

By Randy Whalen

Uncommon.

It's more than just a hashtag that is used by Lockport Township boys basketball coach, Brett Hespell.

It's a word that describes the long and successful history of the Porters basketball team.

"Yes, we used it in my first year," Hespell said of the Uncommon tag. "The birth of that was to embrace the uncommon history of our program and we've used it ever since.

"We wanted something the guys could look up to. We talk to them a lot about the players, the history here. A perfect example is the opportunity to play in a tournament like Pontiac. Every year we go there I remind them it's because of the Lockport team before that we get to come here."

That uncommon history was recently honored on Monday evening, Jan. 31 at Lockport Township High School. The Porter program was recognized by the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association (IBCA) before their game with longtime rival, Joliet Central, for achieving over 1,500 wins in their history.

The win total increased to 1,612 following a 72-35 victory over the visiting Steelmen.

Senior forward Khari Carpenter scored a career-high 21 points, including nine straight in the first quarter as the Porters had a 13-0 run to go ahead 18-5 and then coasted to a 40-16 halftime lead.

"My teammates just looked to me, I got open and hit my shots," said Carpenter, who was 9-for-9 from the field and also made all three free throws. "It was a special night with all the coaches here. It was a great time and exciting for me to play the way I played on a night like this."

Junior Quinton Hunter and senior Nico Vassilakis added 10 points apiece and senior Dominic Crapia had nine points, while junior Adam Labuda added eight points for Lockport (14-11), which shot 29-of-40, including 9-of-15 from 3-point range, and had 11 different players score. The Steelmen (2-22) were led by senior guard Jarrell Smith with eight points.

But the evening was all about Lockport's program and the milestones it has achieved along the way. The Porters have won 29 regional titles, 12 sectional championships, a trio of teams have made the Final Four in the state and the 1977-78 team was undefeated Class AA state champions at 33-0.

Two of their players, Alando Tucker (2002 graduate) as the 29th pick in 2007, and Richaun Holmes (2011 graduate) as the 37th pick in the 2015 draft have been NBA draft picks.

Before the game, IBCA representative Steve Allen presented a plaque to the school in recognition of the achievement.

Bob Basarich, who had a record of 496-99 in his 21 years as Lockport coach, couldn't be in attendance. But the four head coaches who followed him were all there. They are Rollie Bolattino (1987-88), Joe Gura (1988-99), Lawrence Thompson (1999-2015), and Hespell (2015-present).

Bolattino, a 1961 Lockport graduate who was an assistant coach in the program from 1966-82, is still as old school as they get.

"They gave away the best home-court advantage in the state by moving the games here," he said of the Porters now playing their games at the main campus instead of in "The Pit" at the old Central campus. "But yes, this program has been special. I used to go to see the team play at the Pontiac Tournament (Lockport has been there since 1952) since before I was in high school."

Gura, who is currently the boy's basketball coach at Joliet Catholic and will be retiring at the end of this season after 49 years of coaching, was separately honored at midcourt during a time out in the second quarter for his achievements. He was inducted in the IBCA Hall of Fame in 2015 and Basarich (1979) and he are the only two Lockport coaches to have that honor.

"Yes, it was very cool to be recognized by the place that gave me my start," said Gura, who began coaching at Lockport in 1977-78 and recently listed his 1993 Porter Class AA supersectional team as the best one he's coached. "It was really nice, I appreciate it and this program."

Thompson was involved in coaching longer than anyone else in Lockport basketball history. That was 33 years, the last 16 as head coach. He has been the head coach at Joliet Central for the past six seasons.

"I'm behooven to this program," said Thompson, who guided the Porters to an unprecedented three straight sectional championships between 2006-08, capped by a Class 4A fourth-place finish in 2008. "I thank Charlie Travis for helping me get my interview here and for Bob Allen, Rich Dittle, and Jim Naylor for believing in me and giving me my first head coaching job (in cross country where he led the Porters to back-to-back Class AA titles in 1996 and 1997) here. They and others enhanced my love of the game."

Hespell, a 2001 Lockport graduate, played basketball for the Porters. So he knows from all sides how special of a place it is here.

"It was just great to have the coaches in-house here and honor the history of this program," Hespell said. "It was great to see all the faces with them and the alumni in the crowd. People care about this program. They come to the games because it matters."

Just four days later, on Friday, Feb. 4, Lockport had another night for those that matter. That was the 7th Annual Veterans Night, which honors those that served in any branch of the military.

The event was not held last year because of COVID protocols. So it was the first one since Feb. 21, 2020.

While it didn't match the record amount of veterans (144) that showed up two years ago for the always well-attended event, there were still over 100 veterans in attendance. They were individually recognized before the game and that was followed by a moment of silence.

The veterans then proudly held the American flag, which covered the entire basketball court, during the National Anthem. There was a trio of World War II Vets in attendance with their service time ranging between 1943-1945.

The Veterans Night Event has been put together every time by Lockport social studies teacher, Mike Zaworski.

"It's just great," Hespell said of the Veterans Night. "It's great for the kids, the whole school, and the community to recognize those that served here. The credit for this goes to Mike Zaworski. It's amazing that we get to honor World War II and Koren War veterans. It's just a really nice event."

In the game itself, Lockport defeated Sandburg 54-40 in a SouthWest Suburban Conference, Blue Division matchup. The Porters jumped out to a 32-19 halftime lead and cruised to their 15th win of the season and improved to 2-3 in the SWSC Blue. Nine different players scored and eight different players had an assist.

Crapia scored 16 points to lead the way. As usual, twins Alex Vassilakis (7 points, 3 steals) and Niko Vassilakis (6 points, 5 rebounds) contributed. Senior Ethan Gallagher got the crowd going with a pair of rim-rattling dunks.

It was Lockport's seventh win in the last eight meetings with Sandburg.