

By Randy Whalen

In order to do great things, a team must be challenged.

The Lockport Township girls bowling team was challenged this past weekend.

But, like the champions they are, the Porters responded.

Two-time defending State Champion Lockport tuned up for what can be a historic weekend by capturing the championship of the Oswego East Sectional on Saturday, Feb. 11, at Parkside Lanes in Aurora. Seniors Morgan LiCausi and Abby Miller medaled with Top Four finishes.

The Porters rolled a 6180 total, which was the highest in the six sectionals across the state, to capture their 10th straight sectional title. It's also their state record 24th sectional championship, five more than anyone else. They survived a tough challenge from Oswego (6126). Andrew (5682) placed third and then, in an incredible finish, Richards and Stagg tied for fourth with a 5202 score.

The top four teams advance to state, so the Chargers and Richards had a roll-off to see which team would advance to state. Stagg won that by four pins. Lincoln-Way East (5028) was sixth. Then Oak Forest (4998), Plainfield Central (4985), Oswego East (4956) Plainfield East (4912), Evergreen Park (4789), and Sandburg (4461) rounded out the 12-team field.

While the Porters won by 54 pins, it was their closest margin of victory out of the 10 sectional titles. The previous closest was 70, over Oswego East, in 2017. In the four sectionals since then Lockport was won by 320, 776, 846, and 660 pins. There was no IHSA postseason held in 2021 because of the COVID pandemic.

"It's definitely a feeling of relief," Lockport coach Lynda Siezaga said. "We shot big games in the morning and I told the girls, don't lose momentum. But the lanes in the afternoon started breaking down and it was a struggle. The girls fought hard."

They sure did, and including the SouthWest Suburban Conference and postseason tournaments, it was the 10th tournament out of the 11 the Porters have been in this season that they won. This one was a battle from the get-go. Despite having games of 1051 and 1055 to start, Lockport was in second place, seven pins behind the Panthers.

So what did the Porters do? They rolled an 1159 in the third game while Oswego had a 931. So Lockport (3265) led by 221 at the break. Plus, they had extra motivation to get that score.

"One of the dads told us if we shot an 1100 or higher that he would buy us all Starbucks at State," LiCausi said. "With that and the fact that we were challenged, we were definitely more into it."

LiCausi finished with a 1336 total, including a high of 258 in both the first and third games. That was 49 pins behind Oswego senior Lani Breedlove (1385, high of 258 in Game 4) for the individual title. Stagg junior Arianna Araujo (1283, high of 266 in game 2) placed third, and Miller (1273, 257, and 256 in first 2 games) was fourth.

"Oh yes, the team win was more important," LiCausi said. "Our energy was down a bit in the afternoon (with games of 954, 1009, and 952) but we did it."

Miller's morning was key as she added a 235 in the third game and was in first at the break with a 748 total.

"I honestly shocked myself doing that," Miller said. "A 748 is my highest (3-game) series ever. I felt proud to do that here at the sectional. The afternoon wasn't the best but I pushed through it and was still in the Top Four.

"There is just a mix of emotions. My senior year and all the hard work has paid off I'm so happy to have a bond that is this close with all these girls."

Senior Maddie Lave (1236, high of 224 in Game 5) placed sixth, junior Paige Matiasek (1225, high of 247 in Game 3) was ninth, and senior Cassie Kontos (1110, high of 212 in Game 3) was 23rd overall for the Porters. Juniors Kadie Kontos and Lauren Lane as well as freshman Brooke Stroud were on the Lockport active roster but didn't bowl.

Siezaga was an assistant coach on the 2016 Lockport team. The Porters had come off a state title the season before and beat out host Joliet West by 493 pins to win the sectional. But at state, the Tigers turned the tables and went on to win the state championship while Lockport was third. So the challenge in this season's sectional should be a good thing.

"We have to keep our heads and stay focused," Siezaga said. "We have to keep it like we did and pick up our spares. We know we will have to fight through adversity and this is how we fight for it. We've been good under pressure."

The Porters have two more days to be their best under pressure. They will make their record 27th State Finals appearance this weekend. The opening day is Friday, Feb. 17, and the top 12 teams from the first-day advance to Saturday, Feb. 18 at The Cherry Bowl in Rockford.