

Alton Deals With Injury Bug, O'Fallon Wins Big To Remain Unbeaten

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
April 19 2023 9:21 AM



ALTON - The Alton High School girl's soccer team came into the game against Southwestern Conference powerhouse O'Fallon having won four straight, three over SWC opponents and the other against a good Rock Bridge team from Columbia, Missouri.

Momentum was on their side as they hosted the Panthers Tuesday night at Public School Stadium, but the result was more or less the same from the last time the two met.

O'Fallon went on to win by a lopsided scoreline of 7-1 to remain undefeated on the season at 9-0-1.

The Panthers sit at 7-0 in the SWC and have all but yet clinched their second straight regular season conference title. Their remaining conference games are against the bottom three teams, Collinsville, Belleville East, and Belleville West, three teams they've already beat, but the Panthers aren't celebrating anything yet.

"Once those three games are done, we'll celebrate, and we'll be happy about it, but there's still three games to play," O'Fallon head coach Justin Judiscak said. "I don't ever want my girls to be taking it for granted or thinking that they've won anything before it's happened."

For Alton, their record this season still shows a successful one at 8-3-1, with two losses to O'Fallon and the other to the defending IHSA Class 2A state champions Triad.

Tuesday night, Alton played its best soccer in the opening 15 minutes, leading up to the Panthers' first goal. Having hit the post twice already in the opening minutes, Kiley McMinn finally put one home to break the tie. Claire Nieroda doubled the lead in the 27th minute from a nice set free-kick routine before McMinn made it 3-0 moments later.

Alton grabbed a glimmer of hope when Emily Baker found some open space and darted in toward goal, finishing a shot into the side netting with her right foot in the 37th minute. Shortly after, Baker delivered a near perfect cross into the box that Dachele Carter nearly headed in, but it went narrowly high. With the goal and the late chance, the Redbirds went into the half time break with all the momentum.

"Credit to Alton, they came out and put a lot of pressure on us in the first half and early on," coach Judiscak said. "It was not as well played from our side like I wanted in that first half, and credit them, they battled, kept it close, and made it tight."

Two goals in the opening five minutes of the second half all but sealed the deal for the Panthers. It was Nieroda and McMinn who struck again. O'Fallon goals came again in the 56th and 61st minutes, once again from Nieroda and McMinn. Nieroda finished the game with a hat trick and two assists, while McMinn ended up with four goals and an assist.

Six different players had assists for the Panthers: Addison Baldus, Sadie Mueller, Ella Peterson, Allie Tredway, Nieroda, and McMinn.

"Ultimately, putting the ball in the back of the net is a remedy for anything, but to see the girls come out and play a team game, those goals we scored came from nice assists

from their teammates, they were setting each other up, ultimately, I like to see that," Judiscak added.

The final outcome puts Alton at 4-2 in the SWC, with two tough games against Edwardsville coming up soon.

Alton's goalkeeper Peyton Baker did all that she could Tuesday night, recording 17 saves as she was tested early and often by the Panthers.

It was the most goals Alton has given up since another 7-1 loss in the 2020-21 season to Triad, who won state and went undefeated that season.

"O'Fallon is a very good team," Alton head coach Gwen Sabo said following the loss Tuesday night.

"They possess the ball well, they move off the ball well, they anticipate, they like to knock it. Like one of our girls said, as soon as you step to the ball, they play it to where you just were. They create space for themselves and then they exploit it. They did a good job of capitalizing on our mistakes."

As mentioned earlier this season, Sabo saw her program with diminishing numbers after last year's record-setting year, for reasons she doesn't exactly know why. With an already limited bench, injuries are beginning to catch up with the Redbirds.

"Unfortunately, the injury bug has hit," Sabo said.

"I was hoping after Belleville West, I gave them Friday off, Saturday, Sunday; I was hoping we'd be better, but I had two starters sitting on the bench 10 to 15 minutes in sitting the rest of the game. Lot's of injuries right now and we don't have the bench to support that."

Still, Alton battled and played a game that was closer than the scoreboard suggested.

"The scoreboard doesn't show a lot of positives, but there still were a lot of positives from the game tonight," Sabo said. "Overall, I thought we defended better as a team, especially my back line in the first half."

The Redbirds will look to shake this one off as they prepare for what has been dubbed the 'Battle of the Bowl' on Friday. It'll be the Alton Redbirds vs. the Marquette Catholic Explorers under the lights at Public School Stadium with a 6:45 p.m. kick off.