

Wilson's last-second three-point play gives Tigers 57-54 Senior Night win over Lancers

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – It was Senior Night at Lucco-Jackson Gym for the boys' basketball team at Edwardsville High School. And the finish of the game was both appropriate – and exciting.

R.J. Wilson's three-point play with only 0.7 seconds remaining in regulation gave the Tigers a dramatic 57-54 win over Belleville East in both team's regular-season finale. Edwardsville finishes the regular season with a 17-8 record, 10-4 in the Southwestern Conference, while the Lancers finish at 11-16, 2-12 in the league.

The Tigers six seniors – Jack Marinko, Cole Scarbrough, Caleb Strohmeier, Wilson, Craig Roberts and Tyler Halling – were honored in pregame ceremonies, as was coach Mike Waldo who was presented a plaque in honor of his 30th season at Tigers' head coach.

After the game, Waldo praised both teams.

“First of all, I thought Belleville East played great,” Waldo said. “They made a lot of shots. And they made a lot of shots from guys we weren't counting on. And I think they just played a great game. And to my guys' credit, I thought defensively, we executed

what we were trying to do most of the game. It's just that they played so well, and made so many shots. They were hard to stop. And I thought that offensively, we executed a lot of things good against an athletic team.”

And once the game started, it came down to doing the things in the game itself that the Tigers practiced.

“I think for our seniors, I think whatever you do in practice when the game starts, that's what you're gonna do,” Waldo said. “And our guys are used to practicing good. So I think Senior Night was an emotional thing for them because they love their parents and they love being here. And I think once the ball gets thrown up, you do just what you're going to do in practice.”

The Lancers indeed did get off to a hot start, scoring seven consecutive points after both sides exchanged baskets to open the proceedings. Malik Williams hit a three at the top of the key, followed by two straight baskets from Jordan Yates to give East a 9-2 advantage early. The Lancers then extended the lead to 14-6, but a Malinko three and a Strohmeier basket sandwiched around a Williams score made it 16-11.

The Lancers scored five of the period's last seven points to take a 21-13 lead at quarter time, but the Tigers came right back at the start of the second, as Marinko, Strohmeier, and Jaylen Tuggle all scored the first 10 points of the period to give Edwardsville its first lead at 23-21. A three from Jared Adams gave the Lancers the lead right back, but the Tigers, from a Marinko three and basket from Malik Robinson, scored five of the last nine points of the quarter to give Edwardsville a 28-26 lead at halftime.

The third term was a see-saw affair, as both teams kept things close throughout the period. The Tigers opened a 35-31 lead halfway through, thanks to a basket and free throw from Strohmeier, a three from Marinko and a Robinson free throw. The Lancers came back to tie from a basket from Jaylen Lacey and free throws from Williams then took the lead on a Riley Barnes basket. East extended its lead to 42-37, thanks to a big three from Williams, but a Strohmeier basket right before the siren cut the Lancer lead to 43-39 after three.

Strohmeier scored the first five points of the final term with a basket and a three-point play to give Edwardsville the lead right back at 44-43, and it helped set the tone for the period, as both teams traded the lead or tied it most of the way. A Robinson score made it 53-50 for the Tigers late, but a Barnes score with 1:38 left to cut the lead to one at 53-52, and a Wilson free throw restored a two-point Tiger lead in the final minute, but a pair of Barnes free throws with 19 seconds left tied the score and set up the game's final play.

The Tigers ran down the clock, and Marinko shot a three-ball that missed. But Wilson was there to get the rebound, put it back up, and scored with 0.7 seconds left to give Edwardsville the lead and send the Tiger supporters wild with delight. Wilson was fouled and converted the free throw to make it 57-54, and after a series of timeouts, a final three-point shot fell short, giving the Tigers the win.

Edwardsville now rides a five-game winning streak into the postseason, and Waldo thought the win was a reward to his players for their hard work and preparation in practice.

“You know, our guys do a good job of practicing,” Waldo said, “and I really think that we would have prepared well either way. But I do think it's a good reward for our guys to get a win against a team that played great.”

Both the Tigers and Lancers now go to the IHSA Class 4A playoffs, with both teams playing in the O'Fallon regional. Edwardsville will play Wednesday evening against the winner of a game between the host Panthers and Belleville Althoff Catholic in a 7 p.m. tip, while the Lancers play Monday against Granite City in a game that tips off at 6 p.m.



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