Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Grafton pulls away in 2nd half to secure win, move one step closer to conference championship

Staying close is the first step in upsetting a heavily favored opponent.

For three-plus quarters last Friday, the formula worked to a tee for the Port Washington girls' basketball team as it tangled with host Grafton.

The Pirates trailed by only 27-21 with less than seven minutes to play against a foe that began the night with a 10-game winning streak and its sights set on a North Shore Conference title.

But moments later, Port's upset hopes were dashed as Grafton went on a 16-4 run that carried it to a 43-25 victory.

Besides keeping the Black Hawks' streak alive, the win put them in position to claim a share of the league crown. Whitefish Bay's victory over first-place Nicolet the same night left all three teams tied for the top spot with 11-2 records and one NSC game left for each.

Despite his players' struggles Friday, Grafton coach Bob Maronde said persistence had its reward in a Senior Night game.

"All year long, I kept telling them they had to practice like champions and play like champions if they wanted to be champions," Maronde said.

"Now we're in position to accomplish that."

The Hawks, who can clinch a title share by defeating Milwaukee Lutheran (1-12) this week,

found themselves scuffled much of the game against a Port team that used hustle and hard-nosed defense to stay close.

The Pirates (3-10) had several first-half leads, including an 11-9 edge late in the second quarter on a basket by Nicole Ziehm. However, Grafton responded with a 5-0 run to end the half and never trailed again.

Although Port got within 20-18 midway through the third period, the Hawks answered with a 7-0 run — including five points by Sam Gosewehr — to grab a 27-18 lead.

After the Pirates rallied to start the fourth quarter, Grafton sealed the outcome with an offensive flurry by guard Hannah Eichler, The senior scored 11 of her game-high 17 points in the final six minutes against a tiring Port defense.

"We just had to keep playing hard," Eichler said. "We couldn't seem to find any rhythm early in the game, and you have to give Port some credit for that with their defense.

"We kept being aggressive, and our defense helped us get some baskets at the end."

Port coach Brian Johnson was pleased with his team's effort against an opponent that has usually taken charge early in decisive wins over the Pirates.

"We played hard, inspired basketball," Johnson said. "We talked about responding to the physical challenge of facing Grafton, and that's what the girls did.

"We just ran out of gas at the end."

Besides Eichler's effort — which also included 11 rebounds, four steals and four assists — the Hawks were sparked by Haley Orlowski. The junior had seven rebounds and 11 points in a strong all-around performance.

Port was led by Ziehm, a senior center who finished with 13 points. Guard Caity Tydrick added seven points.

"Port played hard and made us work for everything we got," Maronde said.

"We missed a lot of shots early in the game, and it snowballed on us. It took us until the fourth quarter before we finally got things turned around."

The Hawks resurgent play since back-to-back losses in early January has surprised many people, including Maronde.

"I would have never guessed that this team would be in a position to win a championship," he said.

"Earlier in the season, I didn't think they had it in them, but they've proved me wrong. They have

wonderful chemistry. I couldn't be prouder of them."

Grafton will take its shot at the NSC title Thursday when it travels to Milwaukee Lutheran for a 7:30 p.m. game that ends the regular season.

The same day, Port will conclude conference play with a 7:30 p.m. home game against Cedarburg.

Next week, Grafton and Port will both open WIAA Division 2 tournament play. The Hawks received a No. 2 seed, and Port is seeded No. 8.

On Tuesday, March 6, Pirates will host Kewaskum (No. 9) in a 7 p.m. regional quarterfinal game. The winner will play at Beaver Dam (No. 1) in the semifinals Friday, March 9.

Grafton received a first-round bye. The Hawks' first test will be Friday, March 9, when they host the winner of a game between Cedarburg (No. 7) and West Bend East (No. 10).

Cudahy 51, Port Washington 24

A lack of spark against a tough opponent saddled the Pirates with a nonconference loss at home Feb. 21.

Struggling at both ends of the court, Port fell behind, 13-7, by the end of the first quarter and was outscored by 19 points over the next two periods. The Pirates faced a 40-15 deficit entering the fourth quarter.

Port's leading scorer was junior Stephanie Volesky with six points.

Ten players scored for Cudahy, led by Taylor Gradinian and Emily Wiltzius with 13 points apiece.

Image Information: PORT WASHINGTON'S Nicole Ziehm found herself surrounded by Grafton defenders, including Haley Orlowski (left), during a North Shore Conference game last Friday. Photo by Sam Arendt