

Tigers Take Big Volleyball Win Over O'Fallon 25-15, 25-21 In Hard-Fought Match

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – The Edwardsville boys volleyball team won a very hard-fought and entertaining Southwestern Conference match over O’Fallon 25-15, 25-21 Tuesday evening at Lucco-Jackson Gym in one of the best matches of the season.

The Tigers avenged a loss at the Panther Dome on Mar. 28 for their first win over O’Fallon in just over a year.

Edwardsville lost junior middle hitter Eric Epenesa to an ankle injury during the second game. It wasn’t believed to be serious, but Epenesa was held out as a precaution.

“The trainer gave us the green light for him to go back in after getting some treatment,” said Tigers’ head coach Scott Smith, “after inspecting his ankle. Looks like he just rolled it; he’s going to be going to the trainer during lunch to get some stretching and attention to that before the day’s over, and we have practice several hours after he has lunch. The trainer gave me the go-ahead, and I asked Eric if he felt comfortable going in, and I told him straight up that ‘I would like to rest you because you just twisted your ankle, regardless of how good you feel right now, but it’s possible we won’t need you,’ and I told him if we’re down two points from now, that’s when I’m going to possibly get him in, so he could get mentally ready for that, and also have that mental awareness of being like ‘OK, I’m going to be possibly going in, how’s it feeling right now,’ so that way, he could have that chance of saying ‘alright, maybe not, coach,’ but that would

have been his decision, and he said he was ready to go, the trainer said he was ready to go, but I chose to just keep him down to avoid any further injury.”

As for the match itself, the Tigers played one of their best matches of the season against a team they’re very familiar with.

“Yeah, it’s always a battle between Edwardsville and O’Fallon,” Smith said. “They’re always well-coached, and they’ve always got some very talented players that are able to train and improve every time we see them. We weren’t battling the last time we saw them. We came in flat, and O’Fallon did not come in flat when we played them in O’Fallon, but this time, it was both teams doing well, especially that second set, where we were just challenging each other, and battling the whole way through.”

The second set was very entertaining volleyball on both sides, with the Tigers coming out on top.

“They did well,” Smith said. “There were so many great decisions that the boys were making. We tried to prepare them for O’Fallon’s team, and the boys know them. They’ve played with them and against them in club for years now, and they know that O’Fallon’s always the one we want to take out.”

The Panthers started out by scoring the opening three points of the first game, but the Tigers quickly leveled with three points of their own to start the game 3-3. The teams continued to trade points until it was 5-5, when Edwardsville took its first lead at 6-5, thanks to a Daniel Pauk spike. The teams traded points again until it was 7-6, when Edwardsville went on its first extended run with Max Sellers serving, taking advantage of some Panther errors and a Josh Whittenburg spike to take an 11-6 lead, forcing O’Fallon to call time out. Afterward, the teams traded points again before the Tigers scored five of the next seven points to go in front 16-8, forcing the Panthers to call their final time out of the game. The teams again exchanged points to make it 18-13, then at 21-14, Edwardsville scored four of the final five points, with an Epenesa spike leading the way to make the first game final 25-15, giving the Tigers a one-game advantage.

The second game started evenly as well, with both sides exchanging points when at 5-3, Kendall Walter tipped home a shot to make it 5-4, but Epenesa was hurt on the play and had to come out. The Tigers then scored twice to make it 7-4, and the teams again exchanged points before Edwardsville extended its lead to 10-6. The Panthers got it to within 10-8, and the Edwardsville lead kept fluctuating between one and two points before the Panthers rallied to tie it up at 17-17. The game stayed tied until 20-20 when the Tigers took the lead for good when an O’Fallon serve went into the net to make it 21-20, and then Pauk and Preston Weaver, then Pauk and Sellers combined on back-to-back blocks to make the score 23-20. The Panthers got the ball back at 23-21, but Sellers got

a kill in to make it 24-21, and then Sellers served the point that won the game and the match for Edwardsville 25-21.

John Matthews and Sellers served up five points each, while Henry Hupp had 14 digs, Whittenburg had eight and Matthews seven, Whittenburg had eight kills, Pauk and Whittenburg had two blocks each, and Weaver had 20 assists.

The Tigers next play at Belleville East Thursday evening in a 4:30 p.m. start, then host Metro-East Lutheran on May 1 at 6 p.m. There's always the possibility of the Tigers and Panthers meeting in the postseason, and Smith is looking forward to it, and to send a message to Chicagoland schools after an incident involving a match official during a tournament in Joliet earlier this season.

"Exactly, it's the Southwestern Conference, and we've got to keep representing and helping that the Chicago teams understand and realize that we have some great programs down here," Smith said. "We were insulted a little bit when we were in Joliet when one of the referees was trying to be a little belittling to Edwardsville, because he had never heard of it. That was unfortunate, so that lit a fire under a couple of our boys' butts. You want to go up there a little more when one of the referees was being a little disrespectful to our program."

Smith really likes what he's seeing from the Tigers, and likes his chances down the road.

"I think every day that we're practicing, we're getting better," Smith said. "We're working on different things, and more players are stepping up and challenging each other to improve, and nothing is set in stone, and we're not only going to be doing the same thing we're doing now, we're going to adapt and improve."



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