

Tillman Leads Tigers With 17 Points, Coates Adds 16, Edwardsville Reels Off Game's First 15 Points, Wins SWC Opener Over Redbirds 76-61

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - A.J. Tillman led Edwardsville with 17 points, while Donovan Coats added 16 points as the Tigers scored the game's first 15 points, helping the Tigers go on to a 76-61 win over Alton in the Southwestern Conference boys basketball opener before a packed house at Lucco-Jackson Gym in Edwardsville.

The 15-0 run the Tigers used to start the game was the key, as Edwardsville kept coming the entire 32 minutes to give the Redbirds their second straight loss after winning their first five to get the season underway. Although the Redbirds kept striving and didn't give up the whole game, the 15-0 start was too much to overcome.

"We feel great," said Tigers' head coach Dustin Battas. "We're proud of our guys. We loved the fast and quality start in getting out to that lead in the first quarter, our preparation was great. Our guys, they're learning every day so early in the season, so there's some things we're going to clean up, and man, the effort was great, the execution on offense.

"We think we're a team that should have balanced scoring, because we've got five or six guys that can lead us in scoring every night, and tonight was an example of that. Balanced scoring and a lot of our shots were assisted, which we think is really hard to

guard, hard to play against. And really proud of A.J. and Herb (Martin) for their ability to handle the trap and the press, getting the ball out, and like I said, assisting, spreading the ball around. Just an overall great win for our players."

The Redbirds are a vastly improved team despite the difficulties they encountered on the evening, and Battas thinks Alton will be heard from as the season goes on.

"That's a very improved Alton ball club," Battas said, "and coach (Dylan) Dudley does a great job with them. They're building something there. They're going to win some games this year, no doubt, and they've got good players, they try hard and they execute coach Dudley's plan/ It's a big win for our guys, and that is not an easy win, they're going to be a hard team to play against. Coach Dudley's really done a nice job with them."

And it being a Southwestern Conference win makes it all doubly important as well.

"Yes, wins are important," Battas said, "home wins are really important if you want to protect your home court. Last year, we were just a game or two away from having a chance to win the conference championship. So, our guys are prepared for every game and they know how valuable every game is."

Coates had a great game in leading the way with his 16 points, and also had a great night in shooting.

"Donovan gets a lot of credit," Battas said. "He's really been engaged in practice, and he's asking questions to make sure he's guarding the right way. We think he's a unique athlete; he can do a few different things. He also rebounds well for a guard. He's also starting the shoot the ball from three well, and he's also a great free-throw shooter. Tonight, I believe he was nine-for-nine shooting free throws, which is outstanding. Great night for Donovan, I thought Kris Crosby gave us some good minutes, and helped us alleviate some of the pressure by being able to split traps and take the ball to the basket.

"Kris is getting better every day and Iose (Epenesa)'s getting in shape every day," Battas said with a smile. "He's a big, strong guy, his defense is a little bit ahead of his offense right now. I've really been impressed with his defense and his rebounding. Offense is timing, and he's still going to have a good year for us offensively. And he's a willing screener. Part of his effectiveness for us is his ability to get other guys shots, by screening and by eating up space in the post. I thought he was very valuable tonight in his physicality."



Dudley agreed that the Redbirds couldn't get as far behind as they did at the start of the game and wasn't pleased with the job he did getting his club ready to play.

"You can't get down 15-0 or 13-0 on the road against them," Dudley said. "And that's on me. I have to do a better job getting our kids prepared. That falls on my plate, that falls straight in front of my face, so, I've gotta be better. They exposed us, they really exposed us. They were straight up. like, driving us all night long. We didn't have enough toughness to keep the ball in front of us. And when you let A.J. get into the paint and make plays, it's hard."

It was the Redbirds' second straight loss after losing a close game in overtime at Jacksonville on Nov. 28, and Dudley agreed that the Friday night loss can help serve as a wake-up call for his club.

"Yeah, it does," Dudley said. "This group has had their character tested multiple times, some self-inflicted, some not. But this year, we have a lot to learn from this, and we've got to do it quickly. We've got to get a lot better real fast."

Although Alton faced much adversity in the game, the Redbirds kept playing hard and didn't surrender, which will bode very well for the team down the road.

"I hope so," Dudley said. "This group has character; I'm not worried about their character. To be honest, I'm not really worried about their response, but we have to fix some things real fast. We told them going into the game that offense wouldn't be a problem. I mean, we basically scored 61 points on them in three quarters. Offense wasn't going to be a problem, we were going to get the shots we wanted to get. We were going to have the people shoot the shots we wanted to get. But the number one thing going into this game was we had to guard the ball. We have to guard the basketball, especially in this game. And you saw what happened when we didn't."

Edwardsville got off to a great start with a three from Coates, and from there, Tillman, Epenesa, Miccah Butler and Crosby all combined to give the Tigers their 15-0 start. Kobe Taylor hit a pair of threes to break the ice for the Redbirds, but in between, Coates hit three free throws to give the Tigers an 18-6 lead after the first quarter.

After an exchange of points to start the second, Taylor hit another three to cut the Edwardsville lead to 20-13, but another three from Butler. along with baskets from Martin and Tillman upped the Tigers' lead to 27-13. It was a part of a 12-0 run that led to a 33-12 lead before a three from Samaj Stampley and a three-point play from Alex Macias cut the lead to 32-19. The Tigers and Redbirds played to a 6-6 stalemate the rest of the way to give Edwardsville a 38-25 halftime lead.

The Tigers opened the second half with a three from Butler and a dunk from Coates to make it 43-25, with the Redbirds countering with a three and a free throw to make it 43-29, with Martin and Crosby, among others hitting their shots to put Edwardsville on top after the third quarter 56-35. In the fourth quarter, the Redbirds kept hanging in, but constant runs by the Tigers helped keep Alton at bay as Edwardsville went on to their 76-61 win.

Tillman led the way for Edwardsville with 17 points, while Coates added 16, Butler came up with 15 points, Martin hit for 12 points, Epenesa had seven points and Crosby scored four points.

Stampley led the Redbirds with 18 points, while Sean Tyus had 12 points, Taylor had nine points, Macias scored eight points, Hassani Elliott came up with four points, Ian Kambarian had three points and Ka'Nye Lacey, Tyrean Jones and Kameron Burnett all scored two points each.

The Redbirds are now 4-2 on the year continue their road trip next week with games at East St. Louis on Tuesday night, at O'Fallon next Friday night, both games starting at 7:30 p.m., and at Springfield in a shootout event on Dec. 9, with a tip-off time of 2:30 p.m.

The Tigers go to 3-2 and are at O'Fallon on Tuesday, then host Belleville East next Friday and Gateway STEM of St. Louis City on Dec. 11 and St. Louis Roosevelt on Dec. 12, with all games starting at 7:30 p.m.



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