

Rivers scores 16, Clay 15 as Redbirds advance with 66-61 win over Senators

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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COLLINSVILLE – The Alton High boys basketball team countered an 18-5 run by Springfield High that gave them the lead in the second half with a run of their own in the second and third quarters to help give the Redbirds a 66-61 win over the Senators in the semifinals of the IHSA Class 4A Collinsville regional Tuesday night at Vergil Fletcher Gym.

It was a very streaky game, where both teams went on runs at one time or another, but it was Alton that went on the game's most decisive run, outscoring Springfield 8-0 at the end of the second, then 9-2 at the start of the third that gave the Redbirds enough cushion to survive at the end.

“Yeah, it gave us enough breathing room,” Alton coach Eric Smith said with a laugh.

Smith also thought that his team didn't play that well offensively.

“Offensively, we've just got to be a little bit better,” Smith said. “We've struggled here for the last three or four games offensively, so whatever the formula is, we've got to get back to it to what we had about a month ago.”

The game's momentum switched back and forth throughout, and as things turned out, the Redbirds were able to gain enough of an edge to advance.

“Yeah, I mean, the kind of the formula for us when we've been really, really good is we've shared the ball, we've got ball movement, player movement, and we've not taken contested shots,” Smith said. “We took contested shots tonight, we didn't move, so it wasn't a stellar offensive performance for us.”

Alton was able to get baskets at key moments throughout the game.

“Yeah, and that's the frustrating part,” Smith said, “is that we've got skilled offensive kids. But when they don't necessarily play together, it makes it a little bit more difficult.”

The Senators were led by Zaire Harris, who had 25 points. Smith knew that Springfield would be a good opponent.

“Yeah, and they've got some athletic kids who can do some things,” Smith said, “and we knew that going in. They play in a tough conference, they play some really good teams. We thought they were going to fight us; we didn't expect anything less than what they gave us tonight.”

And Smith wasn't surprised with the big run the Senators went on to take the lead in the second quarter.

"Yeah, I mean the frustrating part for us was they did to us what we kind of what we hoped to do to them," Smith said, "is that everything for them was going at the basket, and anything they got was all in rhythm because they got paint touches."

The Redbirds exploded out of the gates, getting an early basket from Donovan Clay and dunks from Rivers and Clay to take an early 6-0 lead. After a time out, Harris hit on a three-point play to halve the lead, but a Moory Woods free throw gave Alton a 7-3 edge. After an exchange of baskets, Rivers scored twice to give the Redbirds a 13-5 lead, but a Shane Miller basket shortly before the buzzer made the score 13-7 for Alton after the first quarter.

Bennie Slater hit a fadeaway jumper to start the second quarter for the Senators, but free throws from Clay and a Malik Smith basket extended the Alton lead to 19-9. That's when Springfield started their 18-5 run, beginning with a basket from Nate Borders and free throws from Miller to cut the lead to 19-13. A Randy Butler three gave Alton a 22-13 advantage, and after the Redbirds went up 23-15, Miller hit consecutive threes to cut the lead to 23-21, A Charles Miller free throw made it 24-21, but the Senators got a pair of baskets from Miller to go ahead 25-24. A pair of Miller free throws made it 27-24, and from there, the Redbirds got free throws from Butler and threes from Clay and Ky' lun Rivers to take a 32-27 lead at halftime.

The momentum stayed with the Redbirds at the start of the second half, as Alton scored the first seven points of the half, getting a basket from Clay to start, then Josh Rivers hitting a three and a driving lay-in to make it 39-27, forcing a Springfield time out. Harris immediately hit a three to cut the lead to nine, but a Miller basket underneath gave Alton a 41-30 lead. Borders then hit on a three-point play and a basket to cut the lead to 41-35, but a Butler floater, free throws from Woods and a Clay basket restored a 12-point Redbird advantage at 47-35. The momentum then switched back and forth, but in the end, Springfield outscored Alton 8-5, but it was the Redbirds who led 52-43 after three.

Harris hit inside and Miller connected on a pair of free throws at the start of the fourth quarter to cut the Alton lead to 52-47, but a pair of free throws from Charles Miller and a basket from Rivers re-upped the Redbird lead to 56-47. Baskets from Slater and Harris cut the Alton lead to 56-51, but then, Andrew Jones hit a clutch three on the baseline to make it 59-51. Brayden Schmoehle countered with his own three, and Shane Miller scored from the side to make it 60-56 with 1:31 to go. Woods upped the lead to six, and the Senators did cut the gap to three on a three-point play by Harris with 48.8 seconds

left to 62-59. The Redbirds then hit on five free throws in the final minute to make the final 66-61.

Woods scored 10 points to help the Redbirds, while Miller had 14 and Slater 10 for the Senators.

Alton is now 18-9 on the year and advances to a rubber game against Collinsville, a 54-34 winner over Edwardsville, in the final on Friday night, with a 7 p.m. tip-off. The two teams split their Southwestern Conference games this season, and Smith is looking forward to the final.

“It’ll be fun,” Smith said. “Kids will be excited to play in the game, I would expect that it’ll be a pretty good crowd. Two good teams are going to go play for a regional championship.”

Smith isn’t worried that the game will be played on Collinsville’s home court.

“I don’t think that really bothers our kids too much,” Smith said. “Just another game for us.”

And if the Redbirds play the way they’re capable of, the final could turn into a classic.

“Offensively, if we play the way we have about a month ago or so, we’ll be fine,” Smith said. “If we don’t do a little better offensively, it’s going to be a struggle.”





[Chris Rhodes also contributed to this story.](#)