

By Randy Whalen

With two games left in the Plainfield North Boys Bowling Sectional, Lockport Township looked poised to not only advance to the State Finals but also win a sectional championship.

But bowling is a fickle sport. All of a sudden, things that went well for the previous three games went south. In the end, the Porters fell short of advancing on Saturday, Jan. 21 at Town & Country Lanes in Joliet.

The boy's bowling state finals are this Friday and Saturday, Jan. 27 and 28 at St. Clair Bowl in O'Fallon. A decade ago, Lockport won the state championship there. Every season since, with the exception of 2018 and the COVID season of 2021, the Porters had been back at state.

Last season, they made their 13th appearance and eighth in the last nine played postseasons, since the tourney started in the 2002-03 season. Lockport finished fifth last year and had high expectations to do even better this season. But it wasn't to be.

"There is no way I thought we wouldn't get out of the sectional," Lockport boys bowling coach Ron Davis said. "I thought we may be able to get a trophy. As a coach, I had been down there for nearly 10 years in a row (since he became head coach in 2015). It almost seemed like old hat but I know how hard it is to go to state.

"Still, it's my first time as a coach not going to state. I've been beating myself up wondering what we could have done differently. But I've never seen three guys get such bad breaks in my 40 years in bowling."

Although the Porters didn't start well, with a 960 opening game, leaving them tied for 13th, they had followed with games of 1,082, 1044, and 1,055 to move into second place with two games left. At that point, Lockport had a total of 4,141, which was 56 pins behind Stagg but five pins ahead of Joliet West, 14 pins ahead of Sandburg, 56 pins in front of fifth-place Lincoln-Way West, and 96 pins in front of sixth-place Oak Forest.

"After four games I told everyone, 'let's go win it,' Lockport senior Jason Laba said. "But it didn't work out."

No, it didn't. The Porters rolled a 901 in the fifth game to drop to sixth. But the top six teams advance to state so they just had to hang on. But a final game score of 916 knocked them out of the running and left them 74 pins out of sixth.

The standings flipped a lot over the past two games. In the end, Lincoln-Way West finished with a 6,217 pinfall total to win the sectional. It was the first sectional title for the Warriors, who advanced to state for

the sixth straight season in which there has been a state final. They have a trifecta of winning the SouthWest Suburban Conference, a regional, and a sectional championship.

Lincoln-Way West held off a late charge from defending state champion Minooka (6,200), which was in 15th place at the midway break but shot a 3,306 total in the afternoon which included a tournament-high 1,142 in the final game, to place second. Joliet West (6,105) placed third while Yorkville (6,060), rolled a 1,101 in the last game to rally from eighth place after five games, and had the individual medalist, senior Dale Horstmann (1,410) to tie Stagg (6,060) for fourth. Sandburg (6,032) held onto the sixth and final spot by 18 pins.

Lincoln-Way Central (6,014), Lockport (5,958), Andrew (5,915), Lincoln-Way East (5,907), Oak Forest (5,892), LaSalle-Peru (5,812), Morgan Park (5,739), TF South (5,732), Oak Lawn (5,615), and Marist (5,374) rounded out the 16 team field.

There were seven SWSC teams in the sectional. Three of them, including Stagg which had never advanced to the state finals in boy's bowling, and Sandburg, which placed fourth last year, along with Lincoln-Way West, advanced.

It was a tough way to end for the three Porter seniors, who bowled every game. Laba led the way with a 1,299 total. That left him in 14th place overall and he was eighth out of the bowlers on the non-qualifying teams. The top seven advance to state and Laba missed it by 16 pins.

"It was unlucky," Laba said. "I had three 7-10 splits with two in the last game. I didn't miss the pocket all day but we just couldn't catch the breaks. A lot of teams surprised (in the sectional)."

Laba, a four-year varsity bowler, had a high of 246 in the second game. He had a 234 and a 227 to lead off the afternoon session. But the splits led to him having a 174 in the final game.

Seniors Nate Arient (1,198), who had a high of 226 in the fourth game, and Ryan Muhr (1,159), who had a high of 225 in the second game also bowled all six games.

"Nate, Ryan, and Jason hit the pocket all day," Davis said. "Nate had an 8-10 and a 7-10 split. I knew we needed a 1,000 in our last game to advance but it was uncanny the bad breaks we got. Our sectional was uber-competitive. I think that it and the Collinsville one were the toughest in the state. It was a crazy day."

Steven Talaski was credited with four games bowled. The junior had a high of 235 in the second game. Freshman Austin LiCausi was in games three, four, and five and finished with a 621 total, with a high of 236 in the third game. Junior Ross Karraker bowled the first two and also the last game, with a high of 179 in the opener, and finished with a 513 total. Junior Neil Mamparo had a 205 in the sixth game and freshman Aaron Chrusciel came in to roll a 152 in the fifth game for the Porters.

Since he only missed qualifying by 16 pins, Laba hoped to advance to state as one of the two at-large bids that the IHSA awards. As a senior, Alec Buchaas did that for Lockport in 2018 and led the individual tournament standings up until the final game, eventually placing third.

The at-large bids go to the bowlers who came closest to missing the cut at one of the four sectionals. Seniors Kamdyn Raymond from Freeport (1,257) and Devan Skridla (1,256) from Rockford Guilford missed the cut by one and two pins at Guilford Sectional. So they got to go.

"Jason is one of the best bowlers that I've ever coached in high school," Davis said. "I feel bad for him. He only got to go to state twice and deserved to go this season."

In the SWSC meet, on Saturday, Jan. 7, Lockport placed second at Laraway Lanes in New Lenox. Making All-Conference was Karraker (4th, 1,281), Laba (10th, 1,210), and Muhr (11th, 1,201).

At the Oswego East Regional, which was held on Saturday, Jan. 14 at Parkside Lanes in Aurora, the Porters placed third with a 6,090 total. The top four teams (Lincoln-Way West - 6,228, Sandburg - 6,106, Lockport - 6,090, and Lincoln-Way Central - 5,811) were all from the SWSC and advanced to the sectional. The Lockport scores were, Laba (1,311), Muhr (1,234), Karraker (1,173), LiCausi (1,003), Arient (756), Talaski (420), Mamparo (193), and Chrusciel didn't bowl.

Laba, who bowled a 300 at practice on Thursday, Jan. 12, was obviously disappointed that he and the team didn't make it to state. But after the sectional, he had many hugs. Not only from his teammates but from the other bowlers that had qualified.

"I've got nothing but love for all these people," Laba said. "I love these guys and have grown a lot more friendships in the past year.

"We bowled well during the season. There were some ups and downs but it was a good season. I've made a bond with all these guys."