

Lady Redbirds' Historic Season Ends In O'Fallon In Sectional Semis

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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O'FALLON – In one of the most anticipated games in Alton's basketball program history, the Redbirds were on the road against the O'Fallon Panthers (30-4) in a Class 4A Sectional Semifinal Tuesday night. O'Fallon, who came into the game ranked No. 6 in Class 4A, defeated Alton, ranked No. 3, by a score of 49-43.

The Redbirds finished the season at 31-2, both of those losses being against the Panthers.

“31 wins, but the two losses were here. The two losses are the two that mattered,” Alton head coach Deserea Howard said.

Alton picked up two wins over O’Fallon, one in regular-season conference play and the other in the championship game of the Mascoutah Holiday Tournament.

O’Fallon returned the favor by snapping a 24-game win streak when they beat Alton 51-38 back on Jan. 26 at the Panther Dome. After Tuesday night, the Panthers remain undefeated on their home court.

The Sectional Semifinal game was a very competitive one, a game that delivered after all of its hype and build-up.

Josie Christopher opened the scoring when she drained a corner three. The teams then traded baskets, Kiyoko Proctor doing the damage early on for the Redbirds before Christopher drilled another three.

The Panthers were up 11-7 after a Shannon Dowell three, but after an awkward fall, Dowell, the team’s leading scorer, left the game with an apparent injury. She didn’t return until midway through the second quarter.

With Dowell out, it was the next player-up mentality for O’Fallon. That next player up was Laylah Jackson who came into the game and hit some huge shots.

After Proctor briefly tied the game up at 13, Jackson drilled a three to go back ahead and then another right before the first-quarter buzzer to go up 19-14.

The teams traded scores before Dowell joined back into the game. Proctor got a steal and a layup to close the gap to 21-19. Her three-pointer at the end of the quarter gave Alton its first lead at 24-23. That’s how things stood heading into the locker rooms.

Coming back onto the court it was Dowell shooting two free throws. She converted on one to tie the game back up at 24. Alton got the lead back at 28-26 before Jailah Pelly made a three to go back ahead.

The Panthers wouldn’t lose their lead after this point. They led 33-30 after three quarters.

Although Alton went down fighting, they were never able to get back into a rhythm. They closed the gap to 37-34 before O’Fallon went on a quick run to grow the lead back to 42-34.

After some successful trips to the foul line, O'Fallon put the game to bed with its free throw shooting.

The Redbirds only made two threes, both from Proctor.

"We're a shooting team. We didn't make shots tonight," Howard said.

"We didn't rebound the way we should have; we didn't execute the way we should have. We gave up easy threes in the first quarter, and you know when you lose by six, you think about how many threes they hit in the first quarter just from poor execution," Howard added.

"They beat us, and we beat ourselves," she said.

Proctor led all scorers with 17 points while Jarius Powers had 14. Kaylea Lacey, Talia Norman, and Kyridas Orr each scored four for Alton.

The Redbirds' historic season saw them capture two mid-season tournaments, the most wins in program history, the longest win streak in program history, and the first regional title since 1985.

The team graduates just two seniors, Dachele Carter and Laila Blakeny, so their window is still open. With the bulk of the team being sophomores, this team will be one to be reckoned with in the future.

Until then, the team proudly making it out of the brutal SWC is the O'Fallon Panthers. Howard tipped her cap to them.

"I think both of these teams tonight were good enough to win state," she said. "O'Fallon is going to represent the Southwestern Conference really well."