

Undefeated No More: Lady Redbirds Suffer First Loss Of Season Against Panthers

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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O'FALLON – Going undefeated is a tough goal, an ambitious one too. But, at the beginning of the season that is what the Redbirds set out to do.

Winning 24 straight, they were close but still had one big test in their way. That test was the Panthers Thursday night.

O'Fallon capped off a tremendous regular-season trilogy with Alton with a massive 51-38 win at home.

The Redbirds suffer their first loss of the season and are now 24-1. The Panthers remain unbeaten at home improving to 23-4 on the season. Both teams sit tied atop the Southwestern Conference at 8-1 with their losses being to one another.

O'Fallon who was ranked No. 9 by the Associated Press in Class 4A, won what is to be believed as its first game over a No. 1 ranked opponent in program history.

“They beat us in Mascoutah, they beat us at their place. We watched it, we watched them celebrate, and we internalized it,” O'Fallon head coach Nick Knolhoff said. “We’ve seen them on the news, we’ve seen their tweets, and we just continue to say, ‘one game at a time’.”

Alton won the first meeting of the season by a score of 40-36 back on Dec. 8 and then again in the Mascoutah Tournament Championship 52-51 on Dec. 29.

It's likely there will be a fourth meeting in the postseason, possibly in the Sectional Championship.

The Redbirds, who were held to their fewest points of the season, just had an off-night shooting-wise, especially in the second half.

At one point, Alton went 0-11 from the field and didn't score a basket in nearly eight minutes.

Things looked promising for Alton after getting off to a quick start. They went up 6-0 forcing O'Fallon to call a timeout just three and a half minutes in. Coming out of the break the Panthers tied the game back up at six.

Laila Blakeny rattled home a three for Alton to go up 10-6 after the first quarter.

The teams traded three-pointers to open the second quarter.

Josie Christopher went first for O'Fallon followed by Kyoko Proctor for Alton. The score was 15-9 then.

The teams went at it back and forth for the remainder of the half and the game was tied up at 22 heading into the locker rooms.

Jarius Powers scored back-to-back buckets to start the second half and Alton went up 26-24 before the Panthers tied it back up at 26.

A three-pointer from O'Fallon's Shannon Dowell gave them the lead at 29-26. They never trailed again from that point on. The Panthers led 40-30 after the third.

O'Fallon used a 14-point run to put the game away and pick up a decisive conference win.

Dowell finished with a team-high 12 points followed by Jailah Pelly with 10. D'Myjah Bolds and Haeli Tart each added nine, Christopher had five while Laylah Jackson had four.

Coach Knolhoff was pleased with two things mainly, his team's ability to have more balanced scoring and their defense.

“A fantastic defensive effort from my girls tonight,” he said.

Alton head coach Deserea Howard was disappointed that the streak is over but knows there is still a lot of basketball left to play.

“This isn’t the last game of the season for us. We’re going to be able to take this film, piece it together, and get ready for playoffs,” she said.

“I feel like we just didn’t play our style of basketball, that’s just the best that I can put it.”

Alton relied on Powers who led them with 17 points, the only Redbird in double-digits. Blakeny and Alyssa Lewis each scored six, Kaylea Lacey had four, Proctor had three, and Meyonna Banks had two.

Alton has five games remaining, four of which are against SWC opponents. They will play Granite City next at home on Tuesday, Jan. 31 at 6 p.m.