

Lady Redbirds Finish Strong To Beat Nashville In Highland Tourney Semis

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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HIGHLAND - The Lady Redbirds are headed back to the Highland Tournament championship game.

While many clamored for a semifinal between the two Southwestern Conference juggernauts, Nashville had other plans.

The No. 4 team in Class 2A according to the latest AP rankings beat O'Fallon (No. 9 Class 4A) in the quarterfinals 63-56 on Monday, setting up an interesting seminal between the Hornets and Redbirds.

Alton, which got its spot back at No. 2 in Class 4A, struggled out the gates Wednesday night, but still went on to a 55-42 win. Although the game was much closer than the 13-point margin would suggest.

Talia Norman put Alton's first three points on the board followed by baskets from Jarius Powers and Kaylea Lacey as Alton got out to a 9-5 lead.

But from there, Nashville went on an eight-point run to go ahead 13-9. The Hornets had all the momentum early on and led 15-11 after the first quarter.

"We didn't rebound," Alton head coach Deserea Howard said about the early goings. "It was a game of rebounds. 8 to 16. That does it. If we keep letting people out rebound us and get the second and third chances, we're going to struggle in the beginning of the game. There is no ifs, ands, or buts about that."

Nashville opened the second quarter on a 7-2 run thanks to back-to-back baskets from Emma Behrmann and a three-pointer from Summer Brinkmann to grow the lead to 22-13, forcing Alton into a full timeout.

The Redbirds would begin to chip away immediately with a Meyonna Banks trey, but they still trailed 27-22 at halftime.

Behrmann scored 12 of her team-leading 18 points in the first half and was a nuisance down low.

"We knew 33 (Behrmann) could play," Howard said. "I think a lot of her points in the beginning were second chance points. She was hanging around the basket. Defensively, we didn't clear the paint."

Combine Nashville's clutch shooting with an impressive first half defensive effort and it was a perfect storm for Dempsey Witte and his team.

"I thought our defense was pretty good the whole first half," he said. "We did a great job of containing them as much as we could."

"They're a load to guard. They got so many different options with their perimeter shooting and their post presence is really good," Witte added. "It was quite a challenge

for us. I thought we battled really well, our kids fought hard. We just came up on the short end in the second half, kind of ran out of gas a little bit and didn't finish down the stretch."

The Redbirds would come back onto the court and outscore Nashville 33-15 in the second half, but really didn't pull away until midway through the fourth quarter.

Norman and Alyssa Lewis both scored to open the second half and cut the lead to 27-26, forcing Nashville into a quick timeout.

Alton would trail 29-28 and 32-30 before Kiyoko Proctor's three gave her team its first lead since early on in the first quarter. Norman closed out the third with another basket as Alton led 35-32 after three.

But the Hornets still had some fight in them.

Samantha Brinkmann and Makayla Gajewski both made two free throws as the four-point swing gave Nashville a 36-35 lead.

The Redbirds answered with a nine-point run to make it a 44-36 ballgame. With just under four minutes remaining in the game, Alton had all of the momentum.

"When we take a lead it drops the shoulders a little bit," Howard said. "That's something I definitely noticed. We can play well and composed in the fourth quarter, so we don't really get rattled that easily."

"Once they got a little lead, they got a lot of energy in a hurry," Witte said. "That made it really difficult to get a flow going when there was that much pressure."

After Nashville's four free throws to open the quarter, Alton would outscore them 20-6 to close out the game.

"Fatigue is not something that we really deal with, so I think that's why a lot of people call us a second half team," Howard continued.

But she doesn't want to be known as a second-half team.

"It actually really frustrates me when we're going into halftime and we have to re-adjust, come out harder in the third quarter," she said. "Sometimes I think we don't lock in to the little things until we go back in there and re-talk, re-asses."

But Alton's conditioning certainly helped them down the stretch.

"We play very, very hard in the beginning and we don't really get tired. We keep going and a lot of teams fade out."

Nashville didn't fade out until the dying minutes. After shocking O'Fallon, the Hornets believed they could do it again against Alton.

"That's one thing I'm really proud of," Witte said, "We came here expecting to win the game. Our kids really believed in themselves. We knew we'd have to play a really good game and they'd have to be missing some shots, but we felt like we could win."

Witte and his team will play the loser between Breese Central and Mater Dei in the third-place game on Saturday at 1 p.m. The winner of the 'Battle of Breese' will play Alton in the championship game at 2:30 p.m. Saturday.

"It's a great tournament," Witte said. "When the brackets came out, quite lot of people came to me and said that we probably have the toughest road."

"We had to beat Triad who's really good and then O'Fallon and Alton just get to Central or Mater Dei. So, it was a really challenging road, which is fine. It's good for us to play good competition and prepare us for the postseason."

Howard, not always one to shout out her opposition, had nothing but good things to say about Nashville.

"I think they're a great team, especially for some young girls," she said.

The Brinkmann sisters are freshman. As is Gajewski. Behrmann is a sophomore. Nashville only rosters three upperclassman.

To go along with Behrmann's team-high 18 points, Gajewski added 11. Summer Brinkmann scored five while Samantha Brinkmann and Avery Reeder each scored four.

"I think they're going to make a big difference in 2A," Howard continued. "We did not underestimate them at all. A lot of our struggles and frustration tonight was due to how they were taking it at us and how they were rebounding. So, I have to give them credit for how they slowed us down tonight."

Norman finished with a game-high 18 points for the Redbirds. 13 of her points came in the second half, nine of which came in the fourth quarter.

Proctor scored 15 points, also having 13 of them come in the second half and eight of them in the fourth. Lacey finished with nine points and Powers had eight.

Alton's record improves to 22-1.

The Redbirds will play either Mater Dei (18-3, No. 3 Class 2A) or Breese Central (19-1, No. 2 Class 2A) in the championship game on Saturday, Jan. 20 at 2:30 p.m. at Highland High School.

"Both teams are big, both teams are physical, Howard said. "It's going to be a battle of the rebounds. We know that, they know that, and so we just have to come out and work on that again over the next couple of days and be better."

Central and Mater Dei play tonight, Jan.18 at 8 p.m. in the other semifinal.