

By Randy Whalen

For Adam Labuda, it was a zen moment.

The Lockport Township senior guard let his three-point attempt fly from the left side and right away he had a feeling of dread.

"I released it and thought it was off," Labuda said. "But thankfully it hit off the glass and went in."

Yes, it did with one second left and it tied the game and sent it into overtime. From there the Porters came up big in overtime and defeated Peoria Manual 58-56 on Wednesday, Dec. 28 an opening-round game at the Pontiac Holiday Tournament.

It was the first opening-round victory for Lockport since 2010. Labuda's trey tied the game at 50-50. He finished with nine points and had a team-high six assists. The Porters had a balanced scoring attack in the come-from-behind win. Junior guard Jalen Falcon (10 points, 6 rebounds) made two free throws with 10 seconds left in the extra session for the win. Senior forward Caden Schoolcraft scored 12 points on six-of-seven shooting, and sophomore guard Bryce Turner led the way with 13 points.

The win sent the Porters to the tourney quarterfinals the next day and they saw a neighboring team. That was state-ranked Joliet West, which came away with a 57-33 victory. The Tiger defense clamped down and Lockport finished 12-of-46 from the field, including 3-of-18 from beyond the arc.

Falcon had 13 points, Labuda contributed nine points and senior guard Quinton Hunter had seven points and six rebounds. Joliet West (15-5 through Jan. 13), which lost to Benet Academy 56-47 in the semifinals and Curie 65-55 in the third-place game, was led by sophomore guard Jeremiah Fears with 17 points. Senior guards Jeremy Fears and Jayden Martin added 12 points apiece for the Tigers, who led 31-18 at halftime and 45-24 after three.

The loss didn't stop the Porters from having a little fun. That evening the team went bowling. The champion was longtime assistant coach Bill Crossen. Junior guard Evan Dziadkowiec was the runner-up and the Bronze Medal award went to Labuda.

Now, hoping to advance to the fifth-place game, the Porters hung tough on Friday morning, Dec. 30, but ultimately lost 49-45 to a very good Bloom Township team. The loss ended their tournament run after three games. Lockport led most of the game but couldn't close it out. Labuda led the way with 20 points, making 6-of-8 shots from three-point land. Hunter had eight points and five rebounds and Falcon chipped in with seven points and five rebounds.

Trailing 12-8 after one quarter, the Porters rallied to take a 24-18 halftime lead and still led 37-34 after three. But Bloom outscored them 15-8 in the fourth quarter. Senior swing player Jayden Watson had 16 points and senior guard Jordan Brown added nine points for the Blazing Trojans (12-5 through Jan. 13), who defeated New Trier 50-47 to capture fifth place later that day.

Despite not getting the full amount of four games in at Pontiac, Lockport coach Brett Hespell was very happy with his team's defense.

"I'm really proud of how we've been playing defensively," Hespell said. "Starting with a string of possessions back in the Joliet West game at Pontiac. We stopped them 14 out of 15 possessions at one point in the second half. We followed that up with a great defensive effort vs Bloom."

That great defense continued on Friday, Jan. 6 as the Porters traveled to Palos Hills and defeated Stagg by a score of 43-31 in a SouthWest Suburban Conference crossover.

The Chargers (10-9 through Jan. 13) hit four shots from downtown in the first 5:03 of the game and led 13-4 at that point. It was 15-10 after the first quarter. Sophomore guard Julian Ruiz rained in another three-pointer to open the second quarter to up the lead to eight.

Then Falcon, who finished with a game-high 24 points to tie his season high, bookended an 11-0 run with a three-pointer and a pair of free throws to give Lockport the lead for good. It was 23-20 at halftime. The Chargers, who trailed 31-24 after three, were limited to 13 points in the final 23:44 of the game.

"It all starts with coach," Falcon said of the Porter defense. "He told us to turn it up on defense. It all starts with Adam (Labuda) and I forcing turnovers."

Lockport's defense forced 15 turnovers. Still, Stagg junior guard Connor Williams (7 points) hit a three-point shot from the right side and was fouled on the play. He calmly stepped to the line and converted a four-point play with 6:18 to play in the game and pull the Chargers within 31-28.

But Falcon found his way to the hoop and had a pair of old-fashioned three-point play opportunities in a 46-second-span, converting one of them, for a 36-28 advantage. Sophomore forward Domas Narcevicus (8 points, 7 rebounds) nailed a three-pointer with 4:17 left to cut the lead to five.

Those, however, would be the final points for the Chargers. Labuda (13 points, 6 rebounds) hit a three-pointer and then went 4-for-4 from the free throw line in the final minute to wrap it up for the Porters.

"They hit some three-pointers early," Labuda said of the Chargers. "But then we rotated and doubled over on them."

The defense impressed Stagg coach Marty Strus, whose younger brother Max Strus, is a guard for the Miami Heat.

"We've had a few of these games recently and the easy thing is to say our shots weren't falling," Strus said. "But (Lockport's) defense is fantastic. Jalen Falcon is all over the place for them. On defense at the top of the zone he had us out of rhythm and then he did what he wanted to score in the paint."

The next night brought a change of location home game, a milestone victory, and more defense from the Porters. They pitched a shutout in the first quarter and coasted to a 40-27 win over Naperville Central. The game was played at the old Lockport Central campus, in the gym which is commonly referred to as "The Pit.

"I love playing in that gym," Labuda said. "We played our freshmen basketball home games there and I love the feel of the gym and the history."

Lockport loved it to start the game, racing out to a 15-0 lead after the first quarter. It was 18-0 before the Redhawks (5-13 through Jan. 13) scored. It was 18-6 at halftime and 30-18 after three. Falcon led the way with 16 points and four steals, and Schoolcraft supplied 10 points and eight boards.

"It was a bit of an offensive grind but 'Porter Pit Magic' helped us lead by double figures wire to wire," Hespell said. "We had two lockdown games (on that) weekend. That sort of attention to detail is our foundation for sure.

"We are working to get better on the offensive end but right now Jalen and Adam are carrying us. We could use some other guys to be a tad more assertive looking for their own offense, but that's the inexperience of this group showing as we grow through it."

With the victory, Hespell reached 100 wins as Lockport's head coach.

Hespell, who is in his eighth season, is the sixth coach in Lockport's long, illustrious history with at least 100 victories. The others are Bob Basarich (496-99 between 1966-1987), Lawrence Thompson (245-201 between 1999-2015), Bill Connors (169-68 between 1957-1966), Joe Corcoran (166-78 between 1921-1934), and Joe Gura (152-145 between 1988-1999).

"I'm just grateful for every player who has bought into what we've asked them to do over the years," Hespell said of reaching the milestone. "They earn the wins, not me.

"I'm also thankful to have had some stellar assistant coaches who have contributed as much to this as me. Rory O'Connell, Jim Murtaugh, Andrew Weber, and Jon Voyt, who have moved on. Then, Bill Crossen, Matt Seaquist, Cory Dillard, Michael White, Aaron Woods, and Brandon Winslow now. Excellent men and really good coaches."

The win over Naperville Central also gave the Porters 12 victories on the season. While Labuda expressed optimism for the team to reach the 20-win mark for the first time since the 2010-11 season, Hespell was more pragmatic.

"We haven't really talked about 20 wins as a goal, to be honest," Hespell said following the Naperville Central game. "We're just on a mission to keep improving game by game."

Unfortunately, there wasn't any improvement for the Porters in their next game.

That was on Friday, Jan. 13 and that proved to be unlucky for host Lockport. The evening started great as it was Senior Night and the Porters honored their seven seniors. They are Nicholas Dominici, Hunter, Labuda, Carter Peetz, Schoolcraft, Hyatt Timosciek, and Trevale Williams.

But on the court, the Porters went stagnant in the second half and lost 47-38 to Bradley-Bourbonnais in an SWSC crossover.

Falcon, who had 24 points in a 49-41 victory when the two teams met on Nov. 26 in the third-place game at the WJOL Thanksgiving Tournament, had 22 points this time around. But that was the issue. Hardly anyone else scored.

Lockport (12-6) led 23-16 at halftime thanks to a 9-1 run to end the second quarter. Falcon had the final seven points in the burst.

Falcon also had a three-point play with 5:12 to play in the third quarter. That put the Porters ahead 27-20. But Bradley-Bourbonnais ended the quarter on a 9-0 run. Falcon gave Lockport one last lead on a trey 22 seconds into the fourth quarter. But the Boilermakers scored five points in 49 seconds to take the lead for good.

A slam by Falcon off a turnover momentarily energized the crowd and made it 34-32 with 5:53 to play. But Bradley-Bourbonnais scored the next six points and the Porters never got closer than seven points the rest of the way. Brandon Harris scored nine of his team-high 11 points in the fourth quarter. Fellow junior guard Gavin Kohl also had 10 points while 6-foot-10 inch sophomore center Nick Allen added 10 points and six rebounds for the Boilermakers (10-8), who have had an up-and-down season, which includes a 33-point loss to Sandburg and a 57-47 win at Bolingbrook.

Hunter (8 points, 5 rebounds) made a layup with 45 seconds to play for the Porter's final points. Those were also the first and only points that the team scored that weren't from Falcon, who had scored 20 straight points.

"Being a senior comes with a lot of responsibility," Hunter said. "We've got to own up to it. We've got to figure out how to get more involved in the scoring. We've got to learn from this, bounce back, and be a great team together."