

By Randy Whalen

"Best together."

That has been a tagline for Lockport Township High School for some time.

Now it is a rallying cry for the Porter boys wrestling team.

On Monday, Jan. 9, Lockport inexplicably lost its best performer, senior Brayden Thompson, who was in contention for the top wrestler in the Nation. Instead of dwelling on the loss, the Porters went out and did what they do, perform like a champion.

Lockport was stunned to learn that Thompson, the top-ranked 182-pounder in the country, decided to compete at Stillwater High School in Oklahoma for his final semester of high school. The decision was made public that day in an article on Flowrestling. He is now the fourth high-profile transfer from out of state to transfer to Stillwater and will be moving with his family and Jon Henslee, his Chicago-area personal coach.

Last season, Thompson won the 170-pound Class 3A State Championship with an undefeated record. Last summer he committed to Oklahoma State. He's ranked as the No. 4 recruit in the class of 2023 and hasn't lost a match against a high school opponent since October of 2021. In that time, Thompson has won Powerade, an Illinois state title, the U20 World Team Trials, Ironman, and Who's Number One.

He was most recently entered in the 185 lbs bracket at Doc Buchanan National Tournament, which was held on Jan. 6 and 7 in Clovis, California. There Thompson, who is undefeated this season, went 2-0 before being disqualified for a "code of conduct violation."

"We found out on that Monday," Lockport boys wrestling coach Jameson Oster said. "He and Henslee (who was also an assistant at Lockport) are no longer part of the team. We have always had a 'next man up' mentality here and that's what we will continue to have.

"Wrestling is a sport where you go through a lot of adversity. You just work toward it and keep going forward. Wrestling teaches you a lot of life skills outside the sport and this is a great example of that. I still believe we can place in the state and that's what we are working toward."

One of the Porter's main competitors in the regional will once again be Lincoln-Way East. But last week the two teams met with something else on the line. That was the Blue Division championship in the SouthWest Suburban Conference. That happened on Wednesday, Jan. 11 in Frankfort and Lockport

came away with a 36-25 victory to hand the defending conference champion Griffins (17-1, 3-1) their first loss of the season.

Last season, on Jan. 20, host Lockport tied the Griffins 33-33 but lost on criteria.

If the Porters defeat Bolingbrook on Thursday, Jan. 19 at home, which they are favored to do, they will go 4-0 in the league and win the SWSC Blue title for the first time since the 2019-20 season. It will be their seventh SWSC conference championship but sixth in the last 10 years.

"It was a great environment to wrestle in and it felt even better since they beat us last year in our own gym," Oster said. "Plus, with everything that went on earlier in the week, we really rallied around our school slogan of 'best together.'"

"That was the best that we've wrestled as a team all year. It's good to see that the kids are making the adjustments late in the season. There are still things to work on but we are headed in the right direction."

Against the Griffins, Lockport flipped the total number of wins from last season's bout and got eight. Seniors Jad Alwawi (with a 5-2 win at 126 pounds) and Carlos Munoz-Flores (with an 8-4 win at 132) got the bout off to a good start. A huge match was senior Logan Kaminski getting a pin in 4:46 at 145. Sophomore Durango Valles followed that up with a 7-3 victory at 152. Following a Griffin pin at 160, senior Logan Swaw registered a pin in 34 seconds at 170 for a 21-9 lead.

"To beat Lincoln-Way East was great," Swaw said. "Logan Kaminski getting a pin at 145 was amazing and changed the momentum. I bumped up to 170 but I will be at 160 for the state tournament."

"When (Thompson) left, it was disappointing. He's doing what he thinks is best for him. We have to do what is best for us as a team here at Lockport."

Lincoln-Way East rallied with three consecutive wins, including a pin and a major decision, to take a brief 22-21 lead. Then junior Wojtek Chrobak, in 2:35 at heavyweight, and freshman Anthony Sutton, in 2:23 at 106, got back-to-back pins to put the Porters up 33-22. A one-point loss at 113 actually clinched the win and then freshman Justin Wardlow capped it off with a 3-1 overtime win at 120 pounds.

"Logan Kaminski getting a pin at 145 against a good opponent really helped spur the team," Oster said. "Also Jad Alwawi getting a three-point win, Plus Logan Swaw with a pin, and Anthony Sutton also got a pin at 106. Anthony is the third or fourth guy that we've used at 106 and that was big."

Swaw has been coming up big all season. He missed some time after getting injured in early December after his only loss in early December at the Ironman Tournament in Walsh Jesuit, Ohio. But he still managed a blood round victory before injury defaulting and placing eighth at 157 pounds.

"I hurt my left LCL (lateral collateral ligament) in the quarterfinal at Ironman but I'm fine now," Swaw said. "But I won the Cheesehead (at 160 pounds on Jan. 7 in Kaukauna, Wisconsin) over Zach Eliszewski (of Mukwonago, Wisconsin). I lost to him a few times in Greco but I got a late takedown and beat him 3-2.

"I feel that it will come down to myself against (Conant senior and defending Class 3A state champion at 152) Ethan Stiles. He beat me at state last year (5-1 in the semifinals with Swaw finishing sixth) and I figure I will see him at state again. That's what you train for."

Oster knows that Swaw has put in the work and hopes he gets another shot at the title.

"He's been working really hard, has put in the work and it shows," Oster said. "He won the Donnybrook (on Dec. 3 at Xstream Arena in Coralville, Iowa), and the Cheesehead. He's got a lot more offensive this season. He comes out, puts pressure on guys, and just goes after it."

Following the big win over Lincoln-Way East, the Porters were back in action the next night, Thursday, Jan. 12. That was in an SWSC crossover home matchup against Stagg, which was a 76-6 win. There were a trio of forfeit victories (Sutton at 106, freshman Isaac Zimmerman at 113, and Kaminski at 152), eight pins (Wardlow at 120, sophomore Liam Zimmerman at 126, Alawi at 132, Munoz-Flores at 138, freshman Chris Miller at 145, senior Adain Nolting at 182, freshman Tyler Sefcik at 195, and Chrobak at heavyweight, as well as a pair of tech fall victories (Valles, 20-2 at 160 and Swaw 18-3 at 170).

On Saturday, Jan. 14, Lockport was at the Joliet West Quad and got a trio of wins. Those were 52-21 over the host Tigers, 48-18 over Barrington, and 37-28 against Glenbard North. Isaac Zimmerman (106), Wardlow (120), Kaminski (145), Valles (152), Swaw (two at 160, one at 170), and sophomore Payton Roberson (two at 195, one at 182) all picked up three wins on the day.

Sophomore Max Knezevich (in 1:11 at 160 against Barrington) also added a pin for the Porters.

Lockport will host the regional on Saturday, Feb. 4. There the Porters will bid for their eighth straight regional championship in seasons where there has been a state tournament. Last year Lockport finished with 229 points, Lincoln-Way East (215.5) was second, followed by host Homewood-Flossmoor (171). The same teams are back together in the regional again this season.

"The regional is not a one-on-one competition," Oster said. "It's going to take a team effort. It's important that the kids that may not advance out as individuals still win some matches and get bonus points."