

By Randy Whalen

In the fall of 2019, eight freshmen joined the Lockport Township swim team.

Little did they know the adventures that awaited them in the next four seasons.

Those eight seniors survived a sophomore season COVID pandemic that shortened the schedule. But, at the same time, resulting in the Porters capturing their first conference crown for the first time in over two decades.

Some COVID restrictions were still in place last season. This year, things are back to normal and Lockport looks to finish out what it hopes will be a historic season.

"This group has seen a lot of adversity," Lockport boys swimming coach Jason Ozbolt said. "They are a resilient group. They had a lot of things thrown at them and it's a credit to them as a group and as individuals."

The group of seniors was celebrated on Thursday, Jan. 19 in their final home dual meet. The eight seniors are, Shaw Carlson, Michael Erickson, Sebastian Lesnicki, David Mancini, Julian Moreno, Ryan O'Connor, Charlie Pluth, and Ethan Rudman.

O'Connor went out and was part of four winning events as the Porters topped Lincoln-Way Central 132-48 on the varsity level in a SouthWest Suburban Conference matchup to send the seniors out in style.

"It's been a good time being on varsity all four years, it's been fun," said O'Connor who will attend Washington University in St. Louis. "It was a fun Senior Night. Everyone likes to feel appreciated and we are."

With aspirations for a return trip to state, O'Connor tuned up by winning the two events that he qualified for state in last season, on Senior Night. Those were the 200-yard individual medley (2:05.84) by over 15 seconds, and the 100-yard backstroke (:56.39 seconds) by nearly six seconds. He was also part of the winning 200-yard medley relay (1:49.07) by over four seconds along with Pluth, Carlson, and Moreno. Plus, the 400-yard freestyle relay (3:30.23), where freshman Ian Allen, Erickson, sophomore Shane Gabel, and O'Connor won by 16 seconds.

Also winning races on Senior Night was Erickson in the 200-yard freestyle (1:57.51) by nearly five seconds, Pluth in the 100-yard breaststroke (1:12.42) by over six seconds, and Allen, Carlson, Moreno, and Pluth in the 200-yard freestyle relay (1:38.98) by less than a second.

"There were ups and downs," Erickson said of his four years swimming for the Porters. "But you have to motivate your team and each other. If you motivate your team, you will go far. We hope to win the sectional."

Erickson plans to continue to swim while studying pediatric nursing at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Pluth is undecided on what college he will attend but he plans to study aerospace engineering.

"I've always been interested in space and stuff, so it's just natural," Pluth said of his future profession. "I like to challenge myself and you are always doing that in swimming."

Carlson, who is undecided about where he will attend college but will probably stay in state and study finance, and Moreno, who is undecided on his future plans, will both remember their team.

"A lot of us have been on the varsity all four years," Carlson said. "Being on the team together that long is a great experience and I'm really glad we had that."

Moreno agreed.

"I've been on the varsity all four years and swimming most of my life," Moreno said. "I will remember how my teammates pushed everyone and the support system we had."

Lesnicki has big plans as he will go to Loyola to study pre-med for neuroscience and eventually go to med school.

"It was worth it," Lesnicki said of his four years swimming for Lockport. "It's just the team. We have such high morale. We all come together, push each other, and have a good time."

Mancini plans to go to Joliet Junior College and study history.

"There is no other team that I'd like to be than with these guys," Mancini said. "I know that the future swimmers here will carry that legacy on."

Rudman will major in biomedical engineering at Milwaukee School of Engineering.

"The swim coach there has reached out to me so maybe," Rudman said of swimming in college. "I think what I've enjoyed most is the team building in swimming. You are always striving to improve yourself and your goals."

Someone with a bright future is Gabel. In the dual meet against Lincoln-Way Central, he won the 50-yard freestyle (:23.26 seconds) by over a second, and also captured the 100-yard freestyle (:50.99 seconds) by over three seconds.

Also winning for Lockport was junior Jake Balitewicz by over two seconds in the 100-yard butterfly (:59.87 seconds), and Andy Giorgetti (231.35 score) along with fellow freshman Logan Fields (162.70) were the only two in the diving competition. Freshman Jack Mroz captured the 500-yard freestyle (5:08.65) for the Knight's lone win by a whopping 28 seconds.

The senior celebration continued into the weekend. That's because Lockport hosted its own invite with the diving on Friday, Jan. 20, and the swimming on Saturday, Jan. 21. There the Porters placed fourth overall in the 13-team field. The top five teams were St. Ignatius (475), Plainfield Co-Op (448.50), Wheaton Co-Op (302), Lockport (242.50), and Reavis (180).

O'Connor had another excellent day. He tied Plainfield senior Joe Broadway for first in the 100-yard backstroke (:55.78 seconds), and he also placed second in the 200-yard IM (2:03.85).

Gabel won the 50-yard freestyle (:22.55 seconds) and was fourth in the 100-yard freestyle (:50.09 seconds). Giorgetti (408.25) placed second in the diving.

Lockport (6-2 record through Jan. 19) will close the dual meet season on Thursday, Jan. 25 by traveling to Homewood-Flossmoor for another SWSC matchup. The Blue Division SWSC meet is on Friday, Feb. 3 with the diving and Saturday, Feb. 4 with the swimming at Sandburg.

Then on Saturday, Feb. 18, Lockport will host a 14-team sectional. Last year the Porters just missed winning the sectional, finishing eight points behind Lincoln-Way East (238). This season, Lincoln-Way East is hosting its own sectional.

The Porters won their one-and-only sectional championship in 2001. They know it will be close but believe they can break that 22-year drought.

"In the sectional, we know that we are very close in a lot of events," Ozbolt said. "The work that they put in is what they are going to get out. A lot of them have put in a lot of work, so hopefully, that's what they will get out of it."