

By Randy Whalen

The Lockport Township boys basketball team was looking to play its best ball at the end of the regular season.

While there were a couple of losses along the way, that's what the Porters did as they won four of their final six regular-season games to reach the 18-win total for the first time since finishing with a 21-9 record in 2011.

After winning a pair of games, by the scores of 72-35 over Joliet Central and 54-40 over Sandburg the previous week, Lockport continued its winning ways on Tuesday, Feb. 8.

That's when Anthony Munson and Julius Smith combined for 32 points and the senior guards hit their free throws down the stretch as the Porters won their third straight with a 65-57 win in a SouthWest Suburban Conference Blue Division matchup in Frankfort.

At that point, the victory, its 8th in the last 12 games, gave Lockport its 16th win which is the most since the 2011-12 team finished 16-12. It also clinched the Porter's second straight winning season and third in the last four years.

"I think that every single guy has bought into what we can accomplish the rest of the way," Lockport coach Brett Hespell said. "They sense it, they are going after it."

After a tight first quarter against the Griffins, which had three ties and three lead changes, the Porters led 13-12. They led the rest of the way thanks in part to Munson, who scored a team-high 18 points, nailing a trio of 3-pointers in the second quarter.

"Discipline," Munson said of the key to the victory. "We stayed disciplined. After all the close losses we had (5 of them by 4 points or less) I felt bad. I asked myself what I can do and I stepped up."

A pair of free throws by Smith gave the Porters a 29-19 lead in the final minute of the second quarter. They settled on a 29-22 halftime advantage.

Lincoln-Way East (11-16, 3-5 final regular-season record) closed within 40-37 on a rebound basket by junior forward George Bellevue (9 points) with 2:13 left in the third quarter. But that was as close as it would get.

The Porters led 46-40 after three and 57-52 before making 8-of-8 from the free-throw line in the final 30.3 seconds to clinch it. Munson had four of those free throws. They were 21-of-24 from the line in the game.

"I felt like we were in a slump and that it was up to myself and Anthony to get the team going," said Smith, who did just that by scoring six of his 14 points in the first quarter. "This is another step we needed to take. We can't fall back, we need to lead by example."

Smith added five rebounds, three assists, and three steals. The Vassilakis twins, seniors Alex (7 points, 5 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 steals), and Nico (8 points, 5 rebounds) also contributed for the Porters, who had nine different players' score.

"We've got work to still do but proud of every one of these guys, up and down the lineup," Hespell said. "We played much better on defense and stuck to the game plan. We didn't let them come back. We wanted it."

Tylon Toliver scored all of his team-high 18 points in the second half and fellow junior Kyle Olagbegi added 14 points and 10 rebounds for the Lincoln-Way East, which celebrated Senior Night before the game. There are only two seniors, Tommy Cheney and Josh Ellison, on the team.

The Griffins, who started the season 1-8, have been trying to climb back to .500 since. They rallied with six wins in the next seven games and were within 7-9 on the season. After two losses, they won the first meeting by the score of 55-51 on Friday, Jan. 21 at Lockport to improve to 8-11. But they have lost four of five since then.

"We only have two seniors which is really our story," Lincoln-Way East coach Rich Kolimas said. "We lack that experience. Every time we step up and try to make a run, Lockport would answer. Plus we didn't shoot well (8-of-16) from the line and had too many (14) turnovers.

"Give (the Porters) credit, they played a great game and took care of the basketball. They did a great job hitting some big shots."

Unfortunately for the Porters, they didn't hit big shots or get big rebounds three days later in their final home game of the season.

The result was Bolingbrook dominating on the boards and pulling away for a 60-36 victory in an SWSC Blue matchup on Friday night, Feb. 11 in Lockport.

Bolingbrook outrebounded the Porters 21-6 and the Raiders grabbed 11 offensive rebounds, converting those into 12 points.

That was just in the first half.

Michael Osei-Bonsu, a 6-foot-5 senior center, had 12 points and 11 rebounds, including five offensive boards. His tenacious effort helped the Raiders spoil the fun for a large crowd in pink shirts on the annual "Porters Vs. Cancer" night and the game was also broadcast before a local TV audience on the WCIU Game of the Week.

"It's the thing that coach demands," Osei-Bonsu said of the rebounding. "We need to get on the boards and break the ball out to the guards."

Two of those guards, junior Mekhi Cooper (14 points) and senior Jaydin Dunlap (12 points, 8 rebounds) were among the four Raiders in double digits scoring. Donovan Younger, a 6-11 junior forward, who had 11 points, was the other.

"We just wanted to run the floor, get after it, and we did," Cooper said. "We just kept the pressure on and didn't let them get into it."

Lockport (16-12, 3-4 at that point) had all 14 of its turnovers in the first three quarters.

"Between Donovan and Michael we control the interior," Bolingbrook coach Rob Brost said. "Throw in some rebounding from our guards and we controlled the boards."

"We were pleased with our play, our pressure. We sped them up a bit and took control. We've won the league numerous times. But we've never finished undefeated in the conference. When we play well we are hard to beat. But we don't talk about the number of wins we have, the conference titles, or what we are seeded. We just focus on what is right in front of us."

Bolingbrook, which finished with a 34-12 rebounding advantage, had already clinched the SWSC Blue Division championship coming in. The Raiders (25-6, 8-0 final regular-season record) have now won or tied for the SWSC Blue for four straight seasons and nine times since the league formed in 2005-06. They beat visiting Sandburg 75-37 on Tuesday, Feb. 15, to run the table in the conference.

Senior forward Ethan Gallagher, who led Lockport with 10 points had a nice scoop move to tie the score at 11-11 in the opening minute of the second quarter. He also added a dunk later in the game. But fittingly it was a rebound basket by Osei-Bonsu, who scored all six of his second-quarter points on putbacks, which started a 10-0 run that gave the Raiders the lead for good.

Osei-Bonsu had six boards, four of them offensive, in the second quarter alone. Dunlap added five rebounds, two of them offensive, in the quarter, which saw Bolingbrook get half its 14 rebounds on the offensive end.

"We had to get the energy up," Osei-Bonsu said of the second-quarter spurt. "To win the conference feels good but we have to keep working hard at everything."

The Raiders led 27-15 at halftime. Despite senior guard Julius Smith scoring six of his eight points in the second half, Lockport never got any closer in the third quarter. Bolingbrook led 49-31 after three.

"I didn't think we were mentally tough," Lockport coach Brett Hespell said. "Bolingbrook was a lot more mentally tough than we were. We didn't do what we wanted to do, we did what they wanted us to do."

"We're better than we showed. I'm very disappointed in our effort and execution."

Both teams are in the Class 4A Oswego Sectional, where Bolingbrook got the No. 2 seed and the Porters are seeded No. 6.

The following week, on Tuesday, Feb. 15 the Porters traveled for their final SWSC Blue game and lost 67-57 to host Homewood-Flossmoor. The Vikings finished 19-7 and 6-2 in the SWSC Blue during the regular season.

"H-F shot the ball very well, but we battled hard," said Hespell, whose team lost 68-59 at home in the team's initial conference clash on Jan. 28. "I was proud of our resilience."

Munson led the way with 23 points and seven boards. Gallagher had a nice all-around game with nine points, six rebounds, plus five blocked shots. Sophomore Jalen Falcon came in and contributed had seven points, four rebounds, and a pair of steals.

In the final week, Lockport also added to its win total as Joliet Central never found a replacement game from back on Friday, Nov. 26 at the WJOL Thanksgiving Tournament. The Steelmen (3-27 final record) couldn't compete at that point due to a COVID outbreak. So the Porters received a forfeit victory.

In the final regular-season game, on Wednesday, Feb. 16 at Yorkville, Lockport emerged victorious by the score of 59-46. The win put the Porter's final regular-season record at 18-13, while the Foxes fell to 8-20 overall.

"It was a hard-fought wire-to-wire road win against a physical and big Yorkville team," Hespell said.

Once again, Munson led the way with 18 points. Alex Vassilakis contributed 10 points and four rebounds, Gallagher garnered 10 points with another dunk, and Smith added nine points and four steals.

The Porters opened the postseason on Wednesday, Feb. 23 against the host, and No. 12 seeded Wildcats (16-14, regular season) at the Class 4A Plainfield Central Regional.

The first semifinal that night pitted No. 3 seeded Andrew (18-7, regular season) against No. 15 seeded Lincoln-Way West (12-18, regular season). The regional championship game was slated for Friday, Feb. 25 at 7 PM.