

# **Johnson Scores Four Touchdowns, Ahlers Has Big Touchdown Reception As Tigers Down Saints 44-17 In Class 8A Playoff Opener**

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
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EDWARDSVILLE – Junior running back Justin Johnson, Jr. ran for three touchdowns, had a reception for a fourth, and junior tight end Mason Ahlers took a flip pass 69 yards for another score as Edwardsville won its IHSA Class 8A first-round game over St. Charles East 44-17 Friday night at Tiger Stadium.

The Tigers jumped out to a 20-0 lead in the opening quarter and never looked back, even throwing in a different wrinkle with Johnson taking a direct snap late in the third quarter and running it in from 32 yards out to give Edwardsville their final touchdown on the evening.

“We had it in earlier, just he was banged up,” said Tigers head coach Matt Martin. “He’s our best player, We thought it could have helped us in some other games.”

The Wildcat offense that Edwardsville used during certain points in the game may have caught the Saints by surprise, and it was a look the Tigers had ran some during the regular season.

“I don’t know what film they had, so we ran a little bit of it earlier in the year before we got hurt,” Martin said. “Just a little bit, not as much.”

It was still very important to set the tone early, and that’s exactly what the Tigers did by jumping out to the early 20-0 lead.

“Yeah, we got a turnover there, we were winning the turnover battle,” Martin said. “Then the game kind of leveled off, they got the turnover, we dropped about three possible picks, we had a pick called back, and that led to a score. So that was a tough deal, but I just told our kids we beat a very good football team that is well-coached, and I’m proud of them.”

A key moment of the game was the Ahlers touchdown, coming right before halftime that gave Edwardsville a 34-17 lead at halftime.

“Huge,” Martin said emphatically. “Huge. I mean, that was just a little more cushion at halftime. It’s a pretty good play when he doesn’t fumble,” Martin also said with a smile and laugh.

“He’s one of our best players, too,” Marin also said of Ahlers. “I’m going to tell you something: He’s a good player, and just a junior. There are some college coaches that need to look at him.”

Ryan Hampton also turned in his usual solid performance as well, throwing for two touchdowns.

“He did a solid job,” Martin said of Hampton, “and I told him at halftime he’s going to have a better second half, and he did.”

The entire defense also had a very good game, bending but not breaking in East’s opening drive in the second half as the Saints ended up empty-handed after keeping the ball for just over five minutes.

“They got us with option a little bit there,” Martin said, “we got a penalty, we gave up a penalty, that got them a critical third down, and it just was tough. Coach (Kelsey Pickering) did some adjustments, got kids’ heads screwed on straight, and started tackling better.”

The offensive line also had a great game, despite missing a key member in Blake Moss out, Kyle Smith stepped in and did a magnificent job in the line.

“I think Kyle is doing a good job,” Martin said. “Kyle Smith’s doing a great job for Blake, but we’d love to have Blake back. Reed (Kaburick) was in, he twinged his ankle again here, so we’ll see.”

The Saints managed to rally back to within 27-14 before halftime, but the Ahlers touchdown was a major backbreaker for St. Charles East.

“The first two possessions, we had them in a third-and-long, and they converted on third-and-long,” said Saints head coach Bryce Farquhar, “and I thought that was a big momentum shift. I give our kids a lot of credit for staying in it in the first half, and we made too many mistakes overall to be able to hang with a team as good as Edwardsville.”

The 20-0 deficit was a big hole that St. Charles East had to climb out of, but the Saints had built some momentum in coming back to within 24-14. The Tigers came up with the big plays to take back momentum.

“Yeah, 20-0’s a big hole. I think we come back, and we make it a two-possession game at one point in time,” Farquhar said. “We’re feeling good about ourselves, and the big plays tonight really killed us, and I thought their ability to create the big plays off their running game was huge. We lost one of our big-time leaders in the middle, and that hurt us a little bit, but they were down a guy too, tonight. So weren’t able to pick up the big plays when we needed them. I don’t know if they punted at all, tonight.”

The Saints had seen a Wildcat-style offense before and saw it a bit more when Edwardsville ran it, But Farquhar gave credit to the Tigers for forcing St. Charles East to do things they don’t ordinarily do.

“A little bit more tonight,” Farquhar said. “I felt like tonight, they forced us to do what we weren’t really good at, in running the box, and kudos to them for being able to force us into, really, one of our weaknesses, and that’s an inside running game.”

And the opening drive of the second half, where the Saints marched the ball downfield, only to come up empty-handed when St. Charles East missed a field goal attempt, was a big momentum changer as well.

“We came down and drove the ball,” Farquhar said, “and I thought, once again, we had an opportunity to convert points; really, you’re just looking to convert points on all your possessions, but we really needed some points on that possession. I think that would have taken us back to a two-possession game, and we would have had a 14-point difference at that point. And, you know, we lost that, and we lost some field position, because it went back to the 20, and they went down from there and scored. We didn’t convert when we needed to, but they were the better team tonight.”

The Tigers didn’t waste any time in their opening possession, going down 70 yards in five plays, with Hampton throwing to Pierce Boyer 32 yards to the Saints 29 on the third play from scrimmage, then two plays later, Johnson went left 37 yards for the opening touchdown, with the convert kick from Chase Parker good to give Edwardsville an early 7-0 lead.

On the Saints’ first possession, a Nathan Hayes pass was intercepted by Nick Hylla to give the ball back to the Tigers. Edwardsville responded with a six-play, 65-yard drive, which at the start was aided by a pass interference flag against St. Charles East, and also had a 27-yard completion from Hampton to Johnson, with Johnson making a great run after the catch. It climaxed with Johnson running in from a yard out to give the Tigers a 13-0 lead after the conversion was blocked.

Edwardsville got the ball back on the Saint 21 following an excellent punt return by Kenyon Johnson, and it only took the Tigers three plays to score, with Ahlers going on an end-around for 10 yards, and Justin Johnson scoring on the next play from eight yards out to make it 20-0 after the conversion. East then got their first touchdown drive started, and was aided by both a face mask penalty and a pass interference call that negated an Ethan Young interception, A pitch to Colton Conn gained 21 yards, and from there Conn took the ball up the middle one yard for the touchdown with 3.7 seconds left in the first to make it 20-7 following Ryan Gerkin’s conversion.

The Tigers took the kickoff, and Jacob Morrissey got good blocking in returning the kickoff to the Saint eight-yard line, and from there, Hampton faked, kept and scored from one yard out on the third play, making the score 27-7 after the PAT.

St. Charles East came right back on the ensuing drive, getting to the Tiger 47, where Hayes threw over the middle to Clayton Conn, who took in on a nice run after the catch with 7:58 until halftime, with Gerkin's kick making the score 27-14.

After holding Edwardsville, the Saints then went down the field in 10 plays from their own 19 after a penalty on the kickoff. Gino Cerrone ran for 18 yards on the first play, then a face mask penalty on Edwardsville placed the ball on the Tiger 12, A false start flag on the Saints helped stall the drive, and Gerkin came on to kick a 37-yard field goal to cut the Edwardsville lead to 27-17.

It took all of two plays for the Tigers to score on the kickoff. Justin Johnson went up the middle for one, and on the next play, Ahlers took a flip pass from Hampton, and made no mistake, going 69 yards for the Tiger touchdown to give Edwardsville a 34-17 lead going into halftime.

Another of the game's key drives happened on the first possession of the second half. The Saints took the second-half kickoff and went down the field very well, as both Colby and Colton Conn ran the ball very effectively. At one point, Colton Conn ran three straight times for 19 yards, running the time off the clock. A flag against the Saints took them back five yards, and the drive stalled out. But before a 28-yard field goal try, The Tigers were called for encroachment, putting the ball five yards closer. Gerkin tried from 23 yards but was wide right, and Edwardsville held.

The Tigers got the ball on their own 25 after the miss, and Justin Johnson immediately went on a 21-yard run to give Edwardsville a first down, and Hampton hit on a pass of 30 yards to Ahlers and got another 15 yards on a keeper to the left. The drive stalled out and Parker kicked a 37-yard field goal with 1:14 left in the third to make it 37-17.

But on the ensuing kickoff, which was squibbed in the middle of the field, the Tigers recovered the ball on the Saints 32, and on the second play, Justin Johnson took a direct snap and rambled 32 yards down the for his fourth touchdown of the game to increase the Edwardsville lead to 44-17 after the

The Tigers defense then came up big, holding the Saints on a pair of fourth-down situations to help make the 44-17 final in favor of the Tigers.

St. Charles East ends its season 7-3, but Farquhar is very proud of his team and their accomplishments during the season.

"We start 20 of the 22," Farquhar said of his seniors. "Our group is a special group, and you know, they were able to beat the number-two team in the state in Batavia, and they had their rivalry win. This group's a special group, they've been around for a long time,

and you can look around; we've got one kid going to Wisconsin, but besides that, there's not like a ton of Division-I kids. It's just a great group that's become a family, and you know, they come out and execute well, and tonight was probably our worst performance of the year scorewise, but that doesn't tarnish what they've done this year, being able to be at the top of our conference, which is one of the best in the state, I assume like Edwardsville's conference, take a lot of pride in finishing towards the top, so what they did this year was special."

The Tigers are now 8-2 and advance to the second round, where they'll face top-seeded Minooka, a 20-7 winner over Joliet West. Martin is looking forward to the challenge and knows that winning is something no one can take for granted.

"We've won a lot here," Martin said. "Sometimes, you take it for granted, but it doesn't come easy. You have to beat good programs, and we've been able to do that. So it's a blessing, enjoy it."



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