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Wednesday, 24 February 2010 17:23

Opportunity knocked, but the Port Washington boys' basketball team couldn't open the door last Friday in Mequon.

Given a chance to clinch a share of the North Shore Conference title, the Pirates found themselves outmuscled by a Homestead squad that spoiled their victory plans and walked off with an 82-77 win.

"We got pushed around, and we didn't push back," said Port coach John Bunyan, whose team remains tied for first place in the NSC race with Germantown but fell to 9-4 with its third straight road loss.

"It's disappointing because we had a chance to win the championship outright, and now we have to win another game (against Grafton this Thursday) just to make sure we tie. We can still do that, but this was a missed opportunity."

Homestead played the role of villain perfectly in what became a frustrating drama for the Pirates. Coach Ray Curry's Highlanders pounded the ball inside and hit perimeter shots during a first-half blitz that left Port facing a 48-33 deficit at the break.

Guard Coy Smith and center John Laihinen did much of the damage, scoring 13 and 10 points, respectively, in the first half. Smith continued his work after the break, finishing with a team-high 27 points that included four three-point baskets.

The Pirates stayed in the fight most of the opening half, thanks in large part to guard Josh Gasser, who scored 13 of his game-high 28 points before intermission. However, Homestead tightened the screws late in the second period by going on a 13-2 run after Port got within 35-31.

Referees' whistles also helped slow the Pirates' front line, as center Zach Schultz and forwards Cory Steinmetz and Shane Kennedy all spent time on the bench with foul trouble.

"Giving up 48 points in one half is unbelievable for us," Bunyan said. "We're a much better defensive team than that, but you have to give Homestead credit. They came at us and didn't let up."

The Pirates made some defensive adjustments that paid off in the second half, including trapping pressure, but had trouble whittling the deficit. When Homestead scored the first five points of the third quarter, its lead ballooned to 53-33.

To their credit, the Pirates made a game of it. After a late 7-2 run pulled Port within 62-49 by the end of the third period, Homestead countered with a fourth-quarter flurry of its own that stretched the margin to 72-56 with four minutes to play

Facing a 76-65 deficit with 1:25 left, the Pirates made a last-ditch rally. Sophomore guard Sawyer Mosley sank a pair of three-point shots and Gasser completed a three-play point after being fouled on a layup to cut the margin to 80-75.

While Homestead helped out by missing four straight free throws, the rally continued with Mosley scoring on a layup to make it 80-77 in the final seconds. However, the Highlanders squelched the comeback when Andrew Debbink got free for a breakaway basket as the clock ran out.

Mosley and Kennedy each finished with 15 points.

Laihinen totaled 20 points.

“We weren’t sharp, but Homestead took us out of our game plan early and forced us to play from behind,” Bunyan said.

“Right now, we’re struggling on the road. And we have to find a way to win away from home if we want to go anywhere in the (WIAA) tournament.”

The Pirates’ loss came against a team they handled, 66-49, on Jan. 15. The defeat also overshadowed the fact that Port still has a chance this week to end a long drought.

After facing Sheboygan Falls in a nonconference game Tuesday, the Pirates will host winless Grafton in their NSC and regular-season finale at 7:30 p.m. Thursday. A win will give Port at least a share of its first league championship in boys’
basketball since 1974, when it was a member of the Braveland Conference.

Germantown will also try to clinch its half of the co-championship the same night and is expected to face a tougher task. The Warhawks host Homestead, which Port fans are suddenly hoping will continue to be a title spoiler.

Port Washington 56, Cedarburg 49

Kennedy scored 22 points, and Gasser added 16, as the Pirates pulled away early for a conference home win Feb. 16.

After leading by only three points after one quarter, Port took control with a 13-2 run that gave it a 27-13 edge at halftime.

The Pirates cashed in on 25 Cedarburg fouls by making 22 of 31 free throws in the game.

The Bulldogs were led by Chip Rank’s 27 points and also got 15 from Justin Stiever.