



Rich Scores 15 As Tigers Rally Runs Out Of Time, East St. Louis Wins SWC Boys Basketball Tourney

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - Sophomore forward Macaleab Rich was the game's leading scorer with 15 points as Edwardsville rallied again in the final quarter, but ran out of time as East St. Louis defeated the Tigers 30-27 to win the Southwestern Conference boys basketball tournament in the final Saturday afternoon at Lucco-Jackson Gym.

Edwardsville trailed by as much as six in the first half, but rallied to tie the game after three quarters, but the Flyers hit some big shots along the way, and managed to hold off the Tigers in the end. It was another great effort throughout the game by Edwardsville, which was so characteristic of the team this season.

"Our guys tried their best," said Tigers' head coach Dustin Battas, "and have a lot to be proud of. They had a couple of guys make some uncharacteristic threes; (Rich) made three of them, and he's a good player. But you have to pick your poison, so it's nothing our guys did. They did everything we asked them to do, they tried their hardest up until the bitter end there. And so, I'm obviously proud of them, and I think they'll go down as one of the great Tiger teams that we've had."

The Tigers had a chance to tie the game in the final seconds, and had a great look from Preston Weaver, who's late basket won the semifinal game the night before of Belleville West. The shot just missed, and Caleb Valentine got the rebound and went back behind the arc for a shot, but stepped out of bounds to give the ball to the Flyers, who managed to run out the clock.

"A great look," Battas said. "The way they were guarding Brennan (Weller) was making it tough to get Brennan open, but then, you can use him as a cutter or a screener. We got a really good look for Preston, he shoots 200, 250 three-pointers a day. Obviously, he had a big shot for us last night. We have all the confidence in the world in all of our guys. And we're able to get him open and had a great pass on time, he just missed it, and Caleb hustled over there and was getting ready to load up on a three on an offensive rebound, and just stepped out of bounds. So, very proud of our guys, and to hold a team like that to 30 points in three games in three nights. I just thought we did a lot of things well, and they just made a few more baskets than we did, and maybe, we just ran out of time there at the end."

East Side is a long, athletic team, which made things difficult for the Tigers to get inside or go up the middle on the day.

"It does," Battas said. "In the first half, I thought we had some good shots around the basket, and we created a couple for Brennan to get it there. Their length makes it tough. Jalil (Roundtree) did a great job of finishing in there, but in the first half, yeah, it was difficult. Not having too much of practice time to prepare for that, but that's basketball, and we competed, and I think our guys feel good about their effort. We'd love to be

celebrating right now; if ever there's a group of guys who deserve to feel good about their year, it's these guys. We're still proud of the way we competed, and we still think we had a successful season."

Edwardsville will graduate six seniors - Weller, Valentine, Weaver, Roundtree, Ryan Hampton and Hayden Moore - who contributed much to the success of the program, and will be greatly missed.

"Yeah, these are some of the best guys you've ever met," Battas said, "and they are great role models for our younger guys. And I'm just going to miss being around them from a character standpoint. Basketball stuff is fun, but they're just a joy to be around. They care about each other, they're responsible and respectful, and they take pride in Edwardsville basketball, and they take pride in their schoolwork, and they're just going to be missed because they're such a pleasure to be around."

The Flyers jumped out to an early 6-0 lead on a pair of threes from Rich, with Weaver hitting a three of his own to cut the lead in half to 6-3. Ryan Stevenson hit a shot on the side to make it 8-3 for East Side, with the defenses clamping down the rest of the period to keep the score 8-3 at quarter time.

A Valentine three early in the second quarter cut the lead to 8-6, but Rich scored again inside. Another Tiger three, this one from Gabe James, put Edwardsville to within 10-9, but Jalen Watson banked home a shot from the line, and a three from Rich gave East Side a 15-9 advantage. Another James basket and a free throw and three-point play by Weller cut the lead back to 15-13, with the Flyers missing a shot before the buzzer to keep the Flyer lead at 15-13 at the interval.

The teams exchanged baskets to open the third quarter before a Weaver three gave the Tigers their first lead of the afternoon 18-17. A Rich free throw tied the game, and the two teams exchanged baskets to keep the scores level at 22-22 at the end of the third, setting up an exciting fourth quarter to come.

A pair of early Rich free throws gave the Flyers the lead back at 24-22, and it stayed that way until just past the halfway mark, when David Granger dunked at the end of a break to push the score to 26-22. James came right back to connect on a three to bring the Tigers to one at 26-25, but an inside basket from Rich put the Flyer lead back to three. James then drove the lane to score and make the score 28-27 with close to a minute left to play, Christian Jones then hit both ends of a one-and-one with 17.5 seconds left to give East Side a 30-27 lead, and the Tigers had one last chance. Edwardsville got the ball to Weaver, who had a great look on a three, but the ball just bounced off the rim, and Valentine hustled to collect the rebound and go back behind the arc to take a shot, but stepped out of bounds with 1.6 seconds left to give the ball to East Side. The Flyers

inbound pass was deflected out of bounds by Roundtree on a great play, but the buzzer sounded to end the game and give the championship to the Flyers 30-27.

James led the Tigers with eight points, while both Weller and Weaver had six points each, Roundtree scored four points and Valentine had three points. Beside Rich's 15 points, Jones had six points, Granger hit for five and Stevenson and Watson both had two points each.

The Flyers finish the season as SWC champions at 10-5, while the Tigers conclude the season 13-3. And for Edwardsville, there's still plenty to look forward to for the 2021-22 season.

"Well, we just hope that the culture that's created here is maintained," Battas said, "and we have guys that care about each other and play unselfishly, compete, and hopefully, that's consistent in our program. Like I said, these six seniors have showed them a great example of how to be good, or maybe you're not the biggest, or the fastest, or the strongest. So, hats off to our seniors, and I can't thank them enough. I told them we're going to get a big picture, we're going to hang their picture up in here, a big poster sized one, we're going to put our record on there, and let people know about the Tigers of 2021."

With all the uncertainty of whether there would be a season or not because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes the Tigers' accomplishments even more remarkable.

"To be honest, when the season got thrown together, I thought it didn't help us much," Battas said, "because we value practice, and we value preparation. And sometimes, a shortened season favors athleticism and things a little bit more skilled, because you don't have time. So, for us to do what we did is a testament to the commitment these guys have, how smart they are and how hard they tried. You know, maximizing practice time. We get to coach basketball every day. We don't have to manage egos, we don't have to manage personalities, we get to coach basketball every single day. And when you do that, you have a chance to be pretty good. You have that, and you have some pretty good players like we have."





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