

Warriors Win Ninth Straight - Defeat Edwardsville Again In Jersey Mid-Winter Classic Championship

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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JERSEYVILLE – The Warriors found themselves at 4-8 on the season after a first-round loss to Decatur MacArthur in the Prairie Farms Holiday Classic in Collinsville back on Dec. 27.

Since then, they've rattled off nine wins in a row now including back-to-back wins over Alton and Edwardsville to win the Jersey Mid-Winter Classic.

That's a heck of a way to turn a season around.

"It's a great way," Granite City head coach Gerard Moore said. "The group we have is a special group because we have a bunch of seniors. These guys have been talking about having a successful season all Fall. To see them have some success is really special."

After a 49-46 win over Alton on Tuesday, Granite beat Jacksonville 48-46 to get into the championship game where they'd face Edwardsville.

The Warriors took it to the Tigers and won 47-43.

Iose Epenesa scored the game's opening basket, and little did he know that would be the only time his team led the game.

From there, Granite scored the next six points capped off by an emphatic dunk from Mario Brown which brought the crowd to life.

Edwardsville's Kris Krosby responded with a basket to make it 6-4, but the Warriors ended the quarter on an eight-point run to lead 14-4 after one.

Andrew Walker hit back-to-back threes along with Alvin Valentine's basket to close out the first.

Two quick baskets from Malik Allen would cut the deficit to 16-10 before Granite scored the next seven points, capped off by Milton Dowell's three to make it 23-20.

The teams traded baskets the rest of the way and the Warriors led 27-17 at halftime.

Granite opened the second half on an 8-3 run and after Evan Brewer's three his team led 35-20, their biggest lead of the night.

Edwardsville outscored Granite 11-4 for the rest of the quarter and trailed 39-31 after three.

The Tigers made Granite sweat a little bit in the final frame. After Brewer's basket made it a 10-point lead again, Allen went to work with back-to-back baskets to make it 41-35.

Brewer made two free throws at the other end before Donovan Coates drilled a three and Miccah Butler scored a basket to make it 43-40 with just under two minutes remaining.

The game went into a frenzy when Allen dropped in a step-back three to tie the game at 43.

But Walker found a lane to the basket and gave Granite its lead back. So, with 37 seconds left on the clock, the Tigers inbounded the ball needing a three.

Coates got one off, but it was a contested shot that hit the rim and bounced away.

Valentine was fouled but only made one free throw, giving Edwardsville another chance to tie with 16 seconds left. But the Tigers would turn it over and Brewer made it a two-possession game with his free throw with less than a second left.

Coach Moore knew that Edwardsville could mount a comeback.

“You know, we were up by 15 and I knew that was just a two-point lead,” he said with a laugh.

“I’m watching the guys’ body language of Edwardsville and for some reason, they did not come out playing hard. They were flat. That was not what we expected but I knew at some point their coach was going to fire them up and it would turn into a game. They caught fire there at the end and I’m just happy that we survived.”

“I felt like we needed this championship more than Edwardsville,” Moore said. “We’ve come out and been resilient and we are getting better every day. We just need to continue to play good basketball at the end of the year. If we do that, we might have a chance.”

Brewer led the Warriors with 14 points while Walker added 12. Brown had eight, Valentine had five, and Trevon Bond and Dowell each scored three.

Brown would go on to win tournament MVP honors.

“I actually gave the trophy to my boy Evan (Brewer) because I feel he deserved it more,” Brown said. “He was working, him and Andrew (Walker), a freshman.”

“It means a lot,” Brown said about winning this tournament. “Coming together with the guys, and playing hard, we wanted it. I feel like we just wanted it more.”

Edwardsville falls to 14-8 on the season.

“They were amazing,” Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas said of Granite City.

“I can’t believe what a high level some of their guys played. 0 (Walker) makes two threes in front of us, 33 (Brewer) makes a three down there. I think traditionally, those guys don’t make very many. We get a really good look for some of our guys that shoot 40 percent that don’t go in and that’s the difference.”

Allen led the Tigers with 15 points, Coates had 11 and Epenesa had 10.

The two teams met last year in the Mid-Winter Classic championship game; a game Granite City won 51-50 on a buzzer-beater.

If they meet again this year it would have to be in the postseason.