

By Randy Whalen

The Lockport Township girls basketball team is trying to claw its way back to the .500 mark.

Literally.

In a recent game, Evelyn Ingram had a scratch mark on her face as she helped the Porters pull within a game of the .500 mark.

Unfortunately, the Porters couldn't get back to break even in their next game. That was a 67-53 loss to Lincoln-Way West in a SouthWest Suburban Conference crossover on Tuesday evening, January 9, at Lockport.

Sophomore swing player Laura Arstikaitis led Lockport with 16 points. Junior guard Lucy Hynes added 15 points, while Veronica Bafia, a forward and the only senior on the team, added 10 points for the Porters.

Junior forward Caroline Smith led a balanced Lincoln-Way West attack with 21 points. Senior guard Peyton Madl made 15 points, freshman guard Kenzie Roesner contributed 12 points, and sophomore guard Molly Finn added 10 points as the Warriors were the one to get back to .500, moving to 9-9 on the season.

But to end the previous week, Lockport closed within a game of the .500 mark by having some freshmen come up big.

That's exactly what happened for the Porters in a matinee special that tipped off at 11:37 AM on Saturday, Jan. 6 at Joliet Central. The host Steelmens had battled back to trim a double-digit deficit to two points and looked poised to catch up.

But it didn't happen thanks in part to the efforts of Ingram. The freshman forward scored six of her seven points in the fourth quarter as Lockport held off the Steelmens 42-35 in a battle of longtime rivals.

This week, it was the second close win for the Porters who, also lost an SWSC Blue game 67-44 on Thursday, Jan. 4, to an excellent Homewood-Flossmoor team.

"That's good and that's what she needs to be able to do," Lockport coach Darien Jacobs said of Ingram. "I get it, she's a freshman but she's a varsity basketball player and did what was expected."

Joliet Central (6-13) trailed 31-25 after three quarters but quickly closed the gap to 31-29 on consecutive layups by seniors Afrika Armstead-Lee (5 points) and Aubrey Weems (11 points) in the opening 43 seconds of the fourth quarter. The Steelmen then had a couple of close-range opportunities to tie the game but missed.

Arstikaitis, who led all scorers with 13 points and added six rebounds, and Ingram then sandwiched 3-pointers around a free throw, as the Porters restored the lead to 37-30 with 4:42 remaining in the game. Joliet Central got back within 37-33 on a pair of free throws by Nevaeh Wright with 3:03 left but didn't score again until the final seconds.

In the meantime, another freshman, Katie Peetz (4 points), scored on a layup with 1:41 left and Ingram made 3-of-4 free throws in the final 30.5 seconds to give Lockport a 9-point cushion. Sophie Hynes is also a freshman for the Porters.

Ingram, who had a scratch mark on her face from one of the many tussles for rebounds and loose balls in the game, believed she was ready for varsity basketball before the season started.

"I've been preparing for these moments by playing with my travel team in the summer, so I was prepared," she said. "Still, I didn't know I'd be on varsity right away. But I knew my teammates would back me up."

They did but the Porters still had to overcome 27 turnovers in the game, including seven in the fourth quarter.

"We just have to be more focused," said Ingram, who added five rebounds. "We have to be more disciplined on offense."

Jacobs, who saw his team nearly lose a 16-point fourth-quarter lead in a 41-38 home win over Providence on Tuesday, agreed.

"We get in these situations, especially in the fourth quarter, and we run around like a chicken with its head cut off," he said. "We have to realize that we're up and we don't have to force it. I'm not a fan of stalling but we have to look for the best shot."

Wright, who had eight points, scored on a layup one minute into the game to give the Steelmen their only lead. It was tied at 4-4 when Arstikaitis gave Lockport the lead for good midway through the opening quarter with the first of her three 3-pointers. It was 8-4 after one quarter and 20-14 at halftime.

"I have a lot of days that I don't make a lot," Arstikaitis said of her 3-pointers. "But I keep shooting them."

Lucy Hynes, who had seven points, scored twice inside in the opening 44 seconds for the Porters as they opened the third quarter on a 7-0 run to take their largest lead at 27-14. It was 31-25 after three.

Lockport lost this game at the same time and same location by a score of 39-35 last year. But despite the turnovers, won this season's matchup.

"We don't look for the open person enough," Arstikaitis said of the turnovers. "We have to move the ball more and handle the pressure better."

Sophomore post player Armante Dambrauskas contributed five points and eight rebounds and sophomore forward Makenna Klacko (2 points) also added eight rebounds for the Porters, who were without Bafia, who wasn't at the game. Sophomore guard Elliana Fowler scored nine points for Joliet Central, which missed over 40 shots and was 9-of-15 from the line in the game.

"We have to score the basketball," Joliet Central coach Laura Brumfiel said. "We just have to move the ball better and if we score, we win the game."

"We play hard and have good kids but it's just the little things. We put ourselves in a position to win. We just have to keep getting better."