

Gaston Scores Four Times, Larson Has Go-Ahead TD With 1:43 Left In Regulation, Tigers Take Dramatic 43-36 Playoff Win

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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O'FALLON - Quarterback Jake Curry hit Joey DeMare with an 87-yard pass play, then De'Shawn Larson scored on the next play to help give Edwardsville a dramatic 43-36 win over O'Fallon in the first round of the IHSA Class 8A football playoffs Saturday night at OTHS Panther Stadium.



The winning touchdown took place on the ensuing drive after the Panthers took a 36-35 lead on a 32-yard touchdown pass from Colt Michael to Jalen Smith and two-point conversion run by Chris Caldwell with 2:18 left.

The Tigers then scored on the ensuing drive and got the defensive stop they needed on the next drive to preserve the win. When the Tigers fell behind after the touchdown and two-point convert, Edwardsville head coach Matt Martin kept encouraging his club.

"You know, I keep working with this team because, in some ways, we're still young," Martin said in his postgame interview. "Sometimes, the body language rides a little high or a little low with how the game's going. I kept telling them there's two minutes and 18 seconds, let's get a great return, and then, the offense drives the ball. Well, we didn't drive it, we big-played it. We kept fighting, that was a great catch, he was pretty well open. Sometimes, those are the most difficult catches, great protection and a great throw by Jake."

Martin also expressed his feelings about playing the Panthers in the first round.

"I just want to say this: O'Fallon's a great team," Martin said. "I understand there's got to be seedings, but really, what we want to do is the root for O'Fallon. We were hoping they'd play someone else and we'd play someone else and we root for each other. Kind

of enemies in season, but postseason, we want to kind of cheer each other on. Unfortunately, someone's gotta lose."

On the drive that put the Panthers ahead, Martin gave praise to Smith and his efforts.

"That was a big play," Martin said. "They're a great offense; (Smith's) is arguably the best player in the (Southwestern) conference, right with the ball in his hands. So, he's a tough one to stop."





The Tigers' Daion Gaston had an incredible night himself, catching three touchdown passes from Curry and taking a kickoff back 85 yards for another touchdown.

"Daion makes an argument for himself, doesn't he?" Martin said. "He's pretty special, he's pretty special. I want the ball in his hands. Kellen (Brnfre's) a pretty good one too."

The fact that the Tigers are through to the second round, means a lot to everyone as well. Along with an intangible that's not talked about much.

"I'm just proud of these kids," Martin said. "Here's the thing that nobody talks about: You've got your younger guys up, getting another week of practice. So when the summer hits, those younger guys are going to be more familiar with the process. And that's a huge advantage right there."

The Tigers opened the scoring on their first possession of the game when Curry threw 11 yards to DeMare with 5:37 left in the first quarter to take a 7-0 lead after Tyler Dacus added the conversion. O'Fallon took the ensuing kickoff and went down the field 16 plays and 62 yards in 6:32 as Caldwell scored from one yard out on early in the second quarter, but the conversion kick was partially blocked. leaving the score 7-6 for the Tigers.

Edwardsville came right back on their next possession as Curry found Gaston in the corner of the end zone from 19 yards away to go up 14-6 after Dacus' point after. It only took one play for the Panthers to counter, with Michael hitting Smith for a 65-yard touchdown pass and a Kylan Green two-point conversion to tie the game 14-14 with 9:03 left in the first half.

The Tigers took the lead right back on Gaston's 85-yard kickoff return, in which he ran right away from the coverage right into the end zone to give Edwardsville the lead right back at 21-14 after the conversion with 8:51 to go. The Panthers came right back with another touchdown drive that climaxed with a three-yard run by Green to make it 21-20, but the point after was blocked again, preserving the Tigers' slim advantage at halftime.

It didn't take Edwardsville long to get back on the board, getting the second-half kickoff and taking off on a five-play, 78-yard drive that ended spectacularly when Gaston scored his third touchdown of the night, taking a pass from Curry, making a brilliant spin move around a defender and taking off on a 55-yard run that ended in a touchdown and a 28-20 Tiger lead.

The combination of Curry to Gaston struck again early in the fourth quarter when Gaston took a Curry throw 63 yards into the end zone for a 35-20 Tiger lead. The Panthers then went on a long drive of their own, culminating with an 11-yard run by

Caldwell, then taking a two-point pass from Michael with 7:25 left in regulation to cut the lead to 35-28. Late in the game, after an Edwardsville punt, O'Fallon took 59 seconds to go down the field and scored on the 32-yard pass play from Michael to Smith, with Caldwell adding the two-pointer to give the Panthers their only lead at 36-35.

On the first play after the kickoff, Curry found DeMare in the open and hit him with a perfectly thrown pass that DeMare took in stride and raced down to the Panther two, where he was stopped. Larson scored on the next play, then added on a two-point conversion of his own to give the Tigers the lead back at 43-36. On the final O'Fallon possession, a pass from Michael to Caldwell was stopped well short of the first down, giving the Tigers the ball back and the 43-36 win.

Edwardsville is now 7-3 on the year and advances to a second-round game against Wilmette Loyola Academy, who defeated Plainfield South 42-7 on Saturday afternoon to advance. The site, date, and kickoff time will be announced by the IHSA office on Monday afternoon.





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