

One big play helps send Tigers to IHSA Class 8A semifinals past Minooka

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – One big play. That's all Edwardsville needed.

It was a backbreaker, felt Tiger coach Matt Martin.

That play was an interception from Norman Harris that snuffed out a Minooka drive at the start of the second half that took about six minutes off the clock with the Tigers ahead 21-17. Harris' 38-yard pick eventually led to a 14-yard touchdown run from Kendall Abdur-Rahman that extended EHS' lead and proved to be the game-winner in the Tigers' 28-25 win over the Indians in an IHSA Class 8A playoff quarterfinal game Saturday evening at Tiger Stadium.

The win not only put the Tigers at 9-3 on the year after an 0-3 start, it also sent them to next weekend's Class 8A semifinals against Wilmette Loyola Academy, 30-10 winners over Chicago Marist Saturday night. The game will be played in Edwardsville, with the IHSA to announce the date and time Monday afternoon; the winner advances to the Class 8A final against either Park Ridge Maine South or Frankfort Lincoln-Way East, who clash in the other semifinal, at 7 p.m. Nov. 25 at Northern Illinois' Huskie Stadium in DeKalb.

“All these games, everybody's good,” Martin said, “and it's a possession-by-possession game; if you can steal a possession and not give up a possession, it's huge.”

Harris' pick in the end zone off Indian quarterback Zach Gessner was a turning point in the game, Martin thought. "We needed it," Martin said. "That was a backbreaker; it was kind of bend but don't break – the kids didn't break. That was a big play."

Special-teams play was also a key point of the result; a couple of punts pinned the Indians deep in their territory and a 50-yard punt return for a touchdown midway through the opening quarter from Rodney Smith gave the Tigers their first score of the game. "The kids did great," Martin said. "We were atrocious early in the year on special teams, and we've improved so much."

Smith's punt return and a fumble recovery on the ensuing kickoff that led to a six-yard Abdur-Rahman touchdown run was huge factor for the Tigers, but "if you're asking me if I felt comfortable – no," Martin said, "but to get up 14-0 helps obviously; anytime you can put points on the board – whenever it happens..."

Edwardsville's confidence has certainly grown from their 0-3 start to where they are now on the brink of a possible berth in the state championship game. "I don't know if I'm ever confident," Martin said, "but the boys are and that's all that matters; they believe in themselves and they're doing it for each other; every huddle we've broke this year has been 'family' – that was their decision and that's what they've done."

After the Tigers got to their lead, the Indians came back to tie the game on a 30-yard TD pass from Gessner to Connor Ezkorn and a two-yard plunge from Jack Kropke late in the opening quarter to tie things up at 14-14. The Tigers answered with 8:08 left in the second when Donovan Booker went up for a Abdur-Rahman pass and hauled it in from 20 yards out while taking a hit to give EHS a 21-14 lead. It stayed that way until late in the first half when Trent Hudak connected from 29 yards out to cut the EHS lead to 21-17 at the half.

Then came the opening drive of the second half that ended with Harris' interception in the end zone; the Tigers took the ball and scored with 50.1 seconds left in the third when a seemingly trapped Abdur-Rahman suddenly got loose and waltzed into the end zone from 14 yards out to put EHS up 28-17.

It wasn't quite over at that point; the Indians cut the lead to 28-25 when Kropke scored from a yard out and Ezkorn ran it in for a two-point convert, but Minooka's chances faded away when, late in the game, Ryan Connolly stepped in front of a pass to give the ball back to the Tigers.

That the Tigers are in their first semifinal game since the 2013 Class 7A semis, where they fell to Chicago Mount Carmel, means much for EHS. "We've got another week to practice – we'll have to play probably our greatest game to beat Marist or Loyola, but we

have a chance,” Martin said. “If you give this team a chance, they proven they'll take advantage of it.”







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