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Slow starting Tigers lose to Lions, 51-41

By **JOSH BROWN**

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Another slow start led to another hole to dig out of for the Hutsonville-Palestine Tigers Friday night in their 2009 Boys' Little Illini Conference Tournament play-in game at Edwards County.

However, the Tigers found a way to get to the top of the hole, but couldn't get all the way out, as they lost to the host Lions, 51-41.

"Tonight was similar to quite a few games this year," HPHS head coach Denis Bennett said. "We had trouble getting started offensively and dug ourselves a hole. But, the good thing was we were able to dig ourselves out and compete for 32 minutes."

The Tigers' offense sputtered out of the gate, as they went scoreless for the first 4:16 of the game. Jenson Martin made one of two free throws at the 3:44 mark of the first period and the score was only 3-1 in favor of Edwards County, but the Tigers would not score again in the period and trailed 10-1 after the first eight minutes. In the first period Hutsonville-Palestine missed all nine of their shots from the field, including six three-pointers.

"The boys know we have had trouble scoring early and I think they have become a little tight at this point," Bennett said. "We have got to make sure we get into an offense. When we do that and get an entry pass, we are usually successful with our offense."

The roles reversed a bit in the second period, as the Tigers found their rhythm and were able to outscore the Lions 10-5, including the last five points of the half on a layup and three-pointer by Blake Callaway, to cut the deficit to 15-11 at halftime.

After a layup by Chad Smith at the outset of the third quarter to give Edwards County a 17-11 edge, Ethan Blankenkemper connected on back-to-back three-pointers for the Tigers to tie the game at 17. A basket by the Lions' Stephen Vallette put Edwards County back in front, where they would stay the rest of the period. Jacob Columbia threw in a 25-footer at the buzzer and the Lions held a 26-22 edge with eight minutes to play.

Jeff Otte hit a jump shot and Austin Callahan made a layup in the first minute of the fourth quarter to pull the Tigers even, 26-26, but Edwards County would score six straight points on a pair of baskets by Chris Dongu and two free throws from Craig Harris for a 32-26 lead with 5:30 to play. Hutsonville-Palestine had one more run, as Callahan hit a layup and Callaway knocked down a three-pointer to pull within 32-31 with 4:35 remaining. Edwards County had an answer, as they poured in 10 straight points on a free throw by Harris, two three-pointers by Columbia and a three from Michael Aaron, to make the score 42-31 with 2:15 left and the Tigers would get no closer than seven points the rest of the way.

"We were right there," Bennett said. "We talked at halftime that when we cut the lead to four that we planted a seed of doubt in Edwards County and that we would be able to compete."

Callaway and Callahan shared scoring honors with 10 points apiece. Callaway added seven rebounds, five assists and a blocked shot, while Callahan had one rebound and a blocked shot. Otte registered nine points, seven rebounds, four steals and two assists, while Blankenkemper had nine points, four rebounds, two steals and an assist. Alex McDaniel, who started the game in place of Callaway, who has been battling illness this week, chipped in with two points, six rebounds, three blocked shots and an assist, while Martin had one point, five rebounds, four assists and two steals and Jevon Pearse grabbed three rebounds.

"Jeff (Otte) and Ethan's (Blankenkemper) floor games were improved tonight, as compared to the last few games," Bennett said. "We have to continue to develop those guys. Alex (McDaniel) was called on tonight and he held his own. He rebounded and blocked shots and was where he was supposed to be most of the night."

Columbia was the lone player in double figures for Edwards County, as he tallied 19 points, including five three-pointers. He also had eight rebounds, one steal and one assist. Vallette added eight points, two steals, one rebound and one assist, Harris had seven points,

four rebounds, two steals and two assists and Aaron had five points, seven rebounds, three steals and three assists. Smith, Dongu and Ben Pertl scored four points each to round out the scoring for the Lions.

Hutsonville-Palestine (4-13, 0-5 LIC) will play at the loser of today's Lawrenceville-Oblong game in a consolation bracket game of the Little Illini Conference Tournament on Monday at 7:30 p.m.

"We feel like we have a little chip on our shoulder right now because we are still being made to go on the road instead of being invited to Casey to play," Bennett said. "We need to come out and play a solid game."

2009 Little Illini Conference

Boys' Basketball Tournament

At Albion

Hutsonville-Palestine 1 10 11 19 - 41

Edwards County 10 5 11 25 - 51

HUTSONVILLE-PALESTINE (41)

Blankenkoper 0-1 3-8 0-0 9, Jenson Martin 0-6 0-2 1-2 1, Blake Callaway 2-4 2-7 0-0 10, Jeff Otte 3-5 1-6 0-0 9, Cole Knoblett 0-0 0-0 0-0 0, Jevon Pearse 0-0 0-0 0-0 0, Alex McDaniel 1-1 0-0 0-0 2, Austin Callahan 4-10 0-2 2-3 10, TOTALS 10-27 2FG, 6-25 3FG, 3-5 FT, 41 TP.

EDWARDS COUNTY (51)

Columbia 0-1 5-15 4-4 19, Smith 2-6 0-2 0-0 4, Dongu 2-3 0-3 0-0 4, Vallette 2-4 1-2 1-2 8, Aaron 0-4 1-6 2-6 5, Harris 1-4 0-0 5-6 7, Winemiller 0-0 0-0 0-0 0, Pertl 1-4 0-0 2-2 4, TOTALS 8-26 2FG, 7-28 3FG, 14-20 FT, 51 TP.

Turnovers - HPHS 20, ECHS 14. Team fouls - HPHS 21, ECHS 12. Fouled out - Pearse, Callaway. Technical foul - none. Rebounds - (HPHS 33) Callaway 7, Otte 7, McDaniel 6, Martin 5, Blankenkoper 4, Pearse 3, Callahan. (ECHS 41) Columbia 8, Smith 7, Aaron 7, Winemiller 6, Pertl 5, Harris 4, Dongu 3, Vallette. Steals - (HPHS 8) Otte 4, Blankenkoper 2, Martin 2. (ECHS 12) Aaron 3, Dongu 2, Vallette 2, Harris 2, Columbia, Smith, Winemiller. Assists - (HPHS 13) Callaway 5, Martin 4, Otte 2, Blankenkoper, McDaniel. (ECHS 9) Aaron 3, Harris 2, Columbia, Smith, Dongu, Vallette. Blocked shots - (HPHS 5) McDaniel 3, Callahan, Callaway. (ECHS 1) Winemiller.

Next game - Hutsonville-Palestine (4-13, 0-5 LIC) will play at the loser of the Lawrenceville-Oblong game today in a consolation bracket game of the Little Illini Conference Tournament Monday at 7:30 p.m.