

By Randy Whalen

Josh Oster went out the only way he should.

As a winner.

Although he didn't announce it at that time, Oster coached his final dual-team match on Saturday, Feb. 26. That happened when Lockport Township defeated Prospect 46-19 in the third-place match of the Class 3A IHSA Boys Wrestling State Dual Tournament at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington.

It was the fourth trophy for the Porters in the last seven contested seasons. But it was also their first since winning the Class 3A state championship in 2017.

"Did I know it t that time, yes," Oster said of his decision to step down. Did the kids know it, no. But the attention shouldn't be on me, it should be on the kids. I told them the following Wednesday (March 2).

"I'm going to get my doctorates degree in educational leadership. I plan to stay in the special education role. I've been the department chair there for the last three years."

A 2002, Lockport graduate, Oster compiled a 221-49 record in his 11 seasons as the Porters head coach. In his final weekend at the dual team state finals, he and the team experienced a rollercoaster of emotions in eventually claiming third.

Lockport (18-6) would never have gotten to that point if it didn't get some huge performances on Friday, Feb. 25 in a 34-33 quarterfinal victory over Marist.

The bout started at 132 pounds where junior Carlos Munoz-Flores registered a pin at the 4 minute: 31-second mark for a 6-0 Porters lead. After a loss at 138 and a pin at 145 put Marist up 9-6, Lockport bounced back to tie when junior Logan Swaw won an 11-5 decision at 152 pounds. The RedHawks briefly retook the lead at 13-9 with an 11-3 major decision at 160 pounds.

A trio of pins in the next four bouts put the Porters in control, however. The first was by Class 3A individual 170 champion, junior Brayden Thompson in 2:49 at 170 pounds. Senior Paul Rasp, who missed the individual state tournament with an injury, had a pin in 1:27 at 182 pounds.

After the Porters got pinned at 195, senior Drew Blackburn-Forst, who captured his second straight Class 3A individual championship the weekend before at 220, registered another one of his quick pins at the 1:28 mark to give the team a 27-19 lead.

In the heavyweight match, Lockport lost a 23-8 tech fall. Then there were a couple of key wins, starting with Liam Zimmerman, who had a 12-3 major decision at 106 pounds. Then, at 113, junior Nore Turner rallied for a 7-6 overtime win and a 34-24 lead. The RedHawks won a 10-4 decision at 120 but since it wasn't a major, it was only three points. That gave the Porters an insurmountable seven-point lead and they just forfeited the final match at 126 pounds.

While there were some nice, close wins in the quarterfinal match, the semifinal against DeKalb the next morning, unfortunately, didn't have those. The final score may have been close, as Lockport lost 34-30. But it was really far from it.

Things didn't start well for the Porters, who lost the opening bout 8-5 at 138 pounds. They then got pinned in 55 seconds at 145 and dropped a 5-1 decision at 152 to fall behind 12-0.

Senior Paul Kadlec got Lockport on the board with a 9-4 win at 160 pounds. But the Barbs got a pin in 3:49 at 170 to go up 18-3. At 182, Thompson had a 3-1 win. DeKalb, however, recorded an 8-0 major decision at 195 to take a 22-6 advantage. Blackburn-Forst gave the Porters some hope with a pin in 47 seconds. at 220.

But DeKalb earned a 7-2 win at heavyweight, got a pin in 3:48 at 106, and won a 4-2 decision at 113 pounds. to go ahead 34-12. That allowed the Barbs to just speed up the process by taking forfeits in the final three bouts. Senior David Vukobratovich (120), junior Jad Alwawi (126), and junior Logan Kaminski (132) were the beneficiaries of the forfeits for the Porters.

In a match that came down to the final bout, Mount Carmel defeated DeKalb 32-27 for the state championship. Sergio Lemley, an individual state champion at 126 moved up two weights to register a pin in 3:41 at 138 pounds to clinch the title. That was the first for the Caravan since they won three straight Class AA championships between 1992-94.

"To get to the final day, we had to win probably the match of the tournament in the quarterfinals," Oster said. "Against DeKalb match, there were a bunch of close matches. If we could have won a couple of more, we would have been wrestling for the title, but it didn't work out that way.

"When you get to get to that point of the year, everybody is hurt, tired, beat up. There is just a grittiness at this point of the year, and our guys showed that."

They certainly did against Prospect. It was the second third-place trophy for the Porters, who also won one in 2016. They were fourth in 2015.

The match didn't start well for the Lockport as the Knights registered a pin in the opening bout at 145. But Swaw had a pin of his own in 2:51 at 152 pounds. Kadlec came up with a 9-4 win at 160. It was a nice way for Kadlec to end his high school career. It was a tough season for him as his mom passed away and he just missed placing at the individual state tournament, losing by getting pinned in the final minute after leading 3-0 in the blood round at 160 pounds.

Rasp, who was one of the defensive linemen for the Porter Class 8A state champion football team, also ended his high school career on a high note with an 11-3 major decision at 170 pounds.

"It was a nice way to end the season," Rasp said. "It was a little disappointing to not come in first place, but to have two state medals in my senior year is great. This is my second sport and I had fun with it."

He did and stepped in wherever he was needed during the season.

"It was great for Paulie (Kadlec), Paul (Rasp), and David (Vukobratovich) to go out with wins," Oster said. "Paul Rasp is a natural 170, but he had to wrestle 182 most of the year. That happens when the best wrestler in the nation at 170 (Thompson) is on your team. But he just did a fantastic job for us."

Thompson, however, wrestled at 182 against Prospect and recorded a pin in 1:02. At 195, junior Aidan Nolting notched a 7-3 decision for the Porters and Blackburn-Forst won his final high school bout in an unconventional way on an injury default just 43 seconds into the match. That put Lockport ahead 28-6.

"The season went pretty well," said Blackburn-Forst, who became the second Lockport two-time individual state champion with a 3-2 win in the 220-pound title match the Saturday before. "We had a lot of tough duals, and everybody thought we would lose to Marist in the quarterfinals. But the coaches had a plan and we executed it."

Blackburn-Forst will wrestle at Northern Colorado next season.

"Winning three state titles (the 2 individual and also being All-State in football) and a third place in less than two years is pretty great. I can't thank everyone around Lockport wrestling enough. Thanks to all the coaching by Josh and all the other Osters, I improved over the years. If you were to ask me if I wanted to go wrestle at (state champion) Mt. Carmel, I would say, 'No. I am Lockport all the way.'"

Another of the Porter defensive linemen from the football team, senior Cody Silzer, had a pin in 32 seconds to make the score 34-6. A close 7-5 loss at 106 was only a temporary setback for Lockport. That's because Turner won 9-2 at 113 pounds. Vukobratovich followed with a pin in 3:21 at 120 and Alwawi capped off the Porter winners with a 6-4 decision at 126 pounds. The Porters lost by pin at 132 and by an 11-1 major decision at 138, but third place had been clinched by then. Seniors Isaiah Rogers (132) and Shane McEntee (138), however, got to wrestle one last bout for Lockport.

"It was nice for us that we were able to get all the seniors a match in the final match of the year," Oster said. "This is one of the better teams we have had. From top to bottom, we had a complete team, and the guys came up big when we needed them to."

Thompson finished 49-0 on the season. Although he didn't know Oster was stepping down at the time of the dual meet tourney, he credited him and his family for helping make his transition to Lockport this season a very special one.

"The Oster's know what they are doing and were very welcoming and loving," said Thompson, who wrestled at Montini as a freshman and was out of state last season. "They have taken me to another level."

The entire Lockport athletic program has been on another level this school year. The Porters have earned an amazing three state championships (Class 8A in football, Class 3A in large school competitive cheer, and girls bowling), which is a first in school history. There's also been a pair of Class 3A third-place trophies in boys soccer and now boys wrestling, along with a third-place finish in the Special Olympics state basketball tournament.

To get to the dual team state finals, the Porters defeated Yorkville 39-24 on Tuesday, Feb. 22 in the Class 3A sectional match at St. Laurence. The Foxes are coached by one of Oster's younger brothers, Jake, who won the Class AA individual state title at 112 pounds in 2004.

"I decided sometime in January to step down," Josh Oster said of his decision to make this his final season as a head coach. "It's very hard to have a top program year in and year out. You have to have that dedication."

He certainly had that dedication in his 11 seasons as a head coach. During that time, Oster coached 11 state champions, 41 all-state wrestlers, 61 state qualifiers, won nine regional titles, eight sectional championships, had the four state trophies, and won the 2017 Class 3A dual team tournament title.

He's confident the program will stay in good hands and still plans to be around.

"I'm confident not much will change in the program," he said. "There are so many highs and lows in wrestling, and you have to stay even-keeled. I knew I wasn't going to coach forever. I will still be around some though. I'm not going to shut any doors to maybe coming back and say, coaching freshmen in the future. But right now I'm going to open some new ones."