

By Randy Whalen

There's a unique feeling every time the Lockport boys basketball team faces Joliet Central.

The two teams are longtime rivals, playing in many classic games over the years. While this week's game was a lopsided 58-28 Lockport victory on Monday, Jan. 30 at Joliet Central, it still featured the last two Porter basketball coaches facing off against each other.

That's current coach, Brett Hespell who is in his eighth season, and former Porter coach Lawrence Thompson, who is now in his seventh season as head coach at Joliet Central.

Thompson was head coach at Lockport for 16 seasons (1999-00 until 2014-15) and had a record of 245-201 in that span. His victory total is the second highest in program history and his teams captured six regional titles and an unprecedented three straight sectional championships (2006-08) in that span.

The Steelmen won regional championships in Thompson's first two seasons but have fallen on hard times recently. This season's game was the Porter's fifth straight win over their former coach, including a forfeit one from last season due to COVID. Lockport leads the matchups against Thompson by a 6-3 count.

"It's always great to play against Coach Thompson," Lockport coach Brett Hespell said. "He was my coach when I was in high school at Lockport, and he helped me get my start in teaching and coaching. He was a mentor to me then and still is.

"He's as class of an act as there ever has been."

Unfortunately for his team, Thompson had a great view as the Porters pulled away in the second quarter. Joliet Central (6-22 through Jan. 31) had taken a 13-11 lead on a three-pointer by senior guard Robert Williams with 5:19 left in the second quarter.

Then senior guard Adam Labuda (6 assists) scored his only points of the evening on a three-pointer. That started a 14-0 Lockport blitz, which included a highlight reel slam by junior Jalen Falcon on an alley-oop pass from senior guard Quinton Hunter (8 points) with 1:18 left in the half.

"It's fun to play them," Falcon said. "I talk to coach Thompson (who still works a security job at Lockport) at our school and he roots for us, too. He's a cool guy, and I see him in the hallways a lot."

Thompson could only smile when asked about Falcon's slam.

"It was a great play," he said. "Jalen Falcon is a real good athlete. He is quick and he gets into the passing lanes.

"A lot of our (26) turnovers were self-induced. But you have to hand it to Lockport, they mixed up their pressure. We like to pressure, too, but they do it differently than we do with their length."

Falcon, who finished with 22 points and six rebounds, had three points in a 9-0 first quarter run that put the Porters ahead 9-4. It was 9-6 after the opening quarter. Falcon had 10 points in the final 3:05 of the second quarter, including not only the dunk but an even more athletic play that happened right before the halftime buzzer. He raced in and tipped a missed shot in from the right side of the rim to give the Porters a 27-13 lead at halftime.

"They were playing us scrappy and tough early in the game," Falcon said. "I wasn't getting any calls going to the rim, so I had to kick the ball out to my teammates. Then we got some turnovers and I got the alley-oop and the tip-in. Those got my teammates hyped, and we kept it up the rest of the game."

They sure did, leading 41-22 after three. Falcon canned a pair of three-pointers to open the fourth quarter. Junior center Josh Bluhm (4 points) and junior guard Logan Cooper (5 points) also had baskets as Lockport extended to a 54-24 advantage and activated the running clock with 5:45 left in the game.

Zion Kostyra, a junior guard, led Joliet Central with eight points. Senior forward Caden Schoolcraft finished with six points, as 11 different players scored for the Porters.

"We were struggling offensively in the first half, but then we got some offense from our defense, and that picked things up for us," Hespell said. "Once we got the alley-oop, the ball seemed to move faster and our offense was cleaner. We also did a good job of getting offensive rebounds, which is a big key when you are struggling to score."

The victory clinched at least a .500 record for Lockport (15-10). One more win would give the Porters their third straight winning season and fourth in five years. That would be the longest continued success streak since 2005-06 through 2011-12, which saw six winning records and one .500 one in a seven-season span.

The win also ended a three-game losing streak. On Friday, Jan. 27, Lockport lost 51-46 in a SouthWest Suburban Conference Blue Division game to host Homewood-Flossmoor (15-11, 2-3 through Jan. 31). The Porters had a 33-27 lead in the third quarter but went ice-cold shooting, going 3-of-19 from behind the three-point line, and 11-of-17 from the free throw line. Falcon led with 18 points, Hunter had 13 points, and Cooper chipped in with five boards and a pair of steals.

Also that week, Lockport lost 49-46 to Plainfield South on Wednesday, Jan. 25 at home. The Cougars got hot down the stretch, especially from beyond the arc, and came away with a victory. They made eight three-pointers in the second half, three of them by junior guard Michael Smith II (10 points), and rallied from a 37-29 deficit with 1:45 left in the third quarter.

Senior forward Jermaine Theodore (11 points) led Plainfield South (12-15 through Jan. 31). Labuda (18 points), Schoolcraft (10 points), and Hunter (9 points) led Lockport.

The day before, Tuesday, Jan. 24, host Lockport played a very good Bolingbrook team tough before losing 65-57. Labuda scored 21, going 4-4 on treys. Schoolcraft had 13 points, seven rebounds, three assists, and took four charges. Falcon added 13 points and five rebounds for the Porters, who trailed 37-28 at halftime. Bolingbrook was 20-6, 5-0 in the league through Jan. 31.

But a highlight of the season happened on Saturday, Jan. 21. That's when the Porters hosted Plainfield North in "The Pit" at Lockport Central and rallied for a 51-48 victory. The Tigers (13-11 through Jan. 31) led 42-33 in the fourth quarter. But Lockport went on a 14-3 burst to grab a 47-45 lead.

In the final 30 seconds, Plainfield North hits a three-pointer to go back up by one. Undaunted, Hunter found Schoolcraft on the left side for what proved to be the game-winning layup. Schoolcraft, who had seven points in the fourth quarter, then made a steal and got the ball to Labuda for a layup right before the buzzer to seal the win.

Hespell, who was honored before the game for getting his 100th win on Saturday, Jan. 7 in a 40-27 win which was also at Lockport Central, called it "Porter Pit Magic." There were quite a few alumni at the game and they were recognized as well as having a tribute to two recent Porter boys basketball coaches who passed away, Bob Basarich, and Rollie Bolattino.

All-in-all, it was a great afternoon as both Thompson and former Lockport boys basketball coach Joe Gura (152 wins between 1988-89 and 1998-99), were also in attendance.

Lockport has four regular season games left, all of them SWSC Blue matchups, starting this Friday, Feb. 3 at Sandburg. The postseason opens on Wednesday, Feb. 22 and the Porters are hosting their own Class 4A regional. What do they have to do to do to advance to a regional championship game for the first time since the 2010-11 season?

"It all starts with practice," Falcon said. "We have to have good ones."