

Vonner's 47-Yard Interception Return For TD At Start Of Second Half Helps Spark Edwardsville to 35-14 Playoff Win Over West Aurora

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
October 29 2023 6:32 AM





EDWARDSVILLE - Senior linebacker Jaiden Vonner intercepted a Mason Atkins pass very early in the second half and returned it 47 yards for a touchdown that sparked Edwardsville to a 35-14 win over West Aurora in the first round of the IHSA Class 8A football playoffs on a dreary Saturday afternoon at Tiger Stadium.

The interception return broke a 7-7 halftime tie and sparked the Tigers to 28 unanswered points in the second half that put Edwardsville through to a second-round home matchup against Glen Ellyn Glenbard West, a 23-6 winner over Naperville North Friday afternoon. The date and time for the game will be announced by the IHSA on Monday afternoon.

The win put the Tigers' record to 9-1 on the year and was first-year head coach Kelsey Pickering's first-ever postseason win. The feeling hadn't yet sunk in yet during his postgame interview.

"I don't know. About the same, maybe," Pickering said with a smile and laugh. "I know it means more. The thing is when you know you can do some things differently. And the hard part, coaching, is that we're already looking at next week, where I look at fixes we have to make. So, we have to remind ourselves to go out and enjoy this. Because playoff wins, any win in our conference in this state is not easy. So, Being able to take a minute to enjoy it is going to be important."

It was a very lethargic first half by both teams, where mistakes, dropped passes and other errors ruled the day. After Vonner's interception return for the touchdown, it brought the Tigers to life, and they were the better team after that.

"Yeah, you know, he's been in the right spot quite a few times this year," Pickering said. "He's just doing a great job. He's really building off last year."

Pickering agreed it was a key play in the game that gave Edwardsville the kick-start it needed at the time.

"Well, again, I think when you look at momentum swings," Pickering said, "that's one of them. And anytime you can score on another phase of the game besides offense, that's a big turn. That means something, and you could see our sideline kind of ignite. It really sparks everybody else up. So getting a momentum change like that's always a great time."

The play also helped settle the offense down, as they were able to find its rhythm and make plays that helped the Tigers pull away.

"I think offensively, we've used just our own mistakes," Pickering said. "That's a very good team, don't get me wrong. I won't take anything away from West Aurora; they are a very good football team. A lot of the things we've seen, the fumbles, not hanging onto the ball, the missed catches, whether it's the elements, whatever, we're both playing in it. And so, we'll have to figure those things out. I think this is the first cold weather we've had all year. So, I think that makes a little bit of the difference, but we'll be able to make the corrections that we need to."



The Tigers were able to establish their ground game much better in the second half, behind the blocking of an outstanding offensive line.

"The offensive line does a good job," Pickering said. "They block their tails off. It's nice to know what we can do."

Edwardsville received the opening kickoff and in two plays, a 54-yard run by Jake Curry and a 19-yard reception by Clayton Lakatos, the Tigers were on the Blackhawks' seven, but on the next play, West Aurora recovered a fumble. It set up a 95-yard march in five plays, with Atkins connecting with Max Poss for a 74-yard touchdown to put West Aurora up 7-0 with 8:39 left in the opening term.

The defenses took over from there, but on both sides, key penalties, dropped passes and mistakes were common, especially on the Edwardsville side, where dropped passes cost the Tigers dearly. Edwardsville was able to put things together in the second quarter and went on an eight-play, 82-yard drive where Curry connected twice with Kaylon Bursey for key first downs. The drive ended with an 11-yard pass to Bursey, who found the corner of the end zone to tie the score at 7-7 with 8:18 left in the first half.

The Blackhawks launched a drive that stalled out at the Edwardsville 23 and Casey B. Roney missed a 40-yard field goal try wide left to keep the score tied. The Tigers fumbled the ball away almost immediately, giving West Aurora another chance, but the Tiger defense came up big to keep the score tied at 7-7 at halftime.

On the sixth play of the second half, with Atkins back to throw, Vonner stepped in front of his pass to intercept and took it down the far sidelines 47 yards for the touchdown that put the Tigers up for good at 13-7, with the conversion kick being blocked.

Later in the quarter, going into the start of the fourth, with the big play a 15-yard pass play from Curry to Joey DeMare, which set up a 10-yard run by Patrick Chism for a touchdown, and after a two-point pass from Curry to DeMare, the Tigers went ahead 21-7 with 11:08 left in regulation.

Edwardsville further extended its lead on the next possession, where Curry ran 14 yards for the touchdown that made it 28-7. Later on, Curry climaxed another drive with a one-yard sneak over the middle for his second score of the game making the score 35-7. The Blackhawks were able to a late score when Atkins threw seven yards to Terrence Smith, where the Tigers ran out the clock to give them their 35-14 win.

West Aurora ends its season 5-5, while the Tigers go to 9-1 and to their second-round date against the Hilltoppers next weekend, with the date and time to be announced.

"Perfect," Pickering said. And when asked about Glenbard West.

"Let me deal with this week first," he said with a smile and laugh. "Let me put this one to bed."







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