

By Randy Whalen

The Lockport Township girls' wrestling team did something amazing.

In only their third season as a program, the Porters took second in the state as a team.

That happened on Friday and Saturday, February 23 and 24 at the Illinois High School Association's Girls' Wrestling State Finals, which were held at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington.

The catalyst for this accomplishment was a pair of individual champions. Those were sophomores, Claudia Heeney at 130 pounds and Morgan Turner at 110 pounds as their state titles added a total of 57 to the Porter point total.

"To take second place is insane," Lockport coach Nate Roth said. "We wrestled great and I'm happy for the whole team. I didn't think this was possible at the beginning of the season.

"This is for those girls we have that weren't here at state too. We have a great team and girls that want it. They have done all the work, and want to be better and it shows. All credit to the girls, their love, passion, and commitment."

Roth is a 2002 Lockport graduate. He was one of two former Porter wrestlers who finished as state runner-up coaches on February 24. The other was Jake Oster, a 2005 graduate, who won the 112 pound state title for the Porters in 2004. Oster is now the head boys wrestling coach at Yorkville and the Foxes placed second in the Class 3A dual team tournament later that day.

It's the third year of the IHSA Girls Wrestling State Finals, but the first time that team trophies were awarded. Those were based on scoring from the individual tournament, just as the boys' team used to be before 1983.

Despite not having an individual state champion, Lakes, which is located in Lake Villa, won the team title with 61 points. The Eagles had second, third, and fifth-place finishers, as well as a fourth wrestler score five points. Lockport (58 points) was second and Batavia (46.5) placed third as the Top Three teams got trophies. Hoffman Estates (43), Schaumburg (43), Huntley (39), Peoria Richwoods (38), Burlington Central (34), Canton (33), and Zion-Benton (33) were the Top 10 teams.

"It's super exciting," Heeney said. "We have a hardworking room. Everyone's around to push each other to get better. That trophy means a lot."

Heeney's title also meant a lot. Especially after she placed second in the state last year at 125 pounds, losing to Freeport's Cadence Diduch by a 12-2 major decision. Diduch, who won the 120-pound title as a sophomore, captured the 135-pound championship this season and went undefeated (29-0) with a 10-1 major decision over Toledo Cumberland sophomore Natalie Beaumont (19-3) to complete an awesome 3-peat.

But Heeney, who finished 42-1 last year, flipped the tables this season as she beat a previously undefeated opponent. That was Collinsville junior Taylor Dawson (47-1), whom Heeney defeated 4-2 in the title match.

It was a defensive bout with a scoreless first period. Heeney started the second period in the down position and got a reversal early in the second to take a 2-0 lead. But Dawson had a reversal of her own before having to take an injury time out with 34 seconds left in the period.

"I have never been good on the bottom," Heeney said. "But I have been working with my coaches and working on my cradle defense."

That showed as the third period started with a 2-2 tie and Heeney was hurt 13 seconds into it as she was folded after starting in the down position. But there were no points and Heeney came back after a short break. She was able to hit a reversal again with 1:10 left and then showed every ounce of strength gained in all her workouts to hold Dawson down for the remainder of the time and win the championship.

In the end, the usually subtle sophomore celebrated with emotion, throwing her hands in the air as her coaches literally jumped up and down.

"There was such a moment of relief, happiness, and excitement after the match. I still can't believe it," Heeney said. "I tried not to take my loss (in the finals) last year too hard. I don't think I realized how big it was until now. I was telling myself 'I was going to be the state champ,' but I still can't believe it. There are so many emotions."

Heeney (21-1), whose only loss was 5-0 on December 2 to sophomore Chloe Sanders from Vinton-Shellsburg High School in Iowa at the prestigious Donnybrook Tournament at Xtream Arena in Coralville, Iowa, overcame a midseason thumb injury. That sidelined her for five weeks but she came back before the regional tournament.

Her thumb was still wrapped but she wasn't going to let that stop her.

"I was sitting out but once I came back, I knew I wanted it," Heeney said. "Even when I broke my thumb, I wanted to come and get this one."

At state, won her first three matches by pin. Those were in 5:33 over Tinley Park junior Simone Standifer, in 4:38 against Camp Point Central sophomore Amber Louderback in the quarterfinals, and then in 2:57 over Seneca sophomore Sammie Greisen in the semifinals.

Roth was so happy for Heeney.

"Claudia wrestled really well," he said. That girl (Dawson) was known for being tough on top but still going into the third period I felt good about Claudia being on the bottom. She did a great job.

"She's not very emotional, she's very in the zone. When she wins and she's like, 'OK, cool, I won. I usually win. It's fine.' So to see her so happy was just amazing. All of us coaches were so happy. I don't have words. It was phenomenal. I'm so proud of her."

Turner joined the girls team for the State Finals. She started the season with the Porter boys wrestling team and hoped to duplicate what she had done last season.

As a girl wrestling at Bremen High School as a freshman Turner made history at the 2023 IHSA Individual Boys Wrestling State Finals. She became the first female wrestler in IHSA history to place in the boys' tourney by placing third at 106 pounds in Class 2A.

So entering this season, Turner is looking for a state championship on the boys' team at 106 pounds. But she was in the girls' division at the Donnybrook Tournament, where she won her 105-pound weight class title and was named the Outstanding Wrestler for the tournament.

But a shoulder injury sidelined her for much of the boys' season. When the postseason started, she was cleared to wrestle on the girls' team only. So she joined the Porters at that point.

"It feels good," Turner said of the state championship. "It's what I came down here to do. My shoulder is still sore, but I am grateful the doctor cleared me to wrestle against girls. Wrestling against boys helped me in this tournament. The boys are stronger."

Turner (11-0) proved to be plenty strong at the state tournament. She started with a pin in 2:24 over Lakes junior Haven Sylves and then won by a 21-6 tech fall over senior Ella McDonnell from Morris. In the semifinal, Turner had another tech fall, this one 23-8 over Sandwich senior Ashlyn Strenz.

In the title match, Turner jumped out to another huge lead of 11-3 after one period. It was 13-3 when she pinned Joliet Township senior Eliana Paramo (37-4) at the 2:40 mark to win the championship.

"I felt like my first match was a little tough. But I feel like if I run the score up I have a gap just in case," Turner said of her big point totals. "So I try to build up a cushion."

Paramo, a two-time state finalist, lost to Glenbard North's Gabby Gomez by a 12-3 major decision at 115 pounds last year. All Gomez (38-0) did was win at 115 pounds again this season with a 4-3 victory over Loyola Academy junior Harlee Hiller. It was the third straight title for Gomez, who was 33-0 last year and 12-0 as a freshman when she captured the 105 championship with a 5-3 win over Lincoln-Way Central's Gracie Guarino. Gomez is 83-0 in her high school career.

Afterward, Paramo was very complimentary of Turner.

"I've never seen a wrestler quite like Morgan," she said. "I have nothing but good wishes for her. She's amazing and has a bright future."

Roth thinks so too.

"Morgan is a very talented wrestler," he said. "She demonstrated that and helped us to a state runner-up finish."

Turner expressed afterward that she hoped to wrestle with the boys' team next season.

Also wrestling at state for the Porters was junior Averi Colella (40-13) at 105. She dropped a 10-1 major decision to DeKalb sophomore Alex Gregorio-Perez. In the consolation round, Colella came back to register a 15-8 win over sophomore Carmen Jackson from Chicago Agricultural Science to get a team point. But then Colella lost to East Peoria senior Bailey Lusch by a pin at 3:18.

At 235 pounds, freshman Rebekah Ramirez (36-14) dropped her two matches. Those were a 13-0 major decision to junior Chloe Hoselton from Fairbury Prairie Central and then in the consolation round, she was pinned at the 3:01 mark by Oak Forest senior Jessica Komolafe.

Lockport had wrestlers at the sectional, which was held on Friday and Saturday, February 9-10 at Schaumburg. There Turner and Heeney won titles, Ramirez was second and Colella placed third. Lucy Madrigal (16-12) at 120 pounds, and fellow sophomore Sophie Kelner (29-18), who was an alternate and won her first match there at 190 pounds, were also at the sectional for the Porters.

They all helped Lockport tie host Schaumburg with 92 points apiece to win the sectional. Hoffman Estates (91) was third and Andrew (85) placed fourth.

There were only two seniors on this season's Porter team. Those were Mayte Manteca and Liz Ramirez, who had qualified for state at 115 pounds last season and was on track to make another run before breaking her arm in practice in mid-January.

"If we have Liz here, I think we win the state," Roth said of Ramirez getting points at state. "But we only lose the two seniors and have a lot coming back next season."