

By Randy Whalen

The Lockport Township girl's wrestling team continues to impress.

Especially freshman Claudia Heeney.

Right after Christmas, the Porters added another team championship to their resume. That was the Ottawa Township Girls Invite, a 24-team event held on Tuesday, Dec. 27 in Ottawa. That was the second tournament victory for Lockport this season. The other one was on Nov. 26 at the 22-team Niles West Invite.

"The season has been going great so far," Lockport girls wrestling coach Nate Roth said. "We have had two tournament wins under our belt and a lot of girls getting a lot of matches.

"We are barely halfway through the season and some girls already have 20-plus matches this season. Last year I think the most anyone got was around 15. Thanks to a much more loaded schedule we are getting so much more experience than we did last year."

That experience showed at the Ottawa Invite, which was at the historic Kingman Gym. There Lockport finished first with 132.5 points, Peoria Richwoods was second with 104 points, and Conant and Glenbard North tied for third with 88 points. Geneseo placed fifth with 84 points and the other teams that filled out the top half of the field were Phoenix Military Academy (64), Morris (50), Kaneland (46), Curie (36), Lane Tech (36), Ottawa Township (34) and Harvard (33). There were 11 bracketed weight classes and four others determined by round-robin competition.

There were a lot of successful Porters at Ottawa. In the bracketed weight classes Heeney (125 pounds) and sophomore Lizzie Rock (120/125) won titles. Senior Monica Skibicki (100), sophomore Averil Colella (105), and junior Liz Ramirez (115) were second, junior Mayte Manteca (120/125) was third, senior Maya Hernandez (115) took fifth and freshman Lucy Madrigal (130) placed sixth. In round robins, sophomore Lydia Chrobak (170) was second, freshman Sophie Kelner (190) was third and seniors Deylin Manteca Claros (145) and Kelli Watkins (170) were fourth.

Heeney, who is ranked fourth in the state at 125, captured an 8-1 decision over Richwoods' Indhira Moore in the 125 title match at Ottawa after pinning Geneseo's Bella Curcuru in the semifinals and claiming a win by technical fall in her opener.

Earlier in the season, on Friday, Dec. 2, Heeney showed that she is already going to be a major name in the sport. She defeated Reese Roberts from Lin-Mar High School in Marion, Iowa, to win the title at 125 pounds at the Dan Gable Donnybrook, a premier high school boys and girls wrestling tournament. at Xstream Arena in Coralville, Iowa.

"It was really exciting and I was ecstatic that I did that," Heeney said of the Donnybrook. "But it didn't happen without my teammates. It takes a lot for the team to be there all of the time, and practicing all of the time, helps me immensely. I think that we have a lot of talent in the room and we can do great things in the future. Obviously, it's hard for girls who are coming in, because they don't know what to expect, and I know that a lot of girls are afraid, and I completely understand that.

"It's amazing to be there and wrestle at Lockport since the boys have a history. So for us girls to come in and make new history is amazing, there are so many opportunities now. They (her teammates) put a lot of hard work in and they really go at it in practice and I think that's what makes them better. I train all year round. Every day, all day, whenever I can, it takes a lot and it's everything. I go to bed early, I eat the right things and I train every day."

Roth, who competed for and graduated from Lockport, knows very well about the school's successful boys program. He's coached in it since 2012 under head coaches Josh and Jameson Oster. The Porters have qualified for the IHSA dual team finals in six of the last seven seasons and captured four trophies, including a state championship in 2017, and that provides plenty of motivation for the girls that are in his program.

"We try to live up to the boys' name," Roth said. "The boys wrestling team has been dominating for the last 10 years or so. Sometimes it's a little bit of a challenge since we have girls like Claudia, who've been wrestling for six years but then we have a lot of other girls that have never wrestled before. It's still great because Claudia helps all of those girls. A lot of the girls who just wrestled last year are a super big help.

"You've got girls who were super successful last year and now they're helping the new girls to be super successful for this year. Having those girls being the leaders and showing the new girls that this is what wrestling is, this is how you do it and how you succeed and how you prosper, it's really great having all of these experienced girls and all of these new girls. We have a lot of depth, which is great. We want to get as many of those girls matches as we can."

The Porters were able to do that at Ottawa. Rock won a title in a 120/125 B Class. She took first with a fall over Glenbard North's Samira Benevides after recording a pin in the semifinals over Morris' Jordan Wilson which followed a decision in her opening match.

Rock, played soccer much of her life but decided to give wrestling a try this season. She is certainly happy she did.

"Our team is building up, practice by practice, and we're just drilling until we get the moves right," Rock said. "Claudia is a good leader. It's really fun and I'm so glad that I joined the program. I like our team building. we're a really big team and we do a lot of activities together.

"We just make sure that everybody is having fun and is engaged and we don't let anybody fall behind. If we see someone needing help, we step up and help them through it. I've always wanted to do another sport. I decided to step up and try another sport to help get cardio in and get muscle. I'm so glad that I joined."

Rock typifies many of the members of the team.

"One of the coolest things about coaching the girls team is that we see them at the beginning of the season with most of them not knowing anything but then with the way they've progressed, they've turned into wrestlers," Roth said. "It's really cool to see the evolution of 'I know nothing' to 'I can do all of these moves, it's great.' Even in basketball when you're starting from square one, you still know how to play basketball. But with wrestling, these girls have never experienced anything like it before. Some of them are absolutely starting from square one."

Two days later, on Thursday, Dec. 29, the Porters traveled to Palatine High School and competed in the 2nd annual Sally Berman Holiday Classic. There they took fifth in another large field. District 230, which is comprised of Andrew, Sandburg, and Stagg students, won with 217 team points. Oak Forest (172), Minooka (158), Homewood-Flossmoor (145.5), Lockport (108), and Round Lake (102) rounded out the top six team places.

Heeney, however, won again at 125 pounds. She was also named the tournament's outstanding wrestler. She also won at Niles West and this was her fourth tourney title of the season. At the Berman, she pulled away from a 9-7 lead after an action-packed first period and won a 23-9 major decision in the finals over Ava Babbs of Lakes. Heeney used three falls to reach the finals, capped by a semifinal fall over Burlington Central's Soraya Walikonis, a state qualifier last year.

"It's fun because the whole crowd is cheering, but it's also a lot of pressure," Heeney said after winning her title at the Berman. "I was a little nervous but I looked around and found one of my best friends, and she just told me to calm down. So it's hard to be in those kinds of matches, but winning them feels even better."

Also placing for the Porters at the Berman was Skibicki (3rd, 100), Ramirez (4th, 115), Manteca Claros (5th, 145), Rock (5th, 120), and Madrigal (6th, 130).

"I'm seeing girls like Averi Colella and Monica Skibicki that are first-year wrestlers but still turning into hammers on the mat," Roth said. "But we are still getting girls that are having a little more growing pains in the sport still getting matches also thanks to the nature of the girls wrestling community."

"So many of the meets we go to are so welcome to bringing extras, which is great because that way we can still get the girls that are not the best in their weight matches. We even had a girl on Wednesday,

(sophomore) Emily Makinney, who because of an injury and some tough matchups before her injury, hadn't gotten a win yet this season, but she got her first win Wednesday at the Batavia open matches which also happened to be her birthday. So that was a fun realization for her and the team."

The Batavia open was held on Wednesday, Jan. 4. These are open, non-scored meets that are just a way to get extra matches in. There are usually about a dozen teams there. This was the second one that Lockport has traveled to this season. The other was on Dec. 14.

Lockport concluded the week on Saturday, Jan. 7 by traveling to the Conant Invite. For the postseason, the Porters have been assigned to the Schaumburg Sectional, which will be held on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 10 and 11.

"Claudia Heeney and Liz Ramirez have both great assets to the team," Roth said. "Not only for their talent and amount of wins they get, but they are both such great leaders. Claudia has been around the sport for a long time and knows how things run so she does a great job leading warm-ups and motivating the less experienced girls. Liz is a fantastic lead-by-example type of girl. She grinds at practice every day and never gives up. She shows the other girls what practice should look like and they follow her lead.

"The postseason is fast approaching and the team is excited and looking forward to it!"