

One To Remember: Tigers' Justin Johnson Jr. Runs For Four Touchdowns, Including Game Winner In 43-40 2 Overtime Win Over O'Fallon

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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O'FALLON - Senior running back Justin Johnson, Jr. ran for four touchdowns, including two in both rounds of overtime, as Edwardsville came from behind to pull off a stunning 43-40 double overtime win over O'Fallon Friday night at OTHS Stadium.

It was one of the best high school football games anyone would want to see, as the players on both teams left it all out on the field, big play was countered with big play, and in the end, it was the Tigers who came out on top.

"Both coaching staffs prepared their kids," said Edwardsville head coach Matt Martin, "we just happened to come on the winning side. My hat's off to coach (Byron) Gettis. He's a tremendous human being, he's a great football coach. Preston Foehrkalb, the (defensive) coordinator, did a great job. I'm just proud of the things they've done here, and I'm proud of my kids. We found a way to win."

Johnson's performance on the night, where he became the school's all-time leading rusher, presented more evidence that he's perhaps the best player in a very good Southwestern Conference that's full of great talent, keeping on playing after a fumble that helped give the Panthers an eight point lead late in regulation.

"To me, he is," Martin said. "And so, we needed him. And he didn't hang his head after the mistake, and he just kept fighting. He's a difference maker."

The Tigers were able to come back after Gabe James, making his first-ever start at cornerback, made a key strip and fumble recovery on the second play after Edwardsville was stopped, giving the ball back to the Tigers. Edwardsville scored on the ensuing drive to tie the game up.

"HUGE!," an excited Martin said. "This is the first game starting at defensive back. He made a huge play, and he was kind of learning on the run, they were picking on him. But I just don't want our kids, when things are going bad, get their head down and pout, and just keep fighting, because good things can happen."



Panther quarterback Ty Michael, who played a big role in O'Fallon's stunning upset of East St. Louis last week, was a thorn in the side of the Tigers' defense all night, mixing his plays very well, and running for key gains when needed.

"And he runs," Martin said. "He was such a difference maker running against East Side and us. He made plays for his team tonight."

After the Tiger defense forced an initial three-and-out, the offense went to work as Johnson and quarterback Ryan Hampton ate up chunks of a 53-yard, seven play drive that took 3:17 to run, with Johnson gaining 13 on a first down play inside the red zone, then going the final yard off the left side in for the first touchdown of the game, with Gavin Walls kicking the conversion to make it 7-0 Edwardsville with 7:23 left in the first quarter.

Late in the first quarter, after a good punt return put the ball at the Edwardsville 29, Michael led a four play drive that saw him hit Jalen Smith twice for a combined gain of 24 yards. with Michael running in from eight yards out to cut the lead to 7-6 with eight second left in the first quarter, but Ian Wagner missed the extra point to keep the Tigers in front.

The Panthers struck again on their next possession, going 50 yards in five plays, as Michael ran for 12 yards for a first down, and C.J. Lovett ran 14 more for another first. Michael then hit Lattrell Bonner in the end zone from eight yards out to give O'Fallon its first lead at 13-7 after the conversion.

Edwardsville went back in front on their next possession, going 80 yards in nine plays, with Johnson and Hampton again leading the way. On a third-and-five from the Panther 26, Johnson took a direct snap and flipped the ball to Hampton, who found Grant Matarelli all alone in the end zone for the touchdown. Walls' conversion gave Edwardsville a 14-13 lead with 5:20 left in the half. Both defenses then stopped promising drives on both sides, leaving the Tigers' lead intact at halftime at 14-13.

Both teams started the second half exchanging punts, and the Panthers then took the lead back on a seven play drive that saw Michael hit Bonner for 24 yards, Michael run for 15 more and connect with Beau Carney for another 17 yards. The Tiger defense stiffened, and Wagner kicked a 36-yard field goal with 4:02 left in the third quarter to give O'Fallon a 16-14 lead.

The Tigers took the lead right back on their next possession, with the big play Johnson connecting with James for a 70-yard pass play that brought the ball to the O'Fallon five. Johnson ran it in three plays later from the two to give the Tigers a 22-16 lead after James Ditaso-Hutchins, in for an injured Hampton, tossed a pass to James for a two-point conversion.

The Panthers immediately countered with an eight play, 74-yard march that saw Michael hit three different receivers for a total gain of 56 yards, the big play being a 35-yard completion to Jalen Smith. Michael ran the final 17 yards on two plays for the touchdown to give O'Fallon a 23-22 lead after Wagner's kick.

On the second play after the kickoff, Johnson lost a fumble to the Panthers, and on the first play, Michael hit Smith on the fly for 31 yards and another touchdown that gave O'Fallon a 30-22 lead with 11:07 left in regulation.

The Tigers were stopped on a long drive on their next possession from close in, and on the first play after that, Lovett ran for 29 yards, and on a keeper on the right side, James made the play of the night, stripping Micheal of the ball and recovering the fumble to put the Tigers in business at the O'Fallon 37 with 4:24 left in regulation.

It only took Edwardsville five plays to score, as Hampton, back in the game, ran 21 yards down the left side, then scored on a nice cutback from five yards out with 2:25 left. Johnson swept right on a two-point conversion try, and fought his way into the end zone to tie the game at 30-30.

The Panthers had one last chance to pull out the win, and drove to the Edwardsville 12, where they called time out and sent out Wagner to try a 29-yard field goal to win it with 1.4 seconds left, Wagner's first try was good, but before the snap, Edwardsville called time out. On the second attempt, Wagner was wide right and no good. forcing overtime.

In Illinois' overtime rules, the ball is placed at the 10, and each team has four chances to score by any means. The Tigers won the coin toss and elected to go on offense first, and on the third play, Johnson scored from four yards out, and Walls' conversion made it 37-30 for Edwardsville. The Panthers had their turn on offense, and on fourth down, Michael hit Bonner from five yards out, with Wagner tying the game at 37-37 after the conversion.

The Panthers then went first on offense in the second overtime, and was stymied by the Edwardsville defense. Wagner hit a field goal from 22 yards out to give O'Fallon a 40-37 lead. On the Tigers' possession, Hampton went up the middle for eight yards, and on the next play, Johnson went right for the final two yards and the game-winning touchdown, sending the Edwardsville side wild with delight as the Tigers pulled out the 43-40 win.

Edwardsville is now 4-1 on the year, and will play at East St. Louis in the season finale, with the date and time to be announced for the conference championship.

Martin is very proud of his team and its efforts.

"Absolutely," Martin said. "The kids kept fighting, and they found a way to win. We've got a lot of young kids out here, and they still found a way to win. I'm proud of them."

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