

Maria Smith Leadoff Homer, Strong Pitching, Helps Tigers Defeat Explorers 5-1

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
April 9 2019 5:34 AM







EDWARDSVILLE – Shortstop Maria Smith's leadoff home run over the right-center field fence, combined with Tiger pitching that gave up only one run on four hits, helped Edwardsville to a 5-1 softball win over Marquette Catholic Monday afternoon at the Edwardsville Sports Complex.

Smith's home run led off the home half of the first inning after the Explorers missed a bases-loaded opportunity to take an early lead, setting the tone for the entire game.

"Maria did set the tone," said Edwardsville head coach Lori Blade. "It was huge, and then for us to continue on and get another one that same inning was really important."

Blade was also pleased with the way the Tigers adjusted to Marquette pitcher Taylor Whitehead, who's averaged 12 strikeouts per game.

"I was pleased after the first time through the lineup," Blade said. "I think she struck out five, and we made some adjustments and put the ball in play, which was important. I think she's (Whitehead) averaging 12 a game, so she's awfully good. But you've got to put some pressure on the defense; that's too easy when you strike out 10-plus times. So I was pleased with our ability to make the adjustments and put the ball in play."

A trio of Edwardsville pitchers – Kay Swanson, Lauren Dial, and Ryleigh Owens – shut down a potent Explorer lineup, allowing only four hits combined and a sixth-inning run.

"They did," Blade said. "Kay threw really well; we've got three conference games in the next three days, so we wanted her pitch count at a certain number, so that's why she only went the three, but she threw pretty good, got behind a few times. And then Lauren came in and had a great one inning, and then kind of lost it a little bit mentally the second inning, and then, Ryleigh, I just told her anytime you can get three pitches in one inning, you've done a great job. So, actually, this was a great win for us. We made the plays that we needed to make defensively; I know we made a few errors, but we're getting better. And we're understanding the importance of at-bats, and not taking at-bats off. But this was a good win for us."

The Explorers have gotten off to a 10-1 start this season but made mistakes that cost them on the day.

"We started off with a 10-1 record," said Marquette coach Dan Wiedman, "but it's kind of a sloppy 10-1. We've gotten away with not driving runs in with runners in scoring position, dropping fly balls, bad throws, not hustling to the ball. We've gotten by with a lot this year, and still won, so it's been kind of a sloppy 10-1. But the rest of the season,

we've got a lot of good teams that we're playing, and if we continue to make those mistakes and aren't willing to try to correct them, we're going to be piling up a lot more losses."

Wiedman is hoping that the loss will serve as a wake-up call to the Explorer players.

"I sure hope so, because that's what it needs to be," Wiedman said. "That's why we like to play these teams this time of year, is to show us some things we need to work on and try to fix them before the end of the year. The coaching staff's more than willing, it's just the matter of each individual player trying to fix the things we've told them they need to work on. So, that's what it really boils down to."

Wiedman was impressed with Smith's ability to change the game.

"She's a pretty good ballplayer," Wiedman said. "I don't see Edwardsville play a whole lot; you know, at this time of year, I think as a coach, you're more watching your team see what they're doing instead of focusing on the other team. So I was more interested just trying to keep track of all the mistakes that we were making, and things we're doing well, things that we need to work on so that we can try to take advantage of a couple of practices this week to get ready for these big ball games."

Wiedman is hoping that his team realizes that they need to get back on track as quickly as possible.



“I sure hope so,” Wiedman said with a smile and laugh. “It’s pretty obvious; they’ve been told a lot, and you hope that getting on a big stage like this and having it being reinforced by having a lot of fans, that you make these mistakes, that it’ll click in your head. But I sure hope it does, because I think we’ve got some talent. We’re not a real deep team, we’ve got some young kids playing, but it’s still no excuse for not being able to, at the high school level, being able to throw and catch, and have some good at-bats and those kind of things. We understand that they’re going to be making some mistakes and stuff, but mistakes are OK if you learn from them, and really try to work to correct them. But that’s the piece I really don’t see right now.”

Marquette missed a chance to take the lead in the first inning, starting when Kiley Beth Kirchner singles to open the game, then Hayley Porter was hit by a pitch. Jada Johnson forced Kirchner at third for the first out, but then Kyra Green reached on an error to load the bases. Swanson got out of the inning with a force at home when Whitehead grounded to Jayna Connoyer at second, who made a nice throw to the plate, and striking out Abby Porter to end the threat.

Smith opened the Tiger first with her home run over the right-center fence to give Edwardsville a 1-0 lead. One out later, Moe Kastens drew a walk, then stole second and third, then after the second out, came in on a Swanson single to make it 2-0. A strikeout, Whitehead’s third of the game, ended the inning.

Smith singled to lead off the third inning, then went to third on Katherine Bobinski-Boyd’s sacrifice bunt and scored on a Kastens single to up the Tiger lead to 3-0. Meanwhile, Swanson pitched out of a small jam in the top of the third, getting Whitehead to ground out to second to end another threat, and Dial pitched two perfect innings as Tiger pitching retired seven in a row.

In the home half of the fourth, the Tigers scored twice more to make it 5-0 as Mackenzie Owens led off with a triple to right field, then scored on an RBI single by Sam Sanders. Sanders then came in on a Connoyer single for the final Edwardsville run.

In the visitors’ half of the sixth, Johnson got her second hit of the day, a single up the middle, then went to second when Kyra Green drew a walk. Johnson was forced at third when Smith made a nice play on a grounder to short by Whitehead, but both Green and Whitehead advanced on a wild pitch. Abby Porter then hit a ball down the third base line that just got through for a double that scored Green, and advanced Whitehead to third. Smith threw Whitehead out at the plate on another good play on a grounder by Sydney Ehrman, and Murphy Youngblood grounded to third to end the inning.

Smith's ability to do the little things really makes a difference in determining the outcome of the game.

"I'll tell you what, when she gets on base, she can cause some problems for the defense," Blade said, "just with her quickness and her understanding of the game, and then just putting pressure on with her athleticism. So, that's an advantage to us, and I think she was on pretty much every time. She's a tough one because she can hit for power, like that first time, she can put a bunt down and with her speed, that's a tough out. So, she's doing a great job at shortstop for us, for the first time at really being at that position, and just is kind of leading us at the top in at-bats, too."

Ryleigh Owens came on in the seventh and retired the side on three pitches to give the Tigers their 5-1 win.

Edwardsville improved to 8-2 on the season and will play three straight Southwestern Conference games, starting Tuesday at Belleville West, then host Alton on Wednesday and Belleville East on Thursday before hosting Breese Mater Dei Catholic on Friday. The three conference games start at 4:30 p.m., while the Mater Dei game starting at 6 p.m.

The Explorers drop to 10-2 on the year, and travel to Litchfield on Wednesday, then host Springfield Sacred Heart-Griffin on Thursday and Piasa Southwestern on Saturday. The Wednesday and Thursday games start at 4:30 p.m. while the Southwestern game starts at 11 a.m.



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