

By Randy Whalen

When the Lockport Township boys water polo team opened the season on Tuesday, March 23, there was something missing.

More accurately there was someone missing.

Lew.

Joe Lewandowski, the beloved coach of the Porter boys water polo team since they became an Illinois High School Association program in the spring of 2004, wasn't there. The man with the infectious smile, the voice that boomed, the fist-pumping enthusiasm, unfortunately, passed away at age 47 on Sept. 27 from complications following a heart attack.

"Lew" as he was known to most, was also a physical education teacher at the school. Even though he wasn't there, his presence was.

"As a whole team, we want to dedicate this whole season for him," Lockport senior Danny White said. "We might have lost our opener but I still think it was a good first game."

In the opener, the Porters saw Lincoln-Way West score the first three and the last three goals in getting an 11-7 victory at Lockport. While "Lew" always wanted to win, he would have loved the spunk the Porters showed as they closed within a goal on five occasions before running out of gas at the end.

"Lincoln-Way West had some fast swimmers and we got tired at the end," White said. "But as we get more practice in, grow closer, and know how each other plays, we will get more connected. We just have to keep going no matter what."

New Lockport boys coach, Spencer Krivanec agreed that the team performed better than the final result.

"I'm actually very impressed with how we played," said Krivanec, a 2012 Stagg graduate, who played water polo for the Chargers. "We don't have a lot of guys back from (2-years ago) and we only had a week of practice. There were just a couple of early mistakes that we couldn't come back from."

The senior combo of Jacob Robson (6 goals) and Gavin Boomsma (4 goals) kept the Porters at bay. A goal from White with 3:58 to play in the game drew Lockport within 8-7. The fifth and final time the Porters closed within a single score.

Roberson, however, answered just 14 seconds later by firing one in from the top of the box. Junior Oliver Cha and Roberson added two more tallies to put the game away. Seniors Ben Applegate (shallow end) and Joe Valente (deep end) split time in goal for the Warriors, who led 6-4 at halftime.

White and fellow senior Tommy Abramite each scored three goals for Lockport. Junior Alex Ragsdale also added a goal for the Porters, who had senior Maks Pabian in goal.

"It was our first real game together and we just need to get a better feel as to how everyone plays," Abramite said of the Porters. "As soon as we do that and clean up the ball handling, we'll be better."

While this was the opening game of the season, Lockport did its tributes to "Lew" three days before. That was at the traditional Maroon and White preseason scrimmage. First off the Porters decided to rename that as "Lew's Legacy Game."

There they unveiled a plaque with his picture on it. Inscribed in it was, Honoring The Memory Of Joseph Lewandowski and below that, Coach Lew.

Then, in tradition with his Southside Irish roots, there is a quote from "Lew."

"That's how we do it on the South Side!"

Then his years of life, 1973-2020 followed.

The team also gave out numerous stickers with a water polo ball that had an Irish clover and Lew in the middle. Also, both the boys and girls teams are memorializing him on their caps this season. A special green clover is on the caps, right below the number with Lew in white lettering.

Krivanec is very aware of Lew's legacy and the tradition of the boy's water polo team, which includes a fourth-place finish in 2012 as well as excellent teams which lost in the sectional finals in 2013 and 2018.

"They're big shoes to fill and I've worked as Lew's assistant the last few years," Krivanec said. "To fill those shoes is a tough responsibility but I'm certainly going to give it my best shot."

What made Lewandowski special as a coach is best summed up from Abramite. He was on the 2019 team, which because of the coronavirus pandemic, ended up being Lew's final squad. Last year's season was canceled.

"He was definitely one to believe in you," Abramite said. "(As a sophomore) I wasn't the best player but he saw something in me. I was scared of the ball and he got me out of that. He believed in me and I think he'd be proud that I'm the only one from that varsity team two years ago that is back on the varsity now."

Two days later, on Thursday, March 25, Lockport traveled to Homewood-Flossmoor and got its first win of the season by the score of 16-7. White (5 goals) and Abramite (3 goals) led the way again but they had plenty of help as senior Rory Flanagan and sophomore Kacper Kulesza also added two goals apiece for the Porters.

Somewhere "Lew" was smiling.