

By Randy Whalen

Different guys stepping up on different days.

That's what has been happening for the Lockport Township boy's basketball team.

As the Porter prepared for the Pontiac Holiday Tournament, they won their fourth straight game with a 55-30 victory over Minooka on Wednesday, Dec. 21 at the Minooka South campus in Channahon.

Jalen Falcon led the way with 19 points and sophomore guard Bryce Turner keeps impressing as he finished with 10 points and four steals in his fourth varsity game. The Porters (9-3) are looking for their third consecutive winning season and fourth in the past five years.

"Bryce is doing a great job," Hespell said. "Most sophomores would be timid and bashful in being brought up to the varsity. But he's not that at all. It's a credit to him to step in and be aggressive."

Hespell was also happy with his team's pace, especially in the second half.

"I just thought, 'it's a Wednesday night, there is a snowstorm coming, and finals are almost over,'" Hespell said of his keyword of pace. "We didn't have a lot of energy early, so I was trying to energize them."

It worked. Ahead 24-19 at halftime, the Porters went on a 7-0 run to start the third quarter. Then leading 33-24, they closed the quarter with an 8-0 spurt for a 41-24 lead after three. Senior guard Adam Labuda, who had six rebounds, was the catalyst in the quarter as he scored all nine of his points in a 4-minute: 47-second span.

Falcon, a junior guard, capped his night by making a pair of free throws with 5:56 remaining in the game for a 47-26 lead. He then left the game as the Porters played everyone down the stretch.

"We just had to do that, we just had to play our game," Falcon said of Lockport's second-half surge. "We were on their home court and their crowd was yelling at us. But we just had to play at our pace, not theirs."

Turner thought so too.

"They were trying to speed it up," Turner said of the Indians. "But we wanted to get them to play at our pace. Once we did that, we knew weren't going to lose."

"I might be a sophomore but every single time I'm out there I want to show that I can play at the varsity level."

Lockport jumped out to a 9-0 lead midway through the first quarter. But the Indians rallied back on a pair of 3-pointers by senior guard Preston Van Pelt, who had a team-high 13 points, to knot it at 9-9 after the opening quarter.

Minooka tied it at 11-11, and 13-13, and had a few opportunities to take a lead but never did. A basket by senior guard Quinton Hunter put the Porters ahead for good as they ended the first half on an 11-6 spurt in the final 3:41 of the second quarter.

"We did a good job on (Labuda) in the first half and then he got out and scored a lot in the third quarter," Minooka coach Kevin Cain said. "It was nice that we fought back from being down 9-0 early and we stopped the bleeding. But the first four minutes of the third quarter is the most important time of the game and they smacked us in the mouth."

As usual, the Porters will play in the 91st Annual Pontiac Holiday Tournament. They have not won an opening-round game there since 2010, which was also the last time they had 20 wins in a season, finishing 21-9 in 2010-11. Lockport will open the tournament on Wednesday, Dec. 28 at 1 PM against Peoria Manual. Last year Manual beat the Porters 68-67 in a second-round consolation matchup.

Turner was only a few years old in 2010. But his confidence showed through in his prediction for Pontiac.

"That's going to change," Turner said of the losing streak at Pontiac. "We are going to give it our all and get a W."

Falcon is confident too.

"Peoria Manuel is a tough team that is scrappy, athletic, and strong," Falcon said. "But if we hit shots, box out, and play to the elite level that we can, we are going to get a win."

Hespell knows that there are no easy games at Pontiac. He played at Pontiac for the Porters and helped them to a consolation championship there as a junior in 1999.

"Manual is a historic program," Hespell said of the Rams, who have 16 trophies, including five state championships with four in a row in Class AA from 1994-97. "Six of the 16 teams at Pontiac are ranked in the top 15 in the state. It's such a tough tournament."

Unfortunately for the Indians, this has been a tough season. It was the sixth straight loss for Minooka (1-9).

The two teams split a pair of games last season. Lockport won the first one, 64-57, which was the season opener for both teams at the WJOL Tournament. But the Indians rebounded from that and had a nice 54-46 victory on the road on Jan. 12. That was the second straight in what turned out to be a 7-game winning streak that helped Minooka (20-11) reach the 20-win mark for the first time since going 21-9 in the 2016-17 season.

"Last year was a signature win for us to defeat Lockport on the road," Cain said. "The Porters are solid again this season. They don't take bad shots."

Junior guard Drew Gallagher added five points for Lockport. Senior swing players Nick Andreano (7 points) and Isaiah DuPree (5 points) also contributed for Minooka.

On Saturday, Dec. 17, Lockport traveled to Aurora and defeated Waubonsie Valley 53-47. Senior forward Caden Schoolcraft exploded for 20 points on 9-of-11 shooting and added five boards. Labuda scored 16 points, had four assists, and took a trio of charges. Falcon found his way for 11 points, and Hunter hauled down five rebounds.

The Porters led 40-26 and held off a Waubonsie Valley comeback attempt.

"It was a big road win against a really solid team," said Hespell of the Warriors, who fell to 7-4 in the loss.

The night before, Friday, Dec. 16, Lockport hosted its 10th Annual Porters vs Cancer Night. The Porters sold out every pink shirt for the event, which drew a large crowd, and they won the SouthWest Suburban Conference crossover 52-44 over Lincoln-Way Central.

Labuda led the way with 13 points, seven rebounds, and three steals. Hunter added 11 points. Lockport led 27-18 at halftime. The Knights fell to 2-7.

"In an overly physical game, I was very proud of our resilience to control the game," Hespell said. "Plus, Caden Schoolcraft (who made big free throws at the end), what a warrior!"

The winning streak started with a new guy stepping up on Wednesday, Dec. 14 in a 68-54 home win over Oswego. That was Turner, who was brought up from the JV team to fill in some key minutes.

It turned out that the sophomore made one of the game's biggest plays.

That happened with about five minutes left in the game. Oswego had a three-pointer that could have cut the lead to three. But it rimmed out and Turner, a 5-foot-8 guard, had the presence of mind to fire a long pass down downcourt to a streaking Falcon. Catching up to the ball, Falcon converted it into a layup and was fouled on the play. He finished the three-point play with 4:53 to play in the game.

Then Falcon, who had a game-high 23 points and 10 rebounds, added a free throw to put the Porters ahead by 10 with 4:11 remaining. They maintained that double-digit lead the rest of the way and came away with a nice victory.

"We had two guys (seniors Carter Peetz and Travale Williams) out with injuries," Hsepell said. "So we brought Bryce up. He's a competitor and he was ready as he had helped lead our sophomore team to an undefeated (8-0) record.

"I wasn't surprised (on the long pass to Falcon). He's a true point guard and he has that vision, that presence to do that. It was a big play."

Turner, who finished with five points, five assists, no turnovers, and a pair of rebounds, had practiced with the varsity. But this was his first game at the top level.

"I just grabbed it (the rebound) and saw Jalen," Turner said of the long outlet pass. "He's fast and I knew if I got it out in front of him that he'd finish it."

"I was kind of nervous for my first game on the varsity but I came out and gave it my all. I knew I had to step up and it was a good team effort."

The three-point play by Falcon, who scored 24 points earlier this season in a 49-41 win over Bradley-Bourbonnais, gave Lockport (6-3) a 56-47 lead.

"When Bryce got that rebound I knew what he'd do," Falcon said. "We already have that chemistry in practice and I knew he'd give it to me."

"This is a huge win. We had come off a (2-game) losing streak and we say that no matter what, we can't lose at home."

The Panthers (2-8) cut the lead to 10 one last time at 61-51 on a rebound basket by senior guard Josh Nelson (11 points) with 2:34 to play. But Lockport scored the next seven points to end all doubt. The 14-point margin matches the largest defeat of the season for Oswego, which has a trio of losses by six points or less.

It was the fifth straight loss for the Wolves, who may have lost more than the game. Junior guard Bryce Woods (5 points) made a steal and was fouled in the opening minute of the third quarter. The junior guard twisted his left ankle on the play and didn't return. He was taken for x-rays after the game.

Max Niesman led Oswego with 18 points and added five rebounds. Fellow senior guard Armani Hunter added six points for the Wolves.

Senior guard Evan Dziadkowiec scored 16 points, Labuda had 13 points and senior forward Hyatt Timosciek added six points and four rebounds for the Porters.

The game started at a frantic pace as the teams combined for 37 points and 15 turnovers in the opening quarter. There were five ties and eight lead changes, the last of which was when Falcon hit two free throws with 6.8 seconds left to give Lockport a 19-18 lead after one quarter.

A three-pointer by Niesman tied the game for the last time at 21-21 just over a minute into the third quarter. Then a driving layup by Labuda gave the Porters the lead for good. They led 38-29 at halftime. Oswego never got closer than six points the rest of the game. It was 49-38 after three.

"I thought after the first quarter we got under control with our defense," said Hespell, who saw his team force 19 turnovers in the game. "After losing two games last week we needed to play better. We knew if we did it should turn into a win and that's what we did."