

By Randy Whalen

What a season it was for the Lockport Township competitive dance team.

Returning to a nearly regular schedule for the first time in two years, the Porters advanced to the state finals for the first time in three years. While they fell just short of advancing to the final day of the season, it was still an outstanding showing for a talented group of young women who take a lot of pride in what they do.

"It was great," Lockport senior Reagan Davidson said. "We didn't get to have a real state competition last year (because of the COVID protocols) and we knew it would be close to getting to the second day (at state) this season."

Davidson was one of eight seniors on this season's squad. The others were Nicole Barrett, Hope French, Payton Ignasiak, Caitlyn Kies, Aspen Kropf, Shannon Murtaugh, and Mackenzie O'Connor. They, along with juniors Mackenzie Christopher, Bella Fitch, Marissa Marra, and sophomores Nina Kundrat and Leah Muska.

At the state finals, which were held on Friday and Saturday, Jan. 28-29 at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington the Porters did their signature performance to "You Don't Know Me" by Son Lux.

There were 30 teams in each of the three classes performing on the opening day at state and a dozen of them made it to the final day.

When the scores were tallied, Lockport just missed the cut. The top 12 teams after the first day and their scores were Lake Park (96.24), Stevenson (93.92), Barrington (93.36) Naperville North (90.78), Minooka (90.60) Maine South (90.18), St. Charles East (90.10), Waubonsie Valley, (90.07), South Elgin (89.74), Huntley (88.84), Loyola Academy (88.78), and Andrew (87.02)

Lockport (86.26) was less than a point away from placing 12th. York (85.76) was 14th, followed by Plainfield North (84.52), Downers Grove South (83.96), Neuqua Valley (83.84), Mundelein (82.84), Warren (82.80), and Glenbrook South (82.62) rounded out the Top 20.

The rest were Jacobs (82.54), Bartlett (82.28) Lyons Township (81.94), Plainfield South (80.74), Lincoln-Way East (79.22), Normal Community (79.02) Lincoln-Way Central (78.10), Prospect (77.78), Glenbrook North (77.44), and Niles West (75.88) completed the 30 teams.

"We talked to a lot of people afterward and they were like, '13th place is not bad, you were up against so many,'" Kies said. "They're right. It was intimidating at state but we gave it our all."

Davidson agreed.

"It was tough," she said of just missing out. "But we made Lockport history."

All the scores reset after the first day. But on Saturday, Jan. 29, Lake Park (98.26) actually improved its score to win its second state title in the sport (2014 was the other). Barrington (97.62) was second, followed by the previous 2-time defending state champion, Stevenson (95.82).

St. Charles East (92.74), Maine South (91.38), Naperville North (90.34), Minooka (90.00) Loyola Academy (89.72), South Elgin (87.96), Waubonsie Valley (87.06), Andrew (86.70), and Huntley (86.45) polished off the 12 teams that made the final day.

There were 75 teams total entered in the Class 3A state tournament. So to place 13th overall in the large school class is very good.

"It was the highest state finish in Lockport history," Lockport coach Gina Miranda said of the Porters placing 13th at the state finals. It was packed there, it was very exciting."

Miranda, who has been a dance teacher for 23 years, was in her first season as Porter's head coach. She is correct, however, the Porter pom-pom team captured an IDTA (Illinois Drill Team Association) State Championship in 2000.

That was a different classification but the IHSA didn't start competitive dance until the 2012-13 school year so that 2000 title is deemed an official one.

This was the 10th state finals since competitive dance became an official Illinois High School Association (IHSA) sport in the 2012-13 season. It was the sixth time the Porters have advanced to the state finals, all of them in Class 3A. The others were in 2013-14 (30th, 76.56), 2014-15 (19th, 86.64) 2016-17 (unknown), 2017-18 (20th, 86.94), and 2018-19 (18th, 84.54).

Last season there was a virtual state final where each team got to submit their performance on video. But Lockport placed ninth (80.10) in Class 3A in the Geneva Sectional and didn't make the state finals.

This season's sectional was held on Saturday, Jan. 22 at Fieldcrest High School in Minonk. The Porters missed first place by less than a point and were one of six teams that advanced out of there in Class 3A.

The standings were: Minooka (89.40), Lincoln-Way East (88.73), Lockport (88.53), Plainfield South (85.73), Lincoln-Way Central (85.48), and Normal Community (81.52) rounded out the six state-qualifying teams.

Plainfield Central (80.87), Rich Township (80.00), Homewood-Flossmoor (79.92), Belleville West (77.63), Edwardsville (75.57), O'Fallon (74.67), Joliet West (73.53), Belleville East (69.90), and Joliet Central (67.00) completed the 15-team field.

There were a pair of first-place finishes during the season though. One of those was at their own invite, which took place on Saturday, Jan. 8. There the Porters garnered a score of 85.93 in one of the four invites they were in during the season.

But the biggest accomplishment was winning the SouthWest Suburban Conference championship on Wednesday, Jan. 12 at Andrew. That was Lockport's first time winning the SWSC since 2014 and it wasn't close.

"Sandburg had the title the previous seven years," Miranda said. "Our score was 88.40, the second-place team was Sandburg with a score of 82.73 and Lincoln-Way East was third with a score of 82.70.

"The girls worked very hard and I'm glad they got to achieve that."

It was the highlight of the season.

"Oh yes," said Kies, a 3-year varsity member, who has been dancing for 10 years but won't pursue it any further in college. "Winning conference was an amazing feeling."

Especially ending the Sandburg streak, as the Eagles are a big rival and had set the standard of success.

"Beating Sandburg was the best," said Davidson, a 2-year varsity member, who has been dancing since she was three and intends to continue her career in the sport at Tulane University this fall. "But state was great too. Just seeing the crowd and the lights and performing there made the team know it was all worth it."