

Weller Scores 24, Tigers Use Big Second Half Run, Defeat Belleville West 57-44

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
February 1 2020 6:44 AM







EDWARDSVILLE – Brennan Weller followed up on an impressive 32-point performance against St. Louis Roosevelt on Tuesday with 24 points, Jack Nafziger added 15 points, and Edwardsville used a 19-7 second-half run to take a big 57-44 win over two-time defending IHSA Class 4A state champions Belleville West in a Southwestern Conference game Friday night at Lucco-Jackson Gym.

The win extended the Tigers' current winning streak to five in a row and is perhaps the biggest win of the season thus far for the team. It was a game that the entire team played well throughout.

"I thought our guys really played hard," said Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas. "We lost to them first conference game of the year almost two months ago, It's obvious our guys have improved; they work so hard in practice, and it means something to them. They really wanted to play Belleville West, they were looking forward for the opportunity to compete, so we're very proud of our guys."

It was also a very physical and ferocious game all night, especially under the boards. It wasn't a game for the faint-hearted, and the Tigers certainly held their own and did the things they wanted to do,

"Nic Hemken was terrific," Battas said. "He ended up having eight points. A lot of stuff he does is not on the stat sheet; he gets a lot of rebounds, but he gets a lot of 50-50 balls, he gets our guys in the right spot, and he slammed his body into guys for 30 minutes, so he was incredible. I thought Ethan Young got a lot of loose balls. He's a competitive son-of-a-gun, too, and Jalil Roundtree played 30 of our 32 minutes, guarded their best player, took care of the ball, handled the ball. He's gotten a lot better. Last time we played Belleville West he was probably not nearly as confident as he is now. He's confident, he's playing physical, he's playing smart, he's really helping our offense, and obviously, he's stellar on defense."

The Tigers improved to 15-7 overall with the win and are emerging as a team that's playing their best basketball of the year, and things are only getting even better.

"Yeah, we just try to practice well every day," Battas said. "We try to prepare to win every game. Every game is hard because you spend a lot of time preparing for that game. Our conference is really tough, as you know; we've got the back half of it left, and our guys, they've got a little chip on their shoulder. There wasn't really anybody that picked us to win games this year. Nobody really mentions our guys much when preseason stuff came out, and we're having some individual success that we're really proud of, and having some team success that we're proud of, and at the end of the year, maybe we will celebrate that, but right now, we're just trying to get better every day."

Weller scored the first three points of the game for the Tigers on a turnaround jumper and a free throw, but Tommie Williams countered with a basket of his own to make it 3-2 before a Weller drive made it 5-2 for Edwardsville. After the Maroons came back to tie things up, the teams traded baskets before the Tigers started a 6-0 run late in the period on a Nafziger three and a three-point play by Weller that made the score 13-7 at the end of the first period.

Greg Wells opened the second quarter with a driving basket to make it 13-9, but a pair of free throws from Hemken brought the margin back to six, and another Weller drive in the lane made it 17-9, forcing a West time out. The two teams again exchanged baskets before a Williams free throw, a basket from Preston Weaver and two more free throws from Keli'I Price made the score 21-14 Edwardsville at halftime.

The teams exchanged baskets to start the second half before a Weller free throw made it 24-16, and a Hemken basket made it 26-16, forcing another Maroon time out. A Williams free throw and another three-point play from Weller extended the lead to 29-17, but then, the Maroons went on a 7-0 run on a pair of Williams free throws, a basket from Wells and a three from Price to cut the lead to 29-24. The Tigers then went on to their game-deciding run that started with a jumper from Nafziger that made it 31-24, but a three from Price cut the lead to four at 31-27. Hemken then hit in the lane and got a tip to make the score 35-27 before Deonte Wright got a good roll on a shot to cut the lead back to six. A Gabe James three and a banker from D.J. Newsome made the score 38-31 at the end of the third.

The final quarter started with a three from Nafziger and an unchallenged coast-to-coast lay-in by Weller to complete the run and make it 43-31, resulting in a West time out. Javieon Wallace scored on a long two, but back-to-back threes from Weller and Nafziger gave the Tigers a 49-33 lead, all but putting the game away. The Maroons did outscore Edwardsville the rest of the way 11-8, but it was the Tigers that earned the hard-fought win 57-44.

Besides Weller and Nafziger, Hemken did have eight points for the Tigers, while James scored five, Weaver four and Roundtree three. Williams led the Maroons with 13 points, with Price scoring 12, Wells and Wright had four points each, Newsome, Jadin Brazil, Wallace and Trevor Gray had two points apiece and Tommy Grafe scored one,

The Tigers travel to St. Louis to meet Gateway STEM on Tuesday evening at 6 p.m., then host Alton at home on Wednesday in a game snowed out on Jan. 17. Ahead are conference rematches at East St. Louis, O'Fallon and Collinsville, among many other challenges, and Battas and his team are looking forward to what's coming up,

“Nothing easy, nothing easy as you know,” Battas said. “I like where we’re at, we hope to be playing our best basketball at the end of the season, but we’re certainly playing better basketball right now than we did a month ago, and that’s a credit to our guys and how committed they do what we ask them to do in practice. Just really proud of our guys, and really happy that they got this reward in beating Belleville West. It’s been a few years since we’ve beaten Belleville West, so I’m just proud of our guys and looking forward to practice on Sunday.”







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