

By Randy Whalen

A new winning streak.

That's what the Lockport Township girls basketball team hoped to start after seeing its fortunes turn following a nice showing at a pair of holiday tournaments.

While the Porters didn't start a streak, they played much better at the end of January and into the start of February than they had to open the new year.

A great example of that was a 47-45 overtime victory against Lincoln-Way East on Tuesday, Feb. 1 in a SouthWest Suburban Conference Blue Division game in Frankfort.

Although the Porters led by four at halftime and after three quarters, they trailed by three in the final seconds of regulation. But they got the ball to senior guard Elizabeth "Bit" Sochacki on the wing and the senior guard drained a 3-pointer just before the buzzer to send the game into overtime.

The game was still knotted at 45-45 with just .6 tenths of a second left in the initial overtime period. But there would be no second OT. That's because the Porters were inbounding the ball under their basket and Alena Peetz had a perfect cut to the ball. The freshman was able to take the inbounds pass and convert a layup just before the buzzer to give Lockport the victory.

"The girls have been knocking at the door in some of these close games lately," Lockport coach Dan Kelly said. "So I was really happy for them to close it out this time."

Peetz had 14 points, seven rebounds and four assists to pace the Porters, who lost to Lincoln-Way East 43-36 at home on Thursday, Jan. 13. Senior Emily Villasenor added 12 points and eight rebounds and Sochacki added 11 points in the victory.

Junior Sanai Tyler had a game-high 18 points for the Griffins, who lost to host Homewood-Flossmoor 53-36 two days for their third loss in a row and fell to 14-12 and 3-5 in the conference on the season.

The victory was the 15th of the season for Lockport and guaranteed that it wouldn't have a losing season for the third straight campaign and for the fifth time in the past six seasons. That's the team's longest continued success streak since the late 1990s.

Two days later, on Thursday, Feb. 3, the Porters lost 59-27 at Bolingbrook. The Raiders (18-5, 7-0) won the conference for the second straight season, the fourth time in the past five years, and the 13th time in the 17-year history of the league.

It was also the fifth straight victory for Bolingbrook, which has lost four games to out-of-state teams. With only one regular-season game left, Lockport fell to 15-13 overall and 1-6 in the SWSC Blue.

During the 7-game losing streak, the Porters had a trio of losses by 7-points or less. The last of those was a 59-55 overtime setback to Homewood-Flossmoor on Saturday, Jan. 22 at home. Peetz tied the game on a layup with five seconds left in regulation.

But the Vikings (15-8, 5-2), who hosted Lockport in the final regular-season game on Tuesday, Feb. 8, hit four free throws in the last 15 seconds of the overtime period to hold on for the victory.

"We had also played a tight one against Bolingbrook right before that," Kelly said of the Porters 47-33 home loss to the Raiders on Tuesday, Jan. 18. "It was a 6-point game down the stretch. We're close. We just let some opportunities slip through our fingers."

Lockport finally got back on the winning track when it traveled south to Bradley-Bourbonnais for an SWSC crossover on Tuesday, Jan. 25. The game was originally scheduled for Tuesday, Jan. 6 but had to be rescheduled.

The Porters led most of the game and ended up with a 44-35 win.

Ahead 11-8 after the first quarter, Lockport opened the second quarter on a 7-0 run to pull ahead 18-8. The lead remained in the low teens for much of the game. The Boilermakers (7-19 through Feb. 3), however, opened the fourth quarter on a 7-0 run by forcing some quick turnovers and closed within 38-29.

But they weren't able to get much closer as Villasenor, who scored a game-high 19 points, scored in the post to keep the Porters in control. The game was part of a doubleheader and took place before the start of the Boilermakers SWSC Red boys game against Lincoln-Way Central.

In the final home game of the season on Thursday, Jan. 27 against Sandburg, Lockport once again fell just short in a 46-45 loss to the Eagles.

Danielle Antoine led the way with 14 points and fellow senior Charlotte Trunk added 13 points. Sandburg needed every one of them as the Porters tried to rally from a 46-39 deficit with 3:11 to play, including scoring four points in the final 27.6 seconds but ran out of time. The Porters only had one lead, at 24-23

at halftime thanks to a 3-pointer by senior Charlotte Fahrner with 10 seconds left in the half. Villasenor (10 points) and senior Angelica Bafia (9 points) led Lockport.

Fittingly it was an assist from senior guard Erin O'Connor to Trunk for a layup to open the third quarter and start a 7-0 run that gave the Eagles the lead for good. The duo is both 4-year varsity players and set many personal and team milestones this season. Sandburg (19-9, 2-5 through Feb. 5) also closed the third quarter on a 5-0 spurt to lead 40-32 lead after three.

"In some aspects, I feel like a dog," O'Connor said of her play. "I see the ball and I go to it."

That shows in her stats over the past four years. With three games left in the regular season, she had 661 career points (160 this season), 522 career rebounds (170 this season), 352 assists (100 this season), and recently set the Eagle's all-time steals record, getting her 303rd on Jan. 18 during a 68-31 road victory over SWSC foe, Andrew.

Following the Lockport game, O'Connor had 318 career steals, including 110 this season. The old record was 302 career steals, set by Erika Nelson, who played for the Eagles between 1999-2003.

Also against Andrew, Trunk, a senior guard/forward, scored her 1,000th career point on her first basket of the game. Neither she nor O'Connor knew they had reached their milestones until afterward though. They were both honored before a Jan. 20 SWSC Blue Division home game against Bolingbrook, which the first-place Raiders won 62-49.

Through the Lockport game, Tunk had 1,060 points (303 this season), 432 career rebounds (143 this season), and 145 career steals (49 this season).

Sochacki has also been a 4-year varsity player for the Porters. She knows that the whole Blue side of the SWSC, with every team having a winning record through the regular season, is quality competition.

"It was just that the level of play got a lot higher," Sochacki said of the Lockport losing streak. "Every team has been at a high level and we've had a couple of close games. We've had a lot of foul trouble and a couple of points here or there would have made a difference."

Although they had Senior Night a couple of weeks before, the Sandburg game was the last home game for the Porters seniors. They are Bafia, Fahrner, Delaney O'Brien, Paige Rannells, Sochacki, Dania Sweis, Villasenor, Alexandra Way, and Caley Zukowski.

"It's sad that it's the last home game, I never thought it would come," said Sochacki following the Sandburg loss. "But it's been a fun experience and four years."

"There are times we've gone so hard and then let down and give the lead right back. We just need to keep hustling and leave everything on the floor in our last few games."

Fahrner, a 3-year varsity player, agreed.

"We'd get a basket and then struggle to stop them on defense," Fahrner said of the Lockport losing streak. "We've got to play defense throughout. Plus, we can't have the turnovers (19 against Sandburg). We have to execute and finish."

The Porters did that against Lincoln-Way East and don't have to wait long for a third and final matchup against the Griffins. That's because the two teams square off in the opening game of the postseason. That will be on Monday, Feb. 14 at the Class 4A Lincoln-Way East Regional.

The time is scheduled for 7:30 PM but will follow the opener, which has top-seeded Bolingbrook taking on No. 16 seeded Eisenhower. The Griffins are the No. 7 seed and Lockport is No. 9. The regional title game is slated for Thursday, Feb. 17 at 7:00 PM. The regional winner will feed into the Bolingbrook Sectional, with the semifinals on Tuesday, Feb. 22, and the finals on Thursday, Feb. 24 at 7 PM.