

Lady Redbirds Beat Rival O'Fallon - Remain Undefeated In Conference

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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ALTON – The Lady Redbirds don’t want to share anymore.

“No, not at all,” Alton junior forward Jarius Powers said with a grin. “Right now we’re pretty much in control of the conference title, and we would like to keep it that way.”

Last season the Redbirds had to share the Southwestern Conference title with O’Fallon. They both finished conference play 11-1. The two split their regular season games.

That didn't happen this year as the Redbirds beat the Panthers 52-47 Thursday night, improving to 25-1 and more importantly 9-0 in the conference, while O'Fallon falls to 20-6 and 7-2 in the SWC.

Alton won 55-50 at the Panther Dome back on Dec. 7.

Now Alton has to win just two of its final three conference games coming up against Belleville West, Belleville East, and Collinsville.

"We wanted to secure the conference title," Alton head coach Deserea Howard said after the win over O'Fallon. "Obviously, that's something that we haven't done often. Last year we shared it, and we wanted to take it outright this year. We're not looking past the rest of the teams."

But it never comes easy against O'Fallon, the defending state champs who are currently ranked No. 10 in Class 4A by the Associated Press. Alton is ranked No. 2.

On a night where Powers was celebrated for becoming Alton's third 1,000-point scorer this season, she got the game started with her basket, followed immediately by a 3-pointer from Alyssa Lewis.

Alton got out to a 7-2 lead and eventually led 20-9 after the first quarter. It was unfortunately familiar for the Panthers, who trailed 22-9 after the opening frame in the two's previous meeting.

"Both times we've played them this year we've just dug ourselves a hole in the first quarter," O'Fallon head coach Nick Knolhoff said.

"We have the potential to play with them. I think that we held Kiyoko (Proctor) to five points, and we shut her down. But that's why they're so good because any girl can step up and Lewis was just on fire tonight," Knolhoff added.

Lewis was indeed on fire, finishing with 15 points on five 3's.

"That's what she does," Howard said. She did her job tonight. I told her in the locker room, 'Way to knock down shots in big moments'. That was big."

Howard mentioned after last Saturday's win against top-ranked Breese Central, that Lewis was going through some shooting woes, but those seem to be gone now.

"In the Highland Tournament, she didn't shoot well," Howard said. "She wanted to stop shooting and we just had to tell her, 'Hey, you're going to shoot the ball. You're a

shooter, that's what you do. If you don't shoot what's the point of having you on the floor.' So, just keep giving her that confidence to keep doing what she does. We know she'll miss some shots, but she's going to make some too. We're willing to take that gamble."

Kaylea Lacey didn't gamble. She led the charge with a team-high 16 points.

"Lacey plays hard," Howard said. "If you leave her open, she's going to hurt you and that's what we've been trying to push out of her. She's so used to just passing and playing behind the other girls. Tonight I was just so proud of what she did. She took control and didn't wait for the game to come to her."

Powers was the team's third double-digit scorer as she finished with 11.

After gaining an 11-point lead after the first quarter, Alton was never in any serious danger.

O'Fallon's Haeli Tart gave a spark to her team with her buzzer-beater three to cut the deficit to 34-27 heading into the locker rooms.

But Lacey scored the first seven points of the second half after back-to-back baskets and then a clutch 3-pointer. She upped the lead to 41-27. The Panthers never went away though, trailing 43-35 after three.

O'Fallon used a six-point run to make it 48-43 with 1:32 left in the game, but Alton was able to put the game away with free throws and get one step closer to a conference title.

"Anytime you're playing O'Fallon and come out on top, you have to be happy about that," Howard said.

D'Myjah Bolds led the Panthers with 16 points. Carolyn Foster had 12, Tart had nine, and Josie Christopher had eight.

O'Fallon didn't leave Alton with their heads hung low.

"Being able to grind it out and get back into the game against a team like that, who can potentially put you away, we'll take a positive out of that," Knolhoff said.

They'll take all the positives they can get. That's because barring a huge upset, these two teams will meet again, just like they did last season in a sectional semifinal, more than likely back at the Panther Dome.

But the Redbirds want to finish one task before they look ahead to another.

Should Alton beat Belleville West on Tuesday, they could clinch the conference on Thursday, at home against Belleville East before closing out the regular season at Collinsville on Feb. 8.

Alton beat West 78-18 and 91-21 this season. Alton beat East 66-15 and Collinsville 71-30.