

By Randy Whalen

It hasn't been the easiest of seasons, but the Lockport boys basketball team has kept battling.

This past Tuesday evening the Porters were rewarded.

Collin Miller hit a free throw with 5.5 seconds to play for the game-winning point as the Porters upended Lincoln-Way East 52-51 on Tuesday, January 30 in a SouthWest Suburban Conference Blue Division matchup in Frankfort.

The win snapped a six-game losing streak for Lockport (8-16, 1-3). It was the third loss in a row for the Griffins (15-8, 2-3).

"This is very big," Miller said. "We'd been on a losing streak so this was just great. It gives us a lot of energy and momentum."

Miller, a junior forward, finished with nine points, five of them in the fourth quarter, and eight rebounds. He hit a pair of free throws with 50.5 seconds left to give the Porters a 51-49 lead. But Lincoln-Way East sophomore guard BJ Powell (12 points) answered with a pair of free throws of his own to knot the game at 51-51 with 29.5 seconds to play.

Lockport called a time out with 7.8 seconds left and got the ball to Miller, who was fouled and made the first of his free throws. He missed his second but a rushed 15-foot shot by the Griffins found nothing but air and no foul call in the final seconds.

"I just stayed under control and knew I had to make one," Miller said of his free throws, "Then (on the Griffins' final chance) I just stood straight up and played defense."

Junior guard Anthony Kosi had a game-high 22 points and eight rebounds for the Porters, including numerous big shots.

"This is the biggest win of the year," Kosi said. "Just knowing it's a rivalry game for us, we just had to give our all in order to win. The whole game I felt confident I knew that Collin would make at least one of those and he did."

There were three ties in the fourth quarter but Lockport never trailed. The Griffins had a 6-0 run to tie the game at 47-47 on a pair of free throws by junior guard Brent Taylor (13 points) with 2:08 to play. Junior

guard Ramzy Bardarawi, who came off the bench to score 13 points, banked home a shot in the lane but 14 seconds later Powell drove to the hoop and tied it at 49-49 with 1:19 remaining.

"We weathered the storm," Lockport coach Dave Wilson said. "We needed the win. (The Griffins) have superior athletes and we made a conscious effort to slow the game down to a snail's pace and limit their possessions."

That was certainly the case in the first half as the teams combined to go 9-of 37 from the field. Lincoln-Way East led 10-4 after the first quarter and 12-8 midway through the second quarter. But the Porters went on a 10-1 burst to end the half. That included a three-pointer by Bardarawi with 27 seconds left and a steal and layup from Kosi at the buzzer gave them an 18-13 halftime lead.

"Ramzy is very skilled," Wilson said. "It took him a minute to show what he can do this season. But everyone gets an opportunity and he's made the most of his."

Junior guard Brenden Sanders had six of his nine points in a 16-5 Griffin spurt to open the third quarter for a 29-23 advantage with 3:48 left. But undaunted, Lockport responded with a 15-6 burst of its own to lead 38-35 after three.

Sophomore forward Jacob Alexander also added nine points for Lincoln-Way East, which starts three sophomores and two juniors.

"We scored three points in the second quarter and that was the ball game," said Lincoln-Way East coach Rich Kolimas, who registered his 400th career win earlier this season. "Give Lockport credit. they slowed it down and forced us to shoot outside.

"We had a big run to start the third quarter and forced turnovers (6 in the third quarter). But then they solved it and made open threes and scored 20 points in the third quarter. That was a momentum shift. Unfortunately, it came down to free throws at the end. They made the one and we didn't get an opportunity."

The Porters have had opportunities throughout the season but have lost five games by seven points or less, including a trio by two or fewer.

"Maybe the lid is off," said Wilson, who is in his first season as Lockport head coach after a decade at Andrew. "We've fought through it and this one feels good. We're like cross country runners, we want to peak at the end."

Kosi agreed.

"This is big and we just have to keep practicing as hard as we can," Kosi said. "Coach has been pushing us hard in practice and that's what got us the win."

The day before, Monday, January 29, Lockport hosted a longtime rival, Joliet Central, which is coached by former Porter head coach Lawrence Thompson.

There the Steelmen survived a scare and toppled Lockport 62-53

It was a nice, much-needed victory for Joliet Central, especially after a home loss to Joliet West by the score of 53-47 on Saturday, January 27. It broke a two-game losing streak and improved the Steelmen to 15-9. They won 57-50 over Plainfield East in a Southwest Prairie Conference matchup the next day to improve to 16-9 and guarantee them a winning record for the first time in five years.

It also broke a five-game losing streak to Lockport and was the Steelmen's first win over their longtime rivals since a 53-47 victory on Nov. 29, 2019, in the WJOL Thanksgiving Tournament at The University of St. Francis.

Thompson, who is in his eighth season as coach at the school, is now 4-6 against his former team. It was his second-ever win at Lockport, where he was head coach between 1999-2015, with the other one was 66-60 on January 30, 2018,

"We knew Lockport would come after us," Thompson said. "They are always well coached, and it's always a tough game when you play here. I was proud of the way our guys played at the start and also at the finish. After being in almost the same situation 48 hours ago, they were able to come away with the win.

They were, but trailing 50-40 with just over six minutes to play, Lockport went on a 9-0 run to cut the lead to 50-49 with 4:30 to play. The Porters (8-16), who upset Lincoln-Way East 52-51 the next night, had a couple of opportunities to take the lead. But they didn't, thanks in part to Jamarcho Holman.

The senior guard, who had 12 points, cut off a pass and raced down to the other end for a layup with 2:17 to play. That gave Joliet Central a 52-49 lead and seemed to end any momentum the Porters had.

"Coach Thompson told us to play the passing lanes and I just looked for that and made a good steal," Holman said. "After losing to West this was really big. We wanted that game but we just have to move forward.

"This was a big game for (coach Thompson). It's real personal and a big win."

Holman's basket started a 12-2 run, which included six points from senior guard Zion Kostyra (11 points). A layup by Lockport in the final seconds capped the scoring.

Danny Thompson, who had 17 points in the loss to Joliet West, led the Steelmen with 16 points. Fellow junior guard Glenn Harper added 12 points, while senior guard JayLin Murphy also added 11 points to round out the Joliet Central scoring.

After giving up the final six points to Joliet West in the loss two days before, the Steelmen wanted to come out strong. They did this by racing out to a 12-0 lead in the first five minutes and held a 16-6 advantage after one quarter.

The lead grew to 36-19 on a short jumper by Murphy with 1:14 left in the second quarter. But Barbarawi (8 points) scored four points in the final 32 seconds as Lockport got within 36-23 at halftime.

Trailing 38-23 in the opening minute of the third quarter, the Porters went on a 15-4 burst that was capped on a layup by senior guard Logan Cooper (4 points) to close within 42-38 with just over three minutes left. Thompson, however, scored the next two baskets, and Harper made a pair of free throws to give the Steelmen a 48-38 lead going into the fourth quarter.

Miller led all scorers with a career-high 19 points, while Kosi had 11 points, and fellow junior guard Bryce Turner added seven points for the Porters.

"We made our free throws and got a couple of layups at the end, and that's what we wanted," coach Thompson said. "Jamarcho's steal gave us a big spark. He did a good job of figuring out that they were swinging the ball from one side to the other and stepped in the passing lane. We also had very good balance in our scoring, which is what we like to see."

Miller was happy to contribute in a big way.

"We started out slow because we went small at the beginning and we just got no rebounds," Miller said. "Ramzy helped us a lot in our comeback and the middle was open so we just passed it middle and had cutters drive down to the block. To pull these games off we can't have terrible starts like we did and we need not be afraid to drive to the basket and finish."

Even in the loss, Wilson remained optimistic.

"I'm proud of the way our guys fought back," Wilson said. "If there's a silver lining, it's that I am seeing four or five juniors getting valuable experience. It's the little things that are hurting us. Being able to secure loose balls, being a half-step quicker for a steal, boxing out for a rebound.

"Not doing those little things makes the game harder than it should be. It's the old saying, a young team has to learn how to win. But, again, we are getting experience, and we hope we can start stacking up that experience and getting some wins. No one on this team gives up. They always play hard and hustle."

That hard work and hustle were rewarded the next night.