

By Randy Whalen

When a basketball team loses a 2-point game, it can look at numerous things that could have resulted in victory.

A turnover in the first quarter, a missed free throw in the fourth. It all could have made a difference, especially to a team trying to find its way.

That was the case for the Lockport Township boys' basketball team this past week. The Porters dropped a 54-52 game to an improved Lincoln-Way West team on Friday, Dec. 8 in a SouthWest Suburban Conference crossover at Lockport.

"It's taken us a little bit to see what we're good at, what the team's makeup is," Lockport coach Dave Wilson said. "But it's getting clearer and I guess that's a good sign."

What the Porters were good at against Lincoln-Way West was being resilient. They trailed the entire first half and were down by seven with less than two minutes to play in the game. But junior guard Anthony Kosi keyed a comeback, scoring on a layup with 1:53 to play in the game to close Lockport within 52-47.

Logan Cooper, a senior guard, then had a steal and layup, and Kosi, who tied junior forward Collin Miller for the team-high in points with 14, nailed a 3-pointer from the tight wing to tie the game at 52-52 with 28 seconds left.

But back came the Warriors, who did what they did well the whole game. But following a timeout, the Warriors calmly looked to get the ball to Eli Bach on the block and the 6-foot-2 senior forward easily scored on a layup with 2.5 seconds to play.

Bach banged in a game-high 20 points and added six rebounds as Lincoln-Way West (6-4 through Dec. 12) got its first win over the Porters in many years.

"It wasn't just me, it was Jacob Willis handling the ball and other guys stepping up and hitting big shots too," Bach said. "But at the end, I knew I had a little bit of a size advantage over the guy who was guarding me. Even when I don't have the size advantage, I know what to do."

"I was able to get the ball in the right side of the lane and being right-handed, that's my shot there."

Lincoln-Way West coach Tanner Mitchell, who lives in the Lockport district and whose freshman daughter, Kyla Mitchell was a standout middle hitter on the Porter girls' volleyball team this past fall, knew exactly where he wanted the ball to go.

"I like Eli Bach in that situation," Mitchell said. "We ran a little curl play for him and that was a good play for us."

It was but Lockport called a time out and nearly had a good play of its own. Inbounding the ball from the opposite baseline, the Porters used a pair of quick passes and got the ball to Kosi on the left wing. He launched a 28-footer at the buzzer but the shot was just off the rim.

"I would say that as a team we need to keep our composure a little better on offense when teams are pressuring us so we turn the ball over less and get more opportunities to score," said Kosi, who had seven rebounds. "Also, on the floor, we as players need to communicate more to execute our offensive and defensive sets more effectively.

"I was feeling good when I hit that game-tying shot, and I felt the last shot was on the mark, but it just came a little short."

The Porters won last year's matchup 56-51 in Lockport. But Bach helped to make sure that this season was different.

"I've been on the varsity four years and this is the first time we've beat Lockport," Bach said. "We just have to keep playing as a team, keep playing hard."

The Warriors jumped out to an 8-0 advantage and maintained the lead the entire first half. It was 25-19 at halftime. But Lockport opened the second half on a 11-3 burst and took its first lead of the game at 30-28 on a pair of free throws by Kosi. That was the first of seven lead changes the rest of the quarter as the Porters led 39-37 after three.

Josh Ahrens scored on a layup midway through the fourth quarter to give the Porters their last lead at 45-43. Lincoln-Way West, however, scored the next nine points. Junior guard Max Gabriel (14 points) hit back-to-back 3-pointers from the same spot on the left wing in 30 seconds to highlight the 9-0 spurt. Willis, a senior guard, capped it on a layup with 2:09 to play for a 52-45 lead.

"We didn't play well in the third quarter and it just came down to who can make plays," Mitchell said. "Max Gabriel hit two huge 3-pointers for us. Those were big, big ones. This is my first win over Lockport in my three years as head coach here and it's always nice to get an SWSC crossover win against a Blue Division team."

Jacob Bereza, a senior forward, finished with 13 points and seven boards for the Warriors. Cooper and junior guard Bryce Turner each added seven points for Lockport, which limited its turnovers to 15.

"Our philosophy on defense is that you have to cut the head of the snake, and we didn't cut the head of the snake," Wilson said. "We let Eli Bach light us up for 20. Lincoln-Way West is very scrappy and athletic. We knew it would be a battle and we were swimming upstream all night.

"We were 7-of-14 on free throws tonight and are only 54 percent from the line for the season. We're also 28 percent on 3-pointers and average 22 turnovers per game. But we have a lot of juniors with no previous varsity experience."

It was the third straight loss in a four-game losing streak for the Porters (3-6, 0-2 through Dec. 12).

The losing streak started on Friday, Dec. 1 with a 52-39 home loss to Lincoln-Way East in a SWSC Blue matchup. But that night was a bigger event than just the game as it was the Ninth Annual Veterans Night Celebration, with well over 100 veterans in attendance.

On Tuesday, Dec. 5, York (7-2) came to town and handed Lockport a 59-36 loss. But Kosi played well with 17 points and five rebounds. Then on Tuesday, Dec. 12, the Porters traveled to Homewood-Flossmoor (9-1, 3-0) and lost 81-45 in another SWSC Blue matchup. But Kosi once again scored 17 points.

"In the short term it's a failure," Wilson said after the Lincoln-Way West loss. "But in the long term, we better learn from it."