

Redbirds Cruise Past Spartans, Set Up Rematch With Edwardsville In Regional Semis

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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ALTON – Heading into the 2023 postseason, the Alton Redbirds were trending in the right direction.

Winners of five of their last eight regular-season games, they improved to a 6-12 record to close out the year.

“We made a goal for ourselves for our last eight games, to have a winning record, and we did,” Alton head coach Greg Nasello said. “Five wins in those last eight games. All of those were great, great outcomes.”

The Redbirds earned back-to-back big shutout wins over McCluer North and Hazelwood West to get the ball rolling. They then beat O'Fallon in a close 1-0 game, 4-3 over Highland, and 3-2 after penalty kicks over Granite City.

So, when the Redbirds got to host a regional play-in game on a cold and rainy Saturday afternoon, they were feeling pretty good.

They hosted Springfield Southeast, who came into the game with an 0-17 record. Alton went on to win the game by a score of 7-0, earning a spot in the regional semifinals against the No. 2-seeded Edwardsville Tigers on Tuesday.

The game Saturday against the Spartans should've been over much quicker than it was if you ask Nasello. His side was put through the wringer early on and only led by a goal at the half-hour mark.

Alton thought they scored in the first minute, but they were offside. The Redbirds found this a problem often with Springfield holding a purposefully high line trying to draw Alton offside.

It worked early on for the Spartans. Add in a post and a crossbar hit as well as plentiful chances going over the bar, and the Redbirds grew frustrated.

They could breathe a sigh of relief in the 29th minute when Dillan Cowan doubled Alton's lead. Max Reedy's rocket of a shot, off the crossbar and in, was his first varsity goal and it came in the 8th minute.



Cowan followed up on Cameron Belchik's shot from distance and put away the rebound to make it 3-0 with 45 seconds left in the first half.

Up by three goals at the half, but it still wasn't the effort Nasello wanted in the first 40 minutes.

"I thought we moved the ball fine, but not in that final third," Nasello said. "When you're playing a team like Edwardsville, you're not going to have 25 chances in the final third, you're going to get three or four and have to finish at least one of them to have a chance."

Cowan wrapped up his hat trick in the 57th minute after burying a penalty kick. He's up to 11 goals this season now.

Belchik, Logan Rynders, and Blake Rensing each scored to put the game away at 7-0.

After winning this game, Alton moves on to face Edwardsville (12-6-1) in the regional semifinals on Tuesday. The game is set to kick off at 5 p.m. in Edwardsville.

The two regular-season meetings are not ones that the Redbirds want to remember, a 3-0 loss on Aug. 31 and a 5-0 deficit on Sept. 25.

But Nasello knows that his Redbirds can beat Edwardsville, and he knows that the Tigers aren't already considering the game won. Especially after Alton's 1-0 win over the No. 1-seeded Panthers.

"I think our conference is that good this year, anyone can beat anyone," Nasello said. "You cannot think for a second that you have a game already won, it's not that way. I know this, I know Mark won't let Edwardsville think they've already got the game won. They're going to come out flying."

The Tigers ended their regular season on a three-game win streak over O'Fallon (2-1), Belleville West (3-0), and Normal Community West (1-0) but will have gone eight days without playing a game before meeting the Redbirds.

Nasello is trying to do something the Redbirds haven't done since his original stint with the team, get to the regional final.

"I am the most competitive person in the world. I don't care if I'm playing Monopoly or if I'm playing this game, I want to win," Nasello said. "This is the time of year that matters to me, I want to win."

"I'm going to get them as ready as we can and hopefully, we can find a way to do it."