Written by Steve Ostermann
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Destiny returned to the hands of the Port Washington boys' basketball team last weekend.

Ten days after the second of back-to-back losses cost the Pirates sole possession of first place in the North Shore Conference race, they reclaimed the top spot alone Friday.

A come-from-behind, 51-46 win over Milwaukee Lutheran in a battle of wills punctuated by hard fouls and floor burns helped turn the trick.

"We realize that we control our own destiny," said Port coach John Bunyan, whose team improved to 8-3 in NSC play, one game ahead of second-place Germantown (7-4), which was upset by Cedarburg
the same night.

"We know that all the games left are going to be really big, so we know we have to be focused for every one."

Focus was a problem for the Pirates early against Lutheran. They struggled at both ends of the court and saw the Red Knights run off 13 unanswered points on the way to a 19-9 lead by the end of the
first quarter.

Guard Chim Kadima was the biggest source of the Pirates' frustration, scoring eight of his team-high 19 points in the opening period.

However, Port got back on track by tightening its defense. The Pirates allowed just 12 points over the next two quarters and slowly but surely took control.

After slicing Lutheran's lead to 25-24 by halftime, Port went on a 10-3 run in the third period to take a seven-point lead. Guard Josh Gasser scored six points during the rally, which included a flurry of
no-calls contact at both ends of the court.

Early in the fourth quarter, the Red Knights (5-6) made things interesting again when Kadima led another charge. He hit two free throws to tie the game at 42-42 with 4 minutes, 12 seconds left.

Cory Steinmetz and Shane Kennedy countered that by each making two foul shots to give Port a 46-42 edge with less than two minutes remaining.

Although Lutheran pulled within two points and had a chance to tie or go ahead in the final minute, it couldn't convert. Gasser then made five of six free throws to seal the outcome.

"It was a really physical game, but the refs let us play at both ends, so it was OK," said Gasser, whose team-high 21 points included an 11-for-13 effort at the foul line.

"We're going to have games like this, so we have to be ready for them."

Bunyan was more worried about his team's shaky first quarter.

"I was really concerned. We gave up 19 points way too easily," he said.

"I challenged them to play better defense in the second quarter, and we did that. It was all about effort."

A sustained effort is what Port will need to win its first conference title in boys' basketball in 36 years. The Pirates' last league crown was in 1973-'74 as a member of the Braveland Conference.

Port will try to maintain its hold atop the NSC race with two games this week. After facing Cedarburg on Tuesday, the Pirates will play a 7:30 p.m. game Friday at Homestead.

On Feb. 23, they will host Sheboygan Falls in a 7:30 p.m. nonconference contest.

Port Washington 66, Sheboygan North 56

A strong first half carried the Pirates to a nonleague home win last Saturday.

Port sprinted to a 21-13 lead in the opening period and stretched the margin to 40-23 by intermission.

"Sheboygan North came out shooting a tons of threes, and we were prepared for that," Bunyan said.

"We played good defense and got a hand up on them on just about everything."

North cut its deficit during a reserve-filled second half but never seriously threatened.

The win was the Pirates' third straight and improved their overall record to 15-3.

Gasser fueled the Pirates' offense with a game-best 26 points. He also grabbed 13 rebounds.

Steinmetz had 13 points, and guard Joe McIlree added 11.

Charlie Belanger led North (9-10) with 17 points, including five threes.

THE LONG-ARM DEFENSE of Milwaukee Lutheran's William Arberry didn't stop Cory Steinmetz from driving to the basket in Port Washington's 51-46 win last Friday. The victory, coupled with a Germantown loss, left Port alone atop the North Shore Conference standings. Photo by Sam Arendt