

# **A.J. Epenesa continues to attract national attention on football field with new honor**

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer  
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**EDWARDSVILLE** – **A.J. Epenesa** has had many honors and accomplishments since his athletic career got under way at Edwardsville High School in the fall of 2013.

His talent in football, basketball and track and field has attracted the attention of many observers throughout the St. Louis area as well as collegiate recruiters nationwide.

Recently, Epenesa's talent on the football field has given him national recognition as he was selected to play on the West team for the Jan. 7 U.S. Army All-American Bowl all-star football game that will be played at the Alamodome in San Antonio, a game that is televised nationally on NBC.

The game, an annual event, brings together 90 of the top high school football players in the nation to a game that gives them a showcase to display their talents to a live audience of more than 40,000 fans and NBC's national telecast.

More than 200 players who have played in the game, which first took place in 2000, have played in the NFL, including 73 first-round picks. In addition to the players selected for the game, 125 of the nation's top high school musicians are appointed to the U.S. Army All-American Marching Band and perform in the game's halftime show.

“It's a big honor (to be named to play in the game); I have nothing but respect for the U. S. Army soldiers who that are out fighting and soldiers in general,” Epenesa said. “It's the least we can do to show our gratitude and respect for them to dedicate something as small as a football game to them.

“They have a lot good players coming out, the top-ranked players in almost every position. It's going to be fun; I feel like it's going to be a fun thing than a work thing. Obviously, you have to work, but I'm looking forward to it and meeting new people and playing the game of football in a competitive manner.”

“He's been a good player for four years for us,” said **EHS coach Matt Martin**. “He's been recognized as one of the best in the country and he's got a great opportunity to play after high school; it's just icing on the cake.

“He's a good example for the younger kids to model after; he's humble, he works hard. Good programs have good leaders.”

That Epenesa is a standout not only in football, but on the EHS basketball team and in the discus throw and shot put on the track team, where he won the 2016 IHSA Class 3A individual championship in the discus throw, shows how talented he is in many sports. “He's special,” Martin said. “He should enjoy this time and do as much as he can.”

Epenesa will be coached in the game by Jim Benkert of Oaks Christian School in Westlake Village, Calif., the West's head coach; on his staff will be Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin coach Ken Leonard.

Epenesa has verbally committed to Iowa starting in the fall of 2017; when asked how far he could go with the Hawkeyes, Martin said, “I think he can have a great career there, as

long as he's working hard and has a passion for it and stays healthy, he'll have a tremendous career there.”

