

Butler scores 12 on four threes to help Redbirds defeat Tigers 63-39

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – Senior guard Randy Butler hit on four threes for his team-leading 12 points, helping lead a balanced Alton attack as the Redbirds defeated Edwardsville 63-39 in a Southwestern Conference boys basketball game played Thursday night at Edwardsville's Lucco-Jackson Gym.

The game was originally scheduled for Friday night but was moved up to Thursday because of snow that was forecast for Friday throughout the St. Louis area.

The Redbirds were able to jump to a 27-19 halftime lead, clicked on all their cylinders and shot 10-of-19 from three-point range to help their cause.

“When things are going well, we look pretty good,” said Redbird coach Eric Smith with a smile.

Josh Rivers scored Alton's opening eight points of the game and had different players step up at different times.

“We had, like Randy, I mean, he hasn't gotten a ton of time,” Smith said, “but credit to him, like he came in and did his job. Everybody's excited about the fact he made four threes, but defensively, he did some things that we're pretty excited about.”

The Redbirds used their length and athleticism to help shut down the Tigers.

“We wanted to make sure that we ran them off the line,” Smith said, “have them try to make a play off the dribble. We thought our length and athleticism would kind of affect their ability to score on the drive. And I think, for the most part, our kids did a pretty good job with that.”

The Redbirds were also able to hit most of their shots, which helped tremendously.

“Well, everything looks good when you make shots,” Smith said. “And we have the ability to put some kids out there that can shoot, and knock down shots in stretches. I think, just the most part was this was the first time in a while we were able to run sets, and run them effectively, and know where we were supposed to be. So, that was kind of encouraging for us, and I think we, after the first couple of minutes, we started being a little more active in our offense. We got some good stuff out of it.”

The Redbirds ability to hit their three-point shots made things difficult for the Tigers, but Edwardsville kept battling throughout the game.

“Oh, yeah. They shot 10-from-19 from three,” said Edwardsville coach Dustin Battas. “They're really hard to defend already because they're fast, and they're long, and their

spacing's good and they're well-coached. (Butler) came in, and he made four threes; that really hurt us. We tried to take away their other stuff, (Donovan Clay)'s their leading scorer, (Andrew Jones) can really make them. I think we limited (Jones) to one three, I don't think (Clay) made any. But on the back side, I think you give some up to other guys, so they're really hard to play against for us. I thought our guys executed what we practiced good. It's just hard to go basket-for-basket with them because they are fast, they're getting to the rim. Last time, they hurt us with getting shots in the lane, good shots at the boxes, so we tried to take the lane away, and that leaves up some perimeter shots, and to their credit, they made them. And shooting 50 percent from three's hard to do."

Edwardsville sophomore forward Brennan Weller had a magnificent first half, scoring 14 points, but sat out much of the second half to injury.

"Yeah, he got hurt, he played two minutes in the second quarter," Battas said. "After talking to our trainer, we decided to sit him out, but he'll be back. And Brennan did a great job at finishing around the rim. We run a lot of stuff for Brennan; we have a lot of confidence in him, and our guys did a great job of screening to get him open, A.J. (Robertson), and Jalil (Roundtree) and Malik (Robinson) do a good job of passing it to him, and he's really put in a lot of work in at finishing around the rim, and making shots in the lane. So, we're going to keep giving Brennan the ball, and we did think he did an excellent job of finishing through contact, being physical. For being a sophomore, he's done really well for us."

And although he was kept out because of the injury, Weller wanted to go back in.

"Certainly, and he puts the work in," Battas said. "At the end, when we couldn't play him, he wanted to go back in. And that's a good trait to have. He was upset that we wouldn't let him go back in, and I think that shows how competitive he is. And so, he's going to keep getting better. And right now, I think the best thing is that our guys really believe in him, and I think that makes him feel good that they want him to take the big shot, that they want him to have the ball. And on the flip side, I thought that Jaylon Tuggle, a more experienced guy, really had a good night tonight, be more aggressive, and he got Brennan some of those shots because they had to come off and help of Jaylon. So those little improvements are really helping us on offense."

The game started off with Rivers hitting a three and a basket to give the Redbirds an early 5-0 edge, with Weller countering on both to tie the game at 5-5. A three-point play from Rivers gave Alton the lead right back, while a Tuggle three retied the game at 8-8. Rivers then scored the next five points on another three and a basket to open up a 13-8 advantage for Alton, and a Robertson basket right before the buzzer cut the Redbird lead to 13-10 after one.

Alton started the second period with threes from Ky'Lun Rivers and Butler sandwiched around a Weller basket to extend the lead to 19-12, but a pair of Weller baskets cut the lead to 19-16. Butler hit his second three to extend the lead to 22-16, and after a Tiger time out, the Redbirds went on a 5-3 run to finish the quarter as Butler hit another three and Rivers scored inside to give Alton a 27-19 halftime lead.

The Redbirds started the second half with a 9-3 run, getting a putback from Charles Miller, an alley-oop dunk from Clay, a basket inside from Miller and a three from Jones to extend the lead to 36-22. Alton then extended the lead to 41-26 behind a Miller free throw and baskets from Izeal Terrell and Miller. Butler's fourth three of the night gave the Redbirds a 44-28 lead at the end of the third quarter.

The Redbirds continued to play well in the fourth period, getting a three-point play and three free throws from Moory Woods to jump to a 52-31 lead. Rivers hit a pair of threes in the period, and Alton went six-for-nine from the free throw line to give the Redbirds their 63-39 win.

In addition to Butler's 12 points, Jones, Ky'Lun Rivers, and Josh Rivers all had eight and Miller scored seven. Tuggle had eight points for the Tigers, and Nic Hemken scored six.

The Redbirds improved to 18-9 on the year, and Smith is pretty happy with his team's season going into the final week.

"Certain nights," Smith said with a sly smile and laugh. "We do some things really well, and then, we've got some things that are kind of our bugaboo when we play really good teams. So, it's kind of trying to limit some of those mistakes."

And Smith felt once his team got through the opening two minutes, the energy level picked up considerably.

"No, I just thought, like I said, we got through those first couple of minutes, I thought our energy level picked up a little bit more," Smith said. "If we play with energy, it takes care of a lot of mistakes that we can get by with."

Smith also praised his team for their defense on Weller.

"A couple of things we talked about was just making sure that we run him off the line," Smith said, "and make him put it on the floor. And I think we took that a little bit to the extreme. So once we kind of talked about how we wanted to guard him, they obviously did a nice job."

The Redbirds host Taylorville on Saturday night, then wind up the regular season with SWC games at home against Belleville West next Tuesday and O'Fallon next Friday.

The Tigers, now 6-19 on the year, host their Senior Night game against O'Fallon on Tuesday, then finish the regular season at Belleville East next Friday. Battas is looking forward to the Senior Night game.

"It's a special group of seniors, there's no doubt about it," Battas said. "They've really worked hard, they're really pleasant to be around, they really like each other, and there's never been a better group of guys to work with. So Tuesday will be special for them, but we'll treat it somewhat just like another game. We really want to play our best game on Tuesday, our guys really want to win these last couple of games, and get ready for the postseason. And so, hopefully. we'll have a good couple of days of practice this week, and be ready for O'Fallon, but our guys are really looking forward to that."





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