

Edwardsville Gets Key Fumble Recovery, Wins Senior Night Game Over O'Fallon 26-14

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – It was an ugly game, but the outcome was very beautiful for Edwardsville.

The Tigers turned the ball over five times, but got a key fumble recovery deep in O' Fallon territory that turned into the game-clinching touchdown as Edwardsville won its Senior Night game over the Panthers 26-14 Friday night at Tiger Stadium.

Before the game, the football Class of 2020 – Malachi Revis, Kenyon Johnson, Jacob Waldman, Noah Goldsmith, Trey Lowry, Jordan Coleman, Jonathan Rotherth, Ethan Young, Nick Hylla, Jacob Morrissey, Eric Epenesa, Josh Klein, Colton Dickmann, Evan Ramirez, Trey Boyd, Drake Parker, Ben Beckham, Cameron Kirkpatrick, Lloyd Reynolds, Marquis Jones, Eric Ragland, Blake Moss, Hunter Stellhorn, George Rasmussen, Reed Kaburick, David Snyder and Donte Hill – and their families were all honored in the annual pregame ceremonies thanking them for all of their hard work and dedication to the Tigers' program.

And as for the game itself, it wasn't the prettiest of game, but the Tigers came out on top to officially clinch their ninth consecutive IHSA playoff berth.

"Yeah, it was ugly at times," said Edwardsville head coach Matt Martin, "but, again, I think you have to give their coaches and their kids credit. They played hard. I was worried, especially with Reed being out, and Moss being out, I was worried if we could

run the ball tackle to tackle, and they're pretty good up front. And so, they stopped us pretty good there. We had to get them on the perimeter in the run game, and the pass game, and we had interceptions that didn't help. Anyway, you've got to give them credit, to their coaches, their kids. They did a good job, but I'm proud of my kids; they kept fighting, they found a way to win. That's a very talented team. They don't lack players."

The Tigers had five turnovers in the game, very uncharacteristic for them, but Martin felt that his team kept battling, and eventually found a way to win the game.

"We're not good enough," Martin said. "We can't do that, that's not Tiger football, our kids know it. But it was one of those days. And so, with one of those days, we found a way to win, so I'm proud of the kids."

The Edwardsville defense was able to limit O'Fallon's star running back Mason Blakemore to small and medium gains, not allowing him to break a big play.

"Right, that's what we talk about, try to limit the big play," Martin said, "and that was probably the positives defensively. They scored seven points in the first half." And the Tigers got the big fumble recovery right after Edwardsville fumbled the ball to O'Fallon near the goal line, giving them a second chance to put the game away. The recovery was originally credited to Hylla, but it was Reynolds who recovered the ball at the Panther four-yard-line.

"Huge," Martin said. "And I was talking about it; we've got to start equaling the odds a little bit, and starting to get turnovers, and that was a big one for us, obviously." It was the climax of a great effort by the Edwardsville defense, who are improving week-by-week, and at the right time as well.

"They're getting better, aren't they?" Martin said. "They're getting better as the year's gone on. Good for coach (Kelsey Pickering), and the boys; I thought they did a great job."

A big plus for the offense was the return of Justin Johnson, Jr., who had his usual good game, running for an 80-yard touchdown that was called back, and also having a big kickoff return in a key moment after O'Fallon tied the game in the fourth quarter.

The Tigers had the opening possession and immediately got good runs from both Kenyon, Justin and Torrance Johnson, along with from quarterback Ryan Hampton to get to the O'Fallon 36. But after an O'Fallon penalty, Mason Ahlers took a shovel pass from Hampton and went seven yards, but fumbled the ball, which was recovered by the Panthers. The Tigers argued that Ahlers was down by contact, but to no avail.

O'Fallon then launched a 15-play, 79 yard drive that took just over five minutes to complete. Ty Michael passed five yards to Latrell Bonner, then Blakemore had four runs for 21 yards that put the ball on the 47. Later on, a pair of incomplete passes had apparently stalled the drive, but a face mask penalty against Edwardsville got the ball to the Tiger 16, from where Michael passed 16 yards to Conner Sheehan for the opening touchdown. Ian Wagner kicked the convert to give the Panthers a 7-0 lead with 3:43 left in the opening period.

It didn't take long for Edwardsville to strike back, and did so when, on a second and two from the Tiger 38, Hampton found Ahlers with a pass, and Ahlers made a great run after the catch to go the distance for the touchdown. Epenesa's kick was good to tie the score at 7-7.

The Tigers then went on top with their next possession, and it started at the Tiger 30, with the big play a Hampton shovel pass to Ahlers that gained 17 yards, and a face mask penalty against the Panthers that put the ball on the O'Fallon 15. From there, Hampton passed 15 yards to Justin Johnson for the go-ahead touchdown early in the second quarter. Epenesa's kick was good with 10:25 left until halftime, with Edwardsville up 14-7.

O'Fallon's next drive looked promising, with back-up running back Michael Staley going up the middle for 12 yards, but the Tigers again not giving up a big play. But on a fourth-and-five on the Edwardsville 33, Michael's pass was intercepted in the end zone by Ty Beruman to stop the threat. On the first play after the interception, Justin Johnson took a pitch, went right, and rambled down the sideline 80 yards for a touchdown, but the result was cancelled due to a Tiger holding penalty. The drive fizzled out, and the ensuing punt was partially blocked by O'Fallon, which put the ball on the Tiger 44. On the next possession, a pass interference call against the Tigers placed the ball on the Edwardsville 28, but the drive stalled out, and a fourth-down pass fell incomplete, giving the ball back to the Tigers.

Ahlers took another shovel pass from Hampton to go 17 yards late in the half, but after a good 18-yard-run from a Hampton shovel pass, a fumble was recovered by O'Fallon, then on the next play, a tipped ball resulted in another Panther turnover as the half ended with Edwardsville up 14-7.

The Panthers got the ball to start the second half, and immediately, Blakemore went to work, getting his biggest gain of the night on a 19-yard run, then later going 10 yards to bring the ball to the Tiger 43, The Edwardsville defense then stiffened, and the Panthers turned it over on downs. The Tigers then turned the ball over after a hand-off from Hampton to Justin Johnson was dropped, and O'Fallon recovered. Michael, Blakemore and Staley then took turns running the ball, but on third down,

Epenesa came up with an interception that brought the ball to the Tiger 20. On the third play of the drive. Hampton rolled right and threw a pass that was intercepted by Bonner along the sideline, but the Tiger coaches claimed that the ball was dropped before Bonner established possession. The call stood, however, and the Panthers went on a six-play, 46-yard drive that tied the game. Wagner had successfully kicked a 32-yard field goal, but a penalty against the Tigers for roughing the kicker put the ball on the Tiger four, where Blakemore scored on the next play. Wagner's convert tied the game at 14-14.

On the ensuing kickoff, Justin Johnson got the ball, and almost was downed at his own two, but then found a seam and returned the ball back to the O'Fallon 28. A nine-yard run from Johnson and 11 more from Hampton put the ball on the Panther one, where Johnson took it in to give Edwardsville a 20-14 lead. The conversion was missed, keeping the score as it was with 9:46 left in regulation.

Later on, with the Tigers driving, on a first and goal play, a low snap was recovered by the Panthers on their own four, but on the next play, a fumble caused by Hylla was recovered by Robinson on the Panther four. From there it only took two plays for Justin Johnson to score, on a one-yard run up the middle with 3:16 left in regulation. A two-point pass was incomplete, leaving the score 26-14.

The Panthers had one last drive that was eventually stopped by the Edwardsville defense, preserving the 26-14 final.

Edwardsville is now 6-2 overall, finishing their Southwestern Conference season at 4-1, and officially clinched an IHSA playoff spot for the ninth consecutive year. They'll face St. Louis power St. John Vianney in the regular-season finale next Friday in Kirkwood, Mo., in a 7 p.m. kickoff. Martin is happy with the win and playoff berth, but also knows that the Tigers must play much better to do well in the postseason.

“The bottom line is, and again, I tell our kids is, we can be a very good team if we execute well, and we play hard and are physical. But when we're not, you see, we start to become beatable, and average. So we've got to avoid that if we want to make a run in the playoffs.”

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