

By Randy Whalen

A post by the Lockport Township Athletic Department on X shortly after Lockport cheer saw its season end summed it up best.

"Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." Congrats! 3rd place finish IHSA State 2024, the post read.

Yes, certainly smile because it happened. While the Porters planned to be on top once again this season, it was truly another special one. They placed third at the Illinois High School Association Large School State Finals, which were held on Friday and Saturday, February 2-3, at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington.

"We had an amazing season and an awesome group of girls," Lockport coach Jenny Mercado said. "Third place is something to be super proud of. We don't take it for granted and we cherish that trophy and that we got to bring it back to Lockport."

Alyssa Connell, who is one of eight seniors on the team, agreed.

"To still get third and walk across the podium is an accomplishment," Connell said. "But after the second day, I felt defeated. But even though I still felt proud that we left everything on the mat."

It was the second straight season, third time in the past five years, fourth time in seven seasons, and fifth time overall (2009 was the other) that the Porters have taken third in their state category. They have four second-place finishes (2006, 2010, 2012, 2015) and four state championships (2007, 2008, 2020, 2021).

Lockport has 13 trophies in the 19 seasons that competitive cheerleading has been an IHSA sport. That's the most by any team in school history. It's also second to Lemont, which won the Medium School State Title for the seventh time this past Saturday with a score of 97.94 and now has 15 total trophies, in state history.

It's hard to say, but a music mishap may have cost the Porters a title this season.

"It was hard to accept," Mercado said of the music starting late in the final performance. "A music glitch threw them off and that was tough. I'm not sure what happened but the music started late and the girls missed their cue."

Since cheer is a single performance-based sport that is limited in its time, there isn't a time out or a do-over, like some other sports.

"Even if we would have restarted, we would have got a time deduction," Mercado explained. "That was a first. I heard it happened to some other teams too but I didn't see it."

But there was a deduction in the final performance on Saturday that hurt Lockport.

"We got a deduction for a missed skill in the pyramid," Mercado said. "I wasn't sure if we would get the deduction but I also thought if we did that we wouldn't place in the Top 3. So to get third was still great."

In the final Large School Standings, it was Marist winning with a score of 96.32. It was the first state championship for the RedHawks, who had placed second four times (2013, 2018, 2019, 2022) in the Large School Division. It was also the 17th time and 13th straight seasons that a school from the south suburbs won the Large School title.

Edwardsville (95.90) was second and Lockport (94.99) placed third. Lincoln-Way East (91.85), which had won seven of the previous 10 Large School titles took fourth. Huntley (91.68), Lincoln-Way Central (89.60), Sandburg (89.20), Schaumburg (88.06), Maine South (86.96), and Andrew (86.6) rounded out the Top 10 teams. An incredible five of those teams were from the SouthWest Suburban Conference.

Toss in Homewood-Flossmoor, which took eighth in the Co-Ed Division, and there were a half dozen of the 10 SWSC teams in the Top 10 in the state. The Porters were at the top of that list.

"I was really proud of the team," Lockport senior Emme Sweis said. "We overcame that music mishap. It was on the 8-count and it started about eight seconds late. It threw us off. I heard it happened to one or two other teams and I'm not sure why.

"But I will always remember the bond, the dynamic between all of us. We were all so close and a group of sisters."

The state team was made up of seniors Connell, Nina Fiorillo, Grace Gad, Lindsey Kajmowicz, Ally Namikas, Corinne Nowak, Bianca Richie, and Sweis. Also 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.

Danielle Calabrese and Alex Mercado are the assistant coaches.

At state, 25 teams qualify in the four classes. In the opening round, on that Friday, Lockport had the best Large Division score with a 96.64. Edwardsville (94.72), Marist (93.52), Sandburg (93.44), Andrew (90.72), Schaumburg (90.48), Lincoln-Way East (90.23), Huntley (89.24), Maine South (88.25), and Lincoln-Way Central (88.13) all advanced to the final day.

It was the 18th time in 19 seasons that the Porters advanced to the second day. Each performance is independent of the other though and the preliminary results don't carry over.

"It was unreal hitting that," Nowak said of the first day's routine. "But on the second day, it was my stunt that was off. We still came off the mat so happy with how we picked it up. We still got on the podium and that shows what a great program we have and how hard we work."

Connell agreed.

"After we hit it on Day 1 we felt really good," she said. "And after the music mishap, I thought we hit it and recovered well."

The only season that the Porters didn't make the Top 10 was in 2014, when they placed 11th (87.82), missing the final day by .22 of a point.

"Our Friday performance was awesome and there was a sense of relief that we made the Top 10 and we didn't have to stress the rest of the night," Jenny Mercado said. "We had a great group of eight seniors and showed great sportsmanship. I've worked with some of the Marist cheerleaders before and (Marist coach) Jordan Miller is a good friend of mine. So I was happy for them."

Kajmowicz was happy too. Not only to be a part of this special team but that her older brother Matt, along with Tommy DeSando, were on hand at state to chronicle both Lockport and Lemont's quest for a state championship.

"It was awesome having Matt there, it was very comforting," Kajmowicz said of her brother, who graduated last year. "We did interviews with Thomas (DeSando) too. It was very awesome. We were a team of sisters and so close. It's hard to accept that it's come to an end so soon."

Overall it was certainly an amazing season for the Porters. They graduated 13 seniors and had two others that didn't come back. So they had to replace 15 total spots and did that with flying colors. They won every competition they were in up until the final day of the season.

"Coming into this year there were a lot of doubts," Richie said. "Coming here (to state) with our hard routine and hitting it felt really good.

"To get third was a mixture of emotions. It was disappointing because we knew we could win it. But to get third and for me, my fourth time going across the podium felt really great."