

By Randy Whalen

It was a successful first season for the Lockport Township girls wrestling team.

A pair of Porters qualified for the state finals as the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) held its first-ever girl's state tournament.

That took place on Friday and Saturday, Feb 25-26, at Grossinger Motors Arena, Bloomington. The Lockport girls that qualified for state were junior Kelli Watkins and senior Skylar Wojcik.

"Kelli and Skylar both did a great job this season and had some tough competition at state." Lockport coach Nate Roth said. "Kelli wrestled the girl that eventually got third at state during her first match and just barely lost to her. Skylar wrestled the girl that eventually got fourth in her first round. Skylar also wrestled and beat the girl that eventually got third at state during the sectionals championship match."

Wojcik missed much of the season with a sprained ACL. But she was able to bounce back and make it to state in the 235-pound category.

"It was a good experience," Wojcik said. "It was definitely different at state. There are the best of the best there. But I was out for eight weeks during the season. I came back a week or so before the start of the sectional."

Not only did Wojcik come back, but she also won the sectional championship on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 11 and 12 at Naperville Central.

After receiving a bye in the quarterfinal, Wojcik won her semifinal match with a pin in 37 seconds over Linnie Saldeen from Glenbard West. In the title match, Wojcik pinned Keira Enright from Plainfield South in a time of 4:46.

On Friday, Feb. 25 at state, Wojcik wrestled at 235. She lost to SouthWest Suburban Conference foe, Jocelyn Williams from Homewood-Flossmoor by being pinned in 1:37. Wojcik came back in the consolation round to pin Oriana Casey from Warsaw in 2:58. But in the second consolation round, Sarah Epshtein from Oak Park-River Forest was able to pin Wojcik in 29 seconds.

"At first it was scary but then it was just another girl on the mat," Wojcik said of her nerves at state. "I had never wrestled. I played water polo for three years and did powerlifting. I'm not playing water polo this year but it was the first year of girls wrestling and my senior year is when it started, so I joined."

"I will just remember the coaches and how patient they were with us. It was a great experience and really fun."

At the sectional Watkins wrestled at 170 pounds and advanced to state by placing fourth.

After receiving a bye in the first round, Watkins won by pin in 3:06 over Sidney Ray from Minooka. In the semifinal, however, Rose Cassioppi from Rockton Hononegah was able to pin Watkins in 2:19. But the key bout was Watkins winning 9-8 over Bailey Herr from Granville Putnam County Co-op. Then, in the third-place match, Maria Ferrer from Elgin Larkin won as Watkins' injury defaulted.

Then, on the Friday at state, at 170, Watkins lost a close 7-5 decision to August Rottmann from Highland. In the consolation round, SWSC opponent, Emma Akpan from the Andrew District 230 Co-op team pinned Watkins at the 1:59 mark.

"It was a really good experience," Watkins said. "It was my first time wrestling and I made it to state. It was sad at first to lose right away but I still made it to state. I'm very proud of myself."

Like many of her teammates, Watkins just decided to try the sport.

'At first, I was a basketball player," she said. "But I didn't make the (varsity) team. I didn't want to sit around and do anything, so I went out for the wrestling team and loved it. I just loved being around the team, the coaches. They made me want to go to practice.

"I will be working hard this offseason. Going to camps and getting better. I'm going to work really hard."

That will help her be prepared better for another state-run next year.

"Overall the girls had the talent but I think their nerves just got the best of them," Roth said of Watkins and Wojcik at state. "Wrestling at state in front of all those people for the first time can be really intimidating. Both of them making it down as first-year wrestlers is a huge accomplishment though and we are extremely proud of them. Plus Kelli is a junior and will be back next year and will hopefully bring home some hardware."

The Porters had nine wrestlers at the Naperville Central Sectional. Caitlin Cassello went 1-2 with a pin in 1:08 in the quarterfinal round at 105 pounds. But she was pinned in the semifinal and the consolation semifinal. At 110 pounds, fellow junior Madison Young went 0-2.

At 115 pounds, Liz Ramirez went 3-2. The sophomore had a trio of pins. Those were in the first round in a time of 45 seconds, in the consolation second round in 1:01, and in the consolation third round in 2:24. But then she was pinned in 3:23 in the consolation semifinal.

Ava Thompson had a pair of wins at 125 pounds. The junior registered a pin in 2:55 in the consolation first round and in 1:06 in the second round of the consolation bracket. But she was pinned in 2:47 in the consolation third round.

At 145 pounds, Yazmin Perez lost both of her contested matches. Fellow senior Bella Baer had a pin in 5:45 in her opening match at 155 pounds. But then was pinned in her next two bouts.

Ashley DeBlecourt wrestled at 190 pounds. The senior had a pin in 3:30 in her opening match. But she was pinned in the quarterfinal. After receiving a bye in the second round of the consolation, she was pinned in the consolation third-round match.

"Kelli, as well as our two-state alternates, Caitie Cassello and Liz Ramirez, are all planning on doing a lot of offseason training and really putting a lot of work into wrestling so they can dominate the scene next year," Roth said. "The whole team really had a great season this year. It was such a great experience for all the girls. My assistant coach, Sam Fuentes, and I are already talking about and looking forward to continuing to build the program next year. We learned so much this year I think we will have an even more successful follow-up season."