

# Hot start sends Champaign Central past Alton in East tourney opener

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer  
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**BELLEVILLE** – Champaign Central came into Belleville East's gym Tuesday night and all but shot the lights out of the building.

The Maroons went into their opening-round contest against Alton and couldn't miss a shot, jumping out to a 25-9 quarter-time lead on the Redbirds and went on to defeat Alton 84-50 in the opening game of the Chick-Fil-A Classic, sending the Redbirds to 10-6 on the year; Alton will next play Belleville Althoff at 6 p.m. Thursday in a consolation

bracket game of the tournament, with the winner playing for fifth place at 1:30 p.m. Saturday and loser playing for seventh at noon Saturday.

While acknowledging there wasn't much anyone could do to counter Central's hot start, Redbird coach Eric Smith thought “we felt we could compete a little bit better”. The Maroons were hitting from outside almost from the start – they hit 11 times from behind the three-point line, Kieon Gill connecting six times himself – and Alton was trying to match them, something that Smith wasn't happy about.

“We shoot a lot of threes, but with our percentage – it's just not who we are right now,” Smith said. “We decided that, for a stretch there at the beginning of the game, that's who we were going to try to be, and it didn't work out too well for us.”

The tournament field has some of the top-ranked teams in the St. Louis area taking part, including Chaminade and St. Mary's as well as Belleville West, who will take on Central Friday night. Smith is using the tournament to try to get the Redbirds ready for the postseason that begins in late February; “I don't know how much we learned tonight,” Smith said. “Offensively, that's about as bad as we've been in a long time; we didn't have a whole lot of player movement, we didn't have a whole lot of ball movement, we didn't share it the way we wanted.”

Kevin Caldwell led the Redbirds with 13 points on the night, with Malik Smith adding 10 points and Charles Miller, Donovan Clay and Darrell Smith each scoring six points; the Maroons were led by Tim Finke's 27 points, Gill's 18 and Jonte Coleman's 13 on the night.

Following the tournament, the Redbirds host Granite City at 7:30 p.m. Jan. 26, then return to East for a Southwestern Conference game at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 2.

