

By Randy Whalen

Because of the COVID outbreak, last season was anything but normal for the Lockport Township boys swimming team.

Unfortunately, COVID came back and affected the team to open this season and there was another unconventional start for the Porters. But when it did start, it's been good as the team was off to a nice, if shortened season.

"No, no, no," Lockport coach Jason Ozbolt said when asked if this season was normal. "We are trying to fit a nonnormal season into a normal season."

As far as completion goes, the season was supposed to start on Friday, Dec. 3 at the Lincoln-Way West Pentathlon. But that was canceled and so were any other competitions for the next two weeks.

The Porters finally got in the pool on Thursday, Dec. 16. They opened the competition part of their season two days later, on Saturday, Dec. 18 at the Neuqua Valley Invite.

"We started back up the week before break," Ozbolt said. "That's usually when we are making adjustments and focusing on becoming the team we want. But we toughed it out at the Neuqua Invite and that was a big motivation for the guys to come together. We will make adjustments when we need to."

The team was just glad to get back in action.

"We started pretty late," Lockport senior Dominik Gasienica said. "We had two days of practice and we had a meet. But the team pulled it together and we've given it our all."

"The team has swum well and we are definitely hitting a stride. We all came together in the spring and won a (SouthWest Suburban Blue) conference championship. The upperclassmen wanted to keep that going and have a great year."

A year ago the boy's swimming season didn't start until the very end of January because of COVID. The shortened season didn't have any invites but had seven SWSC dual meets, the Porters won all of them.

The final one, a 96-87 win over host Lincoln-Way East, sealed the Porter's first conference title in over two decades. While this season's schedule doesn't fit a dual meet against every SWSC team, Lockport (5-0) won the ones that were on the schedule, including the opener, a 95-91 win on Thursday, Dec. 30 over visiting Lincoln-Way East.

"So far, even though COVID has affected us, we've brought each other up," Lockport junior Michael Erickson said. "We've given it our all and done our best."

The other dual meet wins were on Thursday, Jan. 6 at Stagg, then 109-77 on Wednesday, Jan. 12 at home vs. Lincoln-Way West, 98-86 on Monday, Jan. 24 against Andrew, and 119-61 on Wednesday, Jan. 26 in the final home meet of the season against Homewood-Flossmoor.

In the H-F meet, which was also Senior Night and Teacher Appreciation Night, Lockport won all but three of the contested events. The Porters swept the relays, with Erickson, Gasienica, junior Matthew Johnson, and freshman Shane Gabel winning the 200-yard medley relay with a time of 1 minute: 48.92 seconds.

In the 200-yard freestyle relay, it was a down-to-the-wire battle between two Lockport foursomes. In the end, Gabel, junior Sebastian Lesnicki, sophomore Christian Sokol, and junior Kacper Kulesza won with a time of 1:38.46. That was less than a half-second better than the Porter group of junior Julian Moreno, junior Shaw Carlson, sophomore Jake Balitewicz, and Johnson (1:38.92).

Gabel, Balitewicz, Gasienica, and junior Ryan O'Connor won the 400-yard freestyle relay in a time of 3:36.02.

Individually, Erickson won the 200-yard freestyle (1:56.58) and the 500-yard freestyle (5:07.33). O'Connor captured the 200-yard individual medley (2:04.58) and the 100-yard butterfly (57.50 seconds). Johnson won the 100-yard backstroke (1:07.54).

At the Andrew meet, the Porters had another relay sweep. Erickson, Johnson, senior Jakob Zajkowski, and Moreno won the 200-yard medley with a time of 1:50.51. In the 200-yard freestyle relay, it was Erickson, Gabel, O'Connor, and Moreno winning with a time of 1:34.01. The 400-yard freestyle relay was won by Gabel, Johnson, Moreno, and O'Connor by nearly six seconds with a time of 3:28.83.

O'Connor captured the 200-yard freestyle (1:54.43) and the 100-yard breaststroke (1:04.33). Johnson won the 100-yard butterfly (55.43 seconds), and Balitewicz was the winner in the 100-yard backstroke (1:03.68).

The Thunderbolts won five events, including the diving. Their divers are coached by 2001 Lockport graduate, Angie Arnold, who used to coach the Porter divers. Logan De la Vega won with a score of 199.95. His Andrew teammate, Cole Arguelles (183.20), was second. The Lockport divers, senior Evan Litynski (144.25), and freshman Ashton Siewert (134.55) followed.

The seniors on this season's squad, including JV, are, Fred Brandt, Gasienica, Kalob La Giglia-Pridham, Litynski, Colin O'Boyle, and Zajkowski.

In addition to the Neuqua Valley Invite, the Porters also competed at the 56th Annual Evanston Invite (Jan. 8), the Riverside-Brookfield Invite (Jan 14 & 15), and hosted their own invite with the diving on Friday, Jan. 21, and the swimming on Saturday, Jan. 22.

There Lockport placed third in a very competitive field. The Plainfield Co-Op team won with 514 points, followed by Saint Ignatius (436), the host Porters (236), and Reavis (207) rounded out the Top Four in the 13-team field.

Litynski, who is in his third varsity season, was the top placer for the Porters, getting second in the diving competition with a mark of 295.20. Lincoln-Way Central senior Tommy Snider won with a score of 375.

O'Connor was fourth in the 200 IM (2:04.66) and fifth in the 100-yard backstroke (55.68 seconds), while Johnson placed fifth in the 50-yard freestyle (23.12 seconds).

In the 200-yard medley relay, Erickson, O'Connor, Johnson, and Gabel finished fourth with a time of 1:45.90.

"We did well at the Evanston Invite and to get third in our own invite was a nice surprise," Ozbolt said. "We want to keep focusing, keep going."

A key to the team's success this season was the dedication of the guys through the COVID outbreak. Even with the team shut out of the pool, the ones who were able to banded together to do other workouts.

"We got together and pushed each other," Erickson said. "We didn't let ourselves get behind."

"I'd like to see us come close to winning the sectional. I know I'd love to get to state."

That is the team's focus. With the addition of Bolingbrook having a first-year swim team, SWSC now has a full plate of 10-teams. But there is still only one meet to decide the conference winner. That took place with the diving on Friday, Feb. 4 at Lincoln-Way West and the swimming on Saturday, Feb. 5 at Lincoln-Way Central.

The sectional will also be held at Lincoln-Way Central on Saturday, Feb. 19. That, and the following week's state tournament at the FMC Natatorium in Westmont, is the focus of the Porters.

"Sure the conference is nice, but we are looking to the sectional," Ozbolt said. "That's what we are keeping the focus on."