



# A.J. Smith Scores 30 Points, MELHS Defeats East Alton-Wood River 79-62

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EDWARDSVILLE - A.J. Smith led Metro-East Lutheran with 30 points, DaMarkus Bean added 15 and Zion Tucker added 13 points as the Knights defeated East Alton-Wood River 79-62 in a boys basketball game played Friday evening at Thomas Hooks Gym.

The Knights went on a 9-0 run late in the first quarter to take an 18-10 lead, then had an 11-2 run late in the second quarter in going on to the win, their second in as many nights. Creating turnovers that led to baskets was a key part of Metro-East's success.

"We played well," said Knights' head coach Anthony Smith. "We played a tough team last night, got a win, came out tonight, created some turnovers, and got out in transition, got a few baskets, and it worked out well for us. It's a good win for us."

The Knights' runs were highlighted by good shooting from A.J. Smith and back-to-back dunks by Bean. Although there won't be an IHSA state tournament this year, both players are very high college prospects.

"Well, I was hoping they were going to have state this year," Anthony Smith said, "but they didn't. But yeah, DaMarcus runs the post well as any kid in the country, very good college product. A.J. is also a good college kid, like I've said before, A.J.'s got to make plays for us. So if he goes down, you notice he's making outlet passes to the big fellows running. We're going to take that nine times out of 10 every night."

It's a part of the little things that add up to big-time success for any team. The Knights did that very well on the evening.

"And we did a lot," Smith said. "We got 25 points off turnovers. They've got a senior-led team, and a really good ball club. They played hard, they understand, When you have guys that big, somebody's got to come out and guard them for a kid, and A.J.'s 6' 6", so somebody's got to be assigned to him. For us, it's an advantage. Last year, he fought by himself, now we've got 6' 8" back there, and now, you've got a 6' 8", 6' 6" standing, and it makes it pretty good."

The Oilers kept battling throughout the game, and Smith gave them much credit.

"Yeah, they play hard," Smith said. "They've got a really good ball club. They're well-coached over there, they do a lot of things well. They started five seniors. Like I said, I don't know what they've been doing; I'd be trying to get (Antonio Hardin) in that lineup, man, he's shooting. But they're a good ball club. It was a good win for us, and anytime you get a win at home, it's a plus for us."

A player like A.J. Smith is a big advantage for the Knights, and is a tough assignment for anyone trying to guard him.

"Oh yeah, when you have A.J., you've got to guard him all over the place," said EAWR coach Steve Flowers with a laugh. "He can go inside, he can go outside, he can go off the dribble, and he's got Bean down low, that can go up and get offensive rebounds. Offensive rebounds killed us tonight. Smith probably had seven offensive rebounds, Bean probably had five offensive rebounds. We're giving up that many offensive rebounds, it's going to be tough to win the basketball game."

The Oilers had four players score in double figures, and that's also a good sign for EAWR.

"I mean, we've got a good offensive team," Flowers said. "Once we control the pace and we're not trying to run with these guys, that's when we're a good team. But whenever they speed us up, they want us to go fast, that's when we see a bunch of turnovers, we see them going on fast breaks, getting easy baskets, easy dunks. And that's the difference in the game tonight."

The turnovers, and the Knights' ability to convert them into points, was one of the keys to the game.

"Turnovers, that's all about them speeding us up again," Flowers said. "It's just when they sped us up, we turned it over, they got out on the break. And when they're out on the break, it's tough to stop. We don't have a kid that can go up with Bean, or go up with Smith. That's a tough matchup for us."

Flowers was very happy with how his team kept battling and hanging in, especially with his bench players keeping the Oilers in the game.

"Oh, I just love the way that bench gave us so much energy when we pulled out all five starters," Flowers said, "and brought those guys in. They just battled, and competed. Like I was saying to those guys, we had a 120 pound kid go in there and get three offensive rebounds for us. If we can get that intensity out of all our guys, we're going to be tough to beat."

Both teams exchanged baskets to get the proceedings started with the Oilers leading 10-9 at the first COVID time out. The Knights then went on a 9-0 run to finish the period, taking the lead for good on back-to-back dunks from Bean to go up 13-10, then got a basket from Roger Holmes and an NBA three from Smith to take an 18-10 lead after the first quarter.

The teams again exchanged baskets and free throws to begin the second quarter, and when Spencer Slayden hit a three from the baseline and got another basket, EAWR trailed 22-19. The Knights responded well as Smith hit from the baseline, Bean dunked again, and Smith scored off a second chance to extend the advantage to 28-19. The Knights, led by Zion Tucker and Smith, scored five of the last six points of the half to take a 33-20 lead at the interval.

Spencer Slayden hit a pair of free throws after a technical foul against the Knights to open the second half to cut the lead to 33-22, and after another Oiler free throw, a three from Smith and a basket by Holmes upped the Metro-East lead to 38-23. It sparked a 15-7 run by the Knights, as Smith and Bean led the way. The Knights got a dunk from Smith off an inbounds pass to go ahead 49-30, and after a basket from Marcus O'Dell, Tucker hit a three to make the score 52-32. The Oilers fought back, getting back-to-back threes from Hardin, eventually cutting the lead to 57-45 on a Braden St. Peters basket, but another basket from Tucker made it 59-45 Metro-East after three quarters.

In the final quarter, Smith continued to keep EAWR at bay, eventually hitting his 30 points for the game. The Oilers continued to battle, but the Knights went on to the 79-62 win.

Besides Smith's 30 points, Bean had 15 points, Tucker scored 13 points, Holmes scored 10 points, Luke Neath came up with nine points and Derek Scott scored two points.

Evan Merritt led the Oilers with 16 points, while Hardin had 14 points, Andrew Oliger scored 12 points, Seth Slayden had 11 points, St. Peters scored five points, and Ahmad Allen and O'Dell each had two points.

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