

# Edwardsville-East St. Louis Battle To End In SWC Football Title Classic

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
April 24 2021 6:46 AM











EAST ST. LOUIS - Edwardsville and East St. Louis battled to the end in a classic Southwestern Conference title match at East Side on Friday night.

Running back Marquise Palmer ran for 168 yards, while freshman quarterback Robert "Pops" Battle ran for 124 more and also threw for 313 yards and three touchdowns as East St. Louis won its fifth straight Southwestern Conference title in an unforgettable 50-47 win over Edwardsville in the football season finale Friday night at Clyde C. Jordan Memorial Stadium. Edwardsville senior running back Justin Johnson, Jr. ran for 200 yards and four touchdowns in a magnificent performance to cap off his high school career in a game that was fitting for a championship match-up.

"Offensively," Tigers head coach Matt Martin deadpanned with a smile and laugh. "But the (defensive) coordinators don't feel too good. I thought as far as the effort and people not quitting, yes, I thought our kids kept fighting all the way to the end."

Edwardsville started freshman Jake Curry at quarterback in place of an injured Ryan Hampton, and Curry played well in the first half, helping to keep the Tigers in the game.

"Well, Ryan barely practiced all week," Martin said. "So we just kept working at it, getting reps. We made the decision today."

Johnson will go down as one of the greatest players in Edwardsville football history, and Martin saluted his do-it-all runner.

"I'm honestly, and I don't want to offend anybody, but I'm just going to say he's definitely the best running back that's ever played here," Martin said. "And I don't know, he might be on of the best football players, as a whole. You know, there's a lot of guys that went two ways, so that would be the only thing, but as far as a guy that absolutely carried a team, I've never seen it before."

Hampton came into the game in the second half, and gave the Tigers a big boost with his running ability and his able to hang on to the ball.

"Just a little more ball security," Martin said, "and a little better runner, bigger kid. The freshman made some good decisions in the running game, but when you're little, they can bring you down with arm tackles, right? And sometimes, you've got to be able to to break arm tackles."

As in the first game against the Flyers, a 52-21 loss in week three at Tiger Stadium, missed opportunities came back to haunt Edwardsville. And a couple of very close calls where the Tigers were denied two-point conversions also made a big difference.

"Yeah, we didn't," Martin said, "because we kept trying - what do we do? We kept running the ball off-tackle, and they kept proving to us we wouldn't able to. So we missed some opportunities. We also thought we had a two-point conversion over there, right?," pointing to the end where Grant Matarelli was stopped on a two-point try. "And there was another close one right over there," pointing to the opposite end, where Johnson was ruled stopped short of the goal line in the second half.

Flyers head coach Darren Sunkett was very happy with his team's effort, and also thought it was a great high school football game that kept everyone on the edge of their seats.

"Oh, no doubt," Sunkett said. "You saw both teams out there fighting for four straight quarters, and both teams definitely left it out there on the field. I'm proud of our guys for not dropping their head, and my hat's off to Edwardsville. They're a well-coached ball club who fought to the end. So you couldn't get a better game to sit there and watch from the sideline."

The Flyers bounced back nicely from giving up a 74-yard return by Mason Ahlers with the opening kickoff that gave the Tigers the early lead and played very well throughout the contest.

"We gave up the opening," Sunkett said, "and that pretty much sparked Edwardsville. And they rolled from there. But like I said, our guys kept fighting, and we kept going score-for-score with them, until we finally got ahead, and doubled those guys up before the half, and coming out at half. So, that was big, scoring before the half, then coming out back in the second half and scoring. And that was the difference in the ball game."

Sunkett and the Flyers were very grateful and happy to have the season, and it gave East Side a chance to do many things during the course of the shortened spring season.

"You've got a chance to see young guys prepared to play football," Sunkett said, "some guys who wouldn't have the opportunity to play varsity during the regular season. So we've got a chance to get our freshman quarterback some time, some freshmen (defensive backs) some time, just a lot of guys. They got varsity game experience, which is going to go a long way come the fall."

And Battle's performance was indicative of how good of a season he had, and his future for the Flyers is a bright one, indeed.

"Battle, you know, he improved day in and day out," Sunkett said, "week in and week out. So we definitely look for big things from him come fall."

The Tigers did get off to an electrifying start with Ahlers' 74-yard return with the opening kickoff, giving them a 7-0 lead after Gavin Walls' conversion kick. The Tigers then held on the opening possession after East Side had some nice completions from Battle to Jaylen Reed. On a fourth down punt, a high snap to Kavan Reed was recovered deep in Flyer territory, but Edwardsville was held on a fourth down play, giving the ball back to East Side.

On the second play from scrimmage in the next series, the Tigers recovered a fumble and were in business at the Flyers 19. But the defense stiffened, and on a fourth down play, Edwardsville faked a field goal attempt, but the pass was incomplete, giving the ball back to East Side. On the next possession, Battle advanced 45 yards with a keeper on the first play, then connected for a 23-yard touchdown pass to Kenneth Cotton with 3:07 left in the first, tying the game at 7-7 after the conversion by Peter Baxton, Jr.

It didn't take long for the Tigers to regain the lead, when Curry flipped the ball to Grant Matarelli on a reverse, and Matarelli took off 57 yards for a touchdown to give Edwardsville the lead back at 14-7. The Flyers came right back with a Battle completion to Luther Burden III, who made two great open field moves as the Oklahoma recruit sped 61 yards for the tying touchdown that made it 14-14 late in the first quarter.

On Edwardsville's next possession, Johnson made some good runs to pick up valuable yardage, and very early in the second quarter, Johnson went in from three yards out to give the Tigers the lead back at 20-14, but on a fake kick, Matarelli went right, and appeared to have crossed the goal line, but the officials ruled he was stopped just short to keep the score 20-14.

Later on in the second, a high snap on a fourth down punt got away from the Tigers, and the subsequent punt was blocked out of the end zone for a safety that cut the Tiger lead to 20-16. On the possession after the free kick, Battle went up the middle and appeared to have scored, but fumbled the ball at the goal line, and was recovered in the end zone by the Tigers for a touchback, giving them the ball at the 20. After an exchange of punts, the Flyers took the ball and went ahead 37 seconds from halftime on a 37-yard pass play from Battle to Burden to take a 23-20 lead at the interval.

After a stop by Edwardsville and a fumble recover by East Side to start the second half, the Flyers extended their lead to 29-20 on a three-yard run by Palmer, with the extra point being missed. The Tigers came right back with a drive that culminated in a Johnson 14-yard run to bring the score to 29-27 for East Side. After recovering a Flyer fumble on the next possession, Johnson went up the middle 25 yards for a go-ahead touchdown that made it 33-29, but on the two-pointer, Johnson went up the middle again, and appeared to cross the goal line, but was ruled down just short again, keeping the score as is with 3:01 left in the third.

On the Flyers' next possession, penalties left East Side with a first-and-38 situation, and the Tigers having the momentum. But two quick passing plays, one from Battle to Cotton for 18 yards, and Battle to Burden for 30 got the Flyers out of the hole and into the red zone. Palmer then ran 29 yards for a touchdown that made the score 36-33 and turning the game around in East Side's favor.

In the fourth quarter, the Flyers extended the lead to 42-33 on a two-yard run by Palmer, but the Tigers kept coming, and cut the lead to 42-40 on an 11-yard pass from Curry to Matarelli. Palmer then went 22 yards around right end, then went in on the left side for a two-point conversion with 4:10 left in regulation to give the Flyers a 50-40 lead. The Tigers cut the lead to 50-47 on an eight-yard run by Johnson with 1:54 left, but the Flyers were able to run out the clock and preserve their win.

The Flyers finish the season 5-1 and SWC champions, and Sunkett is already looking forward to getting things started for a regular fall season in 2021.

"I feel pretty good," Sunkett said. "I'm just ready to get back in the weight room on Monday and start preparing these guys for next fall's season."

The Tigers end up 4-2, and Martin was very happy with how things turned out for his players.

"I think we gave seniors, that most of them will never have a chance again to play organized football again," Martin said, "we gave them an opportunity to play games. Our younger guys that are coming back got an opportunity to get better, and see what it's all about. And hopefully energized for the off-season to get better, and maybe make a two-point difference."

And he's very proud of his team for how they kept fighting throughout the game and the shortened season.

"Yeah, I'm proud of them," Martin said. "I thought the kids fought."









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