

Lady Redbirds Make History At 23-0 – Win Highland Tourney Over Okawville

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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HIGHLAND – Nothing seems to phase the Alton High School girl's basketball team anymore. They seem to rise to the occasion each and every time.

Best start to a season in program history? Check. Win both mid-season tournaments? Check and check. And now, as of Saturday, the winningest team in program history? Check. Still unbeaten? Well of course.

The Redbirds faced a rematch of the Mascoutah Holiday Classic semifinals when they took on the Okawville Rockets. This time, it was for the Highland Tournament championship.

Different day, but the same result for Alton. The Redbirds defeated the Rockets 54-38 Saturday afternoon to remain undefeated and earn the most wins in a single season in girl's basketball program history.

"I'm excited we broke our school record. It's a big day for us," Alton head coach Deserea Howard said.

The Redbirds wore white and were the home team Saturday in a packed house in Highland in a game that was back-and-forth up until the fourth quarter.

The teams seemed to have an answer for one another in the first quarter and the game was tied up at 13 after one. Alton pulled ahead thanks to some good shooting throughout and took a 29-25 lead into halftime.

Okawville junior Alayna Kraus opened up the second half with a three-pointer followed by another Rockets' bucket to take the lead at 32-31. It forced Alton to call a full timeout to sort some things out.

The Redbirds made a quick substitution, and it was exactly what they needed.

On to the court stepped sophomore Meyonna Banks. She made back-to-back threes to regain the lead for Alton at 41-36. That's how things ended after three quarters.

"She has been busting her butt for the last two weeks consistently," Howard said about Banks. "We knew we had this kind of thing coming up. We had her guarding our best players at practice in case we got in any foul trouble. She was ready and came out and proved it."

Her threes were a huge momentum builder, and the Redbirds used that momentum on the defensive end of the ball in the fourth.

Alton outscored Okawville 13-2 in the fourth quarter to hang on for the championship win.

"We've been confident in the fourth quarter in finishing games. Once we got to the fourth quarter, we were confident in what we could do," Howard said.

The defense was stellar for the entirety of the game. The Redbirds made sure they came ready to play.

“That was something we were trying to make sure that we did. 50-50 balls are a matter of heart, rebounds are a matter of heart. We wanted to prove that we had the bigger heart today,” Howard said.

It’s no easy task guarding Okawville’s Kraus and the Redbirds knew that. In their last meeting in the Mascoutah Tournament Kraus scored 22 points. Guarding her most of the game Saturday was junior Alyssa Lewis.

“It’s a big job, and you can trust Alyssa to do a job like that,” Howard said.

Lewis locked her down most of the game, but Kraus was still able to lead her team with 13 points. It’s a tough offense to shut down, but the Redbirds read their scouting reports.

“Honestly I felt we were ready for them,” sophomore Jarius Powers said after her big game. “I think they’re all great players and all play hard,” she said about the Rockets.

Powers finished with a game-high 18 points.

With this unbeaten record, Alton almost has a target on its back. Howard and the team really didn’t care who they were going to see in Saturday’s final.

“Everyone is bringing us their state championship game, so we knew whoever it was going to be, it was going to be a big game.”

Earning spots on the all-tournament team for Alton were freshman Kaylea Lacey and sophomore Kiyoko Proctor who also earned tournament MVP.

“It feels great. I’ve never got anything like that before. I feel like I worked really hard for it,” Proctor said about her accomplishments.

She finished the game with 14 points.

With just seven games left on the regular season schedule, Howard said her team is going to focus on “cleaning it up.”

“Now we just have to clean up our identity and continue to work hard and play hard defense.”

The team will have a few days to celebrate before getting back to business. Six of their last seven are against Southwestern Conference opponents.

Their two hardest tests will both be next week when the Redbirds host East St. Louis on Tuesday and head to O'Fallon on Thursday. Both games have 7:30 p.m. start times.

The Redbirds beat East Side back on Dec. 6 by a score of 58-57 in a game that got quite a bit heated between the two teams.

As for the Panthers, the Redbirds have seen them twice already this season in a 40-36 win on Dec. 8 and a 52-51 win in the Mascoutah tournament championship on Dec. 29.

When asked about next week Howard wasn't fazed.

Alton doesn't have to worry about having East St. Louis and O'Fallon on the schedule.

"They got us."