

By Randy Whalen

Monica Skibicki spent four seasons as one of the top runners on the Lockport Township girl's cross country team.

Now, as a senior who recently completed her final cross country campaign, Skibicki is trying her hand at a new sport.

Wrestling.

When Lockport kicked off its competitive schedule on Tuesday, Nov. 22, Skibicki was the first wrestler of the meet in the 100-pound weight class. She got a pin in 1 minute and 49 seconds in her first-ever match.

Afterward, she was asked which sport she liked better, cross country or wrestling.

"Wrestling!" Skibicki exclaimed. "It's something new and I love it so much. It's so much fun, just the whole energy, the team, and the fact that it's a contact sport. Being my senior year, it's an opportunity to do a new sport and it's intense."

Her enthusiasm illustrated the excitement that surrounds the new season for the Porter girls wrestling team. She showed that after getting that first pin, especially to start the match.

"It felt good and I was jumping up and down afterward," Skibicki said. "You can't do that in running. I just want to learn as much as possible this season. I probably won't have a chance to continue this sport, so I want to make the most of it."

The Porters plan to make the most of their second season as a program. This was the second straight time that they kicked off their schedule against Homewood-Flossmoor. This year Lockport lost 42-36. This is nearly the same result as last season when the Porters and H-F kicked off the campaign on Thursday, Dec. 16, and ended in a 36-36 tie.

This time around, Lockport also scored 36 points. Those came on four pins and two forfeits. The pins were by Skibicki, senior Maya Hernandez in 1:08 at 115 pounds, senior Ava Thompson in 1:23 at 120, and freshman Claudia Heeney in 2:44 at 125.

"It feels good and it's super exciting to be back," said Hernandez, who was on the team last season. "We have some girls with experience and we're looking for more."

"It's just the team, the camaraderie. we're all close with each other and looking to get better. In order to do that, we just have to get more practice, get more aggressive."

Junior Danielle Wyatt at 135 and freshman Melanie Esparza at 145, received forfeit victories for Lockport. The latter gave Lockport a 36-23 lead. But unfortunately, the Porters fell short in the match of the night in the 155 weight class. That was Deylin Manteca-Claros losing by a score of 13-12. The senior was down 9-0 to start and then rallied with such a flurry of points that it was hard to keep up.

The Vikings then got a major decision and a pin to tie it at 36-36. H-F won the meet when the Porters had no one in the 235 weight class and forfeited the final match. That's how close it was to ending in another tie.

Heeney is going to be a force for the Porters. She came into high school with previous competitive experience.

"I wrestled on the boys team at Homer, so I'm used to it," Heeney said. "Yes, I have big goals. I want to make the World Team someday. I've got to work at it. I wrestled for (former Porter and 2016 Olympian) Haley Augello's team too over the summer.

"I'm happy to be here. This is a good school and team. We just have to put in the work. We definitely have a lot of fun and a lot of good people."

Even though the meet officially ended when the Vikings won the heavyweight match, there were numerous exhibition matches. Those allowed others to wrestle as well, including sophomore Faith Hagemann, who got a pin in 1:49 at 170 pounds.

"We have 35 girls out and were able to wrestle a lot of exhibition matches," Lockport coach Nate Roth said. "It's going to make an impact on their wrestling careers to have opportunities. But it's tough to try to get people to wrestle exhibition in a growing sport where there are not that many tournaments."

But just the fact that the Porters have 35 girls out for the team shows the excitement for the sport and the program.

"Last year we had 14 to 15 girls come out," Roth said. "Now we have more than double that. It's just cool to see and it's great that so many girls know about it now. The girls are having a blast and having a great time."

Not only are the Porters having a great time, but they are also showing their potential. That was proven on Saturday, Nov. 26 when they traveled to the Niles West Invite and captured the title. It was the first tournament championship in Lockport girls wrestling history. The Porters placed first with 172 points, outlasting second-place Hoffman Estates (165) and third-place West Aurora (135) in the 15-team field.

Senior Caitie Cassello at 110 pounds and Heeney at 125, were champions at the tourney. Senior Kelli Watkins was second at 170 pounds. Sophomore River VanderVelde at 105, sophomore Averi Colella at 110, and junior Liz Ramirez at 115 all placed third. Skibicki at 100, Thompson at 120, freshman Lucy Madrigal at 130, and Esparza at 145, were fourth. Hernandez was fifth at 125 while sophomore Hannah Wolf at 110 and Manteca-Claros at 155 pounds, placed sixth.

"Caitie and Claudia both pinned their way through the tournament and looked really good all day," Roth said. "Kelli had a tough girl in the finals and got caught on her back and pinned, but we can just make a few adjustments and come out on top of that match next time. The whole team wrestled great. A lot of them got their first or second matches ever and it was really great to see that, and even better to see the giant smile on their faces when they got their first win ever.

"It was also great to have the tournament experience this early in the season. Last year when it was still brand new, matches were hard to come by and we only attended one tournament before sectionals. Now that girls' wrestling is more established, there are many more out there which means more matches and more experience for the team. We are also very grateful that the Niles West girls' team was able to accommodate our army of girls and got every single one of them into the tournament to get them matches."

The Porters got some more amazing tournament experience the next week between Thursday, Dec. 1 and Saturday, Dec. 3. That was on a national scale as they, along with the Lockport boys wrestling team, traveled to Iowa. There they participated in the Dan Gable Donnybrook, a premier high school boys and girls wrestling tournament.

There were 42 teams in the boy's division and 24 in the girl's division. They included some of the best high school teams from the Midwest competing in an individual tournament at Xtream Arena in Coralville, Iowa.

"We have a few girls that are doing well so far," Roth said after the first day of the Donnybrook. "Claudia Heeney and (junior) Ava Kaspar (190 pounds) are currently undefeated, Faith Hagemann went 2-1 and has been wrestling fantastic. Liz Ramirez and Maya Hernandez were both 2-1 on the day and wrestling great. It has been so great to see so many girls getting matches from across the Midwest at such a big tournament.

"Plus for the girls to be exposed to such an impressive setup and to be under the spotlight in an arena like this is just such a cool experience. It really feels special to be on the floor. Getting these matches in this early in the season is really going to help the team develop their skills and body awareness so they can

utilize what they have learned later into the season and postseason and be ahead of the curve come February."

On the final day of the tournament for the girls, Friday, Dec. 2, the Porters did very well. Heeney showed that she is already going to be a major name in the sport, defeating Reese Roberts from Lin-Mar High School in Marion, Iowa, to win the title at 125 pounds.

"Obviously seeing Claudia win was a highlight," Roth said. "That girl is nonstop. Just watching her wrestle is impressive because she is relentless. Her style is practically the definition of chain wrestling. As much as I would love to claim some credit for her success, she is only a freshman and I have only been coaching her for about a month now. All the credit goes to her coaches at Homer Jr. High, her off-season coaches, and of course herself because she works so hard and is beyond motivated."

Also placing for Lockport was Kaspar (4th at 190), Ramirez (6th at 110), got 6th, Hagemann (8th at 170), and Colella (8th at 105).

"Ava, Faith, and Averi have only been wrestling this season but all of them have been absolute superstars," Roth said. "They are always hungry for knowledge and constantly striving to learn more and get better and it obviously paid off. Having a first-year wrestler place at the Donnybrook is a testament to their ability and hard work."

"Liz is a returner from last year and is another super dedicated girl. She did a ton of work over the off-season and even went to an elite week-long camp early in the summer. She has progressed and evolved so much since last year and it made Sam and me so happy to see all that hard work come to fruition during the weekend. Plus, she's a junior so she still has another year. But I am getting ahead of myself, we are still expecting great things from her this year. She will be a name to look out for in the months to come."