

Rich Leads Four Players In Double Figures With 16 Points, Allen Has 13 For Tigers, Flyers Hit On All Cylinders

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - Senior Macaleab Rich led four players in double figures with 16 points as East St. Louis used an opening 17-3 run to go on to a 68-35 win over Edwardsville in a Southwestern Conference game Tuesday night at Lucco-Jackson Gym.



The Flyers hit threes on a consistent basis to break open the game early on, jumping out to a 21-9 lead after the first quarter and 41-19 at halftime, but the Tigers kept striving throughout the entire game, never giving up and played hard for the whole game.

"I actually thought we executed things well," said Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas. "We got shots that we wanted, we got some open threes. But if East St. Louis shoot the ball that well, they were like the (1995-96 Chicago) Bulls. They'll have a hard time losing the rest of the year.

"You try to take away their strengths and make them beat you with their weaknesses and tonight, they had no weaknesses. (D'Necco Rucker) and (Dainen Rucker) and (McKenly Falconer) (all made threes and those guys had not made many in the year. And you've got to worry about (Rich) all the time and you've got to get to (Demarion Brown) in the post. So they were able to put a lot of pressure on our defense and score 24 points in the first half just on threes. And that's a lot to weather for our guys, especially with some guys out injury-wise right now. East St. Louis was just really good, but we're not down on our guys. We thought they really tried hard and honestly executed things well for the most part."

The Tigers give a very good effort every night and also practice hard every day, which shows on the court during the games.

"Yeah, like I said, our guys practice hard every day," Battas said, "and they're competitive. I think they wish they could have played a little bit better, but in sports, sometimes, this happens and East St. Louis is a really good team. So, we're not surprised, I think we just were given a tall task with how many perimeter shots they were able to make tonight."

The quality of East Side's play was one where the Flyers can contend for - and possibly win - a long-awaited and well-deserved IHSA Class 3A championship this season.

"Well, if they play like that, they can beat anyone in the state, there's no doubt," Battas said. "I told their coach (Mark Chambers) after the game that if they continue to play at that level, it'll be hard for anybody to beat that team."

The Tigers had some good play themselves, with Malik Allen leading the Tigers with 13 points.

"I thought A.J. (Tillman) had a good game," Battas said, "and Jake (Curry) got to the basket and made some plays around the rim and both those guys are really good passers. We only had four turnovers at halftime, so those guys are taking care of the basketball and getting us shots on offense. I thought (Jonathan) Stump came in and gave us some good minutes and rebounded well.

"Kris Crosby has stepped up the last couple of games. We think Kris has a bright future for us. He's taken on more of a role as Isayah (Kloster) has been banged up. So, tonight, I thought he competed hard and did a lot of good things. Malik led us in scoring again; he's been really consistent with that. Malik had gotten a lot better in taking care of the ball and I thought did a lot of good things on defense for us. So, each of our guys played well in their own right. It was just a good night for the Flyers and a tough night for us."

For his part, Chambers is feeling very good about his team, despite not having played much over the Holidays.

"I'm feeling pretty good about the group," Chambers said. "We've had a couple of weeks off, we've been in the lab working real hard, getting ready for this January-February-March stretch. I've been saying from the time I've been here that we play for March and that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to get prepared for that."

Rich has had a tremendous season and has played very relaxed and confidently after signing to play with Kansas State before the season began.

"Yeah, it took a whole lot of pressure off of him," Chambers said. "He can now just relax and go play basketball, be a good teammate and be a good leader and that's what he's doing for us."

Rich is definitely the focal point of the Flyers, but he's also surrounded by a very good supporting cast that makes East Side one of the area's best teams.

"That's the thing about us," Chambers said. "It's hard to scout us because you don't know from night to night who's going to beat you. So, we've got four guys who are all going to play college basketball, starting around him. So we're just excited about this group. We're just trying to keep them focused and keep working hard. And so far, they're doing really good."

The Flyers have played exceptionally well all season, save for one or two slip-ups, and have the look of a contender.

"We're playing well," Chambers said. "I still think we have levels to this group. We had one slip-up against a conference team there. But our best basketball is yet to come and that's what we tell them every day. We take one day at a time and we're just getting better every day. These guys, just work really hard because they want to be successful. And they want a championship in March. And that's what we're working for."

A long-deserved championship as well.

"Well, I mean, yeah," Chambers said. "Exactly, since '19, COVID has kind of put us back a little bit, but our program is really on the right path and with guys like Macaleab leading it, I feel really, really happy about our future. Our program is working hard to get better and that's what you're going to see from here on out."



The game started out with a crescendo of threes, as Rich and Antwan Robinson both hit to give the Flyers a 6-0 lead before Tillman hit a three of his own to halve the lead at 6-3. East Side answered with threes from a pair of threes from D'Necco Rucker, a pair of free throws by Dainen Rucker, and another three from Rich to make it 17-3, forcing an Edwardsville time-out. Allen and Curry scored on drives down the baseline to help bring the Tigers back, but the Flyers led after the first 21-9.

Allen sunk a three to start the second quarter for Edwardsville, with East Side scoring the next seven points, highlighted by the first of four dunks by Rich on the night as the Flyers went ahead 28-11. East Side then went on a 13-8 run the remainder of the quarter to take a 41-19 lead at halftime.

East Side started the second half off a Rich dunk off a rebound to go up 43-19, but the Tigers fought back to cut the lead to 45-24 on a basket by Allen, but the Flyers then went on an 11-9 run to take a 56-31 lead after the third quarter and in the fourth, a three from Falconer gave East Side a 61-31 lead to trigger the running clock rule. The Flyers outscored the Tigers 7-4 for the remainder of the period to take the 68-35 win.

Rich led the Flyers with 16 points, while Robinson hit for 12 points, both Demarion Brown and Dainen Rucker scored 10 points each, D'Necco Rucker had eight points, Falconer scored seven points and Cameron Boone and Arlandieous Brown both had two points apiece.

Allen led the Tigers with 13 points, with Tillman adding eight points, Stump had six points, Alec Marchetto scored four points and both Curry and Crosby had two points each.

The Flyers are now 9-1 on the season and host O'Fallon on Friday night at 7:30 p.m, then play in the Highland Shootout against Chicago Staley Saturday afternoon at 2 p.m., then host Belleville East on Jan. 10 at 7:30 p.m.

The Tigers go to 9-7 and travel to Collinsville on Friday night, then are at Belleville West on Jan. 10 and host Alton on Jan. 13, with all games starting at 7:30 p.m.





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