

By Randy Whalen

In a high school bowling season, a dual meet can sometimes be an afterthought as the teams look forward to weekend tournaments, as they are more like what will happen in the postseason.

But the Lockport Township boys' bowling team dual meet against Joliet West was anything but an afterthought. It was just what the Porters needed.

In a 3-game match, Lockport got hot in the second game and stayed there, going on to a 3,338-3,123 win over the host Tigers on Thursday, Dec. 21 at Town & Country Lanes in Joliet.

"The guys came to play, that's for sure," Lockport boys bowling coach Ron Davis said. "We had back-to-back games of 1,232 and 1,137, and that's what it takes to win state. but yes, we have to do it for 12 games over two days (at state)."

But against Joliet West, the Porters did it in the second and third games, to rally for a 200-plus pin victory. In the 3-game scoring that was used, since that is how the Southwest Prairie does it, the low score in each game gets tossed out. Joliet West won the first game, 1,030-969. The Tigers rolled a 1,106 in the second game and then had a 987 in the finale.

"I love bowling against the SPC because we get to bowl three games," Davis said. "I wish our conference (SouthWest Suburban Conference) would do that too. Especially since the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) doesn't recognize anything less than a 3-game series in its record book."

A key for the Porters was that their six bowlers were all within 101 pins of each other. So they were very consistent and everyone averaged nearly 200 or better. Senior Ross Karraker led the way with a 700 series, with every game over 200 and a high of 255 in the second game.

"I just have to not get upset when I'm not bowling well, I just have to keep my head up," Karraker said of what the key was for him. "We've just had good chemistry and we keep each other up when we are doing bad."

Karraker was on the team that fell apart down the stretch last season, falling from second to eighth in the last two games, and didn't advance out of the sectional. That was the Plainfield North Sectional on Saturday, Jan. 21 at Town & Country Lanes.

So being on the same lanes and going up against the Tigers, who advanced to state last season, were motivational for Lockport.

"Yes, it does motivate us," Karraker said of last season's sectional. "We don't want that to happen this season. "It was extra motivation to bowl against (the Tigers) because we will see them in the regional. The lanes here were good (in the dual meet). We just have to keep positive."

Davis has seen the change in Karraker this season.

"Ross has quietly bowled better," Davis said. "He's got upset about last year and bowled well."

In the Joliet West match, Aaron Chrusciel, a sophomore, had a 675 with a 268 in the second game. Senior Steven Talaski (653, high of 239 in Game 3), freshman Nate Cantrall (625, high of 264 in Game 2), senior Aaron Wendell (602, high of 257 in Game 3), and sophomore Austin LiCausi (599, high of 222 in Game 2) rounded out the scores for the Porters.

For Cantrall, it was his varsity debut and he made quite a splash with the 264.

"Coach Ron put me on varsity for the first time and I was just trying to help the team get back to state and win one for coach," Cantrall said. "I was a little nervous coming in but I just slowed down and took some deep breaths and felt better."

Cantrall was on the Homer Junior High team that placed seventh in the state last year and he placed 25th individually. So he's been in big bowling situations before. But a changed approach has also helped.

"I started as a one-handed bowler but switched to being a two-handed bowler a year ago," Cantrall said. "That has given me more power on the ball. Joliet West has some good talent but you just have to come out, bowl, and see what happens."

Davis believes in his team and knows someone like Cantrall can come through in big situations.

"This year I have guys that aren't always confident in their ability but they can do it," Davis said. "(Against Joliet West) is an example with Nate. In the second game, he had the front seven and that's what I like to see."

Joliet West sophomore Alex Sanchez led all scores by rolling a season-high 743, which included a 277 in the opening game.

"I left a 10 pin in the eighth frame and had a 7-10 split in the 10th frame," Sanchez said of his 277 game. "I had a 704 series earlier this season. "I used one ball (the infused) but I also used a spare ball."

"They (the Porters) bowled well. But I was just focused on coming out strong and doing well for myself and my team."

Also bowling all three games and doing well for the Tigers against Lockport was junior Tyler MacDonald (681, including 268 in Game 1) along with seniors Jaylen Clemons (559, high of 195 in Game 3) and Bryce Jinks (543, high of 225 in Game 2). Bowling the final two games for the Tigers were seniors Matt Ruffolo (325, 167 in Game 2) and Mike Skole (315, 175 in Game 2). Sophomore Jacob Landando (151) and junior Brody Johnson (136) bowled the first game for Joliet West.

"They bowled great," Joliet West coach Reggie Lee said of the Porters. "I was teammates with Ron (Davis) in league and told him how well his team bowled. That's why I always want to bowl Lockport, it prepares us for where we are going."

The Porters got prepared for where they are going in the postseason by not only bowling against Joliet West right before Christmas but also by bowling in the Oswego East Tournament right after Christmas. That was held on Wednesday, Dec. 27 at Landmark Lanes in Peoria.

There was a strong field with a trio of the Top Five teams in the state present. The Porters placed third, finishing ahead of Harlem, which is ranked second. The top five teams at the tourney were Mascoutah (6,288), O'Fallon (6,246), Lockport (6,120), Harlem (6,018), and Breese Central (5,989). The Porters had games of 1,069, 992, 1,040, 1,135, 943, and 941.

LiCausi led Lockport with a 1,293 series, including a high of 290 in the fourth game, which placed him eighth overall, Wendell was next in 13th place with a 1,265, which included a 255 in the fourth game. Cantrall didn't bowl every game but had a 238 in the fourth game.

The Porters host the SWSC Tournament on Saturday, Jan. 6 at Strike N Spare II in Lockport. They will be looking to win their first conference championship since 2021 but 12th since 2006.

When the postseason opens, which is soon with the regionals on January 13, Joliet West and Lockport will both be in the Naperville Central Regional, which will be held at Lisle Lanes. The Top Four teams from there will advance to the Sandburg Sectional, which will be held on January 20 at Palos Lanes in Palos Hills.

Both teams also hope to be at the State Finals, which will be held on Friday, Jan. 26, and Saturday, Jan. 27 at St. Clair Bowl in O'Fallon.

"For us, being in the same regional as Joliet West and to go into their house and win is good for my guys," Davis said. "Every day is a different day but we have the ability to be the best."

"The kids are coming around and staying within themselves. I like where we are now. There is all good stuff and a lot of positive mojo."