

By Randy Whalen

Sophie Kelner epitomizes the Lockport Township girls wrestling team.

Tough and hard-working, Kelner didn't even know about the sport a couple of years ago. Now she's wrestling at 190 pounds and is a sophomore dynamo for the Porters.

"It's the best thing I've ever done," Kelner said of wrestling. "It keeps me active and healthy. I did some dance when I was younger but this gives me a passion to try to improve. It's my whole life."

As the postseason opens this weekend, Kelner and the rest of the Porters will look to advance as many wrestlers as possible out of the regional.

There was good news and bad news for Lockport heading into the postseason. The good news is that top wrestler, sophomore Claudia Heeney recently returned to the lineup. Heeney placed second at state at 125 pounds last season. But the bad news is that senior and team captain Liz Ramirez, who was wrestling at 115 pounds and qualified for state at that weight last year, broke her arm at practice in mid-January and is lost for the season.

While Heeney is back after missing five weeks due to a thumb injury, her impact on the team is immeasurable. Her influence got Kelner to come out for wrestling.

"Claudia and I became friends at Homer Junior High," Kelner said. "She said to go to open mats so I did and loved it. The best thing for me about the sport is that I learn something every day, win or lose. For the heavier weights, it's all about strength.

"I'm very happy to be in the sport and on the team. I think the team is very strong right now. Everyone is working hard to be the best that they can be for the postseason."

After having an invite at Hoffman Estates, which was scheduled on Friday, January 12, and Saturday, January 13, canceled because of winter weather, the Porters squared off in a SouthWest Suburban Conference triangular meet on Thursday, January 18 at Homewood-Flossmoor.

The triangular also included Andrew, which is the District 230 co-op team. H-F defeated Lockport 42-33. Andrew won the tri with a 48-24 win over H-F. Andrew defeated the Porters 54-30.

Posting wins via pin for Lockport in the Andrew match were junior Averil Colella (at 105 pounds), sophomore Veronica Skibicki (110), Heeney (130), sophomore Dakota Obbish (155), and freshman Rebekah Ramirez (235).

Despite the losses, Lockport coach Nate Roth is optimistic for the postseason.

"The team is looking great right now," Roth said. "We have been working hard and preparing all season for regionals and we are really looking forward to showing what we can do out there. We did have an extremely unfortunate injury when team captain Liz Ramirez, broke her arm at practice. That was a really rough day, but the other girls are bouncing back from that and using it to fuel the fire and finish the season strong."

Colella has finished first at two invites this season. Those were at Oak Forest (Dec. 27) and Conant (Jan. 6). She's ready and looking forward to the postseason.

"Those were my first time winning a bracketed tournament," Colella said. "I love wrestling. I've learned so much more this season. It's so gratifying to get those wins."

She didn't think much about the sport before high school and now loves it.

"It was very random," Colella said. "I just thought, 'What if I do this.' So I just went to open mat and fell in love with it. You have to be so determined and persevere. I like the challenge."

"I got to the fourth match at sectionals last year but lost. I'm glad we have regionals this year. The sport has grown so much that we need to have regionals before sectionals."

Back on January 10, Lockport had a neat thing as it participated in a triangular meet against TF South and Joliet Township at Joliet Junior College. The Porters split the bouts, losing a close one by a score of 42-40 to Joliet, and defeating TF South 36-30.

The triangular was the first wrestling event held at the new JJC events center. The school has both men's and women's wrestling, but they wrestle in the older part of the school.

In the TF South match, it was Colella, in 51 seconds, and freshman Ella Vicario, in 3:53, getting pins. Skibicki, Obbish, Kelner, and Rebekah Ramirez all registered forfeit wins.

The Porters lost the actual bout to an excellent Joliet team, which won the Southwest Prairie Conference championship. But there were a lot of exhibition matches and Lockport won many of those. Colella registered a 12-3 major decision at 105 to get Lockport on the board.

Having pins for the Porters were Skibicki (in 30 seconds at 110), freshman Bella Romando (in 5:07 at 120), sophomore Kyleigh Green (in 3:06 at 125), junior Kira Lopez (in 3:32 at 170), Kelner (in 1:31 at 190), and Rebekah Ramirez (in 57 seconds at 235).

In the exhibition bouts, Colella (in 1:12 at 105), Skibicki (in 3:08 at 110), Green (in 54 seconds at 125) Rebekah Ramirez (in 53 seconds at 235) had pins.

Lockport and 43 other schools will compete at the Shepard Regional, which will be held this Friday and Saturday, January 27 and 28. The top individuals from there advance to the Schaumburg Sectional, which will be on Friday and Saturday, February 9 and 10. The State Finals will held on Friday and Saturday, February 23 and 24 at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington.

As the regional approaches we are looking to tighten our focus on what we are good at and get as many girls out of regionals as we can," Roth said. "I am expecting big things from junior Averii Colella, and sophomores Lucy Madrigal, Sophie Kelner, and of course, Claudia Heeney.

"The rest of the team is also doing a great job, but we are still fighting through some injuries as well as inexperience. We are a young team and are looking to grow and improve over the next few years."