

# Emotions Run High As Lady Redbirds Beat O'Fallon In Sectional Semifinal, Avenging Last Season's Loss

by Bradley Piros, Reporter  
February 20 2024 9:33 PM



BELLEVILLE – The Lady Redbirds were willing to do anything to make sure history didn't repeat itself.

“We were devastated last year,” an emotional Deserea Howard said regarding last year's postseason exit to O'Fallon.

“It took a long time to recover and that’s what I’m feeling. It took a long time to get over that because we knew we were better. I’m not taking anything from , they played great, but if we would have played 100 percent and lost, we could eat that, so the emotion tonight is because we almost did it again, but we dug deeper and didn’t let it happen.”

Alton did indeed right it’s wrong from a season ago.

Tuesday night in the IHSA Class 4A Normal Community West Sectional semifinal, Alton got its rematch with the Panthers, and this time held on for a 51-41 win.

The game was played out at Belleville West High School, a more suitable Metro-East location for the two teams, and it saw a large crowd for both sides.

The large crowd got to see exactly what was expected of the two sides early on.

O’Fallon got on the board first, but back-to-back baskets gave Alton a brief 4-2 lead. O’Fallon’s Josie Christopher connected on a corner three-pointer to regain the lead. A six-point swing saw Alton lead 11-7, but threes from Christopher and Kennah Barringer tied the game back up for O’Fallon at 13-13 after the first quarter.

The Panthers continued to push the pace and outscored Alton 11-6 in the second quarter, heading into the locker room with a 24-19 lead.

But Alton was a different team in the second half.



Straight baskets from Talia Norman and Kaylea Lacey cut the lead to 24-23, but a three from D'Myjah Bolds and a basket from Haeli Tart boosted the lead back up to 29-23.

But Alton used another six-point run sparked by Kiyoko Proctor. She dropped in a triple and then another basket before Lacey sank a free throw to tie the game up at 29. The game was tied again at 31 and 33 before Proctor drove to the basket and put a shot up and in as time expired.

"We had a little talk," coach Howard said about her point guard.

"Kiyoko Proctor's got to be Kiyoko Proctor, and I told her I don't know who that is in the first half but don't bring her back in the second half, and she didn't."

Seven of Proctor's 14 points came in the third quarter, and thanks to her Alton had its first lead since leading midway through the opening quarter. The Redbirds went into the fourth with a 35-33 advantage.

Alton proceeded to score the first six points of the quarter to extend the lead to 41-33. It started with a Jarius Powers basket before Lacey and Powers each sank a couple of free throws.

From then on out, the Redbirds were able to keep the defending state champs at bay.

Despite the outcome, O'Fallon head coach Nick Knolhoff always looks forward to the matchups against Alton.

"This year, next year, it's just going to be a knockout fight with them every single time; it's fun," he said.

"Look at the atmosphere that these girls have created for both programs, it's just fun to be a part of. Hopefully, they do well and represent the South. We're whole-heartedly rooting for them now that we're knocked out. We made our run last year and it's their turn to make their run this year."

Last year, O'Fallon beat Lisle Benet Academy 62-57 in double overtime to win the program's first state championship, capping off a 34-4 season.

This time around, the Panthers' season ends at 26-8.

"We made our schedule super competitive," Knolhoff said. "I know people see eight losses, but we were 26-8, and all of our eight losses I think we lost by 10 or less. We were in every single game."

Alton finished last season with a 31-2 record, both losses coming to O'Fallon. It was the Panthers who ended Alton's season last year in this very game by a score of 49-43.

That's why it meant so much for Howard and the entire team.

"This was a hurdle," Howard said. "O'Fallon was a hurdle for us because of all the emotions and how great they are. We know there's going to be bigger hurdles, we're not saying that it's won, but we can breathe tonight and get back to it."

Knolhoff knew how much it meant for Alton as well.



“It did. From what we took from them last year, going 31-2 and both the losses to us. They’ve worked so hard. It’s very deserving,” Knolhoff said.

“It was our time last year, we had some seniors, and I’m hoping that it’s their time this year. I really do wish them well and hope they can pull it out for us here in the South.”

Other than Proctor’s 14 points, Alton’s two tall, post presences, Powers and Norman, combined for 28 points. Powers had 18 and Norman had 10.





“They’re just so hard to get around,” Knolhoff said of the two. “We try to front, but those guards for Alton, they look to pound the ball in the post. They do a really good job of looking at and they just know how to finish around the basket and if they get fouled they’re both good free throw shooters too.”

Other scorers for Alton were Lacey with seven and Allison Pruitt with two.

Pruitt, alongside a handful of other bench players such as Aryanna Anthony, Madeline Ducey, and Kyridas Orr were called upon frequently by Howard.

“Since June 1<sup>st</sup> I’ve been telling them that anybody’s name could be called, be ready when your name is called,” Howard said.

“Tonight, I felt like I owed them that to be a part of this, especially when we were losing. I had to put them out there and see what they were willing to do, and I saw Redbird Pride tonight.”

These players also got some time because Alton’s typical three-point assassin Alyssa Lewis went scoreless, sitting out most of the night with some shooting troubles.

Lewis, Alton’s lone senior, spoke like a true team player.

“It’s bigger than me, so I’m not upset by any means when it comes to personal reasons or anything like that,” she said. “This is where we got defeated last year, so I’m not upset by any means. It’s bigger than me; we’re moving on and we’re a step closer to state.”

“Whatever issues that happened, it is what it is, my team won and that’s all that matters to me,” Lewis said.

Howard and Lewis both agreed that it was Alton’s defense that won them the fourth quarter and eventually the game, but it was also a little more than that.

“Passion, rather than emotion,” Lewis clarified.

“The way we dug deep, the way we fought, the way we’ve been fighting all year even since June. Today it showed us, especially when we were down. When we were down by five, we could have easily gave up, and let them keep punching us and punching us, but we didn’t. We fought back and that’s something that we’ve been instilling since June.”

Alton didn’t allow O’Fallon a double-digit scorer. Christopher and Bolds each finished with nine points, Tart had eight and Carolyn Foster had seven.

The Redbirds improve to 31-2 on the season and move on to the sectional final against top-seeded Normal Community. Normal Community beat East Moline United 70-50 in the other semifinal to improve to 31-3 on the season.

The sectional championship game will be played on Thursday, Feb. 22 at 7 p.m. at Normal Community West High School.

“Everybody’s going to be ready,” Lewis said. “We have a straight way in, and I think we have a good chance of doing it.”