



First Game On New Turf: Johnson Celebrates Football Return With 217 Yards and Three TDs, Tigers Top Redbirds 31-7

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March 20 2021 6:28 AM





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ALTON - Edwardsville senior running back Justin Johnson, Jr. celebrated his and the Tigers' return to the field with a great performance, running for 217 yards and three touchdowns as the Tigers defeated Alton 31-7 in the long-awaited season opener for both teams Friday night at the newly refurbished Public School Stadium in Alton.

A new turf field, along with new bleachers and bannisters and a new scoreboard/video board were unveiled in the opener, as the Tigers raced out to a 28-7 halftime lead and didn't look back. For the first game played in nearly a year-and-a-half by both teams, there was plenty to talk about on both sides.

"I told the kids there was a lot of good effort," said Edwardsville head coach Matt Martin. "Both teams hadn't played football in a long time, so I'm sure the game was a lot faster than what they're used to. You can practice all you want, but you need games to learn from. And that's where we're at, we made a lot of mistakes, we're going to have to improve on that, and our kids will. But there was a lot of good, too."

Johnson had a big first half, scoring his three touchdowns, and both he and senior quarterback Ryan Hampton ran the ball exceptionally well in the entire game.

"Right, I thought Justin and Ryan both ran the ball well," Martin said. "Usually, when you run the ball well, your linemen are doing good, and your receivers are blocking downfield. So, a lot of positives."

The second half was a bit sloppy, with many Edwardsville penalties causing some touchdown runs to be called back, thanks mainly to a good and aggressive Redbird defense.

"There were a lot of penalties there in the second half that kept us from scoring," Martin said. "But you know what? Credit to Alton; they're always physical, their coaches do a good job. They created some of our problems, and we're going to have to learn from that."

"I'd like to say that we can learn from our mistakes after a win, right? It's a lot better to win and learn from mistakes rather than lose and learn from mistakes."

The Redbirds played very well defensively in the second half, holding Edwardsville to a field goal while causing turnovers, but in the first half, some missed opportunities came back to haunt Alton.

"Our defense came out and played a stellar second half," said Redbird head coach Eric Dickerson, "Our offense moved the ball at times, but couldn't sustain drives, scoring drives, missed a couple of chances here and there, but overall, I'm proud of the way they played tonight. A lot of inexperienced out there, so a lot of guys getting their first experienced on a Friday night. So, all in all, not bad."

Dickerson, as with everyone else, is very happy to be back after the long delay, and many of his players gained valuable experience on the evening.

"Yeah, it was nice to be back out, that's for sure," Dickerson said. "Obviously, things have gone a little different, but we got some experience tonight, and it was good to get out and get away from practicing against one another and play a game. That's the way it is."

The defense held up well in the second half, and the backfield, led by running back Tim Johnson and quarterbacks Keith Gilchrese and Graham McAfoos, played well for the most part.

"Yeah we did," Dickerson said. "We had a lot of good plays at times. But we weren't able to sustain them for a drive. We just have to go back, watch our film, and see what

happened, and I've got faith in these guys. These kids are hard workers and they're coachable, and they want to get better. So they'll take what we see on film, and we'll get better."

It didn't take long for Edwardsville to score, as the Tigers went 65 yards in five plays to open their 2021 accounts. Hampton ran for 39 yards in the first two plays from scrimmage, then Johnson ran for the last 25 yards in three plays, climaxing with a five yard run for the opening touchdown on the season. Gavin Walls kicked the convert to give the Tigers a 7-0 only 1:48 into the game.

Edwardsville forced an Alton punt on its first possession, and then went on a drive, with Hampton mixing his plays well, but the drive stalled out at the Alton 18, with the Redbirds taking over on downs. Two plays later, the Tigers recovered a fumble and took advantage of the turnover in three plays, with Johnson going in from six yards out for the touchdown. Walls added the point, and Edwardsville led 14-0 with 3:03 left in the first quarter.

The Redbirds then went on a very good drive, as Johnson made some nice plays along with McAfoos, also aided by a pair of Edwardsville penalties. The drive stalled out, and Edwardsville took over on downs. The Tigers needed only two plays to score, with Johnson taking a handoff on the right side, and broke away for a 56-yard touchdown run with 10:04 to go in the first half. Walls' kick was true to give Edwardsville a 21-0 lead.

Later in the half, Alton needed only two plays after recovering a fumble, going 26 yards in two plays: a completion from McAfoos to Jaylen Telford along the sidelines for 17 yards, and a five-yard touchdown run by Tim Johnson to get the Redbirds on the board. Aiden Helchuk kicked the convert with 5:22 left to cut the lead to 21-7.

Edwardsville got the touchdown back on the next possession, with the Tigers going 35 yards after a penalty on the kickoff, with Hampton scoring from two yards out, the Walls convert making it 28-7 at halftime.

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Redbirds' Defense Responds In Second Half

In the second half, the Redbird defense almost cut the lead in half, when on a bad snap in shotgun formation, Damien Jones recovered and went 92 yards for an apparent touchdown, but a penalty for a push in the back nullified the score. Jones also intercepted a pass in the next Tiger possession, but the offense couldn't convert the turnover into points, thanks to a tough defense that made plays when they needed to end Alton drives.

Late in the third, and into the fourth quarter, the Tigers went on a long drive and had a chance to score, but penalties helped stall the drive out, and Edwardsville got a 20-yard field goal from Walls to make the score 31-7. The defenses prevailed the rest of the way as the Tigers won the opener.

Alton starts 0-1, and plays at East St. Louis next week. Dickerson is looking forward to the challenge of the perennial power in Illinois football.

"It's another opponent," Dickerson said. "So we'll forget about tonight, build on this and learn from our mistakes, and be ready to play next week.

Edwardsville opens its campaign 1-0 and has its home opener Friday night against Belleville East at Tiger Stadium. Martin is also looking forward to the challenge of the Lancers.

"I don't know enough about them," Martin said. "They were young, they were playing strong at the end of the year. So I would think that they should be good this year."

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