

By Randy Whalen

It was the most successful season in two decades for the Lockport Township boys swimming team.

While the Porters fell just short of winning a sectional championship for the first time since 2001, they performed very well throughout and advanced to state in three events.

"It was our best season in a very long time," Lockport coach Jason Ozbolt said. "Really since I graduated (in 2000). We won the sectional the following season but haven't come close since."

Lockport captured its one-and-only sectional championship in 2001. That season a Steve Allen Porter-coached team hosted the sectional and edged Sandburg 246.5 points to 244.

This season, the sectional was held on Saturday, Feb. 19 at Lincoln-Way Central. There, Lincoln-Way East High School (238 points) outlasted Lockport (230).

Andrew High School (177) was third, followed by Joliet Township Co-op (140), Bradley-Bourbonnais (121), Lincoln-Way West (117), Lincoln-Way Central (98), Homewood-Flossmoor (81), Morris Community (80), Tinley Park (34), Romeoville (33), Kankakee (26), and Joliet Catholic Academy (10) rounded out the 13-team field.

"It was a great season and going into the season we had a lot of great expectations," Lockport junior Matt Johnson said. "We had a good, close sectional and it stung to be that close and come up short. Next year we want to win it and we should be very good again."

Johnson was on all three Porter relays and the lead swimmer in both freestyle relays. Lockport won the 200-yard freestyle relay as Johnson, junior Kacper Kulesza, freshman Shane Gabel, and junior Julian Moreno won the sectional with a pool record time of 1 minute: 28.85 seconds. The previous pool record was 1:29.12.

Junior Ryan O'Connor won a pair of events for the Porters. Those were the 200-yard individual medley by nearly eight seconds with a time of 1:59.27. He also won the 100-yard backstroke by a little over two seconds with a mark of 53.35 seconds.

In the 400-yard freestyle relay, the Lockport foursome of Johnson, Moreno, junior Michael Erikson, and O'Connor was second by two seconds behind Lincoln-Way East (3:15.55) with a time of 3:17.65. The Porters were also second in the 200-yard medley relay as Erickson, O'Connor, Johnson, and Gabel had a time of 1:40.88. That was about four seconds behind Lincoln-Way East (1:36.96).

In his individual event, Johnson was second in the 100-yard butterfly with a time of 53.26 seconds. Also, junior Shaw Carlson was ninth in the event with a mark of 58.25 seconds. Bradley-Bourbonnais senior Jake Lehman won it with a time of 52.78 seconds.

Erickson placed second in the 500-yard freestyle with a time of 4:56.78. Also in that event, Lockport junior Sebastian Lesnicki placed sixth (5:14.37). Freshman Ben Clark from Joliet Township won the event with a mark of 4:55.23, which was 20 seconds faster than his third-seed time.

Also, in the 200-yard freestyle, Erickson was fifth with a mark of 1:52.11. Senior teammate Dominik Gasienica (1:56.06) placed ninth. Junior Ryan Bates from Joliet Township won it with a time of 1:43.35.

Gabel and Moreno were both in the same individual events. The first was the 50-yard freestyle where Gabel placed sixth (22.52 seconds) and Moreno was eighth (22.90 seconds). Andrew senior Christian Blaske (21.47 seconds) won the event.

They were both also in the 100-yard freestyle and had almost identical times. Gabel placed seventh (49.67 seconds) and Moreno was eighth (49.71 seconds). Blaske also captured the 100-yard free with a mark of 46.96 seconds.

Another junior, Charlie Pluth, placed fifth (1:04.96) in the 100-yard breaststroke while Gasienica (1:08.04) finished 10th. Morris junior James Cameron (1:00.63) won the event by over two seconds. Pluth was also seventh behind his teammate in the 200-yard IM with a time of 2:14.65. Lockport sophomore Jake Balitewicz was sixth behind O'Connor in the 100-yard backstroke with a time of 58.98 seconds.

In the diving competition, senior Evan Litynski placed eighth with a score of 286.60, while sophomore Jake Ferkaluk scored 241.85 to place 12th for the Porters. Lincoln-Way Central senior Tommy Snider posted a score of 446.05 to win the 12-dive completion by nearly 82 points.

"We broke the pool record in the 200 free relay and had a great sectional," Pluth said. "Many of us have another year. We only have one senior (in the sectional swimming lineup - Gasienica) and I think next year we are going to win a sectional."

At the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) state meet, which was held on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 25 and 26, at the FMC Natatorium in Westmont, the Porters hoped for a good performance in their relay to make it to the final day.

But Lockport placed 27th on Friday in the preliminary heat of the 200-yard freestyle relay. Johnson, Kulesza, Gabel, and Moreno finished with a time of 1:29.09. The cutoff for the 12th team to qualify for the final day at state was 1:26.13. Which shows how huge three seconds is in a race like that.

Also at the state meet, O'Connor placed 30th (1:58.47) in the 200-yard IM and 36th (53.63 seconds) in the 100-yard backstroke preliminary races.

Although the Porters didn't make the final day, Johnson loved the new facility and hopes he and the team are back there next year.

"I swim club there," said Johnson, who is on the FMC Swim Club that is out of the facility in Westmont. "It is definitely a step up and much nicer than swimming at the previous venues (Evanston or New Trier High Schools)."

Ozbolt said all season long that the Porter's goal was on the sectional. So at the SouthWest Suburban Conference meet, which was held on Friday, Feb. 4 with the diving at Lincoln-Way West, and Saturday, Feb. 5 at Lincoln-Way Central with the swimming, Lockport didn't swim its postseason lineup and placed fourth.

At the SWSC meet, Johnson still finished second (1:51.47) in a very close race in the 200-yard freestyle to Andrew sophomore Mahmoud Naji (1:51.16). O'Connor placed second (5:11.29) in the 500-yard freestyle. Sandburg junior Andrew Simonek (5:06.92) won the event.

Those were the top finishes for the Porters, who won their first SWSC title last season. But that was based on dual meet results as there was no actual conference tournament because of COVID.

This season, Lockport (5-0) won all the SWSC meets that were on the schedule, including the opener, a 95-91 victory on Thursday, Dec. 30 over visiting Lincoln-Way East.

But Lincoln-Way East (243.5 points) won the conference tourney. It was the second SWSC championship in three years and sixth overall for the Griffins.

Andrew (202) was second. Followed by Sandburg (180), Lockport (170), Bradley-Bourbonnais (158), Lincoln-Way West (113), Lincoln-Way Central (111.5), Homewood-Flossmoor (91), Stagg (77), and Bolingbrook (25), which was in its first-ever season as a swim program, rounded out the 10 teams.

When all was said and done, it was the closeness of this season's squad that made it special.

"The guys continued to grow and the biggest asset is that they came together," Ozbolt said. "They were almost like brothers, that they could get on each other's nerves. But they all worked well individually and all worked well together."

Especially the junior class, which has a final fling together next season.

"We had a lot of talent come in together as freshmen," Pluth said. "We knew that year that if we kept working and getting better we'd be really good. I think there's a strong sense of community here at Lockport and that's rubbed off."