

By Randy Whalen

A year ago the Lockport Township cheer team was the best.

A year later the Porters were once again the best. But this time they were recognized in front of all the other teams and their adoring fans.

And that was the best.

Lockport once again captured a state championship, its second straight, in the sport. Last year was in the Co-Ed category and this season was a Large Division one. That happened in the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) Finals on Saturday, Feb. 5 at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington.

It's the second time that the Porters have captured back-to-back titles. They also did it in the 2006-07 and 2007-08 seasons. They now have five total state championships in the sport. The first was in 1986 when they won an ICCA (Illinois Cheerleading Coaches Association) title, which was the official one at that time.

It's the 11th straight season that a south suburban team has won the large-school state championship in cheerleading.

Last season, due to the COVID pandemic protocols, each team filmed their routine remotely and sent them into the IHSA. But the judging was done as it would have been in the past and all the awards are the same as they would have been if the event were live.

So when the Porters were announced as the champions on Saturday, March 13 of last year, they were gathered on the football field at the Lockport stadium. While parents were allowed to be there, the thrill of being announced as a state champion in the place you just performed in with fans from each school in attendance, was missing.

"It was better," Lockport senior Hannah Boetscher said of this season's championship. "We were able to be in the arena with everyone this year and have everyone support you."

Boetscher, a 3-year varsity member, is one of only two seniors on the team. Four-year varsity member Ashley Leeney is the other one.

There were 11 juniors, Alivia Czaplicki, Nya Ditter, Ava Judge, Grace Kelly, Amber LaMorte, Jake McEntee, Megan Mecher, Belle Purpura, Madison Seymour, Jessica Vanerka, and Lexi Wrona. The six

sophomores are Alyssa Connell, Nina Fiorillo, Grace Gad, Ally Namikas, Bianca Richie, and Emme Sweis. Justyn Boyce and Mckena Miglorini were freshmen on the team. The team manager is junior Audrey Chisholm.

They all came together to do their best performance when it counted. Not only did the Porter fans get to see it, but the cheer fans for all teams also did.

"It was awesome to be there in person," Lockport coach Jenny Krumlinde said. "It is just such a different experience being able to perform in front of our fans and loved ones. Only three of our kids have ever competed in Bloomington before.

"The kids feed off of the energy that the crowd creates and it is a whole new experience for some of these younger kids who have never competed at state in person before. To be able to hear Lockport called for first place and be able to walk across that podium in front of everyone is a dream come true for these kids and is something they will remember for the rest of their lives."

Yes, it was and when Lockport was called there was euphoria.

"It was our goal and we did the best we could," Leeney said. "There are a lot of nerves but we practiced all year and once we get to that point we want to show what we can do."

The Porters did that as they received an outstanding first-place score of 96.27 in the Large Team Division. Marist (95.87) was second, followed by Huntley (94.27), and Lincoln-Way East (93.90), which won the last three and six of the last eight Large School championships, placed fourth.

Stevenson (92.93) placed fifth, while Sandburg (91.40), Hampshire (88.33), Minooka (87.83), Edwardsville (87.37), and Neuqua Valley (87.30) rounded out the 10 teams that competed in the Large School category on the final day.

Lockport's score was the third best out of any team on the final day. In the Co-ed category, state-champion Highland (97.17) and second-place Belvidere North (96.57) were the only scores higher than the Porters.

On the first day, on Friday, March 4, Lockport (94.80) had the best score. But it was barely ahead of Lincoln-Way East (94.47) and Sandburg (94.40). Marist (93.50) was fourth, followed by Huntley (92.75), Stevenson (91.40), Minooka (90.13), Edwardsville (89.63), Hampshire (89.10), and Neuqua Valley (88.53) was the final qualifying team, placing just ahead of 11th place St. Charles North (88.37).

Local teams Lincoln-Way Central (12th, 88.13), Lincoln-Way West (13th, 87.98), Joliet West (14th, 87.67), and Andrew (19th, 84.37) were among the 15 large school teams that didn't finish in the Top 10 and qualify for the second day.

"Our focus has always been on ourselves and the team and doing the best that we could do," Krumlinde said. "We knew after Friday that we did not have the highest (overall) raw score so I think that took some of the pressure off of the kids and they knew they just had to do their best and then it was out of our hands. The kids were happy with Friday's performance but knew they left some points on the table and it was our goal to increase our score, which they did.

"I think our consistency this season has also played a huge role in making the kids feel confident performing out there. We did not drop a single stunt all season and only had one touchdown so they really knew that they could make the routine as perfect as possible."

The previous four years Lockport was in the Co-Ed Division, getting a pair of thirds and a first-place finish. This season they were back in the Large School Category, just as they were between the 2005-06 and 2016-17 seasons. In order to be in the co-ed category, a team has to have two or more males. Just one, as Lockport had this season, means a team falls into either the large, medium, or small school divisions.

"There was not really a difference," Krumlinde said of being back in the large school classification. "We did get to compete against the best of the best more throughout the season as many of the high-level coed teams are further away. It was nice to be able to compare week to week as we competed against these large varsity local powerhouses."

Those included Lincoln-Way East and Sandburg, who are both in the SouthWest Suburban Conference. The Porters beat them out to win the Large School category on Friday, Jan. 21 in the conference competition at Bolingbrook. After missing out last year, it was the fifth SWSC title for Lockport in its category in the last six seasons.

Maybe it was the sweater that did it.

"It was the Friday of conference week and I walked into Mr. (Scott) Malinowski's AP US history class," said Wrona, who is in her third varsity season. "He's like, 'I have something for you.' He pulls out this old 80's cheerleading sweater that he had found. So myself and a couple of other girls put it on and that night we won the conference.

"So we all said that it was because of the sweater. Then the Thursday (Feb. 3) before we left for state, we said that's what worked before so we all did it again."

They did and it worked again, as the Porters were once again state champions.

"It was hands down the best feeling in the world to win it," Wrona said. "When they are there, about to announce it, it's so exciting because you want to win and know you've done your best."

The Porters hosted a sectional on Saturday, Jan. 29 with all four classes, small, medium, large, and co-ed there. Five teams advanced in each category from each of the five sectionals in the state. In the Large School category at the sectional, it was Marist (96.97) winning the title. Lockport (94.87) was second, with Sandburg (93.03), Joliet West (90.57), and Andrew (89.63) also advancing.

"After the sectional, it wasn't our best performance, but we had a week to work on it," Boetscher said. "After our state performance, I was pretty sure (we won)."

Leeney also knew the team would improve after the sectional.

"After the sectional, we knew what we had to work on," Leeney said. "We have an amazing coach and she knew what to do. Just the littlest things to fix and make a difference."

Krumlinde knows the littlest things make a difference. She was a senior on the 2006 team, which was the initial IHSA season. There the Porters placed second to Sandburg in the Large School Division by .26 one-hundredth of a point.

Then, in her first season as Lockport coach in the 2014-15 season, the Porters were edged out for the title to Lincoln-Way East by .13 one-hundredth of a point.

"We really worked on the performance aspect of the routine... voices, emphasizing certain words in the routine, motions, and making the difficult routine look fun and easy," Krumlinde said of what the team did to tweak the performance after the sectional. "We were getting lower scores in that area so we really wanted to push ourselves out of our comfort zone and improve on that. We did the routine in small groups at practice so we could really see where individuals could improve and it paid off in the end."

Since the IHSA began competitive cheer competition in the 2005-06 season, the Porters have qualified for the State Finals all 17 seasons. This was their 11th trophy, which is the second most to neighboring Lemont (13). They have placed second in the Large School competition four times (2006, 2010, 2012, and 2015) and third in a combo of categories three times (2009, 2018, 2020).

The 11 IHSA trophies are the most by a program in the history of Lockport athletics. Girls bowling is second with nine total trophies, including a school-record six state titles (1994, 1999, 2009, 2015, 2020, 2022).

The girl's bowling team won the state championship two weeks later, on Feb. 19. So now are 25 State Championships in Lockport history in 12 different sports. In addition to the six in girls bowling and five in competitive cheer, there are three in football (fall of 2002, 2003, and 2021), with two each in boys cross country (fall of 1996 and 1997), and softball (spring of 1997 and 2004).

There is one state title in badminton (spring of 1995), baseball (2005), boys basketball (1977-78), boys bowling (2012-13), girls volleyball (fall of 1993), and wrestling (2016-17)

The Porter pom-pon team captured an IDTA (Illinois Drill Team Association) State Championship in 2000. The IHSA didn't start competitive dance until the 2012-13 school year so that 2000 title is also deemed an official one.

There has been an amazing three state championships for Lockport so far this school year, which is a first in school history. There's also been a pair of large school third-place trophies in boys soccer and boys wrestling.

After the season, the cheer team was honored by the City of Lockport, the Lockport Township School board, and there was a nice gathering the day after the title at the high school.

At the celebration, on Sunday, Feb. 6, athletic director Mike Dwyer, principal John Greenan, and superintendent Bob McBride all spoke to the team, parents and fans. McBride mentioned that this was special because it's the 50th anniversary of Title IX, which prohibits sex-based discrimination in any school or other education program that receives funding from the federal government.

But it was Krumlinde that summed it up best with her words to the team.

"You worked so hard for this and we couldn't be more proud of you," she said. "We love you."