

Tigers play Panthers tough sectional boys volleyball match to the end, but fall in three sets

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May 26 2018 11:25 AM





EDWARDSVILLE – In a very entertaining and hard-fought match, the Edwardsville High boys volleyball team was eliminated 26-24, 21-25, 25-19 by O'Fallon in the semifinals of the IHSA Minooka Sectional Friday evening at Thomas Hooks Gymnasium at Metro-East Lutheran.

The Tigers finish the season at 20-13 while the Panthers, now 31-5-1, advance to the sectional final against New Lenox Lincoln-Way West, a 28-30, 29-27, 26-24 winner over Plainfield East. The final will be played at Minooka on Tuesday evening, with the winner advancing to the state tournament next weekend at Hoffman Estates High School in northwest suburban Chicago.

And is often the case, a big deciding factor is how a team executed its plays and sets. According to Tiger coach Andy Bersett, execution helped tip the scales to O'Fallon.

“Absolutely,” Bersett said. “They outplayed us. We didn't execute to the level we needed to. Second game, we did, and we win that set. But they outexecuted us, and for that, you just got to just tip your cap. You know, they beat us three times; one of those times was really convincing, the other two, we battled. Today was our best effort against them, and I don't think we played our best volleyball. But you know what? That's the whole part of it, is playing your best, and they did. They played better than we did.”

The Tigers kept battling throughout the match, and Bersett praised their efforts.

“I told the guys 'From day one, when you step on the court, and I'm the coach – effort. Effort, effort, effort,’” Bersett said. “And I can't say we've given an effort every Saturday, every practice, and every match. But I told the guys from the time they stepped on the court today, in stretching and all the way through the match, their effort was there. And you can't question it. Everybody in this gym saw the effort these two teams were playing with.”

The first game saw the Panthers take an 18-16 lead, but two service points from Lucas Verdun drew the game level at 18-18, forcing O'Fallon to call time out. After the time out, the game see-sawed briefly before the Panthers, behind the efforts of Jake Baldus and Justin Hovick, jumped to a 22-19 advantage. The Tigers scored the next three points to draw back level, and both teams traded points again before a Eric Toftmark spike and block gave O'Fallon a 26-24 win and a one-game lead in the match.

The Panthers opened the second game with three straight points before the Tigers rallied to tie game. A spike from Cal Werths gave Edwardsville its first lead of the game at 5-4, then scoring the next two points to extend its lead. The Panthers called time out after Edwardsville took a 9-5 lead, then scored three in a row to cut the edge to 9-8, then tied things up at 10-10 before Jacob Skelton served up three straight to give the Tigers a 13-10 lead. Edwardsville then scored four of the next six points to extend the lead to 17-12, with Josh Whittenberg serving. A Panther rally brought the score to 17-15 before a spike from Evan Billiter made it 19-15. Edwardsville closed out the game by scoring six of the 10 points to win 25-21 and set up a third and deciding game.

The final game started out with both teams trading points before the Panthers jumped to a 5-2 lead, climaxed with a spike from Romell Williams. O'Fallon extended the lead to 9-5, but the Tigers wouldn't go away, and an ace from Jacob Skelton and a Werths' spike cut the edge to 9-8. The Panthers scored the next two points to make it 11-8, forcing a Edwardsville time out. After another point to O'Fallon, Drew Berthlett responded with a big spike to make it 12-9, and giving the ball back to the Tigers. Two points with Verdun serving cut the lead to 12-11, but the Panthers scored five of the next seven points to take a 17-13 lead. A Werths spike and point from Billiter cut the lead to 17-15, but the Panthers six of the next eight points to take a 23-17 lead. O'Fallon closed out the match with two of the last four points to win the game 25-19 and the match two games to one.

Bersett gave credit to the Panthers for their execution.

“I mean, they were able to go on runs from the service line a little bit more frequently than we were,” Bersett said, “basically because our execution wasn't there always.

They've got strong attackers, they stayed aggressive. I know some of those attackers in the past haven't been as aggressive, but coach (Amy) Sheehan has really got them playing aggressive volleyball, and has really done a good job with that team. I just think, you know, we knew what both sides were doing. They made some adjustments, we made some adjustments, but they beat us because they executed. We knew it was coming, they just did it well.”

Bersett also pointed out something that his team didn't do in the first set, which may have cost the Tigers in the long run.

“I thought we needed to run our middles more in the first early,” Bersett said. “I thought part of that is passing, some of that is set selection, but it's a team effort. But I thought that if we would have gotten our middles involved in that first set, I think we win that first set, or at least have a shot of winning, if we run our middles a little more frequently. Again, that has to be with a tough serve and then us getting a pass to work.”

Statistically, Billiter had nine kills for the Tigers, followed by Werths with eight and Berthlett with seven. Werths also had four blocks and assisted on two others, while Billiter also had three service aces on the evening, while Whittenberg chipped in with two.

“Good luck to O'Fallon,” Bersett added. “They worked hard; they deserve it.”