

Redbirds drop close MVCHA playoff matchup against Belleville

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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EAST ALTON – Alton found themselves with their backs to the wall in their opening-round **Mississippi Valley Club Hockey Association Class 1A** series against **Highland**.

The Redbirds fought off elimination with a big win in Game 3 of their series with the Bulldogs to move into the playoff semifinals.

They'll have to do it again in order to win their semifinal series against Belleville when a Terrance Purbihat goal with 7:24 to go gave Belleville a 2-1 win over the Redbirds in Game 1 of their series at East Alton Ice Arena Thursday night; Game 2 of the best-of-three set is scheduled for 8:40 p.m. Monday at Wilson Park Ice Rink in Granite City; if needed, Game 3 will be at 7:15 p.m. Tuesday at EAIA. The Class 1A Final begins Feb. 16.

“It was a tough loss,” said **Redbird coach Steven Campbell**. “We didn't play well at all; I think we didn't expect them to come out as fast as they were. Belleville's really fast and the last time we played them, we won 3-1. The kids weren't ready for it.

“You know what, I just told the kids in the locker room that it's a best-of-three series and we have another game Monday night, and we're going to come out and hopefully play our game and get a win.”

Belleville's second goal came while Redbird goalie Caleb Currie was screened. “The last goal they scored was from a shot from the point and (Currie) was screened; he had no chance. Caleb Currie really held us in the game; he was our factor for the game (Currie turning back 42 Belleville shots).

“When you're facing 50 shots a night, it's expected you'll give up two goals – hats off to (Currie), he's been our backbone this entire season.”

“I got screened on one, and I'm fairly certain one of their players tipped a second shot,” Currie said. “Otherwise, I think I would have had it; those are goals you have to fight for to get them back. I worked as hard as I could tonight; I really wanted to win. My team worked pretty hard too, they just outworked us.

“Our backs are definitely against the wall; we've got to come out with some intensity, play harder than they do and go out there and just take it from them.”

Purbihat got the opening goal of the game after a scoreless first period when Justin Aralza found Purbihat with a pass and Purbihat tucked the puck over Currie's right shoulder 3:03 into the second period to put Belleville up 1-0. Connor Neely countered the goal at 5:45 of the second when he beat Jordon Douglas to tie the game, with assists going to Jacob Eppel and Tanner St. Peters.

Both teams had good chances to break the tie, but Currie and Douglas both came up big when needed until Purbihat scored what proved to be the winning goal in the third, Logan Krause getting the assist.

“Hopefully we can rebound – it's do or die Monday,” Campbell said. “We've got our backs against the wall just like against Highland. I told them we have to play our game; I'm not worried about it, if we play our game Monday, we'll come out and set us up for a Game 3 on Tuesday.”

