

By Randy Whalen

"Champions don't have to be perfect, they just have to keep going."

Those words by Lockport Township High School Superintendent, Dr. Bob McBride perfectly summed up the Lockport Township Girls Bowling team kept going.

At the State Finals, the Porters weren't perfect. But they kept going. Now the Porters are State Champions.

Again.

All season long Lockport aimed for that moment. Along the way, the Porters were on top, winning 10 of the 11 tournaments they were in through the sectional as they went for another state championship.

But when it mattered, on the final weekend of the season Lockport wasn't in first place at any juncture.

Until the end.

In a fantastic local battle for the ages, the Porters (11,975) edged out Joliet West (11,942) by 33 pins in a matchup that came down to the final frame on Saturday, Feb. 18 at The Cherry Bowl in Rockford. The three's seemed to be appropriate as this was the third straight state championship for Lockport It might have been a fourth, but there was no state tournament held in 2021 due to COVID.

That Illinois High School Association State (IHSA) Tournament title was not only the third straight for the Porters, but it was also their seventh (1994, 1999, 2009, 2015, 2020, 2022, 2023) in the sport, tying them with Harlem for the most in state history. They now have 10 trophies and also became only the second team to three-peat. Harlem had done that between 2000-2002. This is also the first-ever Lockport team in school history with three straight state championships.

Dr. McBride spoke his words at the victory rally at the high school on Sunday, Feb. 19 in the auditorium at the main campus. The trio of state-placing wrestlers, freshman Justin Wardlow at 2nd place 120 pounds Logan Swaw 2nd place at 160, and fellow senior Logan Kaminski 6th place at 138 pounds from their individual tournament on Saturday, Feb. 18, were also honored.

Lockport principal John Greenan and athletic director Mike Dwyer also spoke.

"There's something about a championship culture," Greenan said. "We weren't in first place, until the end when it counted."

That was for sure. But it certainly wasn't easy as the Porters trailed by 161 pins and were in fifth place following the first day of the tournament. At that point, Lockport coach Lynda Siezega didn't mince words.

"Friday night we had a meeting to discuss how we felt," Siezega said. "I told them how we didn't pick up some makeable spares and left 260 pins out on the lanes. I told them we know how to pick up spares. So do we want to go home as a state champion or a loser?"

Lockport went home as a state champion.

The 33-pin margin was the smallest in a State Final since Andrew beat Minooka by 22-pins in 2012. Harlem edged Lockport by 38 pins in 2017. The Porters trailed Joliet West by 17 pins going into the last game. It also marked the closest margin of victory in the seven state titles for Lockport. The previous was 34 pins when the Porters (11,056) beat Freeport (11,022) by 34 in 1999.

"It motivated us to be better," Lockport senior Morgan LiCausi said of Siezega's speech. "I'm just so proud of how we all picked each other up. We showed our ability and persevered through everything,"

LiCausi had been the team leader for most of the season. She came through again with a 2,691 two-day series. That placed her second individually.

"It's 100 percent that the team winning it is more important," LiCausi said. "The team means everything to me."

In the final frame of her final high school game, the left-handed LiCausi fired three straight strikes to finish with a 246 in the sixth game. After firing a 268 in the third game on Friday, she had a high of 278 in the third game on Saturday which helped the Porters to their high single game of 1,099. That also moved them from 203 pins behind Harlem to 123 entering the afternoon session.

"I have a bad habit of looking at other people's scores," LiCausi said. "(At the end) I was super into it and I was very nervous. But I just wanted to strike and go to the next shot, then strike and go to the next shot. It was so much fun."

Senior Abby Miller (2,490, highs of 233 in game 5 on the first day and 245 in Game 3 on Saturday) who also medaled in 12th place, had two strikes and a nine in the last frame. When LiCausi followed with her turkey, the Porters could feel it.

"Wall came to the conclusion in the meeting that we didn't bowl as well as we could," Miller said. "We agreed that we had a bench and we had to substitute if we needed to. We ended up bowling everyone and we all communicated well. We all wanted that trophy.

"We knew we had to push through and it's such a good feeling. All we wanted to do was to make history at Lockport and we did."

When junior anchor bowler Paige Martiasek (2,457, 15th place, high of 278 in the opener on the first day and a second day high of 214 in Game 2) threw a strike on her first ball of the 10th frame, the Porters knew they had it. Martiasek turned around to see her coach in tears and the hugs started.

"I was nervous," Martiasek said. "I had no idea of the exact score but Morgan and I kept telling each other in the last frame that we had to finish it. After I threw it (strike) I looked at Lynda and saw the screen come up with the score. Then I saw the energy, the high-fives, the hugs, that's when I knew it. We worked so hard."

Senior Madi Lave (2,311, highs of 203 in the fifth game on Friday and 224 in the first game on the last day) also bowled every game for Lockport

"Coach sat us down and said for us to stay calm and preserve," Lave said of Siezega's speech. "So I tried to come into the last day cool and collected. One of my favorite singers, Niall Horn came out with a new song called "Heaven. on Friday and I was singing it all day.

In the end, the Porters were in Heaven.

"At the end, it was just crazy," Lave said. "It was so loud that I could barely hear my own thoughts. But in the very end, we saw coach Lynda jumping around and got so pumped."

Senior Cassie Kontos (1,313 in 8 games, with a high of 194 in the 3rd game of the first day) bowled into the second game of Saturday. But she was replaced in that game by her cousin, junior Cassie Kontos. Then junior Lauren Lane (713 in 4 games) came in and had a 220 in the third game on Saturday. She rolled the next two games and started the sixth but was taken out during that and freshman Brooke Stroud finished it off as the Porters utilized every one of their eight eligible bowlers.

Senior Cece Gilbert and freshman Taylor Lane were also dressed and made the trip for Lockport.

Joliet West had two senior All-State bowlers Malaya Chavez (4th, 2,577) and Maddie Millsaps (6th, 2,558). The Tigers jumped out with a high of 1,049 in the opening game and had 3,091 at the intermission

on Friday, Feb. 17, the first day of the tourney. That was a 5-pin lead over Oswego. At the end of the opening day, Joliet West had a 5,981 and was still in first by 33 pins of Minooka. Lockport was fifth, 161 pins out of first.

But by the second game on Saturday, perennial state power Harlem had vaulted into first, leading the Tigers by 68 pins and third-place Lockport by 203, which made the Porter's task even more daunting. Huge games by both Joliet West (1,065) and Lockport (1,099) coupled with a 1,019 from Harlem made things a lot more interesting at the break as the Tigers (9,052 after 9 games) trailed by 22 and the Porters (8,951) moved to 123 pins down.

After four games, Harlem led Joliet West by 27 pins and the Porters (1,053 in the 4th game) by 40. The Huskies fell off with a 911 in the fifth game, leaving Lockport and the Tigers (1,002 in 5th) and Lockport (998 in 5th) in first and second heading into the final game, separated by just 17 pins.

"Before the last game I told the team to stay in the huddle if they wanted to know where we were in the standings," Siezega said. "If they didn't want to know I told them to go. Everyone stayed in the huddle. I told them that they were down by 17 pins and asked them if they wanted to make state history. That's what we had set our sights on and that's what they did."

Joliet West won the Plainfield North Strikefest at Town & Country Lanes on Dec. 10. That was the only tournament the Porters were in during the season that they didn't win. Including state, they won 11 of 12 tourneys.

Andy McCormick has been an assistant coach on each one of the State Championship teams. He has been asked before which one of the State Title teams is his favorite. He always answers that they are all the same. But asked again this season, he had a different answer.

"This one might be a little more special," McCormick admitted.

Longtime bowling aficionado, Jeff Vandenburg is also an assistant coach. His daughters Kierstin (in 2015) and Payton (in 2020) were members of Lockport state title teams. Kierstin Vandenburg also placed second in the state as an individual in 2015. So LiCausi the second Porter to ever place second. Sheila Szmergalski won the individual title for Lockport in 1992.

This is also the sixth time that Lockport has had multiple state medalists in the same season. Sarah Gugerty (7th) and Stephanie Fedder (9th) did it on the first state title team in 1994. Devan Wysocki (4th) and Mollie Sloyan (8th) both were on the 2009 championship squad. Dana Ackerson (6th) and Bailey Delrose (7th) were both Top 10 for the 2017 second-place team. Samantha Traina (4th) and Isa Colon (11th) were teammates on the 2020 team, while Colon (6th) and Emma Punter (10th) both punched their ticket for a medal in 2022. Now LiCausi (2nd) and Miller (12th) join the club.

This past weekend, Harlem (11,878) took home its state-record 13th trophy in the sport with a third-place finish. Andrew (11,736) had its best finish since winning the state in 2012. Oswego (11,633) was fifth, followed by LaSalle-Peru (11,496), Minooka (11,433), Hononegah (11,264), Mascoutah (11,184), Collinsville (10,716), Prospect (10,516), and Carterville (10,262) rounded out the 12 teams on the final day.

Individually, Sr. Charles East senior Lida Burgos won the title by 72 pins over LiCausi. On Saturday, Burgos shot 1,459 to finish with 2,763 total. She had a lucky 777 in the morning, which included a 287 in the opener.

This was the 10th trophy in girls bowling history at Lockport (2nd in 2017, 3rd in 1997 and 2016) and sixth in the past eight completed seasons. The 10 IHSA girls bowling trophies are second to the 12 trophies in competitive cheer, including a third-place one this season, which is the most by a program in the history of Lockport athletics.

There are now 26 State Championships in Lockport history in 12 different sports, with 24 of them in IHSA competition. Girls' Bowling leads the way with seven. The cheerleading team won its five state championships (1986 as a club sport, 2007, 2008, 2021, 2022). There are three in football (fall of 2002, 2003, and 2021), with two each in boys cross country (fall of 1996 and 1997), and softball (spring of 1997 and 2004).

There is one state title in badminton (spring of 1995), baseball (2005), boys basketball (1977-78), boys bowling (2012-13), girls volleyball (fall of 1993), and wrestling (2016-17).

The Porter pom-pom team captured an IDTA (Illinois Drill Team Association) State Championship in 2000. The IHSA didn't start competitive dance until the 2012-13 school year so that 2000 title is also deemed an official one.

Because of COVID, there was no IHSA State Tournament in 2021. But there was an unofficial State Tournament, which was held on Sunday, Feb. 28 at Forest Hills Lanes (Harlem's home lanes) Lockport won that title 5,963-5,910 over Harlem. With three starters back from the 2020 State Title team, the Porters certainly could have won it again in an IHSA two-day tourney too.

But no matter, they won this season's title in the most exciting way.

"What a ride!" Siezega said. "My daughter (Chloe) was on the 2020 state championship team and the (unofficial one) the next year too. But this is by far the most special team I've coached. At one point, we had four splits in a frame and the girls picked them all up.

"We went 36-1 in all our competitions this season. These girls said before the season that they were going to win the state and they did. I've never seen a team that wanted it so bad."