

By Randy Whalen

It wasn't just a game, it was an event.

Lockport Township hosted its Eighth Annual Veterans Night on Friday, Dec. 2. Almost a decade old, the event honors the men and women who served in the military with special recognition before the Porters host a boys basketball game.

"High school sports provide values beyond just the result of a game and this event is an example of that," Lockport coach Brett Hespell said. "The opportunity to recognize people who truly sacrificed a portion of their lives for our country is certainly worthwhile.

"I think it's great for the kids to see that the stories they learn about in school have real faces connected to them and wouldn't have happened without those sacrifices. We are honored to be a part of it!"

Lockport came away with a hard-fought 56-51 win over Lincoln-Way West in the SouthWest Suburban Conference crossover game.

But it was the honoring of the veterans that made an impact on those in attendance.

"I'd just say it was an absolute honor to play a small role in the night," Lockport athletic director Mike Dwyer said. "Mike Zaworski and his team do an amazing job reaching out to our community veterans to honor the brave men and women. It was really special to see."

Zaworski, a social studies teacher at Lockport, helped organize the first event nearly a decade ago. He's happy to bring in veterans of all ages but it has been special to have World War II veterans there. One of those was Ted Micci, who is 101 years old.

"It's my first time here," Micci, a Joliet resident, said. "I was in the 8th Air Force. I did 25 missions to Germany as a radio operator in a B-17 bomber. I was invited by my friend, Gordon Millerin."

A Lockport resident, Millerin was a crew chief plane captain in the navy between 1956-60.

"I was here once before," Millerin said of the Lockport Veterans Night event. "We (himself and Ted) were at the Joliet Central one and wanted to come here too. It's just nice to see everyone."

Andrew McCormick is a familiar face around Lockport. An assistant coach on the girls bowling team for all six of the teams state championships, McCormick will turn 71 on Dec. 28. He was in the army from 1970-76.

"I went in the army after high school," said McCormick, who graduated from Joliet West in 1970. "It depends on our bowling schedule whether or not I can get to these. But it's great to see everyone and nice just to see how many come out."

Jerome "Sonny" Zdancewicz, along with his wife Linda, were attending their first Veterans Night event at Lockport. Sonny was in the army and saw a lot of combat in Vietnam in 1968 and 69. He was wounded three times and finished his military service in 1970 back at Fort Sheridan in Illinois.

Sonny, 74, has two Purple Hearts and is getting a third. He had a full-page story done on him in the July 30, 2022 issue of the Joliet Herald News.

"I do a lot of speeches for the military honor flight," Sonny said. "I had never been here before but Mike Zaworski invited us. I want to thank Lockport for having this."

Zaworski is very happy to organize the event and is always on hand for the veterans.

"This year was our eighth year of Veterans Night," Zaworski said. "We had 117 veterans in attendance. Our high was 144 (on Feb. 21, 2020) which was pre-Covid. Each veteran received a free shirt from us, a Jersey Mike's sub sandwich, and a \$5 gift card from McDonald's. The greatest part of the evening was seeing the smile on each of the veteran's faces when they were introduced and the crowd was on its feet applauding. It's basically a 30-minute standing ovation.

"Also, when the flag was unfurled on the court it was really neat to see veterans standing next to high school students holding the flag together. It was just very patriotic and it really was watching education at its highest level when you see veterans interacting with high school kids in celebration of the men and women in our armed forces. Also, I can't thank enough all of those men and women who work to make the event happen. It is an extraordinary group of people."

As for the game, the Porters won for the fifth time in their first six games by jumping out to a big lead and holding off a Lincoln-Way West rally.

Junior guard Jalen Falcon led the way with 17 points. Senior guard Adam Labuda had 14 points, nine rebounds, plus three steals. Junior guard Evan Dziadkowiec added 10 points and senior guard Quinton Hunter contributed eight points, six rebounds, and three steals.

Lockport led 18-7 after the first quarter as Labuda had eight points in that time. It was 26-14 at halftime. The Warriors closed within four toward the end of the third quarter but Dziadkowiec and Hunter each scored baskets as Lockport led 38-30 after three and held on.

The win proved to be even more impressive as the Warriors (4-4 through Dec. 9) won their next two games, including defeating Homewood-Flossmoor 69-67 in overtime on Friday, Dec. 9 in New Lenox.

Unfortunately for the Porters, they lost their next two games. The first of which was a 58-44 setback to York on Wednesday, Dec. 7 in Elmhurst.

"The more assertive team won," Hespell said. "That's the bottom line."

The Porters were up 18-7 but York closed the half on a 16-0 run to lead 23-18 at halftime. The Dukes (3-5) played good halfcourt defense the rest of the way to pull away.

Labuda scored 15 points, had seven rebounds, and distributed three assists. Dziadkowiec scored 10 points and Falcon found seven points, five rebounds, and three assists.

Then on Friday, Dec. 9, Lockport traveled to Tinley Park and lost 51-37 to Andrew in another SWSC crossover.

Things started well as the Porters made their first three 3-pointers. The game was tied at 14 after the first quarter but Andrew (4-3) forged ahead 25-23 at halftime.

Lockport (5-3) only had five field goals in the second half and shot 4-of-15 from the free throw line. Falcon was the leading scorer with 19 points, five rebounds, and three assists. Labuda added six points.

The Porters are busy the rest of the month, with four more games before they once again travel to participate in the Pontiac Holiday Tournament. That starts on Wednesday, Dec. 28, and runs through Friday, Dec. 30.