

By Randy Whalen

Paige Matiasek only knows one feeling at the end of a season.

To be on a State Championship team.

Now a senior with the Lockport Township girls bowling team, Matiasek believes she can experience that feeling one more time.

"This season we have a very different team with a lot of underclassmen," Matiasek said. "I look at myself as a leader and I'm going to have to push myself. This team means a lot to me and we have a great chance to be on top again. We just need to have the underclassmen step up. The team is going well and we just need to communicate.

"Every year that I bowled in the state finals at Homer Junior High, we won it. I'm the anchor bowler and I love that role. That has stood out and shows me how much I want it."

Matiasek has committed to Division 1, Tulane University to continue her bowling career.

When she was in sixth and seventh grade at Homer Junior High, in 2018 and 2019, Mariasek helped the Mustangs to the Illinois Elementry School Association State Championship. When she was in eighth grade in 2020 and then a freshman on the Lockport varsity in 2021, there was no state tournament held due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Porters, however, won the unofficial State Championship in 2021. That took place on Sunday, Feb. 28, 2021, at the Hononegah Invite, which was held at Forest Hills Lanes in Loves Park. There Lockport slipped past Harlem by a final count of 5,963-5,910. Although she didn't bowl in that tourney, Matiasek was on the team.

She was among the Top Four bowlers on the team that won it in 2022 and then was the anchor bowler and had a key strike that helped seal the deal this past February when the Porters rallied to topple Joliet West by 33 pins to win their third straight official State Title.

As usual, the Porters opened their dual meet schedule this season with a match against Joliet West. That took place on Monday, Nov. 27, at Town and Country Lanes in Joliet. There Matiasek rolled a 634 three-game series, including a 249 in the opener to help Lockport edge the Tigers by a count of 2764-2750. But both teams know it's the end of the season that matters.

"Joliet West lost two starters from last season's team and we lost four," Matiasek said. "They have a phenomenal team and we have a good chance of meeting again."

Also, as usual, Lockport kicked off its season on Saturday, Nov. 25, at the Rock Island Invite. There the shorthanded Porters placed third with Lauren Lane finishing 12th and fellow senior Kadie Kontos coming in at ninth overall. But Matiasek and her younger sister, freshman Alyvia Matiasek, weren't there.

They have been back ever since, however, as Lockport captured the team title on Dec. 2 at the Palatine Invite, which was held at Bowlero Bowl Deer Park, in Lake Zurich. There Kontos came in 12th, sophomore Brooke Stroud was third and Paige Matiasek took the top individual honors.

Following the early Joliet West win, the Porters have won dual meets against a trio of good teams to improve to 4-0. Those were against Oswego (on Dec. 4 at Parkside Lanes in Aurora), and then a pair of SouthWest Suburban Conference ones. First against Andrew, which was fourth in the state last season, on Dec. 5 at Thunder Bowl in Mokena, and then against Lincoln-Way West in the home opener on Thursday, Dec. 7, at Strike N Spare II in Lockport.

It's been a neat thing for the Matiasek sisters to be together on the same team this season.

"When it comes down to it, we've been bowling our whole lives," Paige Matiasek said of her and Alyvia. "I told her that I need her, the team needs her, and we need each other."

In their most recent tournament, the Porters got off to a rough start and didn't do as well as they usually do.

That was at the state's largest girls' bowling invite. That was the Plainfield North Strikefest, which was held on Saturday, Dec. 9, at Town & Country Lanes in Joliet.

Lockport only had one game over 1,000 and finished with a total of 5,584 total which still placed them in the Top 10 in the prestigious tournament.

Harlem. out of Machesney Park won it. The Huskies, who finished third in the state last season behind Lockport and Joliet West, rolled a 6,184 total. They got off to a great start by bowling the top game of the day, a 1,159, in the opener. Joliet West had a 1,057 opening game.

After Joliet West had a 1,044 score to open the afternoon session and drew within 16 pins following the fourth game, the Huskies came back with a 1,129 in the fifth game to restore their lead to 154 over Collinsville and 209 over the Tigers. Harlem has seven state championships, which is tied with Lockport for the most in state history.

Following the morning session, Strikefest is divided into four divisions, with the Top 12 teams making the Gold Division. Joliet West rallied for a 1,013 score in the sixth game to edge Collinsville (5,959) by four pins for second. But Collinsville had the top individual bowler in sophomore Laila Jaoko (1,404) who finished with a 266 final game. Plainfield East junior Amber Bozych (1,343, high of 249 in Game 3) placed second.

The rest of the Gold Division team scores were, Macscoutah (5,811), Minooka (5,735), Oswego (5,680), Andrew (5,649), Hononegah (5,643), Oswego East (5,626), Lockport (5,580), Richards (5,435), and Stagg (5,297).

Last year, Joliet West (6,041) won Strikefest. But it's still December and, just like last season, everyone knows it will all come down to the State Finals, which will be held on Friday and Saturday, February 16-17, at The Cherry Bowl in Rockford.

"The end of the season is the only thing that matters," Lockport coach Lynda Siezega said. "We never do well here (at Strikefest), so I didn't care where we finished as long as we learn something from it and get better."

For the second straight season, a poor start helped do-in the Porters at Strikefest. They had an 828 in the opening game and were 16th this year. But last season they rolled a 778 in the first game. That put them in 27th place out of the 44 teams there.

But Lockport (5,599) rebounded from that start to place fifth. Bowling on its home lanes, Joliet West (6,041) was first a year ago. That was the only competition that the Porters didn't win last season.

They were only 19 pins worse this season but other teams did better. Individually this year, Kontos, led the way with a 15th place medalist place, bowling a 1,222 total. That included a high of 257 in the second game.

"I was able to lead the team when some others were struggling," Kontos said. "I was glad I could come up and do that as a senior. I was just consistent with hitting my target."

Kontos, who comes from a long-line of bowling family, knows there is room for improvement if the Porters want to be back on top this February.

"We struggled some (at Strikefest) so we have to work on our spares and target practice. We know we have to continue to uphold our tradition. That's a lot of pressure but we know we can do it."

Paige Matiasek (38th, 1,158 total, high of 225 in Game 2), and Alyvia Matiasek (48th, 1,104, high of 242 in Game 5) were also in the Top 50 for Lockport. Lane (1,049, high of 197 in Game 2) and Stroud (1,047, high of 200 in Game 6) rounded out the Porter scores.

Lockport hosts its invite this Saturday, Dec. 16, starting at 9 AM at Strike N Spare II. That will bring another matchup with Joliet West and Andrew among other top teams.

"We can be competitive with anyone," Siezega said. "We just have things to work on, like spares, as always. We just have to keep setting goals and working on them."