

Historic Win: Alton Defeats Normal Community For Program's First Sectional Title

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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NORMAL, Ill. – “It feels good making history,” Alton’s Jarius Powers said Thursday night.

She’s no stranger to making history, and the Lady Redbirds aren’t very shy about raising the bar.

The bar was raised, and more history was made Thursday night as Alton defeated Normal Community 66-56 to win its first-ever sectional title.

“It means a lot,” Alton head coach Deserea Howard said after the win. “I think that’s why Alton is here. We’re putting Alton on our backs right now and we’re trying to give our city something to be proud of.”

A large Alton fan section made the two-and-a-half-hour trip up north to Normal Community West High School, the site of the sectional championship game.

What those fans saw was their team get off to a fiery start.

Powers put the first basket up and in before Alyssa Lewis netted a three. Normal answered with a three, but another basket from Powers and then triples from Lewis and Powers saw Alton take a 13-3 lead.

The Lady Iron kept pace the rest of the first quarter with two more threes of their own, but they still trailed 24-14 after one.

For Alton, it was a dream start, one that couldn’t have been much better according to Howard.

“Probably not,” she said. “We came out hot. We felt prepared, we felt confident.”

Lewis scored nine of her 14 points in the first quarter. This came after being held scoreless against O’Fallon.

“Alyssa came out hot,” Howard said. “We had a good talk after O’Fallon and let her know we still believe in her. Especially the way she put the team before herself. We were going to go out and perform with her out front tonight. I was really, really proud of the way she performed.”

A three from Madeline Ducey and a basket from Kiyoko Proctor saw Alton take its widest lead of 14 points at 29-15 in the opening of the second quarter.

But the Iron used an 11-point swing to cut the game to 32-29 before Alton made three free throws to lead 35-29 at the halftime break.

Normal used a seven-point run, capped off by Giana Rawlings’ three to get within a point at 37-36 before Kaylea Lacey went the other way with a traditional three-point play. After that Powers made a couple of free throws to boost the lead back to 42-36.

The Redbirds closed the third quarter on a six-point run that included another triple from Lewis to lead 48-38 after three.

But no lead felt safe for Alton, not this far into the postseason.

“Not really, because it’s playoffs,” Howard said. “Nobody quits, nobody gives up. We’ve got to just keep pushing and playing with consistency. I feel like we let them get off way too many threes and our defense usually ignites us. Since we couldn’t get it together defensively, offensively we were a little wild too.”

The fourth quarter saw a stalemate, both teams putting up 18 points as Alton went on to the 10-point win.

The Redbirds led wire to wire thanks to some timely shots from all across the lineup.

Four of Alton’s starters ended up in double-digit scoring.

Proctor led with 18 points, Powers had 17, Lewis had 14, and Lacey had 13.

“I mean we are unselfish,” Howard said. “We never know who’s going to be hot, who’s going to be nervous, who’s going to be feeling it and we just make sure we feed that kid.”

“Really, we’re not a selfish team,” Powers said. “If somebody’s getting doubled or if somebody’s not hot, we’re going to swing the ball and get it to whoever is hot or open. That’s how you beat a team because you don’t know who’s going to show up what night.”

All the Redbirds showed up Thursday night and played with a huge weight lifted from their shoulders after beating the defending state champs O’Fallon on Tuesday.

“We knew that was a hurdle that we had to get over,” Howard said about the Panthers. “This was a quick turnaround, especially for a team we’ve never seen.”

Normal Community, which was led by Olivia Corson with 21 points and Rawlings with 12, ended its season at 31-4. The Iron’s other three losses came to O’Fallon, Lincoln, and Peoria Notre Dame.

Lincoln was one of two teams to beat Alton this season while the Redbirds defeated Peoria Notre Dame in the Morton Tournament. Both Lincoln (Class 3A) and Peoria Notre Dame (Class 2A) advanced to their respective super-sectionals.

Alton's super-sectional opponent will be Aurora Waubonsie Valley, 63-61 winners over last year's state runner-up Lisle Benet Academy.

Alton and Waubonsie Valley will play on Monday, Feb. 26 at 7 p.m. from the Shirk Center on the campus of Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington.

The winner will play in the first Class 4A state semifinal on Friday, March 1 at 2 p.m. at Illinois State University.

But the Redbirds have the weekend to celebrate what they've just accomplished, even though Howard says the preparation for Monday begins on the bus ride home from Normal.

"It's the first time our school's ever done it," Howard said about lifting a sectional plaque. "We try not to think about state, we try to think about this moment, today, and taking care of business."

"It brings tears to your eyes," Powers said. "We really worked hard for it, so it feels good when our dreams are finally coming true. I feel like we're going to keep pushing forward."