

By Randy Whalen

At first glance at the last name of Lockport Township bowler Jason Laba, it looks like lava.

Perhaps that's appropriate because he's been on fire for the Porters.

Laba bowled not one, but two 300 games during the regular season. The junior has helped the Porters to another successful campaign on the lanes as they placed third in the SouthWest Suburban Conference Tournament.

That was held on Saturday, Jan. 8, and was hosted by Andrew at Orland Bowl. The long-time lanes in Orland Park will be closing later this year.

At the conference tourney, Laba led the way with a fourth-place finish (1,367, high of 256 in Game No. 2), and senior Jeff Malak (1,315, high of 264 in Game No. 1) was sixth and both received All-Conference honors. Junior Nate Arient (1,248, high of 222 in Game No. 2) and senior Noah Peake (1,225, High of 226 in Game No. 2) also bowled all six games for the Porters.

Team-wise, Sandburg (6,481) was first and Lincoln-Way West (6,266) edged the Porters (6,264) by just two pins in the battle for second place. It was the third conference championship in the past six seasons for the Eagles. Lockport has a conference-leading 11 titles, including winning or sharing it in the previous two seasons.

While the Porters couldn't pull off a conference championship, they still had another outstanding regular season. That included the pair of perfect games by Laba.

The first of those came in the opening game of the Plainfield North Invite on Saturday, Nov. 20 at Town & Country Lanes in Joliet. On the final ball, there was a little drama, but he completed it.

"It was pretty cool, a relief really," Laba said of his initial 300. "I've been bowling my whole life so it was great to get it. The seven-pin actually fell late.

"Both of my parents (Dan and Maria) were there watching. So it was really emotional."

It also helped Lockport to a Gold Division appearance and a seventh-place overall finish with a pin-fall total of 5,891, which was 191 pins behind first-place Joliet West. There were 39 total teams there. Laba placed sixth overall with a 1,316 total. Arient was seventh with 1,307 and a high of 268 in the second game.

"It was a great job by Jason and hopefully the first of many," Lockport coach Ron Davis said of the 300. "We have different guys take leadership and we all bounce off of each other."

Laba stepped up in one of those leadership roles. He rolled his second 300 on Wednesday, Dec. 15, in a dual meet win over Providence. That came in the second game at Strike N' Spare in Lockport.

His mom, Maria, was there for the second one. Although not quite as thrilling since it wasn't his first, it was still excellent and something that Laba had been leading up to.

"I had the front eight the day before," Laba said of a 2,061-1,803 dual meet win on the same lanes the day before against Stagg. "So it was cool to get it."

The match against Providence was on the "road." But the Celtics also use Strike N' Spare as their home lanes and it was their Senior Night. Lockport had games of 1,202, 1,186, and 1,053 for a 3,441 series. The Celtics bowled games of 1,075, 1,117, and 1,050 for a 3,242 series in the 3-game series.

Laba finished with an excellent series of 762. It was also an exciting day for senior Alex Frost, who had a 279 in the first game, finishing with a 693 series. Sophomore Ross Karraker added 693, Peake pulled off a 639, and Arient added a 630 series.

While he obviously was making strikes, Laba knew that the key to the Porter's success was spares.

"We are excited and we've had a great season," he said. "But it's spares. We have to be more consistent on those. That's kept us from winning a few tournaments."

Lockport went 12-3 overall in dual meets and the Porter's only losses were three in a row to SWSC foes Lincoln-Way Central, Lincoln-Way East, and Lincoln-Way West between Nov. 30 and Dec. 7th. Lockport did defeat Sandburg 2,120-2,037 on Thursday, Dec. 9 at Orland Bowl.

Malak had a pair of excellent games of 268 and 256 for a 524 series. Peake performed with a 453, and Laba ground out a 406 series against the Eagles.

Outside of the Plainfield North Invite, the Porters were also at the Naperville Central Invite to kick off the season on Saturday, Nov. 6th at Lisle Lanes. There they placed seventh in the baker format invite.

The next Saturday, Nov. 13, Lockport placed fourth out of 48 teams at the Lake Park Invite at the Brunswick Zone in Roselle. Laba led the team with a total of 1,333 for six games.

Following the Plainfield North Invite, the Porters were right back at Town & Country Lanes on Saturday, Nov. 27, and placed third with a total of 6,292. Laba led the scoring with a 1,335 series, good for 5th overall. Junior Ryan Muhr had a 1,278 series. Malak (1,274), and Arient (1,240) followed.

A pair of third-place finishes came in the next two invites. Those were on Saturday, Dec. 4 at the Oak Forest Invite at Oak Forest Bowl, where Laba led the way with a sixth-place finish of 1,350 with a 247 high. Arient (1,219, high of 226), Muhr (1,208, high of 242), Malak (1,204, high of 247), and Frost (1,139, high of 214) also contributed.

Then on Saturday, Dec. 11, the Porters placed third (6,277) in the Sandburg Invite at Orland Bowl. The host Eagles (6,352) were first and Lincoln-Way West (6,352) second in the 20-team field. Laba placed fifth with a 1,377 total. Peake added 1,258 and Malak had 1,236.

"The guys are getting better and starting believing in themselves," Davis said after the Sandburg Invite. "We were second in the last three games here and all of the guys are putting it together."

Lockport planned for that to continue in the postseason.