

By Randy Whalen

Yes, they actually did it.

In a moment that was 22 years in the making, the Lockport Township boys swimming team was sectional champions.

To make it even better, that moment came at home as the Porters captured the title on Saturday, Feb. 18 at the Lockport Sectional.

It was the first sectional title for the Porters since 2001. That was their only one in history. Until that Saturday afternoon in February.

How did it feel to accomplish something for the first time in over two decades?

"It was very surreal," Lockport boys swimming coach Jason Ozbolt said. "Besides being excited and elated, there was a feeling of, 'did we actually do that?'"

Yes, they did. But it certainly wasn't easy. Lockport ended up edging Sandburg by 3.5 points. To show how hard it is to defeat a Sandburg swimming team in a sectional, the Eagles have captured 20 sectional championships since 1992. That includes 13 since 2004. Sandburg was a sectional champion last year.

But not this season. The final standings were Lockport (268.5 points), Sandburg (265), Andrew (151), and Oak Forest (150) were the top four teams. Brother Rice (146), Stagg (110.5), Richards (107), Shepard (62), Brooks (40), Julian (12), Agricultural Science (11), Eisenhower (8), and Bremen (4) rounded out the 13 team field.

To make things even more exciting, it came down to the final event.

"It came down to the last relay," Ozbolt said of the 400 freestyle relay. "Whoever won that would win the meet. The same thing as last year, except this time we won."

Yes, they did as the foursome of seniors Michael Erickson, Julian Moreno, Ryan O'Connor, and sophomore Shane Gabel turned in a winning time of 3 minutes: 18.96 seconds. Sandburg (3:21.84) was nearly three seconds behind and Brother Rice (3:30.82) was a distant third.

The winning team gets 32 points while second place garners 26 and third 24. Last year, Lincoln-Way East (3:15.55) edged out the Porters (3:17.65) by 2.1 seconds and won the Lincoln-Way Central Sectional 238-230.

This season the two teams were in different sectionals. But the result was the same for Lincoln-Way East as the Griffins captured the title of their own sectional. It was their 14th sectional championship since 2005 and the eighth straight in seasons with a sectional (there was not one in 2021 because of COVID).

"This year we were behind after the first two swimmers," Ozbolt said of the sectional. "But our last two guys (O'Connor and Gabel) blew them out of the water."

It was one of two relays that the Porters won at the sectional. They also captured the 200-yard freestyle relay as Gabel, Moreno, O'Connor, and Erickson turned in a winning time of 1:30.01 to edge Sandburg by 1.62 seconds.

Individually, Lockport had five champions. Erickson (4:58.52) won the 500-yard freestyle. Gabel captured the 50-yard freestyle (21.35 seconds) and the 100-yard freestyle (48.37 seconds), while O'Connor won both the 100-yard backstroke (53.44 seconds) and the 200-yard individual medley (1:58.33).

"Awesome is exactly what it was," O'Connor said of the team winning the sectional. "As the meet went on, every event built onto the excitement and the pressure. But training and preparation made it easy to handle. We never felt like more of a team than we did (at the sectional)."

In the diving competition, freshman Andy Giorgetti (446.60) was second, finishing just behind sophomore Logan De la Vega (452.80) from Andrew. Porter freshman Logan Fields (364.10) placed sixth.

Grant Ferkaluk, who is the head girls swimming coach at Lockport and was the head boys coach for a decade before Ozbolt took over, has been back as a boys assistant coach for the past five years. He was an assistant coach on the So he's been around the program and knows what it meant to win a sectional.

"We have a flair for the dramatic, that's for sure," Ferkaluk said. "But it was not only the 400 freestyle relay at the end, we had to get in position to do that. In the event before that, the 100-yard breaststroke, our guys (senior) Charlie Pluth (5th, 1:05.97) and (sophomore) Zachary Piechocinski (11th, 1:11.06) got us points (10 and 2) or we wouldn't even have been in a position to win at the end. Both of those guys did well.

"Anytime you win a sectional, it's special. That was the goal at the beginning of the season and it has the greatest meaning in swimming. I wouldn't say this is the best team we've had. We've had a lot of great teams over the past 20 years. But just for these guys to take advantage and know what they had to do and be able to go out and do it. I know it was special for Oz (Ozbolt)."

Also participating in the sectional for the Porters were seniors Shaw Carlson and Sebastian Lesnicki, junior Jacob Baltiewicz (4th in the 100-yard butterfly - 57.33 seconds, and 5th in the 100-yard backstroke - 59.17 seconds), and freshman Ian Allen.

At the State Finals, which were held on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 24 and 25, at the FMC Natatorium in Westmont, Lockport had no one advance past the preliminaries on Friday.

Erickson finished the 500-free in 4:57.28 (28th). O'Connor turned in a time of 1:59.41 (29th) in the 200-yard IM and a mark of 53.68 seconds (32nd) in the 100-backstroke, while Gabel swam the 50-free in 21.98 seconds (37th) and the 100-free in 49.38 seconds (34th). In the 200-free relay, Lockport was 31st in a time of 1:31.30, and in the 400-free relay, the Porters placed 32nd in a time of 3:24.57. In diving, Giorgetti was 33rd with a score of 181.95.

"We did a little better in (the 500-free) time and still had a lot of guys there," Ozbolt said of state. "It was great for our seniors and a good experience for Andy in diving and Shane, who will look to be back in the next two or three years."

But what will always be remembered is the thrill and accomplishment of winning a sectional, especially after a wait of over two decades.

"All the hard work, all the time, the long hours, they all paid off," Ozbolt said. "A really great thing was the amount of alumni and people at Lockport that reached out to congratulate us."

Also, Ozbolt was named the Sectional Swim Coach of the Year, and Lockport diving coach Kris Norton was also named the Sectional Diving Coach of the Year.

That was a fitting honor for Ozbolt, who is stepping down from his head coaching position to take an assistant principal job at the Lockport Freshman Center Campus starting this coming fall.

"I've been swimming since I was six, and I swam here at Lockport," said Ozbolt, who graduated in 2000. "I've also been coaching here since I started in 2004. So it was time and a good move for my family and myself."

"We have a core of coaches that have been here and I'm confident that we won't miss a beat."