

By Randy Whalen

Success is nothing new for the Lockport Township competitive cheer team.

But having to replace over a dozen spots off of last year's squad, the Porters weren't sure exactly how this season would go.

It's gone amazingly well.

On Saturday, January 27, Lockport won the Large School Division of the Hinsdale South Competitive Cheer Sectional. The Top 5 out of the sectional advance to this weekend's Illinois High School Association State Finals, which will be held on Friday and Saturday, February 2-3, at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington.

It was the 12th sectional championship and 8th in the past 10 years for the Porters in the 19 years that the IHSA has held a state competition. Lockport has made it to state all 19 years.

Lockport already has a school record 12 trophies in the sport, with four first-place finishes, five seconds, and three thirds, including third in Large School last year. The Porters will look to add to that total this weekend.

"We graduated 13 seniors and had two that couldn't come back for various reasons," Lockport coach Jenny Mercado said of this season's team. "So we had 15 people to replace and I didn't know how well everything would go. But they've stepped up and exceeded expectations."

Nina Fiorillo, a senior and four-year varsity cheer member, was also happy with how everyone has stepped up.

"It's going really amazing," Fiorillo said. "We have a new team and we've come a long way and it's really awesome. We've come a long way and it's just confidence out there."

"There's so much energy at our cheer sectional. Now there's one to go."

Fellow 4-year senior, Grace Gad also says that the hard work pays off.

"It's awesome and we've put in a lot of hard work," Gad said. "We've all come together and there's a lot of energy and confidence. It's a lot of work and we've worked for it."

Gad believes that being in the same conference, the SouthWest Suburban Blue, as Lincoln-Way East and Sandburg also helps. Lincoln-Way East (7), Lockport (4), and Sandburg (3) have combined for 14 state championships.

"It lights a fire under us," Gad said. "It wouldn't be the same without this competition."

Ally Namikas, a 3-year varsity member, credits her coaches, including assistants Danielle Calabrese and Alex Mercado for pushing the team to be excellent.

"The coaches put in the time and the effort and make us who we are," Namikas said. "They make it fun and challenging for us and we love the sport. This team is special."

The state team is made up of seniors Alyssa Connell, Fiorillo, Gad, Lindsey Kajmowicz, Namikas, Corinne Nowak, Bianca Richie, and Emme Sweis. Junior Justyn Boyce, sophomores Kennedy Bensfield, Keagan Brown, Maggie Calabrese, Morgan Ebert, Carly Fiorillo, Payton Judd, Gianna Lavaty, Jordyn Lyerla, Makaylah Parker, Mia Pasco, and Jade Penzkofer, along with freshmen Lola Alex, Emma Brutus, Kennedy Hedinger, and Emma Smith.

The Large School standings at the Hinsdale South Sectional were Lockport placing first with a score of 95.27. Sandburg (93.47), Plainfield North (88.30), Andrew (87.98), and Richards (87.70) were the five teams that advanced to state.

"We had one little mistake at the end," Jenny Mercado said of the sectional performance. "But we had an excellent performance otherwise and I was really happy."

The Porter's 95.27 score was the third-highest of any team in the state in the sectionals. Only South Elgin (96.27 in the Co-Ed Division) and Lincoln-Way East (95.82 in the Large School Division) had higher scores in the state that day.

The rest of the Large School standings at Hinsdale Central were, Yorkville (87.17), Joliet West (87.12), Plainfield East (86.20), Downers Grove North (85.80), Mother McAuley (84.60), Oak Lawn Community (84.33), Plainfield Central (82.15), Downers Grove South (82.12), TF South (80.78), Argo (71.30), and Eisenhower (69.50).

The sectional title was the seventh of the season for the Porters, who have won every competition this season. They started the competition season with a first-place finish at the Lincoln-Way East North Pole Invite (on December 9). Next was the championship of the Joliet West Invite (on December 17), followed by the Lake Zurich Invite and the Buffalo Grove Bison Invite on back-to-back days (on January 6 and 7),

Lockport hosted its own Porter Frost Invitational (on January 13). While the Porters don't allow themselves to win their own invite, they would have won it. Then, on Friday, January 19, Lockport won the SWSC Blue championship at Andrew. It was the seventh conference championship for the Porters, including three co-ed, with all of them coming since 2017.

"We've got first in all our competitions this season," Jenny Mercado said. "That's never happened that I can remember. The talent in this area is unbelievable so it's really a testament to this team and all the hard work they put in. It's awesome."