

By Randy Whalen

There are numerous positive signs for the Lockport boys basketball team.

Yes, the Porters lost 20 games for the first time in school history this season, finishing 9-21. They also played 28 regular season games, which is a lot more than used to be on their schedule, which for years maxed out at 25 games. Now it can max out at 31 games.

The previous school record for most losses came in an 8-19 season in 2012-13. There have been three seasons of fewer wins than the nine in the last 20 years.

Four of the five starters toward the end of the season were juniors and in a season like this, there was a great highlight for Lockport.

A last-second postseason victory.

Collin Miller banked in a 33-foot shot at the buzzer as the Porters survived and defeated host Thornton Fractional South 60-57 in a Class 4A Stagg Regional quarterfinal game on Monday, February 19 in Lansing. That advanced Lockport to play Homewood-Flossmoor on Wednesday, February 21 in the first semifinal at Stagg. H-F is the top-seeded team in the Rich Township Sectional while the Porters were No. 17.

"It was a great feeling," Miller said after hitting the game-winner. Obviously, it was a much-needed win. We were without (junior point guard) Bryce Turner so it just feels good to win another one and get an extra game."

In the final regular season game, an 80-76 overtime loss to Sandburg, Turner fractured a bone near his left ankle. So without their point guard, the Porters were prone to turnovers in the fourth quarter and made nine of their 19 in the game in the final eight minutes.

That helped TF South (11-19) to rally from a 50-37 deficit with seven minutes to play. The Red Wolves tied it at 57-57 on a short jumper by senior guard Tyler Earmsmuth (10 points) with 11 seconds to play and Lockport finally got a time out after calling for one for a few seconds. That came with 4.7 seconds left.

Then it went just like first-year Lockport coach Dave Wilson drew it up.

"It was an awkward inbounds position," Wilson said. "But I wanted the ball to go to Collin, he's a sure-handed kid. He had to go the length of the floor but you can basically get a dribble per second so I told him to take three or four dribbles and make something happen."

Miller, a junior swing player, who had tied the game late in regulation against Sandburg, did just that. He finished with 14 points but none bigger than the final three, which he launched on the run from about 33 feet on the right side.

"I was supposed to have a running start as I took the inbound pass," Miller said. "But my guy was up on me and I didn't get that. So I just looked to get upcourt. I could look to see if someone was open in the corner but I was the main option. I saw the time out of the corner of my eye and knew I had to put it up."

He did and the buzzer sounded as the ball hit the backboard and went in. His teammates then mobbed Miller.

"No, I didn't think it was in," he said of his first game-winning shot at the buzzer. "I was in disbelief. When everyone piled on me it felt like someone was choking me. But it was still a great feeling."

Anthony Kosi, a junior guard, led Lockport with 17 points and added seven rebounds. Senior guard Logan Cooper contributed 16 points.

Junior guard Rashad Peeples led TF South with 15 points. Senior guard Alex Lesure had nine of his 13 points in the fourth quarter to help the Red Wolves rally.

Lockport ended the first quarter on a 10-3 burst and led 15-13 after one quarter. The RedWolves regained the lead at 17-15 in the opening minute of the second quarter but never led again as the Porters responded with a 9-2 spurt. Cooper had seven points in the second quarter, including a long 3-pointer with four seconds left for a 30-24 halftime lead.

The lead grew to 13 in the third quarter, including Lockport leading 47-34 after three.

It was the Porters' first postseason win since a 43-34 victory over Plainfield South in a Class 4A regional quarterfinal game on Monday, February 27, 2017. They lost the next six postseason games (there was no postseason in 2021) after that, including heartbreaking ones by one point and in double overtime in the regional semifinals the past two seasons.

Lockport, however, has not played for a regional championship since the last time it won one, in 2011.

The victory also felt great as the Porters had some tough losses. They had opportunities throughout the season but lost six games by seven points or less, including a trio by two or fewer, and dropped two of those games in overtime.

"You can't go by the record," Wilson said. "We play one of the toughest schedules in the state. But that schedule prepared us to win a playoff game. No matter what (happened against H-F) we had another practice and another day together as a group."

Yes, they did and then faced H-F in the regional semifinal at Stagg. The Vikings scored early and often and went onto an 82-45 victory. H-F led 54-14 at halftime and coasted.

Playing in his final high school basketball game, senior guard Drew Gallagher led Lockport with 13 points. Senior guard Aayush Joshi also added 10 points, and Miller totaled nine points for the Porters. Senior guard Gianni Cobb scored 20 points to lead H-F. Junior guard Bryce Heard had 19 points, senior swing player Carson Brownfield had 14 points, and junior guard Jayden Tyler added 12 points for the Vikings.

In the regional title game, H-F survived a scare from No. 9 seeded and host Stagg (20-12) to win 64-56. It was the 16th regional championship in the past 20 played postseasons for H-F (28-4). The Vikings faced No. 5 seeded Joliet West (22-9) on Tuesday, February 27 in the Rich Township Sectional Semifinal.

After starting this season with a 3-2 record, the Porters hit some tough times and lost 8-of-9. A 3-game winning streak in the first half of January, all of them by double digits, showed what the team is capable of. But the tough SouthWest Suburban Conference schedule, which includes top 10 teams, Bolingbrook and H-F, caught up to them.

Another great highlight was an SWSC Blue Division win by the score of 52-51 on January 30 at Lincoln-Way East. There Miller hit the winning free throw in the final seconds.

Wilson, who was at Andrew the previous nine seasons is no stranger to having some road bumps when it comes to turning around a program. After having two losing seasons to start there, he had winning campaigns in six of the next seven seasons. That included a regional championship (in 2021-22) and a pair of SWSC Red titles (2017-18, and 2020-21).

"Having a consistently successful program is a 12-month, 365-day commitment by the head coach," Wilson said following the conclusion of the Lockport season. "I am responsible for program development, interest, and opportunity, and player development. I have systems in place to achieve both. It just takes time."

Six seniors graduated from this season's squad. They are Josh Ahrens, Majd Awad, Cooper, Evan Dziadkowiec, Gallagher, and Joshi.

But juniors Ramzy Barbarawi, Kosi, Miller, and Turner were starting toward the end of the season and are all expected back this coming November.

"Yeah, thank you! It'll be really interesting to see how things go next year since we're going to have most starters back," Kosi said. "I'm confident that we'll end up with more wins and things will pan out a lot smoother.

"I think I've personally learned a lot about the game, and my other teammates have too. We're gonna have to continue to work hard this offseason though, and it should be a real good season next year!"