

Redbirds come back from early deficit to defeat Edwardsville

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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ALTON - Playing for four games in the last five days is a grind.

Mix that in with a hungry, motivated rival then you got a tough game on your hands.

The Edwardsville Tigers burst out to a stunning 17-4 midway through the first quarter, however, the Alton Redbirds, who came into the game having won four out of their last five, eventually weathered the storm. They took home a 61-49 victory at Alton High School in Southwestern Conference matchup on Tuesday night.

“They play hard. They cut hard. They move hard,” Alton head coach Eric Smith said about Edwardsville’s offensive setup. “Maybe we messed up by trying to play four games in five days. I think you saw it.”

The Redbirds have now played five games in the last seven days and won all of them, but last showed it was by no means a smooth game.

“It’s been a struggle for us. Offensively it just looks bad because we kind of take the easy way out instead of grinding out possessions. Defensively we were a step late to everything. They just cut, cut, cut, cut. We didn’t jump to the ball and get to the spots we were supposed to be. We made them look pretty good.”

Edwardsville head boys coach Dustin Battas had only positive things to say about his players' performance.

“I’m really proud of our guys. Our preparation was good,” Battas said. “To get off to a start like that they really executed a lot of things we’ve been practicing. Alton’s a tremendous team. To come here and it’s a bit of rivalry over the years, so we’re really proud.”

The Tigers started off shooting 7-for-7 from the field, including two triples by Brennen Weller and another by A.J. Robertson. Nick Hemken scored six points as well. He finished with a season-high of 15 points while Weller added 14 and Jaylon Tuggle chipped in 11.

After a Malik Robinson layup gave the Tigers their 17-4, Smith finally called a timeout with 4:47 to go in the first quarter after waiting out his team to see if they could adjust.

“They got to figure out a way to play through stuff,” Smith said. “If it’s something scheme-wise I need to fix, then we’ll call timeout, but if it’s just lack of effort, then they’re going to have to fight their way through it.”

That timeout would be a big wake up call for the Redbirds as they finished out the first quarter on an 11-2 run, which included an alley-oop dunk by Donovan Clay and another dunk by Moory Woods. Alton started the second quarter back-to-back triples by Clay and Smith to take a 20-19 lead and would not let go of it for the remainder of the contest. The Redbirds size, athleticism, and shooting precision ultimately overwhelmed the Tigers.

Clay had a game-high 19 points while Woods finished with 12 and Smith followed with 11.

“We tried a little zone, and they just have good players and Eric does a great job of putting them in places that make you come a long way to help, and they got guys that can shoot,” Battas said. “They really put you in a bind because you come a long way to guard the rim and then they got or standing out there all by themselves who can make them. They put you under constant pressure, but I thought our guys fought hard.”

Despite having their 13-point lead vanish, Edwardsville was able to keep up with Alton and trailed 28-27 at halftime.

The Redbirds were in control of the game as they tried to take advantage of their height and made a concerted effort to attack the basket in the second half. Still, Edwardsville’s execution to create good shot selections kept them in the game trailing 42-37.

Ultimately, the Tigers could not keep up their first-half shooting while Alton eventually pulled away.

“We handled their pressure for the most part and got open shots,” Battas said. “I thought in the third quarter it came down to making some shots. Without having big guys, we’re going to have to make some threes. I think we only made two in the second half.”

With the majority of the regular season done, Battas believes the Tigers have moved forward positively and have gotten better since the start of the season.

“I really do think we’ve improved. From the beginning of the year we really struggled just to get into the offense,” Battas said. “To execute the things we did in the second half was night and day from where we were a month or six weeks ago. We’ve come a long way with handling pressure. We’ve practiced well this whole time to credit our guys.”





[Chris Rhodes also contributed to this story.](#)