

Liddell scores 22, Randolph 12 for West, Clay 14 for Redbirds as Maroons Advance in Sectional

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – Belleville West senior E.J. Liddell scored 22 points, while Keith Randolph, Jr. came alive in the second half with 12 points as the Maroons defeated Alton 59-49 in the IHSA Class 4A East Moline United sectional semifinal Tuesday night at Edwardsville’s Lucco-Jackson Gym.

Alton star Donovan Clay scored 14 points in the first half to help the Redbirds to a lead at halftime but was limited to three points in the second half for a total of 17.

The Maroons were able to clamp down on the Redbirds defensively in the second half, as Alton didn’t show the patience offensively that brought much success during the latter part of the season.

“I mean, I think we just kind of went away from some of the stuff that we’ve done in the past that we’ve been successful with,” said Redbird coach Eric Smith. “We got a little impatient; I think when they made their run, we felt the moment a little bit, and we weren’t necessarily as patient as we probably needed to be.”

Liddell also had a big night defensively blocking shots, and Smith felt that it helped hinder a small, but key part of the offense.

“I think the issue for us is, that we’ve talked about with our kids in playing them, is, like, the hockey assist is more important to us in this game,” Smith said, “because he kind of floats around and looks to try to block a shot, so the first guy makes a pass to the next guy, then the next guy’s gonna be the one who makes a play, you know, either scores it or to a teammate, because it’s hard for him to go to two spots. And I don’t know if we had a hockey assist or not. Last time, we had four or five of them, so I think that was a good key for us.”

But Smith knew that the effort was there against West.

“Oh, yeah,” Smith said with a smile. “We played our tails off. I mean, we competed, played hard. They’ve just got some big dudes.”

West was able to guard Clay better in the second half, which also helped spell the difference in the game.

“We guarded. I mean, we guarded,” said Maroon coach Joe Muniz. “We challenged our kids to get tougher on them, get better on them. We did some different things that we hadn’t done in the previous three games on them. We switched every screen. They were able to help break us down. A lot of our troubles with them was their ability to break us down, and get in the lane, then kick it out and get wide-open threes. And we didn’t let them get in the lane in the second half. They were doing more standing around the perimeter, but our guys got after it a little bit more.”

West was able to weather the storm in the first half, where the Redbirds went up by as much as nine, and then came back with a big run of their own. Muniz gave Smith tremendous credit for having the Redbirds ready to go.

“I just told our kids this is a game of runs. We just got to make sure that we have the last run. We weathered the storm, and I’m proud of our kids. And one of the things I reminded our kids, we are state champions. We gotta go out there, play like it, act like it. We’ve been here before. And I thought our kids showed great composure during that adversity because we haven’t been hit that hard in a long time.”

The game started out with the two key players, Liddell and Clay, trading baskets. The Maroons went to a 5-4 lead on another basket by Liddell, and the two teams traded the lead on threes by Josh Rivers and Jaylin Mosby before a basket by Malik Smith tied the game at 10-10. Mosby hit another three to give West the lead right back, then a basket by Rivers and a three from Andrew Jones gave the Redbirds a 15-13 lead. Clay extended the lead to 18-13 on a baseline three, but there was no further scoring in the quarter.

At the start of the second quarter, Clay blocked a Liddell shot, which led to a breakaway dunk by Rivers to extend the lead to 20-13. Clay then flew into the lane to score, making it 22-13 and causing West to call time out. After the time out, a Liddell free throw and a Mosby basket cut the lead to 22-16, forcing an Alton time out with 4:31 left in the half. A Lawrence Brazil III three up top and a Liddell dunk cut the lead to 22-21, and after another exchange of baskets, Clay hit a three up top to make it 27-23. Randolph scored inside to cut the edge to two, but both teams missed chances to score at the end of the half, making the score 27-25 Alton at halftime.

The Clay-Liddell matchup was very intriguing, as both players carried their teams throughout the half.

“Yeah, two competitive kids who play hard,” Smith said. “For a high school basketball game, I mean, I don’t know around here, you’re not going to go to too many places and see that kind of competition between two kids.”

Jones opened the second half with a three to make it 30-25 for the Redbirds, but the Maroons began to take control after that, going on an 8-0 run, fueled by a bank shot from Liddell, a Brazil drive in the lane, and a Liddell three up top and free throw to give West a 33-30 lead. A three-ball from Rivers tied the game up at 33-33, but Randolph scored twice to give the Maroons a four-point advantage. After a pair of Moory Woods free throws, Liddell dunked off a rebound and Randolph scored off a Liddell block to make it 43-36 for the Maroons. A Randolph free throw made it 44-36 West after three.

Randolph came alive in that quarter with eight points, which was big for West.

“He was phenomenal,” Muniz said. “And the thing is that he caught the ball, he started attacking, quit dribbling, and he just started attacking them. And when he plays with that motor, he makes us that much harder to guard.”

Rivers hit a three to cut the lead to 44-39 to start the final quarter, but a free throw and a three-point play by Brazil extended the West lead to 47-40 before a Smith basket cut the Maroon edge to 47-42. West went into a slowdown game, and it resulted in a Liddell basket and two free throws to extend the lead to 51-42. After another exchange of baskets, Liddell broke away for a dunk that made it 55-44, and from there, West hit on its free throws to make the final 59-49.

Brazil added 10 points for the Maroons, while Rivers had 13 for the Redbirds.

Muniz was very pleased with his team’s effort, and haven’t lost since dropping a game Feb. 20 in Alton 44-43 on a Rivers three at the buzzer.

“Absolutely,” Muniz said. “I mean, there wasn’t one kid in there that enjoyed what we did two Tuesdays ago. I mean, we made them stand and wait and shake hands and see the celebration on the sidelines, because you’ve gotta learn how to win with class. And you’ve gotta learn how to win. And we heard those celebrations in the locker room while we were in our doldrums. You’ve gotta learn how to accept it; you can look in a mirror and get better, or you can blame other people, or you can do this or that. And I think our kids, after that day, got refocused. And I knew when we walked out of there – I didn’t want to lose – but I knew I had our kids’ attention now. Because like I said, we have been doing that all season long, but we’ve always come up winning. In our two losses, we have excuses. There was no excuse; they flat out beat us. And like I said, that’s a hell of a team, Eric’s a great coach, does a great job.”

West is now 30-4 on the year and advances to the Sweet Sixteen for the second consecutive year, where they will play against Danville, a 68-57 winner over Pekin in the semifinal at East Moline, in the final on Friday night in a 7 p.m. tip-off. Muniz is expecting another great game. Alton finishes with a 23-10 mark.

“Well, it’s going to be another good game,” Muniz said. “I mean, you’re playing for a sectional championship. I know Danville’s really good, and Pekin is just playing as well as they can play. So I expect another great game.”





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