

Epenesa makes it official, he signs with University of Iowa

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
February 2 2017 6:19 AM



SEE NATIONAL SIGNING DAY VIDEO BELOW:

EDWARDSVILLE – **National Signing Day** – the first day where college football programs can begin signing players to letters of intent for their schools – is one of the most anticipated days of the year for college football fans.

For **Edwardsville's football program**, this year's National Signing Day was as much a big day for the Tigers as it was for schools nationwide.

EHS had five players signing with colleges Wednesday; as long expected, **A.J. Epenesa** signed with Iowa, the most-anticipated signing for the Tigers. Four other Tiger footballers also signed Wednesday, Lucas Davis and Tate Rujawitz heading to SIU-Carbondale, Riley Patterson heading to Memphis and Brenden Dickmann signing with McKendree.

“This is the most we've ever had on signing day,” said Tiger coach Matt Martin. “It's a great opportunity for them; it's a good opportunity for them to get college paid for and still play the greatest team sport. They're very fortunate.

“They've all been playing since they were little guys and they've all done well.”

Martin believes that youngsters who have seen the five signees move on to the next level can learn much from their success. “I think if you follow the process, good things can happen for you,” Martin said. “Obviously, as I told them, if you're a Division I athlete, it's more than what we do as coaches; you have to be blessed with talent.

“If you follow the process, you'll get better and you'll have opportunities like this. I'm excited for those boys – what a great opportunity. But I've coached kids who worked just as hard and maybe they weren't blessed with some of the same tools. I'm proud of them all.”

With **Vincent Valentine**, who Martin coached at Edwardsville, playing for the New England Patriots Sunday in Super Bowl LI in Houston against the Atlanta Falcons, Martin was asked about the possibility of Epenesa perhaps playing in the NFL one day. “I think if he keeps working at it, they sky's the limit,” Martin said. “He still wants to throw (the discus in track and field), he can still do special things in track and field.”

“It's a dream come true,” Epenesa said. “Ever since I was little, I've been a huge Iowa Hawkeye fan and I always dreamed the day where I get to be a Iowa Hawkeye. I mean, when I was growing up, I'd be playing NCAA Football (on video game systems) or NCAA Basketball, I'd always be a Iowa Hawkeye.

“Just growing up and being a Hawkeye fan and finally being able to live my dream – I mean, this is a dream come true. I'm happy to be living the dream and doing what I want to do.’

Epenesa's father Eppy played for the Hawkeyes and has family and friends in Iowa City. “My dad has a lot of friends and family up there; they're good people,” Epenesa said. “I

was in a state full of good people, especially in Iowa City where they care about their football team. Everybody knows everybody and they'll help you out with whatever you need. When I can't come home for holidays, I have plenty of places I can go and stay at or go and eat Thanksgiving dinner at because I won't be able to go home for certain things. There are people who welcome you and treat you like family up there.

“That's one of the biggest reasons I went because it feels like home and people who treat you like you're at home.”

Epenesa did consider other schools besides Iowa, mentioning Notre Dame and Oklahoma. “For awhile, I wanted to go to Notre Dame and I wanted to be an Oklahoma Sooner, “ Epenesa said. “Those were my other top two choices, and for awhile, I wanted to go to them and I wasn't thinking; much of Iowa at the time; when it came down to it, I went back and looked back at where I came from and I just remembered I would regret going anywhere but Iowa. That was my dream school.

“I wanted to go where I wanted to be and have no regrets; going anywhere but Iowa would have been a regret for me and me not doing what I wanted to do.”

Martin sees Epenesa as “playing wherever he wants to play” for Iowa. “He's a very gifted athlete and he can be a very good defensive end or he could be a very good tight end; I think he's gifted enough to play either side of the ball.”

At the next level, Epenesa realizes it's going to take a lot of hard work to succeed. “I had some success as a high schooler and it was because working to be bigger, faster and stronger and being able to move and react,” Epenesa said. “It's really just to step it up a level and and maintain what I'm doing and make it be bigger, be faster and be stronger, being able to react quicker to certain situations.

“It's the same game, just faster tempo and bigger people; it's just getting used to the speed, getting used to the size and just keep working the same, keep grinding and keep doing what I do.”