

Edwardsville clinches SWC title with win over O'Fallon

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O'FALLON - Even without starting center Mary O'Keefe, the Edwardsville girls remain unbeaten in the Southwestern Conference.

With 6-foot senior O'Keefe on the bench for the second straight game with a boot on her injured right foot, the Tigers improved to 25-2 overall and 12-0 in the SWC with Tuesday's 53-38 win at O'Fallon. It was the 31st consecutive league win for the Tigers, who clinched this season's title outright.

"The last couple weeks haven't been easy, but the kids are stepping up and doing the job and that's all we can ask," said Edwardsville coach Lori Blade. "We didn't have a real quick start on them, but they were a little bit bigger than we were tonight. I'm proud of the kids' effort and they executed enough to get it done."

"We're having different people step up each night and you never know what position we're going to need most," said Tigers senior Caty Ponce, who scored a game-high 19 points. "Our bench is doing a great job and giving it their all."

The loss dropped O'Fallon to 15-12 overall and 6-7 in the conference.

"Edwardsville's closest game in our conference all year has been 12 points and they're a tremendously good team," said Panthers coach Ryan Massey. "The thing that makes them complete, in my opinion, is their defense.

"In the second half we threw a little something at them that caused them some trouble on the offensive end of the ball. They went five or six possessions in a row without scoring, but at the same time, they were stopping us on the offensive end."

Edwardsville's other top post player, 6-2 sophomore Emmonnie Henderson, played less than half the game due to foul trouble and was held to seven points. But Ponce scored 12 points in the first half to help the Tigers build an eight-point lead.

"That's what Caty does for us," Blade said. "If you leave her open, she's capable of knocking it down. She organizes and she's a coach on the floor for me.

"She's guarding their leading scorer (Taylor Klingelhoef), so she's got to stay out of foul trouble. We had three starters on the bench again tonight in the first half in foul trouble and we've got to fix those things."

"Their team runs through Caty Ponce," Massey said. "She's their point guard and she's one of their high scorers and a tremendous shooter. They pass the ball very well and often times I see that ball coming from her and getting it in the right position. With her being on the floor, they're still able to run through their stuff and do some good things."

Ponce knows she has more responsibility when O'Keefe is unable to play.

"Maybe not necessarily points-wise, but I try to get other people different looks," Ponce said, "Whatever my job is on a given night, I'm going to try to do it, whether it's getting

Sierra (Gaines) the ball or Emmonnie or anybody for that matter. We're going to find a way to get through it until we get Mary back."

A trey by Ponce capped a 10-2 Edwardsville run and put the Tigers ahead 18-12 with 7:26 remaining in the second quarter. Two free throws by Ponce increased Edwardsville's lead to 32-22 with 25 seconds left in the half, but a pair of free throws by O'Fallon senior Sabre Flager made the score 32-24 at halftime.

"They had 17 more shots than we did at halftime," said Massey, whose team had 14 turnovers in the first half. "We were playing hard, but unfortunately, our offense sputtered in the second half."

Another 3-pointer by Ponce put Edwardsville on top 42-29 with 2:02 remaining in the third quarter. A basket by Aaliyah Covington made the score 46-31 with 6:10 to play in the fourth quarter and O'Fallon never again got closer than 11 points.

"We want to think of each game as our last, like it's the postseason," Ponce said. "That way when we do get into that position, we're not frantic. We know what we're doing and hopefully we can stay calm and do our jobs."

Gaines added 10 points for Edwardsville. Klingelhoef, in her second game back after missing three games with a strained right Achilles tendon, led O'Fallon with 11 points.

"Having Taylor in the game gives us a second ball handler at all times," Massey said. "Sabre Flager is our point guard and Taylor is able to take a little pressure off her. She gives us a scoring threat and she takes the ball to the basket."

"I figure they're getting ready to make a run in the postseason with her back and healthy," Blade said. "The first time we played them, she didn't play and a kid as talented as she is is going to make a difference in a game."

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