



# **Caldwell injury hinders Alton as they fall to Belleville West again**

by John Hough, Sports Writer  
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ALTON - Kevin Caldwell collapsed to the floor.

The three-year starting senior leader for the Alton Redbirds was holding his left ankle while showing plenty of pain on his face.

Alton trailed 18-12 to the Belleville West Maroons, and things were never the same afterward.

“We got kids that can play. The frustrating part was it kinda took the wind out of our sails, and he’s been a varsity kid for four years. He handles the ball for us so well that other kids had to do that and we struggled a little bit with that for a stretch,” Alton head coach Eric Smith said. “They’ve played and won a lot of games without him. The frustrating part was just not having confidence without him, which kinda baffles me a little bit. We got really confident kids, and I’m kind of at a loss on what happened with the bravado of confidence that we usually carry around.”

The Maroons went on a 15-0 run, including a basket before the injury to give Belleville West a 29-12 lead during the second quarter and the Redbirds never recovered as they lost 65-40 at home in Godfrey on Friday night.

That’s three straight losses for Alton and the second time they’ve lost to Belleville West in six days after a 72-53 defeat in the semifinals of the Centralia Holiday Tournament. They drop to 5-1 in the Southwestern Conference and 9-4 overall, while the Maroons improve to 13-1 and take a one-game lead over Alton in the SWC at 6-0.

Malachi Smith propelled the Maroons with a game-high 19 points. Belleville West's top college recruit E.J. Liddell was limited to 10 points.

“They guarded Keith and E.J. really hard. Their guys asserted a lot of effort and energy to stop them and made it physical. It kinda bogged us down a bit, but Malachi and Lawrence really had a good first half to catapult us,” Maroons head coach Joe Muniz said. “Our defense created a lot of turnovers and got us some easy buckets and run outs. Anytime you win on the road in this conference it’s a good win.”

Just like it was last Saturday, Donovan Clay guarded Liddell, the six-foot-seven highly touted and athletically gifted forward. Arguably Clay did a better job at limiting Liddell than he did before and Smith agrees.

“That’s two games that Donovan’s defended him and played pretty well against him. His length helps him out. Obviously, Donovan’s giving up quite a bit size-wise, and that kinda wears him out, but he played his but off against him for two days,” Smith said. “Who knows if he can do it for a third time, but I’ll put my money on Don. He’s kinda turned into that kid we put on the other team’s best player.”

Liddell still managed ten points and was one block away from achieving a triple-double. He finished with ten points, ten rebounds, and nine blocks. Alton did well at attacking the basket, but that presented Liddell with a lot of rejections.

“They broke us down a little bit up top, but you gotta shoot over E.J. That’s not usually a good thing,” Muniz said.



“Clay and the Rivers kid really battled hard, but I was pleased with our other guys scoring as they did. It’s hard to take one or two guys away. They did a good job, but others guys stepped up and played well,” Muniz said. “We were pretty unselfish at getting it to the open man, and that’s the key to our team. You gotta take what the defense gives us.”

A Malik Smith three-pointer put Alton up 5-4, but a free throw and fast-break layup by Brazil put the Maroons back on top at 8-5. That was the Redbirds only lead of the game. However, they played noticeably solid defense, especially making life difficult for Liddell down low with someone always in his face and in a better position to rebound.

“We made a concerted effort to talk about rebounding, and the first quarter we went after it. We did a really good job with that,” Smith said. “Our kids competed in the first half, and we guarded the crap out of them.”

At the start of the second quarter, Charles Miller completed an and-one after he made an acrobatic layup, but he didn’t make the free throw. The score was 14-12 at that point, and the Redbirds wouldn’t convert another field goal until Ahmad Sanders broke the spell after the Maroons scored 15 straight points. During that run Malachi Smith scored six points, Brazil drilled a three and scored shortly after off of a Liddell blocked a shot that set it up.

In fact, Belleville West outscored Alton 20-2 until Malik Smith connected on a triple and a layup on two straight possessions. He finished with nine points to lead Alton.

Smith’s buckets rejuvenated the Redbird crowd, seemingly getting the edge of momentum going into halftime, but the other Smith on Belleville West, Malachi dashed those hopes as he sunk a baseline jumper with 24 seconds left and Alton didn’t answer back.

The Maroons outscored the Redbirds 23-9 in the second quarter partly because of their execution and partly because of Caldwell’s injury, which also gave them concern as well given their respect for him and Alton.

“You hate to see a kid like Caldwell go down. He’s a great player, but more importantly he’s a great kid,” Muniz said. “All of our guys are friends, and some were really bothered to see him hurt because they’re teammates in the summer and have great respect for Alton. Hopefully, it’s only a short time, and he’ll be back.

The severity of Caldwell's injury is currently unknown, but coach Smith is confident he’ll find a way to get through it no matter the situation given his mental and physical toughness.

“We’ll see. He’s a tough kid, a football kid,”

Clay opened the second half with a three-pointer, but the Maroons got things going down low with Randolph Jr. and Liddell who converted an and-one. Moments later he blocked yet another layup attempt by a Redbird and drove the down court himself to set up an easy layup for Jaylin Mosby. He finished with eight points.

This was game is one of a rugged streak of contests for Alton.

This upcoming Tuesday they travel to take on the Flyers of East St. Louis and then venture northwest to visit the Edwardsville Tigers the following Friday. In 13 days the Redbirds will take on Tim Finke (Grand Canyon State commit) and the Champaign Central Maroons in the first round of the loaded Belleville East Classic.