

# Seniors Shine Bright For Alton - Finish Season Undefeated At Home And Southwestern Conference Champs

by Bradley Piros, Reporter  
February 10 2023 8:40 AM



ALTON - It was a special night inside Alton High School's gym Thursday night. The Lady Redbirds hosted Collinsville with a chance to go undefeated at home and win the Southwestern Conference title.

After a rocky start, they did just that. Alton defeated the Kahoks by a score of 68-38 improving to 28-1 on the season and 11-1 in the SWC.

"That was a goal," head coach Deserea Howard said. "It's emotional, I'm excited about it, very much so. I'm almost speechless. I'm just proud of them."

The Redbirds were also celebrating Senior Night with Laila Blakeny and Dachele Carter both being honored before the game.

Come game time, both seniors made the start.

With a different starting five than normal, Alton got off to a bit of a slow start and found themselves down 13-10 after the first quarter.

"Anytime you switch up lineups it can be a little interesting for the girls chemistry-wise. We never really got nervous, we knew we could still pull out the game," Howard said.

"We wanted our seniors to have their time and have their moment so we were sticking to the plan no matter what."

At the start of the second Alton put their usual starters back in with the likes of Alyssa Lewis and Kayla Lacey taking the floor, but the Kahoks kept pace. They led 17-10 before Alton stormed back.

After a Blakeny three, a Lacey fast-break layup, and another Blakeny basket Alton took the lead at 19-17.

Collinsville's Deairra Spears came up with the play of the night when she went coast to coast with a couple of behind-the-back crossovers and then a step-back jumper that she was fouled on. She made the extra foul shot and regained the lead briefly at 22-21. This would be the last time the Kahoks led.

The Redbirds clawed back again and led 27-22 at the half.

Coming back onto the court Alton was shooting threes like they were going out of style. Back-to-back-to-back threes quickly grew their lead to 42-26 and then 55-32 after three quarters.

Carter came back into the game and played in the fourth quarter as well as some other bench players.

Blakeny stayed on the court and put on a show to celebrate the occasion. She dropped a career-high 30 points.

"I mean, the atmosphere was just great. I didn't know I was going to hit 30, I just came out here to have a good time really," Blakeny said.

She eventually got her curtain call and was all smiles sitting on the bench with her teammates.

"She's always got that," Howard said of her senior. "Usually, we do a lot more sharing but tonight we made it about our seniors and that's what makes it special, it was her time."

It's been this way all season, but more so Thursday night. The stands are always packed when this team takes the court.

"We get so much support," Howard said. "We wanted to do this for our community. We wanted to restore basketball, restore pride in basketball and I think we've done that. It's just special to look out and see it."

The Redbirds have one regular season game remaining tonight (Feb. 10) against a tough Visitation Academy team. That game has a 6 p.m. start time.

Barring any upsets early on, Alton's road to state goes through O'Fallon, the only team to best them this season.

Looking ahead, it's more than likely that the Redbirds and Panthers meet again in the Sectional Semifinals. Coincidentally, O-Town gets to host that game making it a tough ask for the Redbirds.

"That's okay," Howard said. "Everybody goes back to 0-0 and that's something we're going to ride. We're going to go back to our goals, back to what we were doing to have success and just go out there and put it all out on the court that night."

"We're ready," Blakeny said, "that's all I'm going to say, we're ready."

The Redbirds open the postseason on Tuesday, Feb. 14 at home against Granite City at 6 p.m. in the Regional Semifinals.