

By Randy Whalen

When all is said and done, the Lockport wrestling team knows it lost the battle but still wants to win the war.

The Porters pride themselves on their postseason accomplishments. They will soon have an opportunity to add to those. But they obviously want to do well along the way too.

So they were disappointed when they lost the SouthWest Suburban Conference, Blue Division title match on Thursday, Jan. 20 to Lincoln-Way East. Especially since it was Senior Night for the Porters.

The Griffins claimed a 33-33 tie with Lockport. But Lincoln-Way East won the match on criteria as they captured eight of the 14 individual bouts.

Included in those Griffin wins were a pair in the final seconds and another one in the final bout as Alex Knaperek outlasted fellow senior Cody Silzer for a 5-3 win.

"I knew it was going to be tough in general and they came out and wrestled hard and wrestled well," Lockport coach Josh Oster said of the Griffins. "We gave up a couple of key points at the end of our matches. If we are going to be the team that we want to be, we have to win those."

Two days later that's exactly what the Porters did. They won the Tom Lahey Tournament at Stagg in Palos Hills to capture their first tournament title of the season.

"In the tournament, we won a couple of those matches against kids we lost to," Oster said. "The goal is always for a team trophy. We may not have won a conference championship but we're looking for a state title."

The Lahey Tournament consisted of the 10 members of the SWSC as well as five other schools, including three from downstate. The event is named for 2001 Illinois Wrestling Coaches Association (IWCOA) hall of fame inductee Tom Lahey, who was a coach at Andrew for 20 years where he won 270 duals, seven SICA titles, six regionals, and coached 19 state place winners.

Lockport won four championships and had four second-place finishes to score 251 points, which placed it well ahead of the runner-up Griffins, who finished with 206.5 points. Homewood-Flossmoor edged Lincoln-Way West 176-170 for third while Carl Sandburg took fifth place with 136 points and Lincoln-Way Central was next with 112 points.

Winning titles for the Porters were senior Keegan Roberson (at 145 pounds), juniors Logan Swaw (at 152) and Brayden Thompson (at 170), and senior Drew Blackburn-Forst (at 220). Junior Nore Turner (at 106), senior David Vukobratovich (at 113), junior Jad Alwawi (at 126), and senior Paul Kadlec (at 160) all placed second. Juniors Carlos Munoz-Flores (at 132) and Logan Kaminski (at 138) were fourth and senior Cody Silzer (at 285) finished sixth.

Roberson was second in the IWCOA state tourney last summer. He hadn't wrestled for a title in high school since. He excelled at another sport last fall, being a wide receiver on the Porter Class 8A state champion football team, and hopes this put him back on track in wrestling.

He got falls in his first two matches and won by technical fall in the semifinals over Lincoln-Way East sophomore Domanic Abeja. Then in the 145 finals, he captured a 7-6 win over Homewood-Flossmoor sophomore Jaydon Robinson.

"Coming out of football and missing the first couple of weeks, I was definitely not where I needed to be with my gas tank," Roberson said. "So we've been working a lot harder in the room. In the first couple weeks of practice, we were slacking off and messing around the whole entire time, kind of like knowing that we were going to win. But we got smacked in the mouth and we needed that.

"Now we're working harder and harder and the coaches are definitely getting on us now. At first, I was going to quit football, but then they were like do it since you're not going to get worse at wrestling. So I took the shot and we won and I'm definitely glad I did since I had some good catches in the state game."

Swaw placed fourth at the Dvorak and got noticed. Now he looks to build on his first tournament championship.

Coming in ranked eighth at 145, Swaw improved to 25-5 after claiming a 7-0 victory on the 152 title mat over Lincoln-Way East senior Jack Marion (30-3), who's ranked fifth at 152 with title wins at Niles West and Wheaton Warrenville South to go with a second at the Illini Classic. Swaw earned his spot in the finals with a fall in the quarterfinals and a 7-0 victory in the semifinals over Stagg sophomore Luke Barham.

"I've got some of the best training partners in the state and we're working hard every day," Swaw said. "Keegan (Roberson) is the weight below me and I'm with him every day. Our coaches told us that we needed to pick it up and we responded and won this tournament by a lot. We have goals, we want to win the state duals and we have to achieve those. So we're going to turn it up this week and see where we're at at the end of the year."

Thompson, who transferred from Montini, continues to dominate. He used three falls and a win by technical to capture the Lahey Tournament title at 170, which was his fifth championship of the season.

He is top-ranked ranked at 170 and improved to 35-0, by defeating Bradley-Bourbonnais sophomore AJ Mancilla in the finals by technical fall to add to championships that he's won at the Gable Donnybrook, the Dvorak, the Powerade and the Cheesehead. Thompson, who's competing in his first season for Lockport after placing third in the IHSA while at Montini Catholic in 2020, earned his fifth trip to the finals when he recorded a fall in 1:28 over Lincoln-Way East junior Ari Zaeske in the semifinals.

"I'm on the hunt for that first state title, that's the goal right now," Thompson said. "It's not only about just pushing myself but it's also about pushing everyone else on this team and picking them up when they're down, maybe after a loss. It's great here, they're very welcoming. I've gotten to know them very well and they're almost like brothers to me now. So anything that I can give them advice on, they really take it in and they listen to me. It's just about getting better and having fun."

Blackburn-Forst was an All-State defensive lineman on the Porter state champion football team and won the IWCOA state championship last June at 220 pounds. He hopes to repeat that later in February at the IHSA state finals.

He had accomplished a lot thus far with a second at the Dvorak, fifth at the Powerade, third at the Cheesehead, and a No. 1 ranking in 3A after going unbeaten against Illinois competitors. He reached the top of the awards stand for the first time this season at the Lahey Tournament. He was a fifth-place finisher in the IHSA in 2020 improved to 26-5 after recording two falls and getting a win by technical fall in 5:36 over Homewood-Flossmoor senior Justin Thomas in the 220 finals. It was the third time that Blackburn-Forst placed in the tournament and was his second title, with the other in 2020.

"I think we improved a lot since Thursday when we had a few guys out, but those things happen," Blackburn-Forst said of the 2-day improvement after the loss to the Griffins. "From last year to now, (Lincoln-Way) East has made a lot of progress with a lot of the freshmen and sophomores coming in and H-F is much-improved from other years.

"I feel like as we get deeper into the season and going into regionals now, that everyone is starting to dot the I's and cross the T's. We're making our technique perfect and getting stronger every day and the extra week of practice is going to make us better."

The SWSC Blue championship won on Jan. 20 was the first for Lincoln-Way East. The Griffins were the first team outside of Lockport or Sandburg to win the SWSC Blue in its 17-year history.

Knaperek had never wrestled Silzer. But they faced each other on the football field.

"I knew he was tough," said Knaperek, who had leads of 3-0 and 5-1 in the bout before hanging on. "It's an honor to win this (conference). Last year (in the spring) we weren't that great. But this year I knew I had to be a leader. We're 19-0 (at that point) and that's never been done at East before."

Indeed the Griffins finished the season 21-0 and finish 5-0 in the league. Lockport (16-5, 4-1) was hoping to win its first conference championship since 2020 but it wasn't to be.

"That's just stepping up big in big moments," Lincoln-Way East coach Kevin Rockett said of his team. "We didn't stop, we wrestled all six minutes. We always condition to be ready in the third period."

That showed with a pair of wins in the final seconds, both by freshmen. Tyson Zvonar had a takedown with 20 seconds left to break a tie and pull out a 7-5 win at 120 pounds. Alex Lizak did even better as he got a takedown with just three seconds left in the match to take a 4-3 win at 138.

"At the end, I just shot and was able to take him down," Lizak said of his win over Logan Kaminski. "It was crazy. I was thinking, 'he's ranked. But if I put in my work I can do it.'"

"It's huge. At the beginning of the season, we beat Lincoln-Way West for the first time ever. So we knew there could be big things for this team."

Also getting wins for the Griffins were Noah Ciolkosz with a pin in 37 seconds at 106, Connor Koehler with a pin in 2:34 at 126, Dominic Adamo had a 5-1 victory at 160, Ari Zaeske won 8-4 at 170, and Connor Lindauer had a pin in 1:23 at 195 pounds.

The Porters had five pins. They were by Vukobratovich in 1:14 at 113. Munoz-Flores in 1:52 at 132, Roberson in 3:09 at 145, Thompson in 3:08 at 182, and Blackburn-Forst in 45 seconds at 220 pounds. Swaw also had a 3-0 decision at 152 pounds.

Lockport lost to Sandburg 34-33 on May 13 last spring in what amounted to the conference title bout. So it was the second straight disappointment in the SWSC Blue for the Porters.

Rockett was a 4-year head coach at Lincoln-Way North before it closed. He's now in his fourth season as the head coach at Lincoln-Way East and is proud his team made history.

"I've been doing this 15 years in this conference and that's startling," Rockett said when told the Griffins were the first team outside of the Porters or Sandburg to win the SWSC Blue. "But that's what we want to do, make our mark in this conference."

Earlier in January, the Porters had a couple of big SWSC Blue wins. First was a 67-6 victory over Bolingbrook on Thursday evening (Jan. 13) at Bolingbrook. The Porters (9-4, 3-0) were the beneficiary of eight forfeit wins. But also received a couple of nice pins in the contested matches.

"It's that time of year," Oster said after the Bolingbrook match. "We've wrestled a lot of tough competition and we know what we need to work on. In the last three weeks, we've wrestled at some of the best tournaments not only in the state but in the nation. We took fourth place as a team at the Dvorak and fourth at the Cheesehead. Plus we took 12th at the Powerade with only four guys there.

"Wrestling season is a lot of peaks and valley's and we want to be peaking in February."

The pair of Porter pins were by Vukobratovich in 2:25 at 113 pounds and Cody Silzer, who had a nice move to register his at 4:51 at heavyweight in the final match of the evening.

"Our team is pretty solid," Vukobratovich said. "Bolingbrook had a few good moves but we got around it. Our team is looking to get a lot of guys to state. I'm definitely looking to get to state individually. We want first place, I know I do. We just have to put in the work and practice."

Senior Isaiah Rogers, with a 15-6 major decision at 120 pounds, and Munoz-Flores with a 13-7 win at 132 pounds, also won bouts for Lockport.

"With our team healthy, we can make a run this year and get a team title," Munoz-Flores said. "We have guys up-and-down the lineup who can place at state."

Against Bolingbrook, the Porters received forfeit wins by Turner at 106 and Alwawi at 126, along with Roberson at 145, Shaw at 152, Thompson at 170, senior Paul Rasp at 182, junior Aidan Nolting at 195, and Blackburn-Forst, who recently committed to the University of Northern Colorado for wrestling, at 220 pounds.

The next day, Friday, Jan. 14, Lockport traveled to Palos Hills and registered seven pins in defeating Stagg 79-0 in another SWSC Blue matchup.

Also on Thursday, Jan. 20, the Lockport girls wrestling team celebrated its senior night but wrestled against Andrew in an SWSC exhibition match.

The winners for the Porters were Madison Young (110), Liz Ramirez (120), Ava Thompson (125), Danielle Wyatt (who won 2 matches at 130), Bella Baer (155), and Kelli Watkins (170).