

By Randy Whalen

"That was easy."

With his team struggling to through the morning session of the Sandburg Sectional tournament, Lockport Township boys bowling coach Ron Davis pulled out his secret motivational tool.

The easy button.

Yes, the button which was made famous by the Staples commercials. When you press the button, a voice says, "that was easy."

"I'm demanding on them but I let them have fun," Lockport coach Ron Davis said. "So I wanted to bring that button out and have them relax, to show them it was easy. By the fourth game, they were having fun."

The Porters were also moving up. There were 16 teams at the sectional and the top six teams advanced to the state finals, Following the first two games, Lockport had a total of 1,873 after having games of 958 and 915. But a 1,053 third game helped the confidence and a 1,152 fourth game propelled the Porters back into the top six on Saturday, Jan. 22 at Orland Bowl in Orland Park.

"I put Ross Karraker in for the third game and he hit the pocket," Davis said. "He ground it out and that's what we needed.

It was the only game that Karraker bowled at the sectional. But he rolled a 200 and it was a spark that the Porters needed.

"It felt pretty good," Karraker said of doing well in his appearance "I knew in order to make it to state, we had to bowl well. I focused in and made my shots. It feels great (to make it to state) and it shows we are pretty good."

The Porters showed that as they finished with games of 1,011 and 990 to finish with a 6,079 total. That placed them fifth in the sectional and advanced them to the state finals.

The host Eagles won the sectional title, their first since 2017 and third in school history, with a pinfall total of 6,515. They also had the individual champion, sophomore Woodley Dangerfield, who opened the day with a 298 and had a low game of 231 in finishing with a 1,526 total (a 254.3 average).

Lincoln-Way West (6,318), Minooka (6,198) Lincoln-Way Central (6,149) Lockport (6,079), and Joliet West (5,940) rounded out the top six teams that advanced to state.

Richards (5,888), Providence (5,854), T.F. South (5,831), Morgan Park (5,780), Thornridge (5,765), Oswego (5,749), Oak Lawn (5,715), Oswego East (5,675), Plainfield Central (5,600), and Evergreen Park (5,329) completed the field.

As he had done much of the season, Jason Laba (1,291, high of 245 in Games No. 4 and 5) led Lockport. Fellow junior Ryan Muhr (1,245, high of 267 in Game No. 4). Senior Jeff Malak (1,234, high of 236 in Game No. 3) was the only other Porter bowler to roll all six games.

Noah Peake (1,000, high of 232 in Game No. 5) bowled five games, and fellow senior Alex Frost (774, high of 211 in Game No. 4) bowled the final four games. Junior Nate Arient (335, 161, and 174 in the first 2 games), and Karraker (200 in Game 3) completed the Lockport lineup.

While Davis' "Easy Button" motivation in the sectional worked, the sectional was far from easy. That's because the six qualifying teams from there all made the last day at the Illinois High School Association State Finals. That was held on Friday and Saturday, Jan. 28 and 29 at St. Clair Bowl in O'Fallon.

There five of the seven local teams from the Sandburg Sectional made the top seven. Minooka, which had the individual champion in sophomore Ethan Caruso (2,766) was third in the sectional, placed first in the state. The Indians, which had a 2-day total of 13,014 pins, brought home their third straight trophy in years that the state tourney was held. They were second in 2019 and third in 2020.

Harlem (12,909) was second, followed by Joliet West (12,596), Sandburg (12,472), Lockport (12,282), St. Patrick (12,252), Lincoln-Way West (12,239), Glenbard East (12,161), Belleville East (12,118), Waterloo (12,048), Lincoln-Way Central (12,004, which received a 300 from junior Ryan Marszalek in the third game of Day No. 2) and Hononegah (11,914).

It was the 13th state finals appearance in the 19-year state history for the Porters, and the 11th Top 10 finish, which is second to the 12 by Harlem. It was also Lockport's highest finish since tying for fourth with Harlem in 2016. Starting with their state championship in 2013, the Porters have made it to the final day at state eight times in the last nine played series.

"What it says is that that was the best sectional in the state," Davis said of the Sandburg Sectional. "We had guys step up and bowl well and it was good to have a state series again."

After the first day, the Porters were in third place with a 6,281 series. Every one of their games was between 1,090 and 1,004. Much of that consistency was due to Laba, who ended the opening day in second place (1,384) only 11 pins behind Harlem senior Eric Roberts.

"It was absolutely a great run," Davis said of Laba. "But then he just had a number of bad breaks. In the afternoon (on Day 2) he had seven pocket splits in the first 11 frames. He left the seven-pin nine consecutive times in the last game."

Laba finished with a 2,626 two-day total, which placed him 16th overall, just 13 pins out of the final medalist spot of 12th place. He bowled a pair of 269 games, in the second game of the first day and in the first game of the second day. In fact, following a 236 in the second game on Day 2, Laba was all alone in first place.

"I was leading after eight games but then the wheels fell off," Laba said. "The next four games (all between 170-195) I couldn't string anything together. I just would get a bunch of splits and spares. If we could have kicked one or two of those spares out it could have been different."

Still, Laba, who also led the Porters at state two years ago with a 2,577 series to finish 22nd overall, knew being up there with the top bowlers was something he could achieve.

"I saw myself listed at the top of the board and that was something that was pretty impressive," Laba said. "I was really, really happy with how we did the first day but then we had the splits and not as many spares."

Two of Lockport's three seniors on the state team, Peake and Malek also rolled all 12 frames. Peake (2,552) placed 29th overall and had high games of 258 in the opener on the first day and 257 on the last game that same day. Malak (2,403) was 61st overall and was the final person to average 200 in the tourney. He had highs of 235 in the fourth game and 233 in the opening game on the first day.

"I think I was in the moment and the first day went better because there wasn't as much pressure," said Peake, who bowled a 1,335 and was tied with Caruso, the eventual individual champion for 11th overall at that point. "The second day every team from our sectional had moved on. That helped motivate us but I wasn't in the moment as much."

What will Peake, who didn't bowl at state two years ago, remember most about this season?

"I will just remember all the people," he said. "The teammates, and people on the other teams that all helped make it better."

Arient (2,204, high of 227 in Game 3 of Day No. 2) also averaged just over 200 for the tourney. He, however, didn't bowl the final game. Instead, Karraker (1,018 in 5 games, high of 231 in Game 6 on Day 1) came in and finished with a 200, averaging a 204 in the tournament. Frost (778 in 4 games, high of 226

in Game 5 of Day No. 2) ended his high school career by bowling the last game. Muhr (488 in 3 games, high of 173 in Game No. 2 on Day No. 2) and sophomore Steven Talaski (213 in Game No. 3 on Day No. 2) rounded out the Porter bowlers at state.

The journey to the state finals started on Friday, Jan. 14 in the Plainfield North Regional at Echo Lanes in Morris. There Lockport won a regional title, posting a 6,154 score, which was nearly 200 pins better than runner-up Oswego (5,958). A 1,110 in the fifth game for the Porters was huge. It was their third regional championship since the IHSA went to regionals in the 2013-14 season and also their third in the last four contested postseasons.

Malek was the individual regional champion, rolling an outstanding 1,473 (246 ave,) in the six games. Plainfield Central sophomore Jacob Chavez (1,446) was second. After a 694 morning series, which included a 257 in Game No. 2, Malek bowled 267, 255, and 257 for a 779 afternoon total.

"I just kept my mechanics the same," Malek said of his regional title success. "It (lane conditions) favored my play, my style. I came in sixth at the (SouthWest Suburban) Conference meet the week before so this feels great. It (winning the regional) gives the whole team a mental boost."

Lockport and Oswego were the top two teams with Plainfield Central (5,839) and Oswego East (5,681) also qualifying for the sectional. Yorkville (5,674) was fifth followed by Plainfield South (5,455), Romeoville (5,427), Plainfield North (5,157), Bolingbrook (4,898), Lemont (4,880), Mendota (4,769) and Plainfield (4,662).

In addition to Malek, the rest of the regional Porter scores were, Laba (1,216, high of 244 in Game No. 5), Arient (1,200, high of 227 in Game No. 5), Alex Frost (1,118, high of 226 in Game No. 1), Muhr (778 in final 4 games, high of 204 in Game No. 6), Peake (369 in first 2 games, high of 188 in Game No. 1), and Karraker didn't bowl.

"Jeff did his thing (at the regional and it was great for him," Laba said. "I couldn't carry but I hung in there, making spares. To come out on top and win the regional is really awesome. Both years I've bowled (in the regional tournament) we've won it."

So was Davis as it was the Porters first and only tournament title on the season. The veteran coach, who plans to be back next season, knows it takes every guy to win a title of any kind.

"In team bowling, it's not the high guys that make you win," Davis said. "It's the low guys. I'm really happy for Jeff and the team to win it."