

Eli Bateman's Perfect Strike From Corner Gives Edwardsville Boys Big 1-0 Soccer Win Over O'Fallon

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - Eli Bateman headed in a perfectly placed free kick from Gavin Walls after 45 minutes to give Edwardsville an important 1-0 win over visiting O'Fallon in a Southwestern Conference boys soccer match Monday evening at Tiger Stadium.

The match, originally set for Tuesday night, was moved to Monday to avoid a conflict in the O'Fallon schedule. And it was a closely-contested, hard-fought match for the entire 80 minutes as both sides went tooth and nail the entire time, and saw some late chances on both ends as well.

"I think it was a really gritty performance by O'Fallon," said Edwardsville head coach Mark Heiderscheid. "I thought as much as (Brennan) Weller was beating players as much as a couple of guys like Ben (Loftus) had gotten around on some corners. I think when it was that last final strike, it just didn't seem to present itself. They just had a lot of last-effort tackles that really got the job done. Now, I think, unfortunately for me, it was a couple of exasperating ones," Heiderscheid said with a laugh, "we hit the post, we kind of had a couple there where it was 'aw, shucks,' it went over, or the keeper had a nice one. But I think, the final one, I was really expecting Weller to get by three more, and it just never happened. He unlocked the defense, at times, by himself, which was brilliant. It just seems like getting that final touch just hasn't been there at times."

Despite only having three goals this season, Weller has begun to find a rhythm that makes him a very dangerous player in the offensive third of the pitch, and had set up a number of Tiger opportunities from the penalty spot.

"Yeah he has," Heiderscheid said. "Number one, he was kind of pulling a Mo Salah (who plays for Liverpool FC in England), where he was getting some things off some PKs, or a Bruno Fernandes (also of Liverpool). But then, now, I think it's almost like a lay-up in basketball to pick on Brennan, where sometimes, all of a sudden, you score even off the penalty kick, and now, he's even getting some in open play, but one was on a dead ball. But yes, I think that's the second time Gavin has put an absolutely brilliant ball in on a corner kick. And then, somebody's dealt with it very well, in this case, Bateman went very, very high on the corner. I have to look at that again on tape."

It was a very important three points for Edwardsville, as it now pulls them level with O'Fallon and Collinsville on the top of the league table, with the Panthers and Kahoks playing a very important match on Thursday, which will go a long way in determining the SWC champion.

"Yes, you never know," Heiderscheid said, "because you've still got that last game for us sitting there. But yeah, I think for them, it turns into a cycle, and that'll be a tough one, I really think, for both teams. They have a lot of similarities in terms about how they're going about the game this year, it's a lot of courage and that. I think the last one went down to the wire, obviously."

It only took Weller and the Tigers five minutes to have the match's first big chance, as Weller was all alone in the box, but his shot hit the underside of the football crossbar over the soccer goal. In the sixth minute, Connor Kelley got a nice cross in, but Panther goalie Ben Eckell was there to stop it, keeping the score 0-0. In the 10th minute, a Bateman cross to Andrew Mills was headed high over the top.

The Panthers had their first chance when a free kick from just across the halfway line was sent into goal, but Grant Toby was there to collect the ball. Both sides then settled down into a midfield battle with good chances few and far between. In the 33rd minute, Bateman sent Weller in alone on a great through ball, but Eckell was there to cover up. Just before halftime, Bateman was booked for a hard foul on an O'Fallon player, and the Tigers had one last chance that went awry as the half ended scoreless.

The breakthrough came in the 45th minutes off a corner, when Walls delivered a perfect cross to Bateman near the far post, with Bateman going up high to head the ball past Eckell into the back of the net to give the Tigers a 1-0 lead. The Panthers almost equalized four minutes later, but the defense knocked the ball away to preserve the lead. One minute later, Weller won a ball near the midfield and raced into the box, but Eckell stopped his shot. The Panthers had perhaps their best chance of the night in the 57th minute, when Andre Robertson had the ball alone in front, but his first-timer just went past the left side post to keep the score 1-0.

Robertson had another chance in the 63rd minute, but was called off-side. In the 65th minute, Weller was dragged down by his jersey by Nolan Kumming, who was booked by the referee. Two minutes later, Weller had a big chance, beating multiple defenders, but Eckell was there for the save to keep the score 1-0.

The Tiger defense clamped down on O'Fallon the rest of the way, not allowing a good chance, while four minutes from full time, Bateman's bid for an insurance goal clanged off the bar. The Tigers went on to their 1-0 win, and three vital points in the conference race.

Edwardsville is now 6-2-0 on the season and faces Belleville East on the road on Thursday, then in its final week of the campaign, hosts Waterloo Gibault April 12, has their Senior Night match against Belleville West April 14, and finishes the season Apr. 17 against Belleville Althoff Catholic. Without an IHSA state tournament to play for this season, it makes the conference race that much more important, and Heiderscheid knows that the Tigers will be ready to go for the stretch run.

"For this year, I think, for me, that was the one to kind of hold your hat one was conference, albeit sometimes, it's a matter of can you just play as well as you can, and see what happens," Heiderscheid said. "But other than conference, there just really isn't that much to this one. Just kind of getting the kids, have them play some games, have some fun, that sort of thing. But I think the one thing that you can hang out there would be to try and win conference, because that's the only barometer that you have this season."





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