

Tuggle Scores 18 points, Robinson 17, As Tigers eliminate Granite City in Regional

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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COLLINSVILLE – Senior forward Jaylon Tuggle led the way with 18 points, while Malik Robinson had 17 as Edwardsville defeated Granite City 56-46 in the opening game of the IHSA Class 4A boys basketball regional Monday night at Vergil Fletcher Gym in Collinsville.

The Tigers won the rematch against the Warriors after having lost to Granite at home 50-47 on Dec. 14.

Edwardsville came out with intensity and executed their game plan well.

“We really executed well,” said Tigers coach Dustin Battas. “We were so excited to have an opportunity to play another good team like Granite City, a team that beat us early in the year. We’ve really been working hard in practice, and I thought our guys showed that we’ve improved. And Granite City makes it hard. They play hard, they’ve got tough guys, they’ve got smart guys, and we had to execute a lot of things well. And I was really impressed with our composure, and their traps and their press. I was really impressed with Malik, and Ethan (Young) and Jalil (Roundtree), and Jaylon’s ability to handle that pressure. And then I thought that Brennan Weller and Nic Hemken fought for every loose ball. Nick’s 6’ 2”, Brennan’s 6’ 3” and about 150 pounds probably, but they slammed their body around there and they fought for every loose ball. And we were able to get a lot of those on big possessions when we needed a rebound.”

Everyone in the Tiger lineup chipped in something, and it's helping Edwardsville play their best basketball when it counts most.

"Yes, it's such a great reward for our guys, because they've been trying hard all year," Battas said. "And to be able to improve, and still have enough time left in the season where we can reap the benefits, and win some games, it's just a thrill for the guys to be able to compete, but to win and have that immediate reward, they deserve it. All of our guys, all of our guys have practiced deserve it, and so, we're really excited to have the chance to play Collinsville tomorrow, another great team. And we just want to keep giving ourselves a chance."

Although finishing the season at 14-17, the Warriors battled to the end, and look to be a team on the rise in 2019-20.

"It was, it was," said Granite coach Gerard Moore. "I'll tell you what, Edwardsville's gotten so much better, coach (Battas) did a wonderful job in preparing those guys for the playoffs. They've played a lot of close games early in the year. We saw it coming, knew that they were going to get better, because their program is traditionally one of the better programs in the Southwestern Conference. And they have good coaches on their staff, so I was worried coming into the game here, because we knew they got better, they played well against (Belleville) East and O'Fallon.

"We knew it was going to be a tough one tonight," Moore continued. "And unfortunately, my guys, we had a good season. Our kids played hard, and they're respectful, and they represent Granite City in the way we would want them to represent. The big picture is they're good kids, and they're all going to move on, the seniors are going to move on and go to college and enjoy the rest of their lives. Our program will be on the rise, we are continuing to grow as a program, we are getting better and better every year, and I look forward to next year."

And with the exception of a month-long slump near the end, Granite City improved as the year went on.

"Except for the last month here, we didn't play very well coming in," Moore said. "You want to your best coming into the playoffs, and we did not do that. So that kind of hurt; that's the only negative of our season. But overall, our season's been really good. We have been getting better, and that's what you want to see when you try to build a program. This is my second year here, the first year, we won nine, this year we won 14, we were competitive all year long. We had some tough breaks, tough losses throughout the year. About three losses during the year, we feel like we should have won. But overall, we are a better program here in Granite City."

After an exchange of baskets to start the game, Keyon White hit on a three-point play to give the Warriors an early 5-2 lead, but the Tigers then went on the game's first run, going 8-0 on baskets by Weller and Tuggle, and both a pair of free throws and a driving lay-in by Robinson to give Edwardsville a 10-5 lead. Undaunted, Jerry Watson, Jr. hit on a three and Justin Wiley scored off a rebound to tie the game at 10-10. Tuggle then scored in the lane to give the Tigers a 12-10 lead after the first quarter.

Tuggle made a free throw at the start of the second period, but Christian Jones, a freshman who made a big impact this season for Granite, hit a three to tie the game up at 13-13. A.J Roberson then hit inside to give Edwardsville the lead back, with Tuggle extending it on a three-point play. After a pair of free throws from Jahkeis Tippett, Robinson hit a three to give the Tigers a 21-15 lead, forcing Granite to call time. Nick Grote scored to cut the lead to four, and Robertson and Zidane Moore traded threes to make it 24-20 for Edwardsville, and free throw from Jones and baskets from Tuggle and Watson made the score 26-23 Tigers at halftime.

Edwardsville then started a decisive run at the start of the second half, outscoring the Warriors 8-2 to take control. A pair of free throws from Tuggle, a driving lay-in from Robinson, a Weller basket and two more free throws from Tuggle made it 34-25 before a tip-in from Wiley and a free throw from White cut the lead to 34-28. A three-point play by Davontay Mason made it 34-31, but a Weller basket and two free throws from Robertson gave the Tigers a 38-31 lead after three.

Edwardsville scored the first five points of the final quarter to extend the advantage to 43-31, but baskets from Mason and Wiley and a free throw by Moore made it 43-36. Watson then scored off a steal to make it 43-38, but the Warriors would get no closer, as Edwardsville outscored the Warriors 13-8 down the stretch, going 13-for-14 from the free throw line to clinch the 56-46 win.

Wiley led the Warriors with 18 points, while Watson added 11.

Although Granite saw their season end with the loss, the future looks bright for the program.

"The future looks bright," Moore enthusiastically said. "We've got some great young guys. Christian Jones looks to be a star here in the Metro-East pretty soon, as he continues to get bigger, faster, stronger. He's going to be a good one. Lonnie (Roberson) and Jahkeis Tippett are going to be really good for us, and I've got a big kid, Brian Hines, that's going to contribute well for our program. All these guys are young, and they're long, and they've got desire to be good. So we've just got to do a good job preparing them and grooming them for the future.

“It’s been a great season,” Moore also said, “Edwardsville played really well, and I look forward to watching them tomorrow against Collinsville.”

The Tigers, now 9-19 on the season, advance to the first semifinal against the host Kahoks at 6 p.m. Tuesday evening, and Battas is looking forward to the challenge.

“Well, we’ve got to play them twice already,” Battas said, “and we know they’re really good. They’ve got some good guards, and they’ve got some guys who can shoot, and they’ve got some guys who can do stuff on defense, and they’re well coached with coach (Darin) Lee. So it’s going to be a challenge, but this is the post-season, and it’s the Southwestern Conference, it’s a regional down here, so you’re going to play good teams. I do like that our guys are confident right now, that we’re playing our best basketball, and we’re just excited to have the chance to compete.”

And Battas pointed out a little thing that indicates how close knit the Tiger players really are.

“I just thought our guys have really done a great job of practicing every day,” Battas said, “and making sure that everybody feels valuable. We have some guys who don’t get in a whole lot, and I thought tonight, we had a couple of young guys that had a couple of turnovers, and had their head down, and I saw some seniors on the bench that don’t get to play a whole lot pumping those guys up and telling them how great they’re doing. And I don’t think that’s normal in 2019, so I’m really just proud of our culture and the way that our guys are picking each other up right now.”







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