

# **Epenesa leads five in double figures as Tigers win SWC crown with win over Belleville East**

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**BELLEVILLE**—The boys' basketball team at **Edwardsville High School** played its final game of the regular season Friday night at Belleville East. And if their performance was any indication, the Tigers are ready for big things to happen.

Edwardsville scored 59 points in the first half and had five players score in double figures, led by **A.J. Epenesa's** 27 and **Mark Smith's** 19 as the Tigers clinched their second consecutive Southwestern Conference championship with an entertaining 95-72 win over the Lancers at East's Memorial Gym.

The conference championship, according to Tiger coach **Mike Waldo**, is a credit to how well his players prepared for each game in a very good league.

"The Southwestern Conference is excellent," Waldo said. "And I think to win the league this year is really a great feat, because all the teams you play are really good teams; there's a lot of really good teams in the conference. Anybody could beat anybody on a given night. But I think that's a really good credit to our guys. Our guys have done a good job in preparing and working, so it's a good credit to our players."

The Lancers gave Edwardsville a number of different looks defensively during the game, and each time, the Tigers took what the Lancers gave to them and executed brilliantly.



“Belleville East played several different defenses,” Waldo said, “and I thought our guys did a good job of executing, I thought we did a good job of taking what was open, and I think that’s a credit to our guys. They do a really good job of taking what the defense gives us, and we were able to get a lot of good open shots because of our guys’ skill, but also their teamwork.”



That was very much in evidence in the opening term, as the Tigers jumped out of the gate to a 11-4 lead, led by both Smith and Epenesa. East wasn’t going to throw in the towel, however, and got back to within 11-8 on baskets by both Javon Pickett and Khalil Rainey. Jack Marinko hit a three to up the lead back to six, and later, an Epenesa dunk sparked the Tigers to a 10-7 run to end the quarter, the final points being scored by Smith on a long three just before the siren. Edwardsville lead at quarter time 26-18.

The Tigers started the second quarter on another run, outscoring the Lancers 13-4 in the first 2:27, lead by Marinko, Epenesa and Caleb Strohmeier. The Tigers were hitting all of their open shots, and again, Waldo thought his team was doing a great job getting the looks and taking advantage of them.

“I thought our guys did a good job of getting open shots,” Waldo said. “And our guys work at it, and they can make them. That’s a good combination for us.”

Even after the Lancers called time out to try and cool the momentum, the Tigers kept executing their offense very well. Edwardsville outscored East for the rest of the quarter 20-11 as Epenesa and Smith lead the way. The half ended with the Tigers leading 59-33, and Waldo was pleased about how his team played against a very athletic Lancer side in the opening half.

“Every game’s different,” Waldo said. “You get defended differently every game, every game’s different. And I thought that we executed a lot of things good in the first half on offense. But they’re a hard team to play against. They got a lot of athletes, they got a lot of guys who can score, and they do a lot of things well. But I thought we did a really good job executing most of the night.”

And the fact that Edwardsville scored that many points in the first half is a tribute to how well the Tigers ran their offensive sets.

“Again, we got a lot of open shots, and we made it,” Waldo said. “I think that’s a credit to our guys. We just did a good job playing offense.”

The second half started out just as well for the Tigers, who jumped to a 65-37 lead on a three by Oliver Stephen, who contributed 12 points in the game, an Epenesa free throw and a Smith basket. Pickett and Rico Sylvester tried to get the Lancers back into the game with a basket and a three respectively, and continued to battle after a Tiger time out, helping to cut the lead to 68-50. Sylvester had a game high 29 points, and Pickett chipped in with 20, but no other Lancer was in double figures. The quarter ended with Edwardsville leading 74-55.

The start of the final term saw the Lancers take one more chance to get back into the game, getting a basket from Malachi Smith, along with a basket and a three by Sylvester to cut the Tiger lead to 78-62. A driving lay-in by Epenesa and a Marinko basket off a good feed increased the advantage to 82-65. The basket was part of a 16-point effort by Marinko, while his teammate Strohmeier chipped in with 13. The game ended with Edwardsville outscoring East 13-7 for the 95-72 final score.

Both sides now go on to the IHSA Class 4A playoffs, with Tigers as the top seed in the Granite City regional and will play the winner of a game between Springfield High and Chatham-Glenwood, while East will host their own regional and play Collinsville first. Waldo is looking forward to the postseason, but will take each game one at a time.

“I think that the way to do good is just to keep preparing for each game,” Waldo said. “We’re either going to play Springfield or Chatham, and we’re going to try to practice

good for either one of those, and then try to execute good on Tuesday. And I think that if you just focus on that, that's the best thing you can do, is just think about who you're going to play next, and try to get ready to play them.

“Well, like I said, I like my guys,” Waldo continued. “My guys do a good job of playing together and taking what the defense gives, and my guys have worked hard. My guys play hard when they get out there, so we like our guys. And like I said, every game's different. You play against different styles, play against different defenses. Playing good on one night doesn't insure you're gonna play good the next, you gotta play good against what you're gonna play against.”

And as far as the postseason itself, the Tigers will be ready to go.

“We always want to try to do good in the postseason, and we always look at it that way,” Waldo said. “And I'm sure our guys want to do well, and I'm sure they'll practice and prepare well to do that.”



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