Port's Gasser, Cedarburg's Rank forge special bond while traveling shared path to basketball excellence

It was one of those take-no-prisoners scenes.

Midway through the second half of the Port Washington boys' basketball team's road game Jan. 8, Cedarburg's Chip Rank went after a rebound with a pair of opponents in front of him.

Rank landed in a heap, draped over Port's Josh Gasser, a player he's tangled with many times before.

Amid a few catcalls from the Port crowd, Rank was whistled for a foul, but he got up, helped Gasser to his feet — and on went the game.

"We're friends, but we like to compete," Rank said afterward. "We always play hard."

Gasser got the last word that night, scoring a game-high 27 points in leading the Pirates to a 58-44 win. Rank had 16 points for the Bulldogs, who fell short after upsetting Port on the same court last season.

"It's always a challenge to play against Cedarburg, especially with Chip," Gasser said. "He's their best player, so we had to do what we could to stop him."

Rank is also one of Gasser's best pals.

The two seniors first squared off on a basketball court when they were in fourth grade — playing for different teams from different towns with little in common other than every boy's dream of becoming a standout athlete.

Eight years, dozens of games and countless exchanges of baskets, bumps and bruises later, the dream lives on.

So does a friendship between teens whose shared path to success has forever linked them as rivals, teammates and record setters.

For Gasser, the road has led to a pinnacle in Port sports history. At the end of this basketball season, the 6-foot-4-inch guard will cap a four-year varsity career as his team's all-time scoring leader, a record that stood for 56 years until he broke it as a junior. After last Friday's game against Homestead, he had 1,454 career points.

This fall, Gasser will take his talents to the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a scholarship player on the men's basketball team.

Rank's legacy as one of the top athletes in Cedarburg High School history has led him to the No. 1 spot on the Bulldog boys' career scoring list.

Last weekend, the 6-6 forward scored 22 points against Whitefish Bay and moved into a tie with Jack Friess for the school record with 1,161 points. With his first point this Friday at home against Nicolet, Rank will break a mark that has stood for 43 years.

Like Gasser, Rank will take his basketball skills to a Division 1 college program, having accepted a scholarship from the University of Northern Iowa.

The similarities between Rank and Gasser don't end there.

They're both honor students who were recruited for basketball by several of the same colleges, including Northwestern and Northern Iowa, and excelled as quarterbacks on their school's football teams.

Rank received offers from several Division I college football programs before opting for basketball.

Gasser had an outstanding football season as a junior but was sidelined all of last fall after injuring an ankle while playing on a summer basketball team with Rank. The two have been on the same Wisconsin Swing AAU squad for three years, ever since Rank recruited Gasser to become his teammate.

“I saw him play at the (WIAA) state tournament as a freshman and asked him to join,” said Rank, whose real first name is Charles. “We needed a point guard on Swing, and I thought he would be good.”

Both players have been more than good. During the summers, they’ve helped their AAU team win several tournaments.

This season, they’re each averaging more than 22 points per game, which puts them among the top 10 high school players in southeastern Wisconsin. But they’re receiving even higher marks for intangible assets.

“Josh is a great athlete who’s talented, extremely respectful and leads by example, just like Chip,” Port basketball coach John Bunyan said.

“They’re both unselfish. Whenever they have the ball, they look for their teammates first. They play the game the way it should be played.”

It didn’t take Nick Weisse, Cedarburg’s first-year boys’ coach, long to notice the same thing.

“Chip isn’t a holler guy. He doesn’t run around and yell at people, even though I wish he was more assertive with his teammates at times,” Weisse said.

“Chip just tries to find ways to make everyone on the team better. I think Josh is the same way. They’re not bold and brash. They’re both the real thing.”

When they started out as rivals on youth basketball teams coached by their fathers, Gasser and Rank didn’t suspect they would become the glue in a bond between families. After years of watching their sons play against each other, Pat and Joan Gasser and Scott and Carrie “Beetle” Rank found themselves joining forces on road trips to AAU games and college visits.

“We’ve gotten pretty close to the Ranks,” said Pat Gasser, one of Bunyan’s assistant coaches. “At first, I don’t think we really liked each other because the

boys were always trying to beat one another.

“But by the time they got to high school, they were playing together more than they were against each other. It’s been a lot of fun watching them both.”

Fun is also the operative word for both players, whose outlook reflects a love of sports and a respect for their opponents as much as a desire to win. When asked who’s better with a basketball, they laughed and pointed at each other.

“Chip is really good,” Josh Gasser said. “He’s a better post player than I am, and he’s tougher physically, but I probably have a better perimeter game because that’s my role on the team.”

To Chip Rank, Port has a guard who makes everyone around him better.

“Josh sets up his teammates a lot, which makes him so tough to stop,” he said. “He can also get a shot anytime he wants. I have to work harder for mine.”

Friendly competition has helped both players improve their games.

“They are definitely two peas in a pod,” Scott Rank said. “Besides playing on the same AAU team, they’ve spent a lot of time together on trips and practicing in the summer. They’ve had some free-throw contests where they just kept making them nonstop.”

Communication between the players has been as steady as their shared workouts.

“What’s really nice is that they have had each other to talk to,” Carrie Rank said. “All through this recruiting, Josh and Chip have been bouncing things off each other to find out what they think.

“It’s not a one-upmanship but a way to help them keep things in perspective.”

The perspective includes remembering that sports is only one part of a student-athlete’s life. Stories about Gasser and Rank being courteous, friendly, accommodating young adults are easy to find among their coaches and teachers.

“I think there are some amazing parallels with these two kids,” said Brian Leair,

Cedarburg High School's athletic director and football coach.

"They're tough, they're talented, and they both want to be the best they can be. They're the kind of kids you want to see playing for your team and your school."

Although their high school athletic careers will come to a close in a few months, these players see no end to their friendship.

"We enjoy a lot of the same things and will stay in touch. We text a lot," Josh Gasser said.

As an appropriate send-off, they've planned a shared graduation party in spring. Just to be fair, though, they picked a neutral playing venue.

It will be at Lime Kiln Park in Grafton "because that's halfway between Port Washington and Cedarburg," they said.

SMILES ASIDE, there's no backing down for Port Washington's Josh Gasser (left) and Cedarburg's Chip Rank when they square off on the basketball court. The senior standouts have played against each other since they were in fourth grade . Photo by Sam Arendt