

By Randy Whalen

The best teams face adversity head-on, putting setbacks behind them and rising to the occasion.

The Lockport Township wrestling team has been among the top teams in the state for the past decade-plus.

Then on Monday, January 9, the Porter boys wrestling team received the news that it inexplicably lost its best performer, senior Brayden Thompson, who was in contention for the top wrestler in the Nation, with a transfer to Stillwater High School in Oklahoma for his final semester of high school. Instead of dwelling on the loss, they rallied around their school slogan of "Best Together."

They have been just that ever since and continued that journey on Saturday, Feb. 4, by capturing the championship of their own Class 3A regional.

Just as it did in capturing at Blue Division of the SouthWest Suburban Conference, Lockport (224) edged Lincoln-Way East (214) for the regional championship. Andrew (173.5) was third, with Homewood-Flossmoor (138.5), TF South (49), Rich Township (43), Bloom Township (22), and Thornwood (10) rounding out the eight-team regional.

Including the 2021 Illinois Wrestling Coaches And Officials Association (IWCOA) state tournament regional title, it was the ninth straight regional championship and 11th since 2010 for the Porters.

"It's been the theme for the second half of our season," Lockport coach Jameson Oster said of the 'Best Together.' "We've had guys step up as individuals and guys step up for the team. Everyone we had out there won at least a match for us today."

Lockport had four individual champions and qualified 12 guys to the individual sectional this Saturday, Feb. 11 at Normal Community. The runner-up Griffins, who have never won a regional, finished second to Lockport in a regional for the second straight season. Last year the Porters had 229 points and Lincoln-Way East finished with 215.5 in the H-F Regional.

This season, Lincoln-Way East advanced 10 guys to the sectional.

"We knew that it would be a close tournament and we had to do everything just right to win it," said Lincoln-Way East coach Kevin Rockett, whose team edged the Porters to win the SWSC Blue in 2022. "We had some head-to-head matches (with Lockport) so we had a lot of opportunities.

"But we got 10 guys through to the sectional and have a chance at getting individual medals. We are focused on that."

Both Lockport and the Griffins had four champions, but the Porters were 3-2 in title bouts against Lincoln-Way East and also had freshman Anthony Sutton register a 6-5 win over the Griffins in a 113-pound third-place match.

The only title win for the Porters that wasn't over Lincoln-Way East came 120. That's where freshman Justin Wardlow defeated Andrew senior Trevor Silzer, who had to injury default at the 4:35 mark.

"I was still looking for more," said Wardlow, who was ahead 3-2 at the time of the injury. "He beat me the last time I faced him at the Lahey Tournament (on Jan. 21 at Stagg). But I didn't wrestle to my full ability and I came out ready to wrestle today. Now I just want to go after that state championship."

At 126, Lockport senior Jad Alwawi got a 7-5 decision over Griffin sophomore Tyson Zvonar in the first of the five head-to-head title matchups between the two schools.

Alwawi jumped out to a 5-0 lead before Zvonar narrowed the advantage to 5-4. But a late takedown gave Alwawi a three-point lead before an escape accounted for the final score.

"I wrestled him earlier in the season and also won a close match," Alwawi said. "I felt like I was in control the whole way. It does feel good to get that for my team."

At 145, senior Connor Koehler turned the tables for the Griffins with a 4-0 decision over Lockport freshman, Chris Miller.

"It felt good because we (were) striving to get our team a shot to go to state for the first time," Koehler said. "I got my cross-face to a butcher move to get a three-point reversal and that was big. Now I just have to stay strong for (individual) state."

A huge Porter victory came at 160. In a battle of seniors, Logan Swaw improved to 40-1 with a pin at 2:31 of Lincoln-Way East's Zach LaMonto.

"I knew I had to get bonus points," said Swaw as his pin added a pair of points for the Porters. "We were only up (as a team) by four points at that time and (Oster) didn't tell me to get a pin but he told me to get bonus points. But I knew I had to get a pin for the team because we want to go back to state."

The Griffins got a couple of big title match wins as Ari Zaeske moved to 36-3 with a pin over fellow senior Mike Barberi from Andrew in 1:02 at 170. In a defensive battle of sophomores at 195, Caden O'Rourke outlasted Lockport's Payton Roberson 4-2.

But the fact that Roberson, who was wrestling his dozenth match (10-2) of the season in stepping in for Thompson was in the finals, was huge for the Porters.

"Payton is still small for that weight," said Oster of Robinson, who joined the varsity team after Thompson departed. "He showed a lot of grit."

In between those matches, Lockport senior Aidan Nolting registered a 19-4 tech fall win at 182 in 4:40 over Griffin sophomore Jackson Zaeske.

"After the morning round we were only up by five points," Nolting said. "So I knew I had to start up the team and come through in the last round. Last year I didn't make it to state because I had to injury default in the blood round of the sectional. So it feels great to win a regional title my senior season."

David Wuske, a junior from Lincoln-Way East tried to keep his team in contention for the title with a pin in 1:47 over Andrew senior Danny Cushing at 220 pounds.

"It's just what goes on in the room and it starts with all the coaches," Wuske said of what helped him to the win. "Plus, last year I didn't get to wrestle because of a shoulder injury. Now I won a regional and I want to be a state placer."

The Porters, however, clinched the team title by getting third-place match pins from sophomore Malik Salah (in 1:15) at 220, and from junior Wojciech Chrobak (in 31 seconds) at heavyweight.

Also advancing to the sectional as individuals for Lockport are freshman Isaac Zimmerman (2nd place at 106), senior Carlos Munoz-Flores (2nd place at 132), and senior Logan Kaminski (2nd at 138).

Moving onto the sectional for the Griffins as well are junior Domanic Abeja (2nd at 152), freshman Kaidreaus Richardson (3rd at 120), and sophomore Brayden Mortell (3rd at 132).