

# Tillman Scores 20 Points, O'Fallon Hits Free Throws In Clutch, Takes Hard Fought 60-55 Win Over Tigers

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EDWARDSVILLE - A.J. Tillman scored 20 points to lead Edwardsville, but clutch fourth quarter free throw shooting helped give O'Fallon a hard-fought 60-55 win over the Tigers in an exciting Southwestern Conference boys basketball game Friday night at Lucco-Jackson Gym.

The game served as the annual salute to Lincoln School in Edwardsville, which was attended by African-Americans in the days before integration. The Tigers wore throwback uniforms honoring the Lincoln High Trojans for the game.

For the game itself, it was a typical Southwestern Conference battle, where both teams played very well, and a few plays made the difference in the outcome.

"Yeah, O'Fallon's really good," said Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas. "That was a tough game, I thought our guys tried really hard; they just made a few more baskets than we did. But I'm really proud of our guys, and we're just going to keep working. I think our last four or five games have been one-possession games, and that's just kid of the time of the year, where all these games are going to be close to us in our league. So, we'll just keep getting better, and hope we can make a few more baskets, and feel a little bit better when that buzzer goes off."

The Tigers had a chance to tie the game in the final seconds, but Tillman missed a three that would have drawn Edwardsville level, the Panthers recovered the rebound and hit the free throws to put the game away.

"We had a time out, so we had a sideline play that we practice," Battas said. "I changed it. I wish I could do it again. I changed the thing with the guys, and we were on different pages, and I told them I felt bad about that call; I wish I could have that one back. But we still got the ball in A.J.'s hands, which always makes you feel good. But they guarded it good. We had a chance there, and I think the goal in a competitive game is we always have a chance to win it down the stretch. Our guys executed well, I just wish I could have got them a little more open than I did."







It was another very good game by Tillman, and he's helped the Tigers in many ways in making a difference for the team.

"A.J.'s been playing at a very high level, which is our expectation for him, to be honest," Battas said. "And he's happy to carry that burden. Point guard's a tough job; it's kind of like a quarterback. We put a lot on our point guards in the style that we play. He's really good right now at just taking what the defense gives him, and we want him to score more, we've talked to him about that. He certainly does that, but he's also willing. Iose (Epenesa) had some baskets early; a lot of that was because A.J. was facilitating those baskets. So, right now, he's an all-around player, he's getting it done on both ends of the floor, and I'm just really happy that we have him."

Epenesa scored the Tigers' first six points, and has rounded into a very good player who can score and provide defense for the team.

"Iose's really peaking at the right time," Battas said. "I told him after the game that our plan was to go to him early, and I thought they had to change their defense some, which opened up some things for A.J. and Herbert (Martin), and that's why they were able to get to the basket some. It's chess sometimes, where you have a game plan, and they adapt, you adapt. And Iose just wants to win, so he's an easy guy to play with. But I do think he's peaking at the right time, and I think he's going start being a 12 to 15-point-a-

game night for us, because he's a great athlete, but it takes him a little while at this time to get adapted to basketball, but he's doing terrific."

The Panthers overcame poor free throw shooting early on, missing all five in the third quarter, to hit them during the fourth quarter, which helped them take the win in a typical Southwestern Conference game.

"Worn out," said O'Fallon head coach Brian Muniz with a smile when asked about how he felt. "First half was a grind for both teams, and second half, it was back and forth there. They were making plays, we were making plays. We finally hit free throws after they said we were oh-for-eight the first part of the game, but then, 14-for-16 coming down the stretch. That's a roller coaster, so, I thought we played well in that third quarter, but we could never extend or anything. And finally, in the fourth quarter, we started hitting some that got them into foul trouble a little bit early in the fourth. So we got to shoot some, and then, at the end, we just held on. They were making plays, and we were turning it over a couple of times, and gave them a chance."

Both Edwardsville and O'Fallon played very well, and it's typical of a Southwestern Conference game.

"That's our conference," Muniz said. "I mean, if you don't come to play, you're going to get beat, and today, both teams came to play, and it could have been either way. I mean, there's a couple of possessions here and there, it goes their way, they're leading at the end of the game, and we're chasing them. But instead, they're chasing us, and we knocked down our free throws."

In the opening quarter, Epenesa scored the first six points for Edwardsville, which turned into a see-saw affair, with the two teams trading threes at the end, giving the Panthers a 14-13 lead. In the second quarter, it was more of the same, with the two teams trading baskets on a consistent basis, neither team taking more than a three-point lead during the period. Epenesa and Martin both scored before the buzzer to give the Tigers a 25-24 lead at halftime.

At the start of the second half, a Epenesa basket and a pair of free throws from Donovan Coats gave Edwardsville its largest lead at the time 29-24, but back came the Panthers, as both Jaeden Rush and Will Brown, Jr. hit back-to-back threes to cut the Tiger lead to 31-30. The team traded the lead from there, with O'Fallon getting a basket from Armon Smith to give the Panthers a 39-37 lead after the third quarter.

A pair of free throws and a three from Brown at the start of the fourth quarter gave O'Fallon a 44-39 lead, but the Tigers came right back with a three and a basket by Martin to tie the game at 44-44. If there was a turning point in the game, it came with 3:

04 left, when Malik Allen was called for an intentional foul, which the Edwardsville bench protested strongly, and then a technical foul was called against Allen a few seconds later. The Panthers hit three of the four free throws to go ahead 51-46, getting possession of the ball on both situations.

Undaunted, Tillman scored to make it 51-48 with 2:26 to go, Late in the game, Tillman scored again to make it 58-55, and the Panthers were called for traveling with 14.2 seconds left. After a Tiger time out, the ball got into Tillman, but he missed his three, the Panthers got the rebound, and Rini Harris hit a pair of free throws to clinch the game for O'Fallon 60-55.

Brown was one of four Panther players in double figures, with 18 points, while Rush scored 14 points, Harris had 13 points, and Smith had 10 points. Caden Saunders added three points, while Zach Tebbe had two points.

Tillman led the way for Edwardsville with his 20 points, while Epenesa had 12 points, Martin added 11 points, Allen scored eight points, and both Coats and Miccah Butler had two points each.

O'Fallon is now 16-7, while the Tigers go to 15-9, with Edwardsville playing back-to-back games at home Monday and Tuesday, against Jennings of north St. Louis County, and Lutheran St. Charles respectively, both games starting at 7:30 p.m., then the Tigers play next Friday at Belleville East in another 7:30 p.m. start. Edwardsville concludes its home season Feb. 6 against Waterloo, and Feb. 9 against East St. Louis, both games also starting at 7:30 p.m.









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