

# Weller Scores 24, James 10, Tigers Use 15-3 First Quarter Run To Defeat Alton Boys

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
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EDWARDSVILLE - Brennan Weller led Edwardsville with 24 points, Gabe James added 10, and the Tigers used a 15-7 first quarter run after conceding the first two baskets of the game in going on to defeat Alton 55-28 in the first quarterfinal of the Southwestern Conference boys postseason basketball tournament Thursday evening at Lucco-Jackson Gym.

The Tigers won their second game in three days against the Redbirds, having won 44-31 on Tuesday evening in the regular season finale. And as was the case in the previous game, Edwardsville's defense was an important factor.

"I thought our guys got off to a really great start," said Tigers' head coach Dustin Battas. "(Ja'Markus Gary) is a really great player, and on top of that, he tries really hard. So he's hard to keep getting the ball, and once he does get the ball, we have our hands full, so I thought Caleb (Valentine) and Jalil (Roundtree) did a great job making it hard for him to get it. And when he did get it, I thought we had early help from Preston (Weaver) and Brennan and Shaun (Pacette) to limit him. To hold him to four points is a really tall task, and I think that was one of the differences. We were able to get a lead, and dictate tempo, and make them come out of their zone and play man-to-man. We executed a lot of good things against their zone, made some shots, which is always important. So, overall, just a great effort from our guys, and we were able to make a few more baskets tonight that we did the other night, and we did a better job on the boards."

Although Alton finished the season 0-13, the Redbirds didn't quit, and kept coming after the Tigers, never giving up.

"It's a credit to coach (Dana) Morgan," Battas said, "because when you've had a rough season like they have had, he's really got them playing a lot better these past couple of weeks. They were real close with Belleville East, they're real close in the last couple of games, so that's a credit to him. Those guys try hard, and that says a lot about the character of the team, and how much they respect coach Morgan."

Battas also had much praise for Alton, who competed very well all season in a very difficult league such as the Southwestern Conference.

"Yes, it's a tough conference," Battas said, "it's a tough league, and sometimes, you find yourself on the losing end of games, and he's got a younger team, some guys didn't have a ton of experience. They kept fighting, they are hard to play against, because they try hard. And in our league, if you lose some close games, all of a sudden, your record looks like you're not having success. But playing against them twice this week, I can tell those guys try hard, (Morgan) coaches them well, and they're not an easy team to play against. That's a credit to him and his players."

The Redbirds players kept on playing hard and supported each other on the bench and the floor, always fighting for each other, and Morgan praised his team after the game.

"I thought we had a pretty good game plan for us after scoring the first two baskets," Coach Morgan said. "We had scouted them well, and I just think we had moments when

we kind of lost some guys in different places, and Edwardsville's a good team. They make you pay when you make bad decisions on defense. But most importantly, I feel for our seniors. It's difficult when you have a senior season like this, you only play 13 games, you don't know if you were playing, if you weren't playing, you're not playing. The season didn't go the way we planned, but, I mean, if you came and watched us practice, our kids gave us everything they had, and it just didn't work out this year."

The Redbirds opened the game by taking a 4-0 lead, getting baskets from Smith and Ihzel Brown. Edwardsville scored the next 15 points, starting with a basket by Valentine and a three from James to take a 5-4 lead, with Roundtree making it 7-4, and a four-point play by Weaver extended the lead to 11-4. A pair of Weller baskets made it 15-4 before a late three from Adrian Elliott cut the lead to 15-7 at quarter time.

The teams traded baskets to start the second quarter, and then, Edwardsville went on a 12-0 run, with James hitting a three, Weller scoring the next seven points in a row on a three-points play and a pair of baskets, and a Weaver basket before Smith ended the run with a basket that made it 29-11. A three from Weller shortly before the buzzer made the halftime score 32-11 for the Tigers.

The teams once again traded baskets to start the third quarter before a three from James made it 38-18. A three-point play and a basket from O'Quinn cut the lead to 40-23, but the Tigers got baskets from Pacette, James and Weaver to make the score 46-23 after three quarters.

Edwardsville scored the first five points of the final quarter, a three-point play from Valentine and a basket from Weaver to make it 51-23, and from there, the Redbirds outscored the Tigers 5-4 the rest of the way, with Edwardsville taking the 55-28 win.

Besides Weller and James, Weaver scored eight points for the Tigers, with Valentine scoring five points, Hayden Moore scoring four points, with Roundtree and Pacette scoring two points each. Elliott led the Redbirds with nine points, O'Quinn scored seven points, Brown hit for six points, Smith had five points, Gary had four and both Elliott and Jeremiah Van Zandt had three points each.

Morgan thought that Weller was a the key to the Edwardsville win.

"We lost him a couple of times," Morgan said, "and that's what I said; he's the best player on their team, and we can't lose him. And to beat a team like Edwardsville, you have to take them out of their rhythm. And we kind of let them get into a rhythm, we didn't take away their key that we talked about. So, when they're hitting shots in their offense, they'll be hard to beat, and they're going to be a tough out in the next couple of days."

While the Redbirds' season concludes with a 0-13 record, the Tigers are now 12-2 and advance to a semifinal meeting at home tonight against number three seed Belleville West, a 60-25 winner over O'Fallon in the second quarterfinal Thursday night. The first semifinal pits top-seeded Belleville East against number five East St. Louis, who won at fourth-seed Collinsville 67-52 in the third quarterfinal. Both semifinal games start at 7 p. m., with the final coming on Saturday at the home of the highest remaining seed. Battas is expecting a very good challenge from the Maroons.

"Belleville West is playing their best basketball right now," Battas said. "I just looked at the score; they won by 40 tonight, they beat Belleville East last week, so they are rolling. They've got some good players, they're hard to play against. We made a lot of baskets against them last time, and that got us out to a lead, so our guys won't take it for granted. We know how hard that was, and we know how ready they'll be to play, and I think it'll be a close game. And hopefully, we'll be able to execute and have one more point on the scoreboard than they do at the end of the game."

Needless to say, Battas and his team are very happy to have a postseason to be playing in, and all look forward to the final two days of the season.

"Yes, our guys are just happy to be around each other for a couple of more days," Battas said. "I know we'll show up tomorrow for walk through, and they will be ready to compete, and be ready to learn what we want to teach them. And like I said, these last six weeks, I'm just grateful and happy that we get to spend some more time with them, because they're great guys to be around."





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