

Alton Wins Highland Tourney For Second Year Straight - Proctor Once Again Named Tournament MVP

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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HIGHLAND – For the second year straight, the Lady Redbirds are Highland Tournament champions.

A season ago Alton beat Okawville 54-38 in the final. This year, in the tournament's 37th installment, the Redbirds defeated Breese Central by a score of 57-46.

Alton beat Belleville West in the first round 91-21 setting up a quarterfinal against Okawville, the defending IHSA Class 1A state champions and the No. 5 ranked team in 1A by the Associated Press. Alton beat the Rockets 45-29.

They then had to beat Nashville, ranked No. 4 in Class 2A, in the semis before taking on Central in the final, who is ranked No. 2 in 2A.

“2A in this area is no joke,” Alton head coach Deserea Howard said after the win over Central.

“We have to take them seriously. They’re very fundamental, very disciplined, they play well as a team, and it pushes us to do the same thing.”

The couple of 2A schools were the trickiest for Alton to get past this tournament.

“This tournament is full of 2A powerhouses,” Howard continued. “Someone from this tournament is going to win the 2A state championship. This year I really felt like our road was tough, but we stuck with it and played as a team.”

Alton trailed against Nashville at halftime, and it happened again against Central in the final.

The Cougars opened the game on a 9-1 run. Kylie Rakers drained a three then made two free throws before Taylor Trame scored. Just like that Alton was down eight points.

Kaylea Lacey knocked down a three followed by a Kiyoko Proctor basket to make it 9-6, but Central went on to lead 16-12 after the first quarter.

Kyridas Orr scored to open the second and make it a one-possession game, but Trame scored the next seven points for her team as the Cougars went ahead 23-16. After Ella Nettekmeier’s buzzer-beater, Central still led by seven at halftime 30-23.

Alton scored back-to-back baskets to open the half from Talia Norman and Lacey, but Central did the same from Cece Toennies and Rakers to make it 34-27. Those would be Central’s only baskets of the third quarter.

The Redbirds finished the frame on a 15-point run, taking over the game.

It began with Jarius Powers making four straight free throws, right before she picked up her fourth personal foul with 3:39 remaining in the third.

Orr came back into the game and scored to make it 34-33 Central, but then Alyssa Lewis blew the game wide open. Her first three gave Alton its first lead of the game at 36-34. Lacey followed that up with a three and then Lewis netted another one.



Alton had flipped the script and now led 42-34 after three.

“We had a talk at halftime,” Howard said about Lewis. “She kept saying her shot was off. We had to remind her that shooters shoot. They’ll start to fall.”

Alton played most of the third quarter without Powers and later Norman as well after she picked up her fourth foul. They came back in and played most of the fourth.

Howard was happy to see her bench step up.

“I believe in my team,” Howard said. “I believe that in those deep moments we can pull other girls and they can do their job and that’s what I’ve been on them about. Tonight, I was really proud that we were able to switch out Jarius and Talia in foul trouble and still pull that off.”

Powers finished with eight points, all of which came in the second half and Norman had six.

Lacey led Alton with 14 points, Lewis had 13, and Proctor had 12.

Alton outscored Central 34-16 in the second half.

“I just wanted to see the spark, and I didn’t see it in the beginning,” Howard said. “I tried to stay calm. It was frustrating, but we’ve been coming back in the second half a lot in this tournament, and I was just hopeful that we could do it today as well.”

Regarding the first half, she felt like her team was overthinking it.

“I think we were just thinking way too much,” Howard said. “This was a game where we really, really prepared, but they didn’t trust the preparation. We were really thinking about it and second-guessing ourselves. I think pulling out the win is going to give them the confidence that what we’re doing is working.”

Teams like Nashville and Breese Central had the upper hand on Alton in the first half because it forced the Redbirds to slow things down.

“This isn’t our style,” Howard said. “This slowing it down, we don’t like this. People know that; it’s no secret. To see us continue to fight and not give up makes me very proud. We like a certain style of basketball. The state knows that, and they do a really good job in this tournament exploiting that and I’m really proud that we came out with those wins because that’s not us.”

That’s why the Redbirds enjoyed their time in Chicago land so much because that’s how those teams play. End-to-end and fast.

As Alton boys basketball head coach, Dylan Dudley would say, they want to turn it into a track meet. When it’s a track meet, Alton is tough to beat. But Howard respects the style that teams like Okawville, Nashville, and Breese Central tried to play, and is proud that her team found a way to win those styles of games.

“We’ve seen so many different styles of basketball and I’m really happy with how we’ve looked against this style,” she said.

Breese Central was led in scoring by Rakers with 17 points and Trame with 13. They both were placed on the All-Tournament team along with teammate Kaydence Schroeder.

Alton saw Norman and Lacey on the All-Tournament team as Proctor won Tournament MVP for the second year in a row.

“It feels great,” Proctor said. “I don’t even know what to say. I put a lot of effort into it.”

“Kiyoko is valuable. She’s special, people know that,” Howard said.

“Even if she’s not scoring, she’s out there still impacting the game. She finds a way to impact the game for us and we have to honor that. Whether she’s got zero points or 19 points she does so much on the floor. She is the MVP.”

Breese Central fell to 20-3 on the season while Alton improved to 23-1.

The Redbirds will get back to work trying to defend their Southwestern Conference title with big-time matchups on the road at East St. Louis and back home on Thursday, Jan. 25 against O’Fallon.