

By Randy Whalen

The end of a season is always tough.

But when a season ends with a double overtime loss on your home floor, it's completely heartbreaking.

That's what happened to the Lockport Township boys basketball team last week. The Porters saw their season come to a close in a 57-54 double OT loss to West Aurora on Wednesday, Feb. 22 in the second semifinal of the Class 4A Lockport Regional.

But despite the gut-wrenching setback, Lockport looked at the positives from a 17-13 season, its third straight winning record and fourth in five years.

"We played extremely hard against a very talented opponent who was ranked in the Top 25 of the state at the start of the season," Lockport coach Brett Hespell said. "I'm so proud of our guys, especially our seniors, for how they approached this season and how competitive they were all year long."

No. 11-seeded West Aurora (18-15 final record) advanced to the regional title game against No. 3 seed Oswego East, which defeated No. 14 seed Lincoln-Way West 85-31 that same night in the opening regional semifinal.

In the regional championship game, on Friday, Feb. 24, Oswego East pulled away from a six-point lead to start the fourth quarter to defeat the Blackhawks 56-43. The Wolves (27-5) played No. 2 seeded Bolingbrook, a 50-36 winner over host Waubonsie Valley in a regional title game, on Wednesday, March 1 in the second sectional semifinal at Bolingbrook. No. 1 seeded Joliet West, a 71-54 winner over No. 6 seed Romeoville, took on No. 4 seed Lincoln-Way East, which defeated No. 5 seed Neuqua Valley 50-48 on a buzzer-beating three-pointer, on Tuesday, Feb. 28 in the first semifinal.

While it would have been a tall task to defeat Oswego East, the Porters wondered what could have been. Especially since they missed out on the excitement of a regional championship on their home court. Lockport has not advanced to a regional title game since winning its fifth in six seasons in 2011.

"The season was great," Lockport junior guard Jalon Falcon said. "You know it's disappointing that it ended the way it did, but to overview the whole season, it was an honor to play with my teammates they are brothers to me on and off the court."

Falcon came into his own this season. The talented multi-sport athlete, who is a defensive back in football and qualified for track and field state finals last season in the long jump. This season he paced the

Porters by averaging 16.4 points, 4.3 rebounds, and 1.3 steals per game. He was the leading Lockport scorer against West Aurora with 23 points.

Lockport led 36-29 after three quarters against the Blackhawks. It was 38-31 a minute into the fourth quarter but West Aurora went on a quick 7-0 run to tie the game at 38-38 with 4:51 remaining in regulation. Two more ties and three lead changes followed. Falcon made a free throw with 2:44 left in the fourth quarter to tie it at 43-43.

The Blackhawks missed the front end of a one-and-one with 1:59 to play but got the ball back and held for the final shot. After the ball went out of bounds with 5.2 seconds to play, there were four time outs called. When West Aurora finally inbounded the ball, senior guard Adam Labuda (12 points, 5 steals) blocked a shot and the game went to overtime.

Labuda, who had an excellent season, averaging 12.2 points, 6.2 rebounds, 2.1 assists, 2.2 steals, and shooting 38 percent from three-point range, put the Porter season in perspective.

"So coming into the season no one expected us to be much of a threat," Labuda said. "I think we proved a lot of people wrong though as the season went on. "We never really got blown out any game and in every game we did lose, we beat ourselves with silly turnovers and mistakes.

"Coming into the West Aurora game we knew they were a solid team as they had 17 wins I believe so we were locked in and knew this game would have to be won with discipline. We played a great game but it just slipped away from us at the end."

Things looked good in the initial overtime as junior guard Logan Cooper (6 points, 5 rebounds) hit a three-pointer to give Lockport a 46-43 lead. Senior guard Quinton Hunter, who had six of his nine points in the two overtimes, hit a pair of free throws with 21.6 seconds left in the first OT for a 48-45 lead.

Then things looked good when West Aurora launched a long three-point attempt with about eight seconds to play which was an airball. Sophomore forward Terrance Smith (26 points, 7 rebounds) was there, however, to snare the ball out of the air. He put it back for a layup and it was ruled that Hunter fouled him on the play. Smith converted the three-point play with 5.3 seconds left to tie the game at 48-48.

But the Porters contend it wasn't a foul and that the video seemed to support that.

"I felt like I should've been more aggressive for the whole game," Hunter said. "But at the end of the first overtime, it shouldn't have even happened because we should've secured the rebound but unfortunately, we didn't. I didn't know if it was a foul because I didn't see if Caden (Schoolcraft) hit him or not but I certainly didn't. But after seeing the video it clearly wasn't a foul and should've just been a two-point make."

Hespell agreed.

"There didn't appear to be a foul on the offensive rebound at the end of OT and the most disappointing part of that was that the official at halfcourt made the call rather than the two primary officials," Hespell said. "West Aurora had no timeouts remaining and there were only five seconds left when he made that layup so we weren't even going to need to inbound the ball.

"As hard as that is to swallow, we had plenty of chances before and after that to secure the victory so give credit to West Aurora for taking advantage. We had a beautifully executed last-second fullcourt play that gave us a point-blank layup, but couldn't get it to drop."

Indeed, the Porters set up a great fullcourt play and got the ball ahead to Labuda on the right wing. Rather than try a potential game-winning three-pointer, Labuda saw a streaking Falcon heading toward the basket on the right side and found him with a perfect pass. But Falcon's winning attempt glanced off the rim and the game headed to a second overtime.

"Yes, the defensive play on film wasn't a foul," Falcon said. "But refs make mistakes, they're human so people make mistakes, and but at the end of the day, we as a team shouldn't have to rely on the refs to help us win the game. We should've beaten that team by stopping them from scoring and putting the ball in the basket. But hats off to them they are a great team and they definitely competed and I love competitive ball play.

"I did know how much time was on the clock (at the end of the first overtime). I just simply missed the layup, no excuses made. It was wide open but one thing I wish I could've done was to get in a better position to make the shot because I was kinda underneath the basket. But other than that I should've made the basket."

In the second overtime, the Blackhawks made a layup to take the lead. Lockport then split four free throws, the final one by Labuda tying the game at 50-50 with 2:23 to play in the second OT. But 24 seconds later, junior guard Joshua Pickett (18 points) hit a three-pointer to give the Blackhawks (18-14) the lead for good at 53-50.

Ahead 53-52, the Blackhawks made 4-of-6 free throws to go ahead by five with 16.2 seconds left. Hunter made a layup at the 11-second mark and then West Aurora left the door open by missing a pair of free throws with 10.1 seconds left. Lockport got the ball into the front court and called time out with 4.1 seconds remaining. But, needing a three-pointer to tie, they tried to pass the ball up top and turned it over with two seconds to play.

Still, Hunter, who averaged 7.1 points, 4.2 rebounds, 2.1 assists, and 1.6 steals per game on the season, kept a great perspective.

"The game overall was a blast for everyone and very electric and I just loved the atmosphere all around," Hunter said. "We didn't play badly at all but made some costly errors from time to time. It sucked to lose that game but something to take away from it was that everyone played their heart out and went out with a bang."

Smith scored on a layup to open the game. But that was the Blackhawk's only lead until Smith converted an old-fashioned three-point play for a 41-40 advantage midway through the fourth quarter. The Porters were up 13-9 after the first quarter and 24-13 following a Falcon three-point play with 3:26 left in the first half.

But the lead was narrowed to 24-18 at halftime. West Aurora tied the game at 27-27 with 3:43 left in the third quarter. But the Porters came back with a 9-0 run before the Blackhawks scored with 31 seconds to play in the quarter, making it 36-29 after three.

"I thought we really made things difficult on them defensively and had lots of success early," Hespell said. "A 6:07 drought spanning the end of the second quarter and the start of the third quarter was disappointing as it let West Aurora crawl back into the game.

"We kept making big plays though, but just couldn't cash during the fourth quarter. Like several other games this year, we were just inches short against some really good opponents. But I'm proud of how we played throughout all 40 minutes of that game."

Falcon will be back better than ever next season. But he appreciated his teammates this season and looks forward to making another run to state track.

"They support me in everything I do," Falcon said. "I also have an amazing coach with Hespell. He makes sure to push us to our limits and has high expectations for us and even though he can be hard on us he is definitely one of the best coaches I have ever been coached by and I can't wait to compete in track season with him.

"I love my teammate for reminding me to keep my head up and finish out the game and on to track season now can't wait to compete with the different jumpers this year."

Seven of the Portes 13 losses were by nine points or less, with five of them by six or less. They finished 3-7 in the Blue Division of the SouthWest Suburban Conference. Still, there were a lot of positives.

"We accomplished a lot," Hespell said. "We had a first-round win at Pontiac (58-56 in overtime against Peoria Manual), a win over H-F for the first time in 11 years, placed in third place at WJOL, and beat a number of solid teams. We were just inches short several times of winning more big games vs Bolingbrook twice, H-F again, Bloom, and West Aurora."

"Our seniors were consummate teammates," Hespell said. "Nick Dominici and Trevale Williams pushed us in practice in whatever role was assigned to them. Carter Peetz was a defensive presence. Quinton Hunter willingly played point guard and grew as the year went along. Caden Schoolcraft battled guys four, five, and sometimes six inches taller than him in almost every single game. He took 20 charges on the season and shot over 65 percent from the field."

"Of course, Adam Labuda was our leader. He was selected as SWSC All-Conference, took 35 charges of his own, led our team in rebounding, steals, and deflections, and was second in points scored. What a senior season he had!"

With key members of the team back, next season should also be good.

"Jalen Falcon had a monster junior year leading us in scoring and routinely causing fits for the opponents," said Hespell, who registered his 100th career victory this season. "It's not often that your leading scorer is also an emotional leader as well. He was relentless on the offensive boards in particular."

"It was nice to get some experience for (juniors) Evan Dziadkowiec, Drew Gallagher, Logan Cooper, and (sophomore) Bryce Turner who will all be back next year."