

Alton battles East St. Louis to end in 22-19 loss

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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EAST ST. LOUIS – Alton stayed with East St. Louis all night. Battled with them, went toe-to-toe with them, gave the Flyers everything they could.

In the end, the Redbirds fell just short as the Flyers managed to hang on and take a 22-19 Southwestern Conference win at Clyde Jordan Stadium Friday night; The Redbirds finished the regular season 5-4 overall, 4-3 in the SWC; the Flyers finished at 8-1 overall, 7-0 in the league.

“It was a battle tonight, no doubt about it,” said Redbird coach Eric Dickerson. “A back-and-forth battle; it's a great way to end the season and prepare for Week 10.”

Now the playoff-eligible Redbirds have to play the waiting game to see if their name will be called to take part in the 44th IHSA Football Championship; the announcements of the teams who will be playing in the postseason begins at 8 p.m. Saturday on a live-stream via NBC Sports Chicago on the IHSA web site (www.ihsa.org).

“We'll find that out tomorrow,” Dickerson said of the Redbirds' playoff possibilities, “and we'll get ready for that. It's nice to know that the season's not over.”

Dickerson's pride in how the Redbirds have played all season showed following the game. “I've been proud of these kids all year,” Dickerson said. “It doesn't mean the loss

doesn't sting, but I've been proud of these guys – they've been more competitive and played with more heart and desire than a team in a long time.”

The end of the game didn't exactly go how the Redbirds would have liked, but “that's football,” Dickerson said. “We'll fix things like we do every week and we'll be ready to go.”

After a scoreless opening quarter, the Flyers took the lead with 9:41 left in the second when Jigg Brown found an opening and went eight yards to the end zone, then ran in a two-point conversion to put the Flyers up 8-0; not long after that, with the Redbirds deep in their own territory, Antonio Johnson stepped in front of an Andrew Jones pass and took it in from eight yards out to extend the lead with 8:36 left in the period; another Brown two-point convert put East Side ahead 16-0.

The Redbirds answered back with a drive of their own, the key play of the drive a big catch by Kevin Caldwell that put Alton in close, and Jones found Ahmad Sanders on a seven-yard catch-and-run by Izeal Terrell with 1:08 left in the second, with Colin Lombardi hitting the convert attempt; not long after that, the Flyers, pinned deep in their own territory, wound up conceding a safety when Eric Johnson was tackled in his own end zone to make it 16-9 in the Flyers' favor.

Not long after the free kick, the Redbirds drove down field and got to the East Side and got to the Flyer 29 with 6.6 seconds left, prompting Dickerson to call for the field goal team, and Lombardi connected from 46 yards out to make it 16-12 in East St. Louis' favor at the half.

The Flyers answer came in the form of a one-yard Johnson TD run after a drive that upped the lead to 22-12 with 5:55 left in the third, with a Brown convert run being stopped. The Redbirds, however, had an answer up their sleeves and called Darrell Smith's number deep in their own territory, and Smith found an opening, ran through it and was off to the races on an 86-yard touchdown sprint that cut the lead to 22-19 with 4:27 left.

Both teams had chances but couldn't cash in, with the Redbirds getting in an interception in the end zone to put out a Flyer threat at one point, but Alton couldn't keep drives going down the stretch as the Flyer defense came up big every time it was needed.

“We knew it was going to be a battle and it came down to the end; it is what it is,” Dickerson said. “Everything stood out for us – offense, defense, special teams; they played as a team, played together and played with heart. I couldn't ask for anything more.”

