he found the recruiting process to be rather an enjoyable experience overall.

"It takes quite a bit of stress off. It wasn't really difficult to handle all of that, but I feel like it was more fun than anything," A.J. said. "I'm glad I made my decision and now I can just live and go hang out with my friends more often."

Ever since he's become a Hawkeye, he's been recruiting other prospects along with fellow Hawkeye commits, including four-star and 1<sup>st</sup> Team All-State running back from Texas, **Eno Benjamin**.

"It's been pretty cool. A lot of the guys are really considering going because there's big names there like Eno and me. People take that into consideration and I feel like they can add onto some success there."

Another perk that Epenesa has enjoyed was getting invited to attend and meet several distinguished Hawkeyes since he's committed. He was able to bring his family, including his younger brothers to football events and camps.

"It's been fun. I have a lot of family connections up there and people treat us really well. I feel comfortable in all situations so I'm just excited to get there, but I know I have business to take care of here first."

The business plan as a whole for Edwardsville will be to replicate last season's regular season and go much farther than last year in the playoffs.

Right now Epenesa's focus is on high school and will be suiting up in the black and orange at Edwardsville District 7 before he'll put on the black and yellow at Kinnick Stadium.

This season will be the most important for him, being his last and that is what will be the fuel to the fire, not just for football, but basketball, and track and field.

"I'm going to put everything into this season for all of my sports and hope we get some success."

He will certainly put everything into his final year at Edwardsville High School. The name A.J. Epenesa is one that will go down in Edwardsville sports history. His name is already known across Illinois and once he becomes a member of the Hawkeyes' program, across the country.

[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)