

By Randy Whalen

"Rubber duckie you're the one, you make practice time lots of fun."

OK, the old Sesame Street song doesn't quite go like that. But that's exactly what has worked for the Lockport Township boys swimming team this season.

Especially in the results of the Porters' first meet of the new calendar year, which was a home triangular on Tuesday, January 2, against Bolingbrook and Joliet Township.

Nick Surman has taken over as the head coach for the Porter boys program this season. He used a rather unique method to help junior Shane Gabel with his technique.

"It's going well," said Gabel, who is a 3-year varsity veteran. "Nick has done a lot to help my technique and now it's a lot smoother.

"We have a bunch of sets where we wear drag socks in the pool. That helps us with resistance. He's also had me put a rubber duck on my head. That's to help keep my head straight, especially in the backstroke."

It worked as Gabel turned in a time of just over a minute (1:00.24) to edge Joliet Township senior Tate Thomas by .11 of a second to win the 100-yard backstroke.

"Honestly, the rubber duck was something I did with younger swimmers," Surman said. "It was an age group thing, but it worked with Shane. His technique has really improved."

Lockport (271 points) easily won the triangular meet. The Porters won just three events but dominated the diving. Joliet (168) was second, and Bolingbrook (144), which is only in its third season as a program, placed third.

Winning first in diving for the Porters was Logan Fields (238.60) while fellow sophomore Andy Giorgetti (219.70) was second. In addition to Gabel capturing the backstroke, the 200-yard medley relay team of senior Jake Balitewicz, freshman Adrian Ogrodny, Gabel, and sophomore Ian Allen turned in a time of 1:48.81 and won by seven seconds. Jacob Nacional won two events for Bolingbrook. Those were the 200-yard IM (2:09.91) and the 100-yard butterfly (56.94 seconds). Senior Thomas Bohnert also won the 100-yard breaststroke (1:14.40) for the Raiders.

Joliet Township, which is a co-op between Joliet Central and Joliet West, won six events. Joliet captured the 400-yard freestyle relay as junior Ben Clark, sophomore Vaughn Craven, junior Elliot Martillo, and Thomas had a time of 3:39.00 to win by five seconds. The 200-yard freestyle relay team of Martillo, Craven, Thomas, and Clark also finished first with a time of 1:37.87, winning by over two seconds.

Clark, who is looking to qualify for state for the third straight season. won the 500-yard freestyle by over 16 seconds at the meet with a time of 5:11.8 seconds. Although it's not his normal event, he also captured the 200-yard freestyle by seven seconds with a time of 1:54.7.

Also capturing first for Joliet was Craven (25.62 seconds) in the 50-yard freestyle and Thomas, won by nearly three seconds with a time of 52.45 seconds in the 100-yard freestyle.

The Lockport 200-yard freestyle relay foursome of Orogodny, junior Davin Mikulcik, junior Zach Piechocinski, and freshman Colin Santiago turned in a time of 1:40.22 to finish second in the 200-yard freestyle relay. In the 400-yard freestyle relay, it was Allen, Balitewicz, senior Quinn Stanislawski, and Gabel placing second with a mark of 3:44.14.

Placing second individually for the Porters was Orogodny (2:01.73) in the 200-yard freestyle. Balitewicz (25.90 seconds) in the 50-yard freestyle, Gabel (5:28.13) in the 500-yard freestyle, Santiago (1:14.47) in the 100-yard breaststroke, and Allen and Santiago (55.14 seconds) tied for second in the 100-yard freestyle.

Last year the Porters won a sectional title for the first time in 22 years. But they graduated a lot of seniors and coach Jason Ozbolt left to take a different position at the school.

The expectations are still high for this season, however.

"The sectional title was so memorable and exciting," Balitewicz, a 4-year varsity swimmer said. "I think about it and was glad to contribute to it. It's something I'll never forget.

"We lost a lot of seniors from that team but it's nice to have new kids here and build the team up. We had coach Oz (Ozbolt) for three years and now Nick is here. We have some same stuff but also some things are different."

Gabel likes this season's team dynamic.

"We have become more of a team," Gabel said. "I can see how we've come together as a team and how we can bounce back."

Surman, a 2006 Lockport graduate, is very happy to be the head coach and finds the fact that he has his old head coach as one of his assistants, to be pretty cool.

"Ferk (Grant Ferkaluk) is helping out," Surman said. "I swam under him and now I get to boss him around.

"But when I was swimming at Lockport I had no idea that I'd be the head coach here one day. But soon after high school, it came out pretty quickly that I love coaching. I started coaching water polo and then transitioned to swimming. I really, really love it."

Lockport is in the Sandburg Sectional this season on Saturday, Feb. 17, and will face good competition from Andrew, Stagg, and the host Eagles. But Surman is looking for the Porters to be right in the mix there again in the end.

"We got off to a slow start and have room to improve," Surman said. "Being new, they are learning my expectations. We're not looking at the results now as much. As always, we are looking toward the sectional."