



Clutch Free-Throw Shooting In Overtime Helps Tigers Win Over Flyers 53-44, Weller Leads With 20, Valentine Adds 17, James 13

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February 25 2021 6:08 AM







EDWARDSVILLE - The Edwardsville boys basketball team recovered from missing five-of-six free throws late in regulation to go 11-of-12 at the line in overtime to defeat East St. Louis 53-44 in an important Southwestern Conference game played on Wednesday night at Lucco-Jackson Gym.

The game was a make-up from last Tuesday, when it was postponed due the snowstorms that hit the St. Louis area last week. And the match-up produced one of the best games of the season, as both sides went toe-to-toe in a highly entertaining game.

And afterwards, two of the Tigers' players were apologetic for missing free throws that helped the Flyers come back to equalize late in regulation and force overtime.

"Yeah, I had a couple of players apologize for missing free throws," Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas said, "and I told them that they never have to apologize to me. Those guys put in the work, those guys sacrifice a lot, and that's just something that happens sometimes in the sequence of the game. I thought we rebounded from some of that adversity; we got stops, took a big charge, Jalil (Roundtree) did a great job on (Christian Jones). I get their frustrations on missing free throws in what could have ended the game a little earlier, but that's going to happen in sports. The team that plays the most possessions well consistently will win the game. So, we've kind of always focused on that, just try to play in the present and go on to the next play. But obviously,

we're really proud of our guys and being able to beat a great team overcoming a few missed free throws at the end."

Edwardsville was able to keep the Flyers from playing their game and not go on a big run, which was another key to the win.

"They like to play in the open court," Battas said. "It's hard to guard all their guys, because of their length and their size, so if we can get them to play in the quarter-court, get the ball in front of us, get our guys in the right spot, we like our chances. It's just a battle of pace a lot of times. We like to play in the open court at times, we had some guys in foul trouble, and they were hard to guard us. We like to have the ball and dictate pace, and I thought we were able to eventually do that, and that's where it really helped us win the game. I just told coach (Eric) Smith there they were never able to make that big run that East Side always seems able to make, whether it's against us or anybody. They're just always making 10, 12 point runs at some point. I think that's a credit to our guards for taking care of the ball and dealing with the pressure."

Caleb Valentine helped the Tigers get off to a great start by hitting three three's in the first quarter, helping to set the pace for Edwardsville. Gabe James, as he did the night before against Belleville West, also contributed some big threes early on.

"Caleb's early threes were so big," Battas said. "We've asked him to kind of transport his game a little bit this year to make more threes. He's really been dedicated to that, he shoots a lot at practice, and those were huge. You make those early, you get settled in, you get confident, then it spreads it out. They have to worry about Gabe; Gabe had another good game tonight. So yeah, the three-pointer, those shots are going to be key to our offense because of our size. As we make threes, I think we're going to be a much better team, and much harder to play against."

The Flyers' Ryan Stevenson came off the bench in the first half and started hitting threes of his own to counter the Tigers' three-point shooting, Edwardsville's defense was able to shut down Stevenson in the second half, not allowing him to score.

"Yes, (Stevenson's) made the most threes in the conference, I believe," Battas said, "so we knew he could do that. It's hard, though, in the first half, he made some, because we were worried about their big guys, and we just didn't communicate great. So we changed some things at halftime, and changed our defensive scheme, and obviously, him not scoring in the second half gave us a chance."

The Tigers' defense in the second half was very good, and it helped Edwardsville go on to the win.

"Very proud of our defense," Battas said. "So much of it is just effort. Rebounding, we're not very big, when Shaun (Pacette) and Brennan slamming their bodies into each other. Our smaller guys go down in there and get some balls and dig, and it's just a non-stop effort. To play a game last night, and have to play that game tonight and do that every possession, it just says a lot about our guys, and how tough they are, and how dedicated they are."

The Tigers did get off to a great start, by scoring the game's first eight points in the opening two-and-a-half minutes, with Valentine hitting back-to-back threes to start, then Weller hitting inside to open up an early 8-0 advantage. East Side countered with a Jones three, but Valentine immediately matched it with a three of his own to make it 11-3. After a Flyer basket, two more Weller baskets, the first on a goaltending call, extended the Tiger lead to 15-5. The Flyers fought back on a Macaleab Rich dunk and a basket from David Granger cut the lead to 15-9 at the end of the first.

The first part of the second quarter saw Stevenson and James trade threes which each other, and it eventually made the score 21-18 for Edwardsville. James hit inside to make it 23-18, and the Tigers held for the final shot of the half, but it missed, giving the 23-18 lead to Edwardsville going into the interval.

East Side opened with a 9-0 lead to put them into the lead, with a basket from Jalen Watson, a game-tying three from Rich and a basket by Watson to give the Flyers' their first lead at 25-23. East Side extended the lead to 27-23 on a basket from Rich, and after an exchange of baskets, a three-point play from James put Edwardsville to within 29-28. An exchange of baskets and free throws made the score 31-30 when Rich scored to make it 33-30, and the Tigers played for the last shot of the quarter. Weller hit a basket before the buzzer to cut the East Side lead to 33-32 and set up a very exciting final quarter.

Valentine hit a three at the start of the period to put Edwardsville back up 35-33, and a pair of Weller free throws gave the Tigers a four point lead at 37-33. Weller later missed the front end of a one-and-one to keep the score 37-33. A free throw from Rich and two from Weller pushed the score to 39-34 when Rich banked home a shot from the paint to make it 39-36 with 2:16 left in regulation. Another Rich basket cut the lead to 39-38, and after another exchange of baskets made it 41-40, a Preston Weaver free throw with 45.1 seconds left gave the Tigers a 42-40 lead. Edwardsville had a chance to ice the game, but a pair of missed free throws gave East Side a lifeline, and Jones used it to score inside with 11.1 seconds left to tie the game at 42-42. Edwardsville couldn't get another shot off and the game went to overtime.

Both teams missed opportunities to take the lead in the extra period, but a pair of free throws from James gave Edwardsville a 44-42 lead with 2:01 left. Hayden Moore then

gave the Tigers a 46-42 lead with a pair of free throws with 49.7 seconds to go. On the ensuing possession, Rich was called for charging with 42.2 seconds left, and a pair of Valentine free throws gave the Tigers a 48-42 lead. After Rich was called for his fifth foul with 31.8 seconds left, Flyers' coach Mark Chambers was assessed a technical foul, and Weller connected on the ensuing four free throws to make it 52-44. The final few seconds saw Edwardsville go on to their 53-44 win.

Weller led the Tigers with 20 points, while Valentine added 17, James came up with 13 points, Moore had two points, and Weaver one. Rich led the Flyers with 14 points, while Jones added 13 points, Stevenson had nine points, Watson and Damarion Brown had four points each and Granger had two points.

The Tigers now go to 7-1 on the season, and Wednesday's win was very important, as it comes during a stretch of four games in five days, all in the Southwestern Conference. The Tigers play at O'Fallon tonight, then go to Belleville East for a game on Saturday afternoon, no small task for any team in one of the state's premier conferences.

"I told our guys I'm not sure if an Edwardsville Tiger team has been asked to do more in the 15 years I've been here," Battas said, "as far as playing Belleville West on Tuesday, play East St. Louis the next day with no practice. Our guys had a great walkthrough today. We'll try to repeat that process tomorrow, get ready for O'Fallon. It's a tough task, but our guys like to compete, we have older guys, so I think that helps. And we just remind them to get their rest, take care of their bodies, and get ready for O'Fallon tomorrow."





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