

By Randy Whalen

Claudia Heeney has so many good things ahead of her.

The Lockport Township freshman placed second at 125 pounds in the Illinois High School Association Girls State Wrestling Finals. It was only the second season with a girls state tournament, and this year it was a lot bigger. The finals were held on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 24 and 25 at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington.

"She really did have a phenomenal season," Lockport girls wrestling coach Nate Roth said of Heeney. "I consider myself very lucky to have such a talented wrestler and great leader on the team. She is a very successful individual and makes the whole team better every day."

Entering high school in an era where girls wrestling is taking off, Heeney had immediate success. She was undefeated heading into the state title match. But simply ran into the one girl that was better than her.

That was Cadence Diduch. The junior from Freeport, who won the 120-pound state title last year, repeated with a dominating 12-2 major decision. Diduch was up 2-0 early. An escape made it 2-1 but it was 4-1 after the first period and 8-1 at the end of two.

"I put in a lot of hard work and have high expectations," Heeney said. "I was ready to go. We had drilled together with each other at Gomez Wrestling. I felt I was mirroring myself out there and it was a lot of fun."

Heeney had a lot of fun as she finished an incredible season with a record of 42-1. Diduch finished at 11-0 in a season where she only wrestled girls after also competing against boys for the Pretzels last year.

"I only wrestled against girls this season," said Diduch, who turned plenty of her opponents into pretzels. "My school doesn't have a girls team and it was hard to find tournaments. Yes, I've practiced against (Heeney) at Gomez but not all the time. I expect to wrestle her again. But this just shows that if you put in the work it will show in the results."

"I'm really excited (about the future of girls wrestling. We've put a lot of time into growing this sport."

Heeney agreed and wants more for the sport in the future.

"I hope we get our own arena," Heeney said of the fact that the girls individual tournament is mixed in with the boys dual team tourney, and the finals are sandwiched in between the boys semifinal round and final matches. "I'm proud of the year I've had but not satisfied."

At the State Finals, Heeney had a trio of dominating wins before the title match. those were a pin in 3:40 over Justyce Sieber from Warren, a 14-2 major decision over Bri Bynum from Sherrard, and a pin at the 5:07 mark against Ava Babbs from Lakes in the semifinal match.

"We knew what we were getting into and that girl is really good," Roth said of the final match with Diduch. "That's how the cookie crumbles. "In the offseason, Claudia will put on more weight, more muscle. She works so hard."

Also competing at state for the Porters was junior Liz Ramirez at 115 pounds. Ramirez started off the tourney with a pin at the 2:00 mark over Ireland McCain from Round Lake. But in a really good quarterfinal match, she lost a 5-3 decision to eventual state runner-up, junior Eliana Paramo from Joliet Township (37-5).

Still hoping to place, Ramirez lost a 10-6 decision to Jasmine Brown from Auburn and finished the season with a 33-10 record.

"Liz had a great tournament too," Roth said. "It did not end the way she wanted it to but she wrestled great. The first girl (McCain) she wrestled and beat ended up wrestling back and placing sixth, which stung a lot because Liz had a tough lie in the wrestlebacks. In her quarterfinal match, she lost in the last 10 seconds to Joliet who ended up taking 2nd in state.

"In both those matches she wrestled great, she just could not recover in the wrestlebacks after her loss. But she is still a junior and an incredibly hard worker so we are expecting some really great things from her next year."

Lockport was in an extremely tough sectional on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 10 and 11 at Schaumburg High School.

The Porters just missed advancing some other wrestlers to state. At 105 pounds, sophomore Averi Colella (28-11) went 2-2. Sophomore Hannah Wolf (9-16) wrestled at 110 and Ramirez went 4-1 and placed third at 115. At 120, senior Maya Hernandez (26-12) went 3-2 while Heeney was 4-0 with three pins and a tech fall.

At 130, freshman Lucy Madrigal (21-18) went 2-2, while senior Deylin Manteca Claros (16-22) was 1-2 in matches wrestled at 145 pounds. Senior Kelli Watkins (25-9) concluded a nice season at 170 with a pair of victories to start before losing her last two matches. At 190 freshman Sophie Kelner (15-23) was 1-2 in bouts wrestled and at 235 junior Ava Kaspar (1-2) won a match in her first bouts of the season.

With seven of their sectional wrestlers expected back next season, things will look good for the Porters.

"The team had a great season too," Roth said. "We had more dual meet losses than we would have liked, but we had a really tough schedule. Two of our losses were to Homewood-Flossmoor, which ended up winning the team score at the state tournament. We had two more losses to Andrew and Joliet, the two biggest teams in the state, and another to Oak Forest (barely) which is another great team.

"Not to say that we aren't right there too, we want to get to that level, and we are right there. But we just need to tighten some things up, stay healthy, and get some work done in the offseason. We are hoping to take the successes of the year and continue building bigger and better for the future. I have very high hopes for this team."