

Allen Makes Strong Return, Epenesa Solid Under Basket, But Red-Hot Panthers Prevail 64-46

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O'FALLON - Malik Allen and Iose Epenesa both were outstanding for Edwardsville's boys basketball team Tuesday at O'Fallon, but the Panthers were red hot shooting for most of the night and walked away with a 64-46 win at the OTHS Panther Dome.

Allen led the Tigers with 16 points, while Epenesa had 10 points, A.J. Tillman scored six points, and Herbert Martin scored five points. Epenesa was powerful once again on the boards.

O'Fallon senior forward Rini Harris led with 21 points, while senior guard Jaeden Rush added 15 points.

The Panthers opened the game with a 7-2 run, with the Tigers tying the game later on, but a 9-1 run at the end of the period set the tone for the rest of the game, as Edwardsville tried to play catch-up, and did have some good moments, but not enough to overcome the deficit, which became as much as 20 during the fourth quarter.

"It is really difficult to play from behind," said Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas, "especially that far behind on the road. We just weren't sharp early, the transition defense wasn't great, and there are some things that we'll look at as a staff and try to put

our guys in better spots and try to have them more prepared for certain situations. But, it was one of those games where we got behind; we did have some flashes there of good things.

"Overall, tonight, they just were able to execute better than us, make more shots, and even though we did execute well, we put up a lot of threes and missed them," Battas continued. "So, tonight was just kind of a combination of a really tough game against a good team. We weren't perfect in our execution, but when we did execute, we really had a hard time getting shots to fall."





"We're going to be a perimeter-based team," Battas said. "We have some guards that can do good stuff, and Iose (Epenesa) was good tonight. But without Kris (Crosby), who doesn't play the whole 32 minutes; so we went really small. I think the thing we've got to get corrected as fast as we can is our defense."

"We've traditionally been one of the better defenses in the state, and when you're a perimeter-based team, there's going to be nights when you're not shooting great," Battas said. "Those are the ones you find out and still hold them in the 40s, and traditionally, we've won a lot of those in the past. We've just got to get our guys there, we've got to get our guys a little bit better on defense, so we can win those games. Even when the shots aren't falling."

Harris has been tough to handle in the past for the Tigers, especially in important games, and Tuesday was no exception. Battas feels letting the other team's best players have good games has been a problem thus far.

"We were really frustrated with our defense," Battas said. We spent a lot of time on (Rush) and (Harris), and we just didn't execute. We'll have to look at personnel and put guys in better spots. You never want a team to beat you with their two best players, and we've had a habit this year of letting the other team's best players lead them in scoring. Traditionally, when our defense is good, we limit their leading scorers, but tonight, and

this season, we've had a hard time stopping the other team's best players, which is a little bit unique for us."

On the bright side, Malik Allen returned from injury to play his first game of the season, and led the Tigers with 16 points and played very well in his return.

"Malik was solid," Battas said, "and did some good things for us. I think he's looking forward to helping the team, and he was able to insert himself tonight and help out. We'll just keep getting better with him moving forward."

Rush started off the game with a three-point play, while Harris hit back-to-back to give O'Fallon a 7-2 lead in the opening quarter. A.J. Tillman hit a pair of free throws and Allen canned a three in the corner to tie the game 7-7, but from there, Harris, Will Brown, Jr. and a three from Brenton Hunter gave O'Fallon a 14-7 lead as part of a 9-1 run that gave the Panthers a 16-8 lead after the first quarter.

Brown, Rush and Harris all combined for the first seven points of the second quarter to up the lead to 23-8. After another three-point play made it 26-10, Allen hit a three late in the quarter and Martin scored to cut the O'Fallon lead to 33-17 at halftime.

The Tigers managed to stay somewhat close in the third, as the Panthers came out to take a 37-23 edge at the start of the quarter, with Edwardsville free throw shooting and good play from Allen and Epenesa allowing the Tigers to come back to within 46-36 after three quarters. But the Panthers went on a 14-4 run at the start of the fourth quarter to make the score 60-40, and from there, O'Fallon went on to their 64-46 win.

To go along with Harris' 21 points and Rush's 15, Brown added 14 points for the Panthers, while Hunter scored nine points, Caden Saunders had three points and Calvin Dees came up with two points.

O'Fallon is now 5-2 on the year, while Edwardsville goes to 3-3 and next plays Belleville East at home on Friday night, then plays St. Louis City schools in their next three games, meeting Gateway STEM on Monday, Roosevelt next Tuesday, with both

games starting at 7:30 p.m., and St. Mary's Southside Catholic at the Carbondale Shootout Dec. 15 at 5 p.m.



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