

Tillman, Epenesa, Both Score Eight, Tigers Come Up With Big Defensive Play At End, Win At Collinsville

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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COLLINSVILLE - While Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas was trying to design a defensive play with his team leading by a point and 3.6 seconds left in regulation, senior guard Malik Allen came up with the perfect play.

Allen said "Just get the ball." And that's exactly what the Tigers did, breaking up the Collinsville play as the ball was thrown high in the air as the buzzer sounded, giving Edwardsville a tight and dramatic 30-29 win over the Kahoks in a Southwestern Conference basketball game played Tuesday night at Vergil Fletcher Gym.

It was a very tightly played and defensive game, in which not many shots were made, and only two three-pointers were hit, the second coming late in the game. And in the end, the Tigers were able to make the plays, especially defensively, to win and extend their winning streak to three games, having won seven of their last 10.

"They're (Collinsville) are a really good defensive team," Battas said, "and they're really hard to play against. Baskets are at a premium, and so, I thought we were going to have to match that. We have confidence in our defense as well, but I just thought our guys were special tonight, on the road, in the conference, on their Senior Night, just showed, I think, a lot of toughness, and I'm just extremely proud of our players."



Collinsville Head Coach Darin Lee felt his team did play well, but not well enough to take the win.

"Well, I don't know, we just didn't play well enough," Lee said. "Just didn't have guys make some shots, we didn't make them. We had some good looks, just didn't make them. We guarded really well, we just didn't shoot it really well enough."

The defense had a lot to do with the final score, as both teams played well defensively, and also rebounded well.

"Yeah, tremendous defense," Battas said. "Coach (Darin) Lee does such a good job, and the three seniors (Nick Horras, Jamorie Wysinger, and Zach Chambers) try so hard, and they're so smart. And we knew it was going to be tough. You just practice for those situations. I thought A.J. (Tillman) was tremendous down the stretch.

"The last time out there, they were getting ready for a baseline out of bounds, and we go over those, you never know. Coach Lee's got a lot of bunch of them he can run. And I'm going over some stuff, and Malik just kind of stops me, he looks at his teammates and said 'just get the ball.' And I just kind of smiled. I'm trying to go over Xs and Os, and Malik just hit the nail on the head and said 'just go get the ball.'

And lo and behold, he gets his hand on it," Battas continued, "A.J. or someone else got their hand on it when we get the possession, and that's the game right there. So, I think it's a testament to our guys and how much pride they take in being Tigers, and how much pride they're taking in right now, and playing their best basketball."



Style has nothing to do with it, especially at this time of season. It's all about getting the wins, no matter how it looks.

"Yeah, style, you're just trying to win games," Battas said. "We scored 77 against (East St. Louis), the game dictated that. Tonight, we were trying to score just as many points, I think we were about point-six, or point-seven points per possession, and they were just slightly under that at halftime. So, it's that you're not trying to score, it's just really difficult against two great defensive teams, and shots weren't falling, even if we were getting one.

"We lost (Wysinger) a couple of times, and he missed them, which is rare for him. And Miccah (Butler) missed a couple, which is rare for him. So, one of those nights, and it becomes possessions, and every time you have the ball, it's important. I thought A.J. was tremendous down the stretch, and Herbert (Martin) gave us some great minutes, handled the ball against some pesky defenders."

And when it comes down to possessions, each one becomes important in and of itself.

"What it comes down to is every time you have the ball, you have to get a good shot at the basket," Battas said. "You lose the ball, they get a run out, and all of a sudden, you're down two or your down four. Now, they get to dictate tempo, and they'll do that, they'll spread you out.

"So, we'd much rather play with the lead, and I thought we were able to kind of dictate late who had the ball. A.J. was able to get it, which I thought was outstanding for us, Iose (Epenesa) made some great passes to him. We've been in a lot of close games. I think we've been in eight or nine one-possession games. So, it seems like we're starting to come on the other side of it now, and that's a compliment to our guys, and how they've been playing."

The game started out well enough for the Kahoks, as Chambers scored the first two baskets to put Collinsville up 4-0, both baskets coming in the opening five minutes. The Tigers took their first lead on a three by Martin and a basket in the paint by Epenesa to go ahead 5-4, but Chambers came back and scored inside to give the Kahoks a 6-5 lead after the first quarter.

At the start of the second quarter, Tyree Brister scored to up the Collinsville lead to 8-5, but a Kris Crosby three gave the Tigers an 8-8 tie. An Allen free throw gave Edwardsville the lead at 9-8, but Horras later scored to put Collinsville back in front at 10-9. A Tiger free throw tied things up at 10-10, but Chambers was able to score very late in the period to give the Kahoks a 13-12 lead at halftime.

Tillman hit the first two baskets of the second half to give Edwardsville a 16-13 lead, but both Horras and Chambers came right back to put Collinsville up 17-16. An Allen basket as the Tigers held for the final shot in the last two minutes of the quarter gave Edwardsville an 18-17 lead at the end of the period, after which an Epenesa basket at the start of the fourth quarter put the Tigers up 20-17.

Later on, Edwardsville went ahead 22-18 on free throws by Martin and Epenesa, and after an exchange of baskets, free throws from both sides made the score 26-21, when Wysinger hit the Kahoks only three to bring the score to 28-24 with 46.3 seconds left. Crosby and Allen hit what turned out to be key free throws to give the Tigers a 30-26 lead with 14.6 seconds left, after which Wysinger scored to make it 30-28 with 7.7 seconds left.

The Kahoks got the ball back on a five-second call immediately, and Horras was fouled on a three-point shot try, giving him three free throws with 4.5 seconds to go. Horras only made one of the shots to cut the lead to 30-29, and had the ball out of bounds with 3.6 seconds left. After a Tiger time out, Allen deflected the inbounds pass away, with Tillman getting the ball and throwing it up in the air, allowing the clock to run out and give the Tigers the dramatic 30-29 win.

Tillman and Epenesa led Edwardsville with eight points each, while Martin and Crosby hit for five points apiece, Allen had three points, and Donovan Coates had a single point.

Chambers led the Kahoks with 11 points, the only player in double figures for either team, while Horras scored nine points, Wysinger had seven, and Brister scored two points.

Collinsville is now 26-4 on the year, and concludes its regular season at Alton on Friday night at 7:30 p.m., then plays in the IHSA Class 4A regional against host Granite City next Wednesday, Feb. 21, in a 6 p.m. tip-off. A win puts the Kahoks in the final on Feb. 23 against the winner of Belleville East or Belleville West, in a 7 p.m. start.

The Tigers improve to 19-10, and play at Belleville West in their regular season finale Friday night at 7:30 p.m., then host their own regional, starting on Feb. 21 against O'Fallon in a 7:30 p.m. start. A win put Edwardsville into the final against either Alton or Quincy Feb. 23 at 7 p.m.



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