

# **Grace Baalman, Zirkelbach guide Warriors past Redbirds with 19 and 18 points apiece**

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer  
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**ALTON** – Alton girls basketball coach **Bob Rickman** knew going into their season opener against **Hardin-Calhoun** Wednesday night that this year was going to be a learning situation for his Redbirds.

“When you have one senior starting and one junior starting and everyone else on the bench is pretty much a freshman or sophomore – and none of them have played significant minutes on the varsity – it's going to be tough,” Rickman said following the Warriors' 58-25 win in the Alton Tip-Off Classic. “There's other young teams out there; we've got a lot of things to work on.

“We've got a real young team that's inexperienced, but they're going to grow up quick. We're going to have some nights like this against some teams in our conference (the Southwestern Conference); it was encouraging to see, after the first quarter, how they kind of rebounded from the tough start how they got in there and started playing harder. Our defense was better at times, but we still allowed too many things.

“It's just putting it together. We get a good effort, put together three or four passes and then somebody lets a girl cut behind her and they get an easy basket; that's the thing they've got to learn. There's no taking a second off, you've got to be playing 32 minutes and going after teams – that was the thing. They play hard, they're a tough team, they're disciplined and they took advantage of our inexperience – hats off to them.”



“We've got a good centerpiece in **Grace (Baalman)**,” said **Warrior coach Aaron Baalman**. “It's going to take some time (with four new players surrounding Baalman this year), but I was really happy with the first half.

“At this point, we've got to make sure we're improving every game; we haven't set too many goals yet, but the season's early. We just want to get everyone used to playing with each other, then in a month, we'll see where we're at.”

Coupled with their win over Cahokia in Monday's opener, the win put the Warriors into Saturday night's championship game for the third straight year. “Being the smallest school in the field and three consecutive years in the championship game speaks volumes for our program,” Baalman said. “It's still early and we have a lot of things we have to work on, but I'm pleasantly surprised where we are.”

The Warriors got out of the gates quickly on the Redbirds, getting 12 points from Baalman and not allowing a Alton point until late in the first term when Deja Carter connected on a shot; Rayn Talley scored from behind the arc for the Redbirds right before the siren to end the opening term, but Calhoun had gotten to a lead they wouldn't relinquish, leading 23-5 at quarter time.

“(Baalman) scored 16 points in the first half against Cahokia the other night,” Rickman said. “We knew she was where they were going to try to get the ball and we just didn't do the things to stop her; she got rolling in the first quarter and it's hard to recover from somebody who's that good at getting the ball. We didn't do the things we needed to do to contain her.”

Grace Baalman led the Warriors with 19 points on the night, with **Junie Zirkelbach** adding 18 and Sophie Lorton 11; the Redbirds were led by Tally's 12 points, with Kenya Burnett adding six points and Carter four points.

The Warriors' opponent in Saturday's final is yet to be determined, but the game will take place at 7:30 p.m. Saturday following the fifth-place game at 4:30 pm. and third-place game at 6 p.m. Alton's final group game takes place at 7:30 p.m. Friday against Cahokia, preceded by Jersey taking on Breese Mater Dei at 6 p.m.

