

In the end, the Lockport Township girls basketball team wasn't all on the same Paige.

Paige Rannells had the best game of her varsity career. But a varsity career-high 20 points weren't quite enough to get the Porters a postseason win. They missed too many shots down the stretch and fell 42-34 to the host Griffins on Monday, Feb. 14 in the second semifinal of the Class 4A Lincoln-Way East Regional.

"I told Paige before the game to play like a manic and she did," Lockport coach Dan Kelly said. "She was lights-out."

She was, hitting four 3-pointers and scoring all 11 of the team's points in the second quarter. But it wasn't enough to set up a meeting with Bolingbrook, the top seed in its own sectional, which defeated Eisenhower 85-6 in the opening semifinal of the evening.

In the regional title game on Friday, Feb. 18, which was pushed back a day due to inclement weather, the Raiders defeated No. 7 seeded Lincoln-Way East 56-35 to win their 19th regional championship in the past 20 played postseasons. There was no tournament last year due to COVID and Bolingbrook lost 47-43 in the regional title game in 2014 to Metea Valley.

The Raiders (21-5), who finished third in the state in Class 4A during the most recent state tournament in 2020, hosted Lincoln-Way Central, a 55-47 winner in double overtime over host Sandburg, on Tuesday, Feb. 22 in the opening sectional semifinal. The Griffins (17-13) started no seniors in the game and did much better than their abbreviated spring season a year ago which saw them finish 1-11.

Lockport (15-15), which was seeded ninth in the sectional, finished with an up-and-down season at the .500 mark. Although they lost 11 of their final 13 games, it was the third straight campaign and fifth time in the past six seasons that the Porters didn't have a losing season. That's their longest continued success streak since the late 1990s.

They hoped for a second straight win over Lincoln-Way East. The Porters had won the SouthWest Suburban Conference Blue Division game 47-45 in overtime on Tuesday, Feb. 1, in Frankfort. Lockport lost to the Griffins 43-36 at home on Thursday, Jan. 13 in the first SWSC Blue meeting.

So the rubber match figured to be close and for most of the game, it was. Trailing 35-30 after three quarters, Rannells nailed her final 3-pointer just 12 seconds into the fourth quarter to cut the lead to two.

"That was my high on the varsity but I had 28 points on the freshman team," Rannells said. "Yes, coach Kelly told me to play like a manic so I did. (To score 20 points) felt great. Especially in my last game. I went out with a bang."

She did but the basket to open the fourth quarter would be her last points and very nearly the final ones for the Porters. Senior Angelica Bafia hit a free throw with 6:58 to play in the game and make it 35-34. She, however, missed the second one and Lockport never scored again.

"Thankfully Paige did what she did because otherwise, we struggled on offense," Kelly said. "(The Griffins) rushed us and we got out of rhythm."

Neither team was in rhythm the next six-plus minutes of the fourth quarter. Lincoln-Way East added a free throw by junior forward Sanai Tyler (10 points) with 3:54 to play which made the score 36-34.

But each team turned the ball over three times and missed numerous shots in the fourth quarter. The Griffins finally scored again when Tyler hit a pair of free throws with 48.2 seconds remaining to put them up by four. Just 10 seconds later they missed a pair of free throws but got the rebound. Sophomore guard Lana Kerley (team-high 15 points, 8 rebounds) then made 4-of-4 free throws in the final 34.4 seconds to clinch the victory.

Sophomore guard Maddie Yacobozzi added nine points for Lincoln-Way East. Elizabeth "Bit" Sochacki scored five points and fellow senior Dania Sweis and sophomore Verconia Bafia each added three points for the Porters.

Alaina Peetz, a freshman who was brought up to the varsity just before the Oak Lawn Holiday Tournament in mid-December and ended up being named MVP there, got Lockport on the board first with a pair of free throws 1:40 into the game. But that would be the only points she would score and it would be the Porter's only lead of the game.

With the game tied 5-5, Tyler had five points in a 10-3 burst that ended the quarter and gave Lincoln-Way East the lead for good at 15-8. The advantage grew to 19-8 just 30 seconds into the second quarter. Rannells scored all 11 of the Porter points in the second quarter and they trailed 25-19 at halftime.

The Griffins were up 33-22 midway through the third quarter but Sochacki scored all of her points in an 8-0 run, including a 16-foot jumper that got Lockport within 33-30 with 28 seconds to play in the period. It was 35-30 after three.

"Lockport is fisty," Lincoln-Way East coach Jim Nair said. "We tried to run away but they never gave up. (Rannells) had some good looks and kept them in the game. But we have some good younger kids and have grown during the season."

Lockport graduated nine seniors. They are, Angelica Bafia, Charlotte Fahrner, Delaney O'Brien, Rannells, Sochacki, Sweis, Emily Villasenor, Alexandra Way, and Caley Zukowski.

"I'm not sure why but we had a lot of games where our shots didn't fall," said Rannells, who will study marketing at DePaul University and doesn't plan to play basketball in college. "I was on the varsity the past two years and I'm proud of myself. As a team we're disappointed in the result but not the effort.

"I will just miss being with my best friends every day. It's going to be weird and I will miss being with them next year."

The Porters (1-7 in the league) lost their last two regular-season SWSC Blue games 59-27 on Feb. 3 at Bolingbrook and 43-19 on Feb. 8 at Homewood-Flossmoor. Those were just two of the numerous games against powerhouse teams during the regular season.

"We played eight teams outside of our conference who had 20-plus wins, said Kelly, who also faced 20-win teams Bolingbrook and Sandburg, plus a very good H-F team twice in the SWSC Blue. "It was a good season. I'm proud of the girls, they took care of each other."

Shortly after the season, Kelly announced that he was stepping down as head coach after eight seasons. He will stay on at Lockport as a guidance counselor.

"The main reason is there is a certain level of commitment to the job and I don't feel that I can make that commitment anymore," Kelly said. "I still love it and love working with kids so if the opportunity presents itself in the future I may get back into it."

Kelly, a 1997 graduate of Conant High School in Hoffman Estates, spent eight years as an assistant coach at Romeoville before coming to Lockport at the start of the 2014-15 season.

In his eight seasons as coach, he led the Porters to four winning campaigns and a .500 record this season. Their 2017-18 team won a regional championship, the first one in 11 years and second since 1999.

"One of the goals, when I took over, was getting the program back to where it should be," Kelly said. "I'm proud that we did that and the future looks good here for Lockport girls basketball."