

Edwardsville Wins Title: Evans Leads With 22, Harris Adds 20, Proctor 15, Powers 14, In Tight Battle Between Tigers-Redbirds

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EDWARDSVILLE - Edwardsville senior forward Elle Evans scored 22 points to lead the Tigers, while senior forward Syd Harris added 20 points as the Tigers overcame an opening 10-0 run by Alton to defeat the Redbirds 60-54 in the final of the IHSA Class 4A regional Friday night at Lucco-Jackson Gym.

It's Edwardsville's 18th straight regional championship, and the Tigers used their experience to help overcome the fast start by Alton to take the win and move on to next week's sectional hosted by Joliet Central.

"I'm glad to be out with a win, for sure," said Edwardsville head coach Caty Happe with a smile.

The Tigers' experience, as mentioned, was a big factor in the game as Edwardsville kept calm and chipped away at the Alton lead, eventually taking a lead they would never relinquish.

"They did," Happe said. "We fought back one possession at a time, which is how you've got to do it. And they hit most of their shots early, which, kudos to them for hitting those. But we were able to settle in a little bit, we got some looks that we wanted and it was great to see the kids come back."

Happe also had much praise for the Redbirds, a team that was vastly improved this season and looks to be one to reckoned with in the future.

"Oh absolutely," Happe said. "They've got a lot of talent, I mean, an all-new starting five this year than they had last year. So, developed a lot through this season and just a really good team."

The mood among the Tigers after Alton's opening run wasn't one of worry, but rather of determination.

"You know what? It wasn't down," Happe said. "They were just kind of upset with themselves. They wanted to make sure they could get themselves back into the game, not getting them down too early. And I thought they did a good job; Elle started us off getting the steal up top and getting an easy lay-up. And then, just one possession at a time, like I said."

The Redbirds stuck to their game plan early and played well, but in the end, the Tigers' experience showed.

"Their experience showed," said Alton head coach Deserea Howard. "We stuck to our game plan very well in the beginning, we got up, I think we got a little bit of shellshocked and we tried to focus on not thinking about that our game plan wouldn't work against them, because it's been working. We didn't get relaxed, we just didn't keep that foot to the metal like we usually do."

The opening 10-0 run did put a charge into the Redbirds to get started.

"Being in these type of games is something that's new to us," Howard said, "and they're not used to being down and having to claw back and we had been preparing situations on us getting down and coming back. And we did that a couple of times tonight. I think we should have capitalized a little bit more once we got them down."

A pair of threes from Proctor and Alyssa Lewis helped spark the Redbirds' opening run, going ahead 10-0 after just over two minutes in, but the Tigers were able to close the gap to 10-4 on Evans' steal and score and a pair of free throws from Harris. After an exchange of points, Kaitlyn Morningstar drove in for a basket to make it 12-8, but a Proctor drive to the hoop for a basket before the buzzer gave the Redbirds a 14-8 lead at quarter time.

A pair of Harris free throws at the start of the second quarter cut the lead again to 14-10, but a pair of threes from Laila Blakeny and Raglin, sandwiched around a Morningstar basket, put Alton up 20-13. The Tigers then went on a 12-0 run, with baskets from Macy

Silvey and Evans, a Harris free throw and a three-point play from Evans put Edwardsville ahead 21-20 with 2:44 left in the first half. A basket from Silvey put the Tigers ahead 23-20 before a Powers basket ended the run. Evans scored the half's last five points on a three up top and a driving lay-up to give Edwardsville a 28-23 halftime lead.

Silvey started the second half with a basket and a three to give the Tigers a 33-23 lead, but baskets from Raglin and Powers cut the lead to 33-27. Later on, a Proctor three got the Redbirds to within 35-33, then the Tigers outscored Alton the rest of the quarter 10-4, with Evans hitting another three, then converting a three-point play to give Edwardsville a 43-37 lead after three quarters.

The Tigers' lead became as much as 11 in the final quarter, but the Redbirds kept plugging away as Proctor and Lewis led a charge that cut the Edwardsville lead to 50-42. Harris then hit a three and converted on a pair of free throws to give the Tigers a 55-42 lead, but the Redbirds kept coming, eventually cutting the lead to the final score of 60-54, with the Tigers prevailing and advancing to the sectional.

Besides Evans and Harris, Silvey had seven points for Edwardsville, Morningstar had six points and Emma Garner had four points. Proctor led Alton with 15 points, with Powers scoring 14 points, Raglin and Blakeny had eight points each, Lewis had seven points and Talia Norman scored two points.

The Redbirds season ends at 20-7, and Howard knows that the Redbirds will be ready to go next season, with the year's experience under their belts.

"Absolutely," Howard said. "The biggest thing we needed this year was some experience. And we were able to get that, we were able to have some big games, some games that we lost. We saw a lot of adversity and I think we're ready for it next year. I'm proud of the girls, that's the biggest thing."

The Tigers are now 27-4 and move on to the Joliet Central sectional, where they'll play the winner of Saturday's Belleville West regional final between O'Fallon and Collinsville Tuesday night at 7 p.m. at a local site to be announced. Happe is expecting a tough game regardless of whom the Tigers play.

"It's going to be a dogfight," Happe said. "It always is. We'll enjoy this one tonight, we'll go watch them tomorrow and hopefully, it's another great game on Tuesday."