

# Alton Girls Basketball, And Their Newest Additions, Ready For Another Historic Season

by Bradley Piros, Reporter  
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ALTON - The Alton High School girls basketball program is growing, on and off the court in 2023.

According to head coach Deserea Howard, her Redbirds picked up seven new girls; five freshmen and two sophomore transfers.

But there was an even bigger announcement, one that she tried to keep a secret for as long as possible.

Deserea coaches alongside her husband, Donte Howard, and the two just welcomed their third child into the world, a baby girl born just last month.

The two found out that they were expecting right around the beginning of the new year, Howard said. According to her, it was shortly after the Mascoutah Holiday Tournament.

She decided it would be best to try and keep it under wraps, not wanting her pregnancy to cause a distraction for her team, joking around that it was getting pretty difficult come playoff time in late February.

She mentioned that a couple of moms on the team figured it out relatively early on, but other than them and her family, no one else knew.

Deserea, a P.E. teacher at Alton Middle School, has been on maternity leave and is just now getting back, right in time for the Redbirds to open their season.

Taking a year off was never really in the cards, stating that she had done all of this before with her first two children.

She also mentioned that she has a phenomenal support system and her family has been by her side the entire way to help relieve some of the stress of having a newborn and following up the most successful season in Alton girls basketball history.

It's a whole lot to deal with, but the Howards want the challenge.

"We're trying to take it one game at a time," Deserea said.

"Obviously, we know we have a big season to live up to, but just focusing on the game ahead, so right now we're focusing on North Point and getting ready for them."

The Redbirds open their season by hosting the 28th Annual Lady Redbird Tip-Off this weekend.

Alton opens up tournament play this Friday, Nov. 17 against North Point and plays a doubleheader on Saturday against Hazelwood West and Lift for Life Academy.

Howard loves being able to open the season at home.

"Really just getting to see our girls in front of our crowd," she said. "Our community really supports girls basketball."

"Alton has just embraced us in a way we never thought was going to happen for girls basketball," she continued. "We're so excited to play here Friday night and then again on Saturday. It's a great place to play."

The city really rallied around this team. That'll happen after an unprecedented 31-2 season, one that ended a bit prematurely in the sectional semifinals.

Alton went out against the eventual Class 4A state champions, O'Fallon.

"I think looking back on it, I was more disappointed in the moment until I realized the body of work that had happened with the young team," Howard said.

"I think it was a lot for us to learn from and it taught us a lot. Through the summer we were able to kind of ride that wave and keep growing and building together. Obviously, when you lose to the state championship team you can't be too upset about it."

The Panthers handed Alton its only regular-season loss as well on Jan. 26.

Howard is looking forward to continuing that rivalry.

"For us to have gone 31-2 and both games went to O'Fallon," she said. "But, not really in a hateful way, it's just a fun match-up when we play them. They play almost the same style of basketball that we play, fast-paced, up in your face. The energy's electric, both crowds come out, and it's always a great night."

Those games will look a lot different this year though.

While the Panthers graduated six players, including two key starters, Alton graduated just three players, one starter in Laila Blakeny.

The Redbirds bring back almost all of its starting five rotation in sophomore Kaylea Lacey, juniors Kiyoko Proctor and Jarius Powers, and senior Alyssa Lewis.

Everything is in place to have another wildly successful season.

"We did something historic last year, and I think we have the chance to do something historic this year," Howard said. "We know we have a special team."

With just about the same team returning, they plan to stick to their same style of basketball, a fast, high-octane, end-to-end offense, and a high-press, in-your-face defense.

"That's my style," Howard said with a grin.

"That's all I can teach and with this many girls, I hope we can go faster. Of course, we want them to be growing their IQ and they can slow it down when they need to, but it has to be high-pressure basketball, score a lot of points, get it out there, and get going."

"That's just the style of basketball that I enjoy, the girls are buying into it and they enjoy it as well so it's been working out for us."

It's an offense that scored 50 or more points in all but five games last season. Only Mater Dei and O'Fallon figured out a way to slow down the Redbirds' offense.

Last year's Redbirds started the season on a 24-game win streak, one that saw them win the Mascoutah Holiday Tournament and the Highland Shootout along the way.

This year, Howard wanted to mix things up. No more Mascoutah Tournament for Alton, but the Highland Shootout still remains.

"I wanted a tougher schedule this year," Howard said. "I thought last year was a pretty tough schedule for us, but I wanted to go a different route, I wanted to play some different styles of teams in different areas that maybe we haven't seen before, putting the girls in different situations."

Instead of Mascoutah, the team will be in Morton, taking on some traditional Class 3A powerhouses. The Redbirds take to the road later this season to take on Lincoln, the Class 3A state runners-up.

Howard believes that her team put in a lot of work this off-season and is more than ready to go.

"Off-season was really good," Howard said. "We traveled a lot, and played all through June."

The Redbirds attended multiple college team camps including the NCAA Live Period as well as the University of Illinois-Chicago, Illinois State, and the Southwestern Illinois College League.

It was a time for her new players to become acclimated with the returning starters.

"It was a really good time. There are a lot of girls on the team now, so just really working on their chemistry, which wasn't too hard since they played together in middle school too."

Howard knows there will be a lot of eyes on them this season, but remains calm, knowing that her team is still young.

"We still have time," she said. "We still have two years."

"A lot of people are putting the pressure on us like it has to happen right now. We're still a very heavy team, and like I said, there are seven new girls who are hungry, they fight hard, and we don't have to push them too much to work extra. Things like that, I think that's what makes championship teams."

She expects a lot out of her team but isn't setting the standards extremely high.

"I don't believe in state-or-bust," she said. "That's basically telling them if they don't make state, it's a failure."

"I think right now they need to be focused on being better than they were last year. We lost in the sectional semifinals. We need to get past that. We need to get to Illinois State before we can start talking about winning state. We've got to get in the gym. We just want to get in the door, because once you're in, anything can happen."