

By Randy Whalen

Anytime a team loses by one point and had an opportunity to win the game in the final seconds, the end is what is talked about.

But the thing about it is, there are many moments that could have changed the outcome of a game like that.

The Lockport Township boys basketball team didn't play well for much of what would be its final game of the season. Still, with an opportunity to win the game at the end, a quick decision didn't work out.

The end result was a 45-44 loss to the host Wildcats on Wednesday, Feb. 23 in the second semifinal of the Class 4A Plainfield Central Regional.

No. 12 seeded Plainfield Central (17-15 final record) put up a fight but ultimately lost 62-49 to No. 3 seeded Andrew on Friday, Feb. 25 in the regional championship game. The Wildcats, who led Andrew 41-40 after three quarters, finished the season with a record of 17-15.

It was only the third ever regional championship for Andrew (20-8 final record), which lost to fellow SouthWest Suburban Conference foe, Bolingbrook, 51-41 on Wednesday, March 2, in a semifinal of the Oswego Sectional.

Two days later, Bolingbrook went on to defeat top-seed Oswego East 52-51 in double overtime to win the sectional championship. Then, on Monday, March 7, the Raiders defeated Quincy 49-42 at the Illinois State Supersectional. In the state finals, on Friday, March 11, Bolingbrook lost 77-47 to eventual state champion Glenbard West. Later that day, the Raiders (30-8 final record) fell 59-54 to Barrington in the third-place game. But it was their third final four finish since 2015.

The No. 6 seeded Porters (18-14 final record) wondered what could have happened if they would have won the first game and played Andrew, a team they defeated 53-42 on Dec. 10 in the regular season. Instead, they fell short of reaching the regional title game for the first time since last winning one in 2011.

"We drew up a play and they guarded it well," Lockport senior Julius Smith said of the Plainfield Central game's final possession. "It just didn't come for us and it was a rough feeling."

But a sequence right before that was perhaps more rough, given what happened.

A pair of free throws by Smith (team-high 12 points, 6 rebounds) pulled the Porters within 45-44 with 22 seconds to play. Plainfield Central got the ball past halfcourt and Lockport looked to steal or foul. Well, the Porters got the steal with about 10 seconds left and quickly moved it upcourt.

As the crowd on both sides stirred with anticipation, senior guard Alex Vassilakis took the ball on the left baseline and drove toward the basket. Just after a referee blew the whistle, he put up a floater from just inside 10 feet and the ball sailed through the net.

But what of the whistle? Was it traveling, a foul for a 3-point play opportunity?

No, Lockport had called time out.

"We had struggled vs their defense so when Alex stole the ball, I wanted to see if anything would materialize," Lockport coach Brett Hespell explained of the decision. "Sometimes an open lane pops up and that's a better shot than out of a timeout. He started to slow up though so I went ahead and called timeout.

"(Assistant) coach (Bill) Crossen said he went back and watched the final play and that the official had already granted the TO before Alex even turned the corner to shoot so it was probably the correct decision."

There was no doubt the time-out was called before the shot went up. In fact, the officials put nearly two seconds back on the clock, leaving it at 3.2 seconds. Still plenty of time for the Porters to inbound the ball and get off a good shot.

But instead, the inbound pass was tipped and there was a mad scramble for the loose ball. A Wildcat player literally trapped it between his knees and the time ran out before a jump ball could be called.

"As far as the play, we had a couple of cutters and we were hoping to overload the wing on their zone and get a slip to the basket," Hespell said of the final play. "The pass was late and off-target so that kind of torpedoed any real chance we had of getting a shot off."

But the truth is the Porters performed poorly to start the game and that torpedoed them as much as anything.

An old-fashioned 3-point play by Smith, a senior guard, with 6:51 left in the first quarter gave Lockport its only lead of the game at 3-2. The Wildcats then scored the next 12 points, eight of those by senior guard Donovan Brown, including back-to-back 3-pointers to make the score 14-3 with 2:52 left in the opening quarter.

"Give them credit," Hespell said of the Wildcats. "Early on, their crowd overwhelmed us. Plus, they have big guys and are stronger than us."

Plainfield Central led 16-9 after the first quarter and had its largest lead at 26-13 with 3:10 left in the second quarter on a short jumper in the lane by Brown, who had 14 of his game-high 22 points in the first half. But the Porters ended the first half on a 10-3 spurt to close within 29-23 at halftime.

Senior guard Dominic Crapia nailed a 3-pointer to open the second half and close the Porters within three points. Crapia finished with 10 points.

"I thought it was tough," Crapia said of the team's start. "But we were tough mentally and I thought we were going to make the last shot."

"I love these guys. I will miss being with my friends. I've known Alex and Niko (Vassilakas) and there's going to be an emptiness in my heart. I haven't made my decision yet, but it's onto college."

Another 3-pointer, this one by junior guard Adam Labuda (7 points), drew Lockport within 33-30 with 5:42 left in the third quarter. But the Porters didn't score for nearly another four minutes and Plainfield Central ran off five points in a row.

Another pivotal point came at the end of the third quarter. The Wildcats led 38-32 when senior center Luke Cervelli (8 points, 4 rebounds) missed the front end of a one-and-one free throw. But junior forward Colin Bailye (8 points, game-high 10 rebounds) grabbed the rebound and hit a 14-foot shot from the left baseline to give Plainfield Central a 40-32 lead after three.

The Porters clamped down on defense in the fourth quarter as Plainfield Central didn't make a field goal and had seven of its 15 turnovers in the game, but went 5-of-6 from the line. Senior forward Ethan Gallagher (6 points) scored on a driving layup with 5:30 to play in the game to close Lockport within 42-40.

But the Wildcats made a trio of free throws, including two with 3:22 left for their final points. A jumper by Alex Vassilakis (2 points, 5 rebounds) closed the score to 45-42 with 2:11 remaining. But then Lockport missed a 3-pointer, a rebound shot, and had a turnover before Smith hit his free throws with 22 seconds to play.

"After the guys we had that graduated last year, a lot of people didn't expect us to have a winning season," said Smith, who was named to the All-SWSC Blue team. "We wanted to prove that we could win with these guys and we did."

The Porters did, reaching the 18-win mark for the 41st time in their history. Between the 1907-08 and 1961-62 seasons, Lockport had seven years of 18 or more wins. Between the 1963-64 and 1987-88 seasons, there were 26 straight campaigns of 18 or more wins, including 24 of 20 wins or more. Since that time, this is the eighth season of at least 18 wins but the first since the 2010-11 team went 21-9.

Coming off a 12-4 record last spring in a shortened season with no playoffs, Lockport opened at 7-0 and won the WJOL Thanksgiving Classic. When the Porters won, they looked good. But a downfall was an 0-5 record in games decided by four points or less.

"We had some big wins with our average margin of victory being almost 18 points per game," Hespell said. "But there were lots of close losses with our average margin of defeat being 6.5 points per game. We won the WJOL Thanksgiving Classic and these seniors went 30-18 over the past two seasons. They were a great group."

Seven seniors graduated from this season's squad. They are Khari Carpenter, Crapia, Gallagher, Anthony Munson, Smith, and Alex and Niko Vassilakis.

"I'm still proud of the season," Hespell said. "We've had three winning seasons in the past four years, so a step in the right direction and we are making progress. We will be back."