

Tigers Lead 18-15 At Halftime, But Flyers Take Control In Third Quarter With 13-5 Run, Defeats Edwardsville

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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BELLEVILLE - After trailing at halftime 18-15, East St. Louis took control of the game with a 13-5 run to open the third quarter, then hit their free throws in the fourth quarter to go on to a 58-37 win over Edwardsville in a Southwestern Conference boys basketball game Friday night at Lynx Arena at Lindenwood University's Belleville campus, East Side's temporary home while the gym at East St. Louis Senior High is being renovated.

The loss snapped a six-game winning streak for the Tigers, but Edwardsville has still won 10 of their last 12 games. The Tigers are now 19-9 heading into the final week of the season.

The Tigers played very well in the first half, limiting the East Side offense to 15 points before the Flyers started taking control in the third quarter.

"Well, we're proud of our guys," said Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas. "I thought our execution of our defensive plan and our offensive plan was good. We had eight assists in the first half on 10 baskets, which is really good since we're sharing the ball well. They just make it hard, we got behind in the third quarter a little bit, six or seven points. And they, they were being deliberate on offense and to force them, we've got to press and get out all over them. Well, that doesn't suit our guys very well, so once we've got to press and trap. To their credit, they made their free throws and stretched the lead

out a little bit. That was a good, tough Southwestern Conference game, and credit to East St. Louis, they were the better team tonight."

Allen played well all throughout the game, leading with 19 points, including all eight in the opening quarter, and has been playing exceptionally well during the current stretch for the Tigers.

"Malik's done a pretty good job in practice," Battas said. "He shoots a lot of shots every day, he's also getting better at reading screens and cutting. And they made that hard for him, but him to still score 19 points is a credit to him. And also A.J. (Tillman) for assisting those and our guys screening to get him open, Isayah (Kloster) and Kris (Crosby) and Iose (Epenesa) did a good job with that.

"So, yeah, there's a lot of things to build on,," Battas continued, "and we've still won a lot of games here recently and I think we're playing our best basketball heading into the postseason."

The Tigers current 10-of-12 string, and their 16-4 mark since before the holidays, is a testament to how hard the players have worked in their practice sessions.

"Yeah, it's a credit to our guys," Battas said. "They've been practicing well every day, they like each other, they're a joy to work with and I just hope as a coach, I don't let them down and give them their best experience we can have these last couple of weeks."

Both teams started the game out by trading baskets, with a pair of free throws from Rich giving the Flyers a 4-2 lead, then Allen took charge by hitting back-to-back threes to give the Tigers an 8-4 lead, with the quarter ending with Edwardsville ahead 8-6. Kloster and Tillman scored to expand the lead to 12-6, forcing an East Side time out, after which Epenesa and Kloster scored and Allen hit on a pair of free throws to give Edwardsville an 18-8 lead. The Flyers scored the final seven points of the quarter on a pair of baskets, with McKenly Falconer scoring at the buzzer to cut the Tiger lead to 18-15 at halftime.

Allen sunk another three to give Edwardsville a 21-18 lead at the start of the third quarter and after Kloster scored to make it 23-20, the Flyers went to work. Baskets by Cameron Boone and D'Necco Rucker gave East Side the lead at 24-23 and Dainen Rucker scored back-to-back, the second on a spectacular floater, to expand the lead to 28-23. Free throws put the lead to 30-23 before Jonathan Stump hit a three to cut the edge to 30-26, but the Flyers. led by D'Necco Rucker and Rich, scored the last nine points of the quarter to expand the lead to 39-26.

Allen hit on a three and Tillman scored to cut the East Side lead to 39-31 at the start of the fourth quarter, with the Flyers going into a delay game where they held the ball for over a minute, then down the stretch, the Flyers went nine-of-11 from the free throw line to help expand the lead, sealing the win with a Rich dunk with 1:30 left to help the Flyers to their 58-38 win.

Rich led the Flyers with 13 points, while D'Necco Rucker had nine points and Dainan Rucker added six. Allen led the Tigers with his 19 points, while Kloster added eight points and Stump scored five points.

Chambers also had very kind words for the Tigers.

"Edwardsville, obviously, they always play us tough," Chambers said. "I think coach (Battas) had a really good game plan and I wish them well. I think they will have a good little run in the playoffs as well."

The Tigers close out the regular season at home with a pair of key conference games, hosting Collinsville on Tuesday and Belleville West next Friday, with both also starting at 7:30 p.m. Battas is also optimistic about the Edwardsville chances in Class 4A.

"Just looking forward next week, two more home games," Battas said, "and then, gearing up for the postseason up in Quincy, with some tough opponents up there."



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