

Williams scores 20, Wilson and Bean 12 each as Knights move ahead in tourney

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – Jason Williams, Jr. scored a game-high 20 points while Jonah Wilson and DaMonte Bean each added 12 as home standing Metro-East Lutheran dominated from the late first quarter on in defeating Gillespie 58-23 in the quarterfinals of the 38th MEL Turkey Tip-Off Tournament Wednesday night at Hooks Gymnasium.

The Knights went on a 10-0 late first-quarter run and built on the lead throughout with good defense which led to many baskets on the offensive end. Metro-East has allowed 23 points in its first two games, and tough defense will be a hallmark of the team this season.

“We work hard. Our emphasis is on defense this year,” said Knights’ coach Anthony Smith. “We have to be able to guard people; I feel like if we guard people, the defense will lead to offense for us. A lot of the run outs we got were from good defensive play. That’s one of our focal points this year. We’ve got to be able to maintain and hold people under 40 points a game. You know, Gillespie’s a good program, East Alton-Wood River has a good program. We work hard on the defensive end.”

One of the indications of how good the Knights’ were defensively was a play where Metro-East didn’t get a turnover but had their hands on the ball four times in the same play.

“We want to win 50-50,” Smith said. “Our goal is to win 50-50 balls every time we play. As we go down and play more people and bigger schools, we’re hoping to win that battle. If you win 50-50 battles and play good defense, you’re going to have yourself a real good chance to win ball games.”

On the offensive side, Williams took charge of things and ended up with his 20 points, 14 of them in the first half.

“Jason’s a good player. Jason’s a really good player,” Smith said. “He’s going to have the opportunity to play at the next level. He does a lot of good things with the basketball, gets downhill. He’s gotta learn to continue to be that leader on the court. Jonah and Jason and those guys, they do a great job of trying to get everybody the ball. We’re still building. It’s like we’re laying a foundation down, we’ve gotta put a house on there, eventually.”

The game started out close, with both teams trading baskets, which led to a 9-9 tie after the first five minutes. The Knights then reeled off 10 unanswered points, with Williams have back-to-back buckets, Wilson scoring off the fast break, a Williams steal that led to another score to make it 17-9, forcing a Miner timeout. After the timeout, Williams stole the ball and scored again to make it 19-9 before Blake Zenner broke the string with a basket shortly before the buzzer to make the score 19-11 after the first.

The two teams started the second term by trading baskets again, with Gillespie coming no closer than six points early on. Bean hit in the lane to make it 23-15 and force another Miner timeout. The Knights then totally took control, outscoring Gillespie 16-2 the remainder of the period, as the Metro-East defense continually forced turnovers that led to baskets. Williams and Wilson started it off with a pair of baskets, Cooper Krone and Zach Miller each hit threes, a lay-in by Bean and another Williams basket off a blocked shot by Bean allowed the Knights to build a commanding 39-15 lead before the Miners were able to score before halftime, making it 39-17 at the break.

The third quarter was more of the same excellent Metro-East defense, as the Knights outscored the Miners 15-6 in the term. Bean, Wilson, and Williams all scored during the quarter as the Knights took a 54-23 lead after three and forced a fourth-quarter running clock. Metro-East scored the period’s only four points, from Bean and Williams as the Knights took the win 58-23.

Krone ended up with five points on the night, and Miller and A.J. Smith each had three for Metro-East. Frankie Barrett and Anthony Kravanya each had six for the Miners.

The Knights used their height to good advantage also. peppering the ball inside, which can also open up the outside shooters for good looks.

“We’re big inside, so we try to pound the ball inside to A.J. and Bean,” Smith said, “and if they collapse on those guys, we try to kick the ball outside to our shooters. So we have kids that can knock down shots. We don’t live and die with it, but we want people to double down on Bean and A.J., and if they do those things, we feel like we’re going to have a lot of success this year.”

The Knights advanced to the semifinals Friday evening, where they’ll face a good Litchfield team that advanced with a 57-46 win over Waterloo Gibault Catholic. The Purple Panthers will present a very good test for Metro-East.

“Litchfield is good,” Smith said. “Sam (Painter) played really, really well today; he and (Brady) Bishop shot the ball well, they’ve got a big kid inside that’s blue collar. I mean they looked really good. They’ll be a good test for us Friday. We’re not overlooking them, we need to come out, do what we do best, that’s to play some tough defense. And hopefully, try to keep Sam, I think he might have had 25 or 30 tonight. But we’ve got to keep him under 20, at least. He’s that motor that goes. If we can get him into early foul trouble, that’ll be great for us.”



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