

By Randy Whalen

Last weekend, the Lockport Township cheerleading team got to show itself off to the home fans.

The results were spectacular.

Hosting the Porter Frost Cheer Invite before a packed house on Saturday, Jan. 14, Lockport easily captured the top scores from the judges. The Porters finished with a 97.78, which is an incredible score, in the Class 3A competition. That put them in front of second-place Edwardsville (93.25) by 4.53 points. Neuqua Valley (92.88) was third, Lincoln-Way West (91.75) placed fourth, and Lincoln-Way Central (88.43) was fifth in the 16-team Class 3A field.

To put that 97.78 score in perspective, only two teams have ever registered a higher score than that in the state finals. One of those was Lockport with a 98.20 score in winning the 2020-21 Co-Ed State Championship. The other was Lincoln-Way East (98.73) in capturing the large school state title that same year.

The Porters, however, choose not to get an award or a trophy at their own invite. So every team moved up a place and Edwardsville was announced as the winner. But on paper and in the eyes of the adoring fans that were there, Lockport was the top team.

"It was a great routine," Lockport cheer coach Jenny Krumlinde said of the Porter performance. "It's the fourth year we've had this invite and it's awesome to see many students in the stands. They get to see what the team actually does and that they don't just cheer from the sidelines.

"We had a rough (previous) weekend with a couple of mistakes. So we made the adjustments and really worked hard."

They did and it showed. At a cheer competition, there is a feeling when a team knows it nailed it and the Porters and their fans knew this was an exceptional one.

"Definitely, it was a great feeling with all the people in the stands," Lockport senior cheerleader Jessica Vanerka said. "We had our friends and family here to push us through and perform well with a difficult routine.

"Doing cheer is like a life lesson. We love all the support, it's 100 percent how we get through the routine."

Vanerka, who has been on the performing cheer team for three years, is one of a dozen seniors on the team. Those are, Alivia Czaplicki, Nya Ditter, Ava Judge, Grace Kelly, Maya Kendzior, Amber LaMorte, Jake McEntee, Megan Mecher, Isabelle Purpura, Madison Seymour, Vanerka, and Lexi Wrona.

The eight juniors are Alyssa Connell, Nina Fiorillo, Grace Gad, Autumn Haehnlein, Ally Namikas, Corinne Nowak, Bianca Richie, and Emme Sweis. There are three sophomores, Justyn Boyce, Mckena Miglorini, and Emily O'Day, along with a pair of freshmen, Maggie Calabrese and Carly Fiorillo. The senior manager is Audrey Chisholm.

If there are two or more guys, that team falls under the co-ed division. But with one guy on the team, they are placed in the small, medium, or large school divisions. For the four years between 2018-21, the Porters were in the growing co-ed division, winning the state championship in 2021 and placing third in 2018 and 2020.

McEntee was on the 2020 and 2021 teams. He was also on last season's squad and hopes to be part of an exceptional four trophies in a row in the sport when the state finals happen next month.

"Cheer is my passion," McEntee said. "I've worked hard at it and it keeps me happy. I've been on the varsity all four years. I love to help others and better myself. It was so nice with all our friends and family here."

The cheer season is long. But the competitive tournament schedule is relatively short. There were a pair of competitions for the Porters in December and they won their large school categories in both of them. The first was on Saturday, Dec. 10 in the North Pole Cheerleading Invite at Lincoln-Way East. The second was on Sunday, Dec. 18 at the Joliet West Invite.

The weekend before their own invite, the Porters participated in two big tournaments. On Saturday, Jan. 7, they placed second to Marist at the Lake Zurich Invite. Then, on Sunday, Jan. 8, they traveled to Buffalo Grove and captured the championship of the Bison Cheerleading Invite.

So, including its own, Lockport won the title in four of the five invites it has participated in. The next one is on Friday, Jan. 20, in the SouthWest Suburban Conference championships, starting at 5 PM, at Lincoln-Way Central. The Porters have won their conference division (large in 17 and 22 and co-ed in 18, 19, and 20) five out of the last six seasons.

"This is definitely one of our most talented groups," said Krumlinde, who cheered for the Porters, graduating in 2006. "They just work hard and always want to be the best. They hold themselves to such a high standard."

That high standard always shows in the postseason. Lockport starts another journey to state on Saturday, Jan. 28, at the Bradley-Bourbonnais Sectional. There, the Porters perform in the large school division at 5:02 PM.

The top six teams from each class in the five sectionals advance to the state finals. Those are held on Friday, Feb. 3, and Saturday, Feb. 4 at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington. The Porters have qualified to go downstate every season since the first IHSA Competitive Cheer State Finals, in 2006, and have made the final day each year except one.

In that span, they have brought home a school record 11 trophies, with four championships, including two straight.

"Being at the top is stressful but it's so much fun," McEntee said. "We do feel pressure but we go out and give it our best. That (another championship) is the goal."

Vanerka agreed and a state title this season for the Porters would not only be their fifth IHSA one and sixth overall (they won one in 1986 via the Illinois Cheerleading Coaches Association, which was the official one at that time). It would also be their third straight, bettering the back-to-back ones they captured in 2007 and 2008.

"We all know that we have to stay humble," Vanerka said. "Being at the top is hard to reach and we want to stay there. Being the No. 1 team, people aim for us. We are never doing enough, we always want more."