

By Randy Whalen

Throughout the past decade-plus, the Lockport Township boys wrestling team has been very successful.

This year the Porters made their eighth appearance in the Class 3A Dual Team State Finals since 2012 and brought home their fifth trophy.

But, outside of the State Championship one in 2017, this seasons might have been the sweetest of them all.

Lockport (19-9) placed third on Saturday, Feb. 25 in the Illinois High School Association State Finals at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington.

It was the second straight season and the fifth time since 2015 that the Porters have brought home a state trophy. They now have a first (2017), three thirds (2016, 2022, 2023), and a fourth (2015) place finish. But with the crazy up-and-downs of this season, bringing home some more hardware felt especially great.

"A lot of credit to the guys, they always respond," Lockport coach Jameson Oster said. "It was an interesting season but we kept the momentum. (In the third place bout) we capped it off with our best performance of the year.

"We bumped up some guys and everyone competed. In the second half of the season, we really took our school motto of 'best together' to heart."

This was Oster's first season as head coach. Oster, who is the most decorated wrestler in Porter's history placing fourth (112), first (119), second (125), and third (130) in the largest school class between 2008-11, previously assisted his older brother Josh.

Now Josh Oster is a part-time assistant and to make matters more interesting, one of their other brothers, Jake Oster (the Class AA state champion at 112 in 2004 at Lockport) is the head coach of Yorkville, which is the team that the Porters wrestled for third place this season.

Lockport was dominant in the third-place match, winning 45-16 in the rubber match between the two teams this season. Yorkville defeated the depleted Porters 37-32 on Dec. 10, and Lockport bounced back for a 38-26 victory over the Foxes on Dec. 30.

After losing three of the first four matches, and trailing 10-3, the Porters won nine of the last 10 to claim third. Those were by freshman Chris Miller with a 13-3 major. (152 pounds), sophomore Durango Valles with a 15-5 major (160), and then in the best bout senior Logan Swaw (170) had a 4-3 victory over sophomore Luke Zook.

It was the final high school match for Swaw, who placed second at 160 pounds in Class 3A at the individual tournament on Saturday, Feb. 18 at the State Farm Center in Champaign. Swaw, who has committed to the University of Illinois, lost 3-0 to Conant senior Ethan Stiles (32-0) who won his third state title and handed Swaw (47-2) his only two losses of the season.

But against Yorkville, Swaw moved up in weight and defeated Zook, who placed third in Class 3A at 170 pounds. Thus cementing his place as one of the best wrestlers in the state.

"It was pretty big, it put momentum on our side," Swaw said of the win over Zook, which gave the Porters a 14-10 lead. "In the individual tournament I felt I could have done better but as a last (high school bout) this was really good.

"It was a great two years here (after transferring from Montini) of guys pushing each other in the room. This was a great finish."

Senior Aidan Nolting (182) also went out with a 12-2 major decision. Then, with the score tied at 4-4, sophomore Payton Roberson received an injury default victory at the 2:11 mark at 195 pounds. After being pinned at 220, the Porters closed out the bigger weight classes as junior Wojciech Chrobak registered a 14-6 major decision at heavyweight.

Lockport, which lost a point along the way on its team score for unsportsmanlike conduct, got a trio of pins to close it out. Those were by sophomore Dominic Vukobratovich (in 39 seconds at 106), 113 - freshman Isaac Zimmerman (in 3:30 at 113), and his sophomore brother Liam Zimmerman (in 5:57 at 120 pounds).

Vukobratovich, who had just one varsity win entering state epitomized the Porter's "next man up" mentality. His victory clinched third.

"It felt great," Vukobratovich said. "I knew the kid (freshman Ramsey Barton) from some JV tournaments, so I was ready. I didn't know I clinched it at first, but once I saw everybody jumping, I knew I did.

"Wrestling at Lockport is great. We just all know we have to stick together as a team."

Senior Logan Kaminski, who placed sixth in the state at 138 in the individual tourney, also closed his high school career out as a winner with a 3-1 win at 138 in the third-place match.

The Porters also had another placer at individual state. That was freshman Justin Wardlow, who finished second. But it was just an adventure for him to get there. as he broke his elbow in the third period of the 120-pound state semifinal but continued to go and held on for a 6-5 victory over Teddy Flores from Maine South.

With that win, he became the first Porter freshman to advance to the state championship match. But due to his injury, Wardlow couldn't wrestle for the title and medical forfeited to senior Massey Odiotti from Loyola Academy, who became the first state champion in that school's history.

Before the season, Lockport thought for sure it would have another state placer. That's because senior Braydon Thompson, who won the 170-pound Class 3A State Championship in 2022 with an undefeated record, returned.

But on Monday, Jan. 9, Thompson, who was the top-ranked 182-pounder in the country and was in contention for this season's top wrestler in the Nation award, decided to leave to compete at Stillwater High School in Oklahoma for his final semester of high school.

Looking back on it, Thompson wouldn't have improved the Porter team position anyway.

"It's been a ride," Nolting said. "The season didn't necessarily go how we wanted it to, but we were able to push through adversity and take third at state. No one really expected that from us, to be honest. "I think the seniors, as a whole, helped bring the team together, especially after Brayden left. This shows that we really just didn't need him.

"We became closer as a team and we I thought what we did was pretty incredible."

Earlier in the day on Saturday, the Porters fell to Marmion Academy 36-30 in a semifinal. Marmion went on to lose to first-time state champion St Charles East 28-24 in the title match.

All three team state title matches came down to the final bout. Coal Caity defeated previous champion Yorkville Christian 32-31 to win Class 1A, while Washington prevented Joliet Catholic Academy from repeating with a 28-27 win.

Against Marmion, Lockport got victories from freshman Anthony Sutton (forfeit at 120), Liam Zimmerman (8-3 at 126), Kaminski (7-2 at 138), Valles (7-5 at 152), Swaw (pin in 2:43 at 170), Nolting (4-2 at 195) and Vukobratovich got a forfeit win at 113 pounds when the result was clinched at the end.

On Friday, Feb. 24, Lockport defeated Warren 46-18 in a quarterfinal match.

The Porter parade of 10 victories started with Isaac Zimmerman (8-2 at 106) and then Liam Zimmerman (11-0 major at 120) joined the party. The senior trio of Jad Alwawi (pin in 4:52 at 126), Carlos Munoz-Flores (15-5 major at 132), and Kaminski (4-3 at 138) all had big wins.

Miller (16-1 tech fall at 145), Swaw (pin in 2:54 at 160), Nolting (pin in 55 seconds at 182), Roberson (4-2 at 195), and Chrobak closed it out with a pin in 2:24 at heavyweight. Warren's team score was adjusted by a point for unsportsmanlike conduct.

The quarterfinal win was especially nice for Munoz-Flores, who had to withdraw from the individual state tournament after he qualified but injured his neck in the sectional competition. He would have qualified for the individual state finals but couldn't go with the injury. He was back in the lineup for the team state finals, however.

"There's still a lot of pain but at the end of the day, it came down to knowing it was for the team," Munoz-Flores said of wrestling in the team duals at state. "I'll put my body on the line for this team and I know these boys would do the same for me. That's what was going through my mind and what kept me in the match.

"It means so much to me to be with my team for this. It's unfortunate I didn't get to do it individually. But these boys, I love them all. They're all brothers to me and it felt great to have one last time with them."