

Cunningham Comes Up With Big Shots At Key Moments In Final Set, Tigers Hold Off Maroons

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - Freshman Ciara Cunningham played a key role in the third and final set of Edwardsville's Southwestern Conference girls volleyball match on Thursday night, coming up with the key shots at critical times and putting the match away with a kill to help give the Tigers a 25-15, 18-25, 25-20 win over Belleville West at Lucco-Jackson Gym.



The win keeps the Tigers' conference winning streak alive at 58 consecutive matches, but it didn't come easy as the Maroons rallied back to take the second set and held a lead in the final set, but the Tigers rallied back to take control of the set and match.

"Our girls, we worked hard to make those opportunities," said Edwardsville head coach Heather Ohlau. "Belleville West did a really nice job. They're known for their tough defense and being scrappy. So we had to work to answer back, being able to pick up the balls and our offense take advantage of those opportunities. We had to work hard tonight. I'm glad we have these tough games; as I said, Belleville West is a tough opponent defensively and on offense. They were mixing it up and kept scrambling, which our girls were able to work through."

The Maroons picked up momentum during the second set and played well to tie the match. Ohlau sent an encouraging message to the Tigers between sets.

"That this is our court," Ohlau said. "Play like you are on your court and you take control of the game. Volleyball is all about the ups and downs and the momentum. So you've got to find a way to get that momentum back and run with it."

The Tigers, with so many new players to the varsity, are still trying to find and define their roles on the team. For that, Ohlau is taking a day-by-day approach.

"Yeah, I think, with the large class from last year, this group is still finding their roles," Ohlau said, "and what they want to be known for. And that's what we focus on. Every day is a new day, this team is this team and we've just got to learn and grow together and help each other to be the best players on the court."



Three Edwardsville players came up with 10 digs or more in the match, a testament to the Tigers' defense.

"They were scrappy and I wish we were a little bit more scrappy at times," Ohlau said with a smile. "But they, again, we're creating those opportunities and the multiple chances for our offense to be able to put the ball away. So you can't have an attack without a pass, so we rely a lot on our defense to do what they can to be there for us."

Cunningham was the key player on the night for the Tigers and the freshman hitter is starting to come into her own.

"Yeah, I think she's starting to find her own," Ohlau said. "She fuels from the team, the team fuels her to do better and gosh, she did an amazing job. I think that allowed us in that third set to run a little bit more efficiently."

The first set started out very evenly, with the Tigers going ahead by two and maintaining the lead, but West was able to climb back and tie the set. With the Tigers ahead 9-8, Megan Knobeloch served up a pair of points to give the Tigers an 11-8 lead before the Maroons rallied to tie the set 11-11 behind good play from J'La Sparks.

Edwardsville got the ball back at 12-11 and went on a roll, scoring eight of the next 10 points to go ahead 20-13, then scored five of the set's final seven points to win the set 25-15 and take a 1-0 lead in the match.



The second set started much like the first, with the Tigers eventually taking a 5-3 lead, but back came the Maroons, as Ashley Geluck served up six points in a row, adding to the cause with a tremendous kill during the string that put West up 9-5. The Maroons brought the score to 12-7 before the Tigers rallied behind Cunningham and Sydney Davis to bring the score to 13-11. The Maroons were able to stop the rally and the teams exchanged points to bring the score to 15-13. Maddie Scheid then served up three straight points to make it 18-13, forcing an Edwardsville time-out. West then scored seven of the set's final 10 points, ending the set with an Edwardsville service error to give the Maroons a 25-18 win to tie the match up at 1-1.

West seized the momentum at the start of the final set, leading 4-2, but the Tigers rallied to tie the set 4-4 and after an exchange that saw the Tigers go up 7-5, Addie Reader put the Tigers on a roll, serving up six consecutive points to give Edwardsville a 13-5 lead. Edwardsville kept the momentum on its side, going up 17-8, after which the serving of Addie Gagen helped the Maroons rally back to 17-13. After an exchange that made the

score 18-15, the Tigers scored seven of the match's final 12 points, using great shots from Cunningham and ending the match with a Cunningham spike to give the Tigers a 25-20 win and the match 2-1.

Vyla Hupp had 10 kills for Edwardsville, while Davis had nine and both Cunningham and Ava Waltenberger had six each, Knobeloch had 20 assists and Sara Gouy had 17, Davis came up with 17 digs, while Hupp had 12 and Hanna Matarelli had 10, Addie Reader served up 13 points and Knobeloch had eight points and two aces.

The Tigers are now 14-3 and go on the road for their next two matches, at O'Fallon next Tuesday and at Cor Jesu Academy in Affton, Mo. next Wednesday, both matches starting at 5:30 p.m. Ohlau knows that both teams displayed much resiliency throughout the match and also knows it the tough matches such as this that will help make the Tigers better in the long run.

"Yeah, I like the tough matches," Ohlau said. "I like the ones that make us work because to get to the end goal of what these girls want to do, we've got to be able to battle and outlast and outplay every opponent that we see coming up. Just live to see another day."





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