

By Randy Whalen

The goals for the Lockport Township boys wrestling team are always the same.

Get as many people to the individual state tournament as possible and advance to state in the dual team format too.

So while on the surface, this season's results are as grandiose as in years past, the Porters are young. So advancing nine wrestlers out of a very loaded regional and three of those to the Illinois High School Association State Finals this Thursday-Saturday, February 15-17 at The State Farm Center in Champaign, is very good.

But Lockport did see its streak of eight consecutive team regional titles come to an end on Saturday, February 3 at the Class 3A Joliet Central Regional. What contributed to that was that Joliet Catholic Academy not only moved up a class to 3A but showed why it's perhaps the top team in the state by advancing someone to the sectional in every weight class.

The Hilltoppers who won the Class 2A State Championship in 2022 and placed second last year, are close by. So by them jumping up a class due to their success multiplier, they were put in the regional and there wasn't much room for error by the other teams. That left only two other spots in each weight class as only the top three wrestlers advanced out of the regional.

The Porters had five top-four state finishes in the past eight completed seasons. That included a Class 3A State Title in 2016-17 and back-to-back third-place finishes the past two years.

"To get the team to state is always the goal," Lockport coach Jameson Oster said after the regional. "But JCA is very good. We have a young squad, so to get nine through to the sectional, with a good amount of guys wrestling above their seed, was great."

The final team standings were JCA winning with 269.5 points. Lockport (164.5), Normal Community (116), Joliet Central (94.5), Minooka (94), Joliet West (82.5), Romeoville (60), and Pekin (19) rounded out the eight-team regional.

At the regional, the Porters had a pair of first-place finishers, a second and six third-place qualifiers. They also had two fourth-place finishers.

Sophomore Isaac Zimmerman at 126 pounds was the first of the Lockport champions at the regional. He won a very tough 6-5 decision over Joliet West's Coehn Weber in the finals, handing the freshman his first defeat since mid-December.

"It felt good," Zimmerman said of his regional title. "I just knew that I had to win three matches, so I went out and had fun.

"We're pretty young. We've got a bunch of sophomores in the lineup. So hopefully in the coming years, we will do better as a team."

Unfortunately for Zimmerman, he lost a rematch with Weber by the score of 11-7 in the blood round at the sectional to end his dream of going to state. Weber then placed fourth but moved on to the state finals.

At 138 pounds, sophomore Justin Wardlow placed first winning an 8-2 decision over JCA junior Elias Gonzalez.

"Believe and faith are my words of the year," Wardlow said. "It feels great to just keep performing and getting better. I just have to keep believing in God and believing in myself.

"It's disappointing that we didn't make it as a team. But now I have to focus on myself, click at the right time, go on and win the sectional and then the state."

Finishing second at 165 pounds was junior Durango Valles. In the title match, he dropped a 5-2 decision to JCA senior Max Corral.

The Porters went 6-2 in third-place matches. Winning their third-place matches and moving on to the sectional were freshman John Churnovic at 106, junior Timothy O'Connor at 113, junior Liam Zimmerman at 132, sophomore Naseem Jaber at 150, junior Drew Silzer at 157, and senior Wojtek Chrobak at heavyweight. Placing fourth was freshman Jaedon Calderon at 144, and senior Cyrus Czyz at 215 pounds.

The sectional was held on Friday, February 9, and Saturday, February 10 at Quincy. After making the long trek, Lockport qualified three for the State Finals.

Liam Zimmerman at 132 pounds is one of them as he survived the blood round and then improved to 33-14 with a pin in 4:42 Lincoln-Way East junior Tyson Zvonar (38-8) in the third place match. Also, at 165, Valles (37-14) won by a 16-6 major decision over Lincoln-Way East junior Rory Moran (6-2), who just started wrestling at the regional.

Isaac Zimmerman (33-14), who lost to Weber (35-10) in the blood round at 126, and Chrobak (28-17), who fell to Lincoln-Way West senior Nick Kavooras (39-11) 4-3 in the blood round at heavyweight, are

state alternates. Chrobak was pinned by Kavooras at 3:58 in the opening round but nearly won the blood-round rematch.

Wardlow (39-6) lived up to his word at 138, however. He had a bye in the first round, won a 7-3 decision in the quarterfinal, and was then dominant with an 11-2 major in the semifinal and a 13-3 major decision over Lincoln-Way West junior Luke Siwinski (28-13) in the title match.

It was another step for Wardlow, who burst on the scene as a freshman and placed second in the individual Class 3A State Tournament at 120 pounds.

But he didn't get to wrestle in the title match. He broke his elbow in the third period of the state semifinal but continued to go and held on for a 6-5 victory over Teddy Flores from Maine South.

With that win, he became the first Porter freshman to advance to the state championship match. But due to his injury, Wardlow couldn't wrestle for the title and medical forfeited to senior Massey Odiotti from Loyola Academy, who became the first state champion in that school's history.

Now Wardlow hopes to make history for the Porters and win state.

"I've been looking forward to it since last season," Wardlow said of getting to state. "I felt a little nervous out there to start. But I have to just execute the way I know how to and great things will happen."

A late-season highlight for the Porters was winning the title of the Tom Lahey Tournament on January 20 at Stagg. While other schools are usually at the event, this season it only consisted of teams from the SouthWest Suburban Conference.

So while the dual meet results determine the SWSC champions in both the Blue, which Lockport is in, and the Red Divisions, it was a nice accomplishment for the Porters to win the combined conference tourney.

The team standings were Lockport winning going away with 170.5 points. Lincoln-Way East (144), Lincoln-Way West (140), Sandburg (117), Lincoln-Way Central (114), Andrew (79.5), Bolingbrook (64), Stagg (51), Homewood-Flossmoor (36), and Bradley-Bourbonnais (22) rounded out the 10 teams.

Placing first individually was Wardlow at 138 and Valles at 165 pounds. Taking second was Liam Zimmerman (132), Calderon (144), and Chrobak (285). Placing third were Churnovic (106), O'Connor (113), junior Anthony Sutton (120), and Isaac Zimmerman (126). Finishing fourth was Silzer (157), sophomore Nuh Abukhudair (190), and Czyn (215).

"We lost to three of those teams during the season," Oster said of his squad dropping dual meets to Lincoln-Way East, Lincoln-Way West, and Sandburg. "But at the conference tournament, things went well and the kids wrestled above their seeds."

Now the remaining Porters have to do that for one final weekend this season.

"I believe in them," Oster said. "And good things can happen."