

By Randy Whalen

It's been an up-and-down season so far for the Lockport Township girl's basketball team. But the team has been on the upswing as of late.

While the Porters lost in the title game of the Oak Lawn Invite/ Spartan Holiday Tournament 42-36 to TF South last week, they were certainly playing better. They plan to continue that as another holiday tournament and then the second half of the season will come quickly.

The loss ended a 5-game win streak for the Porters (7-7), who were the defending tournament champions.

"The Oak Lawn Tournament was like a midterm exam for us," Lockport girls basketball coach Darien Jacobs said. "It was a test to gauge our improvement from the beginning of the season. We saw a variety of competition there, including an athletic sharpshooting TF South team in the championship game.

"If this were a couple of weeks ago, we would not have been able to close out the tough games we played leading up to the championship game, and we lose to TF South by 20 instead of six. So I would say we have shown growth over the past month."

Alaina Peetz, a sophomore forward, and senior guard Pat Tamasauskas made the All-Tournament team there. In the title game, on Saturday, Dec. 17, Peetz led Lockport with 13 points and senior guard Kaya Osinski added 11 points.

"Getting first would've been better but TF South was a good team," Tamasauskas said. "They have blown out every team in that tournament so us having a close game with them was amazing. Our team has had a couple of injuries and some people were out of town for the holidays so everything was kind of out of place but now since everyone is back healthy, we are back where we were before."

It was the sixth win in a row for the Red Wolves (12-3), who were led by Tourney MVP, junior Rayvan Rush. TF South won its previous three tournament games by a combined 69 points.

"Against TF South we played pretty well but just got beat on rebounds," Peetz said. "Even when we were down we still hustled and kept the score close."

The tournament opened on Saturday, Dec. 10 with an opening pool play game. That was a 46-41 win over Aurora Central Catholic. The Porters rallied from a 33-29 halftime deficit and limited Aurora Central Catholic (11-3 through Dec. 17) to two points in the fourth quarter.

Peetz (15 points) scored eight points in the third quarter to lead the comeback. Tamasauskas sealed the victory with two free throws in the final 10 seconds.

In the second round of pool play, on Monday, Dec. 12, Lockport held on to defeat the host Spartans 38-36.

Lockport led 16-2 after one quarter and later 23-5 before settling on a 23-8 halftime lead. But Oak Lawn (5-7 through Dec. 17) rallied late to tie, only to have the Porters prevail on free throws at the end. Tamasauskas led the way with 10 points as seven different Porters scored.

Pool play concluded on Wednesday, Dec. 14 with a 52-18 win over Eisenhower. All 13 players saw the floor and 11 of them scored for Lockport.

Even though the pool play of the tournament was over, the schedule for the Porters was not. They traveled for a SouthWest Suburban Conference crossover and defeated Stagg 42-26 on Thursday, Dec. 15 in Palos Hills.

The win put Lockport above .500 for the first time since a 61-42 season-opening victory over Wheaton North.

The games against the two teams have been traditionally very close. The host Porters rallied to defeat Stagg 52-48 in a Class 4A regional semifinal in 2020.

Last year, on Dec. 16, the Chargers saw a 13-point lead late in the third quarter slip away and lost 49-48 at Lockport. Their next game was a 53-52 loss to Crete-Monee. Those losses dropped their record to 5-7. They then won 18 of their next 19 games, tied Lincoln-Way Central for the SWSC Red Division title, and also tied the school record of 23 wins, going 23-9 on the season.

This time around, Stagg (4-8) lost its next game, 48-47 on Friday, Dec. 16 against St. Laurence in Burbank. So it hopes history repeats. The win was the fifth straight for the Porters, who never trailed. With the score tied at 2-2, Lockport closed the first quarter on a 14-0 run and led 16-2. Stagg was 1-of-9 from the field in the opening quarter and committed five turnovers of its 22 turnovers.

The Porter blitz continued with a basket to start the second quarter by senior swing player Caliyah Tate (6 points) for an 18-2 lead. After not scoring for a little over eight minutes, Stagg scored again as junior guard Ameli Sanchez converted a layup with 6:25 left in the second quarter.

That started a 6-0 run as junior guard Ameli Sanchez (10 points, 5 rebounds) capped that with a rebound basket midway through the quarter to make it 18-8. But that was as close as the Chargers got for the rest of the game. Lockport led 24-13 at halftime and 33-17 after three.

"When the first quarter ended I looked at the scoreboard and had a flashback to Monday's game against Oak Lawn," Jacobs said. "We were up 16-2 in that game after the eight minutes of play as well and the Spartans rallied back on their home court and we barely made it out, winning by only two points. Knowing that Stagg was another team that could heat up from behind the arc and rally back I told the team this game is far from over and we need to keep up the intensity for the next 24 minutes."

Tamasauskas led Lockport with 14 points. Peetz (10 points, 9 rebounds) and junior guard Veronica Bafia (6 points) also contributed for the Porters. Gina Librizzi (6 points), Mary Zielinski (4 points), who are senior forwards, and freshman guard Abbey Hobart (4 points) also scored for the Chargers.

"We spend tons of time working on different reads so it is no surprise it translated into the (Stagg) game," Tamasauskas said. "Towards the end, it was getting a bit messy with all the calls but our team fought through that adversity and came out with a victory."

Peetz was happy with the Porter's play as well.

"We have been playing pretty well recently," she said. "Our defense has really improved overall and against Stagg, Veronica (Bafia) did a great job defending their main scorer. Pat (Tamauskas) has also done a nice job of stepping up as our point guard and handling the pressure. Prior to this season, we hadn't played that much together, and with a new head coach, we're just starting to put it all together. We just have to continue to support each other and prepare for the (SWSC Blue Division) conference."

The holiday tournaments aren't over for Lockport. Right after Christmas, the Porters are at the Perspectives Holiday Hoops Classic between Dec. 26-29 in Chicago.

"To keep up and keep winning games I think we just have to put the losses in the past and just focus on what's in front of us," Tamasaukas said. "There are going to be more good teams that we play against and we just have to learn how to keep our composure. We are a good talented team and we will win more games."

Jacobs certainly believes that's what the Porters will do.

"After our 1-5 start this season, I thought back to my first year as a head lacrosse coach when I also started the season the same way with a 1-5 record after six games," Jacobs recalled of his time coaching girls lacrosse at Belleville West. "It really helped my lacrosse team when I started focusing less on the Xs

and Os and more on leading them by forming our identity as a team and building the culture of the program.

"After six games I realized the same thing needed to be done here. We are now starting to find out our identity as a team and a culture is being formed. We have very talented players and coaches who know the game inside and out within our program. My objective is to figure out how to best lead them and get them to reach their full potential. If I can figure that out then I think our team will continue to play well like we have the past few weeks."