

By Randy Whalen

Overcoming adversity is the mark of a champion.

The Lockport Township girls bowling team is a champion.

The Porters pulled a two-day, 12-game total of 11,743 to once again capture the Illinois High School Association Girls Bowling State Championship, which was held on Friday, Feb. 18, and Saturday, Feb. 19 at The Cherry Bowl in Rockford.

A trio of seniors, Isa Colon, Emma Punter, and Demi Kontos, were on this season's team and they were the ones that led the way. It was the second consecutive IHSA state championship for Lockport and a school-record sixth in the sport.

Because of COVID protocols, there was no girls bowling state tournament last season. The Porters, however, won the "unofficial" state championship on Sunday, Feb. 28, 2021, at the Hononegah Invite, which was held at Forest Hills Lanes in Loves Park. So potentially this could have been a 3-peat.

But the fact that it was official and another title is more than fine with the Porters.

"I have no words right now," Lockport coach Lynda Siezega said right after the tournament was over. "This is pretty special."

It especially is for Siezega, a 1988 Lockport grad who bowled on the first-ever girls bowling team in the 1985-86 season, at the school. and started as an assistant coach at Lockport in the 2006-07 season. This is the fourth state championship she's been a part of with the Porters.

The six state titles have five been in 1994, 1999, 2009, 2015, 2020, and 2022.

But this one had a few twists and turns as Lockport once again battled it out with Harlem for the championship.

Plus, heading into the final 3-games of the tourney, the Porters had fallen behind. They had led going into the final day, but now there was a somewhat uncomfortable feeling, which was similar to the one the team had five years earlier.

In 2017, Harlem had a 1,069 score in the third game to take an 11-pin lead on the Porters (975 in 3rd game) at the break on the final day. Harlem ultimately won by 38 pins. Five years later, the Huskies had a 961 in the third game, and Lockport rolled its worst game of the tournament (862) to trail by 47 pins.

Being a witness to what happened in 2017, Siezega delivered a direct message to the team at the intermission.

"At the break, I told them that they had lost their spirit in the third game, and we weren't playing as a team," she said. "They weren't doing their job, and if they didn't want to do it, then go sit with your parents.

"Adversity has been a key for this team all season, and they responded today just like they have all year. To do it on the biggest stage shows what kind of team this is, and I'm so proud of them. Our spare shooting was the key. We aren't a big strike team, and they picked up the spares, especially in the afternoon."

The Porters responded with their two best games of the tournament, 1,036 and 1,045. Harlem had an 894 and 944 in the next two games, leaving Lockport with a 196-pin lead going into the final game. A 958 final game was more than enough for the Porters, who ended up winning by 207 pins.

The final standings were Lockport (11,743), Harlem (11,536), and Oswego (11,321) as the Top Three. Hononegah (11,219) was fourth followed by York (11,203), LaSalle-Peru (11,198), Salem (11,005), Freeport (10,963), Shepard (10,949), Anna-Jonesboro (10,725), Minooka (10,643) and Stagg (10,524) rounded out the final 12 teams that made the last day.

"We've been waiting for this for so long and there was no stopping us," Punter said. "(at the 2nd-day break) we talked and said that we have to get out of this funk. We just had to focus on ourselves. After the fourth game, I knew we'd finish strong."

Punter, an accomplished bowler, who was on the 2020 title team but didn't bowl at state. She was very happy to be a big part of the championship, She finished with a 2,454 total, which placed her 10th overall individually. Her high game of 252, to close the first day, helped keep the Porters (5,919 opening day total) in first place after the first day. She finished off the tourney with Saturday afternoon games of 236, 229, and 204.

"It means a lot and I improved myself throughout the year," Punter said. "We all had our goals and this proves they can be met. I'm so proud. It's just a lifelong dream that we've been waiting for."

Colon was literally waiting for this moment too. She's also a 4-year varsity bowler but had some burnout from the sport and sat out the first few weeks of the season.

She came back in mid-December and ended up being the team-leading bowler at state. Her 2,515 total included a fantastic finish of 246, 255 (her tournament high), and 213 games in the afternoon on the final day. She placed sixth overall in the state and, along with Punter made All-State (top 12) honors.

"This means so much to me, especially coming back to the team after the time off," said Colon, who had the fourth-best team score on the opening day before turning it up down the stretch. "I was a part of the title in 2020 (finishing as the second-highest bowler on the team behind senior Samantha Traina), but this one means a little more because it's my senior year.

"To see my name up there with the leaders was very special to me. I will never have this team again and all the hard work was worth it."

Individually, Vandalia senior Madison Ferguson (2,842) took first by 215 pins over Plainfield East senior Hailey Bozych (2,627). York senior Katharine Svehla (2,587) was third, followed by Oswego junior Lani Breedlove (2,570), and Hononegah junior Madison Davenport (2,519) was fifth.

Kontos also bowled all 12 tournament games for the Porters, placing 43rd with a 2,280 total. She had a high game of 237 in the fifth game on the first day.

Sophomore Paige Matiasek (1,922 in 10 games, high of 239 in Game No. 3 on Day 1), along with four juniors Morgan LiCausi (1,491 in 9 games, high of 213 in Game No. 6 on Day 2), Abby Miller (566 in 3 games, high of 202 in Game No. 4 on Day 1), Madelyn Lave (515 in 3 games, high of 184 in Game 1 on Day 2), and Cassie Kontos, who didn't bowl.

But it was an inspirational performance by Matiasek, that made the difference.

She was nursing a sore right shoulder and it acted up in the opening game of the second day. So she was pulled out in what ended up as a 179 game. It was an understatement that sitting out the next two games was not sitting well with Matiasek. She wanted to be out there, contributing to a state championship run.

"I didn't want to get pulled but my shoulder hurt," Matiasek said. "But coach Lynda said to go out and rest it. She told me to ice it and at lunch, she'd trust me to make a decision."

A member of the Homer Jr. High state title teams in sixth and seventh grade, Matiasek wasn't going to miss out on a stretch run to win another.

"I was itching to go back in, we needed a fifth score," said Matiasek, who was the individual winner as the Porters captured the title of their own Walker Bowling Invitational Tournament on Saturday, Dec. 18 at Strike N' Spare II in Lockport. "(With the injury) I didn't bowl to my full potential but being out there I felt so much more alive."

With the Porters struggling at the intermission, Matiasek's effort is what they needed. She came back in and finished the day and the tourney with games of 193, 189, and 170. Maybe not up to her usual standard but given the circumstance, was the consistency that helped the team pull through.

"She didn't want me to pull her," Siezega said of Matiasek. "But I told her that I would put her back in later if she was OK. She said she did and we needed that positivity."

This was Lockport's ninth overall trophy (2nd in 2017, third in 1997 and 2016). That is second-most in state history, three behind Harlem, which has 12 and a record seven state championships. The Porter's 26 appearances, 23 Top 10 finishes, 23 sectional championships, and eight regional titles are all high marks in the state.

The postseason opened on Saturday, Feb. 5, and Lockport was in the Romeoville Regional, which was held at Bowlero Bowl in Romeoville. There the Porters captured their eighth straight regional championship with a 5,925 total. They led wire-to-wire and had the only two games of a thousand or more (1,052 in Game No. 2 and 1,012 in Game No. 5) out of any team in the tourney.

Oswego (5,721), behind top individual medalist junior Lini Breedlove (1,319) was second. Plainfield East (5,066), and Plainfield Central (4,944) were among the top four teams that advanced to the sectional. Plainfield North (4,757), Plainfield South (4,690), Romeoville (4,651), Oswego East (4,539), Yorkville (4,326), Lemont (4,008), Waubonsie Valley (3,942), Bolingbrook (3,724), and Neuqua Valley (3,617) rounded out the 13-team field.

Bozych (1,274) was second individually. Lockport followed with Colon (1,206, high of 247 in Game No. 1), LiCausi (1,194, high of 245 in Game 2), and Matissek (1,179, high of 224 in Game No. 4) to finish out the Top 5 bowlers. Miller (1,159, high of 222 in Game No. 5) placed eighth overall.

Demi Kontos (644, high of 242 in Game No. 3) bowled the final three games, and Punter (543, high of 213 in Game No. 2) rounded out the Porter scores. Cassie Kontos and Lave didn't bowl.

On Friday, Feb. 11, the Porters hosted their own sectional. The thing was, because of a scheduling conflict, it had to be moved up a day and the location had to be changed from Strike 'N Spare II to Town & Country Lanes in Joliet.

No matter, Lockport had four of the Top 5 bowlers, rolled all six games over a thousand, and dominated with a 6,332 total. Oswego (5,672, with the only other game over 1,000 - a 1,050 in Game 3), Stagg (5,547), and Shepard (5,466) also advanced to state. But Andrew (5,436) which was one of the favorites coming into the sectional, did not.

Lincoln-Way East (5,339), was sixth, followed by Oak Forest (5,004), Richards (4,975), Plainfield East (4,975), Plainfield Central (4,910), Brooks (4,560), and T.F. South (4,338) finished off the field.

Demi Kontos bowled outstanding and finished as the top individual with a 1,325 total (220.8 ave.). Bozych (1,295) had the second-best score and then a trio of Porters followed. They were Colon (1,280), Matiasek (1,278), and Punter (1,262). LiCausi (1,187) placed 11th overall. Cassie Kontos, Lave, and Miller didn't bowl.

"Someone told me afterward that I had won and I was like, 'what,' Demi Kontos exclaimed. "I stay away from looking at the scoresheet so I don't get inside my own head.

"But I'm very confident. I think this (sectional) was the best we bowled all season and I'm really impressed with what we did."

During the season, Kontos missed a month or so with a fractured left foot. She was very happy to be back and contributing to what was eventually a state championship.

"I missed a lot of my season so this was my little comeback," she said. "The night before the sectional we had a little team bonding thing. It was great. We put a lot of trust and faith in each other."

They did and the results spoke for themselves.

"Our spare percentage was 88 percent on 1-pin spares and 83 percent on multiple-pin spares," Siezega said following the sectional. "The time to peak is now, at the end of the season. It's happening at the best possible time and the girls are positive and have that confidence in each other."

The day after the season, Sunday, Feb. 20, the team along with state champion wrestlers, Drew Blackburn-Forst (220) and Brayden Thompson (170) were honored with a reception at the high school. On Monday, Feb. 28, the girl's bowling team was honored by the Lockport Township School board. Then, on Thursday, March 3, by the City of Lockport.

The nine IHSA girls bowling trophies are second to the 11 trophies in competitive cheer, which are the most by a program in the history of Lockport athletics.

The cheerleading team won its fifth state championship (1986 as a club sport, 2007, 2008, 2021, 2022) two weeks prior, on Feb. 5. So there are now are 25 State Championships in Lockport history in 12 different sports. In addition to the six in girls bowling and five in competitive cheer, there are three in football (fall of 2002, 2003, and 2021), with two each in boys cross country (fall of 1996 and 1997), and softball (spring of 1997 and 2004).

There is one state title in badminton (spring of 1995), baseball (2005), boys basketball (1977-78), boys bowling (2012-13), girls volleyball (fall of 1993), and wrestling (2016-17)

The Porter pom-pom team captured an IDTA (Illinois Drill Team Association) State Championship in 2000. The IHSA didn't start competitive dance until the 2012-13 school year so that 2000 title is also deemed an official one.

There has been an amazing three state championships for Lockport so far this school year, which is a first in school history. There's also been a pair of large school third-place trophies in boys soccer and boys wrestling and a third-place finish in the Special Olympics state basketball tournament.

Asked after the season what the key is for the success of the athletic programs at Lockport, especially this athletic year, Siezega offered her insight.

"It's the support we get," she said. "From the athletic department to the administration, the support is like no other."

Siezega used the fact that the bowling team was able to leave early for Rockford, because of forecast snowy weather, as a perfect example.

"We knew there was supposed to be bad weather (on Thursday, Feb. 17), so we asked to leave earlier, on that Wednesday night (Feb. 16)," Siezega said. "We got the go-ahead from Dr. (superintendent Bob) McBride. That started a chain reaction of other schools being able to do the same and I had a lot of coaches thank me.

"That type of support is second to none. It's unbeatable and it shows that we get the support we need and it leads to a lot of success."