

By Randy Whalen

This is the first full season for Mike Thompson on the Lockport Township boys varsity golf team.

It's certainly a memorable one.

Thompson and two other seniors, Vincent Greci III and Ben Sluzas, were honored before the Porters SouthWest Suburban Conference triangular match against Bolingbrook and Sandburg on Monday, Sept. 14 at Big Run Golf Course in Lockport.

"Just the experience," Thompson said of the best part of playing with his fellow seniors and everyone else this season. "Just all the guys having a great time."

During the summer the Porters didn't know if they would have a great time this fall. That's because, with the coronavirus pandemic occurring, they didn't know if they would have a season.

But they have and with four of their six players from last seasons sixth-place state team in Class 3A, the Porters expected a special season.

"Ben and I have both been on the varsity all four years," Greci confirmed. "It's been kind of weird (with the coronavirus protocols) but we've been looking forward to this season a lot. We're happy to be out here."

Sluzas might be the happiest of them all. That's because the two-time defending Class 3A individual State Champion has been able to compete for Lockport once more in his senior season."

"I'm just happy to be playing," Sluzas said. "After going through all the Senior Nights since I was a freshman, it's crazy that it's finally here and we are finally seniors.

"Even with all that's going on, we keep going and are still having fun."

Although the overall result wasn't what the Porters wanted, they had fun on the Senior Night. Matt Eber, who is in his ninth season as head coach of the team, started the festivities by thanking Big Run, the Lockport Township administration, including Athletic Director Mike Dwyer and secretary Ann Hayes, and the parents for all their dedication.

Parents and family came up for pictures. Eber then announced the golfers from all the schools as they teed-off.

"We have two four-year varsity players and three seniors," Eber said. "We just wanted to honor the seniors, wanted to send them out well and it's always neat to announce them at the tee-box.

"But we've got a tough conference and when we play against them we know we have to play our best."

Lockport (13-2) didn't quite play its best on an otherwise gorgeous afternoon. Instead, it was Sandburg, with six golfers shooting 40 or under, that won the 9-hole match with a 155 total. Lockport had 158 and Bolingbrook finished with 194. The Porters' only other loss was to another SWSC rival, Lincoln-Way Central, on Sept. 3 in a quad match at Mistwood Golf Course in Romeoville that was hosted by Providence.

Sluzas shot a one-over 37 to tie Sandburg junior Ben Schieber for medalist honors. Sluzas, however, technically won on a USGA tiebreaker. Lockport junior Brody McCarthy (38) was third overall but the Eagles had the next five finishers. They were seniors Stephen Gallagher and Cole Sanders (39 each, T-4th), along with senior Mitch Mazzei and juniors Alex Pineda and Anthony Bestrick (40 each, T-6th). Junior Andy Stone (43, 11th) was the top score for Bolingbrook.

The rest of the Porter top scores were junior Kody Swedko (41, 9th), junior Dylan Dorian (42, 10th), Greci (44, 12th), along with freshman Joey Sluzas and sophomore Nick Barry (45 each, T-13th).

"My 44 was my worst 9-hole round of the season," Greci said. "Still we've practiced and played together for four years. This year, with Ben's brother, Joey on the team, we believed this is our year."

The Porters hoped this would be their opportunity to get to the state finals for the third straight season for the first time since qualifying four straight years from the fall of 1986-89. At the moment, however, a complete State Tournament is not slated to happen. Instead, a regional type of tournament will be held in different areas throughout the state.

The Illinois High School Association met this week and was supposed to discuss the possibility of reinstating the state tournament. But as of Tuesday, Sept. 15, no decision had been made.

"This, for sure, is our best team," Greci said. "This is the place to be and I think we should have a state tournament. (In the open space) it's safe out here."

Thompson agreed.

"We all want to play," he said. "We have a really good team and hope there's a chance for a state tournament. This is my first full year on the varsity and it's been great. Ben (Sluzas) always leads it and everyone follows along."

Sluzas, who helped the Porters to a third-place state finish two years ago and has committed to continue his golf career at Northern Illinois University, hopes for another opportunity for state this season. In the meantime, he's enjoying playing alongside his brother in a high school setting.

"It's pretty cool, not many have that opportunity," Sluzas said of playing with Joey. "When I first heard we weren't going to have a (State) tournament, I was pretty upset. But we can't control it, we just have to play in each event."

"So far we've had a decent amount of 9-hole matches and have been able to practice. But we haven't been able to play in the big tournaments and that's where you get to showcase what you have."

The next day, Tuesday, Sept. 15, the Porters did participate in one of those 18-hole tournaments. That was the FloGolf Club Invite, which was actually hosted by Lockport.

There the Porters (319) came in second to Lincoln-Way Central (312). Lincoln-Way West (322) was third with Homewood-Flossmoor (334), Providence (338), and Lincoln-Way East (341) rounding out the six-team field.

Individually, Lincoln-Way Central senior Sean Curran, who finished a stroke behind Sluzas for the Class 3A State individual championship two years ago and will golf at Clemson next year, was easily the medalist with a 66. Lincoln-Way West senior Zack Phelps and junior Aidan Healy (75 each) tied for second. A trio of Porters tied for fourth with 76 each. They were McCarthy and the Sluzas brothers.

The victorious Knights and Lockport were scheduled to see each other again at the end of this week. That's on Friday, Sept. 18 starting at 4 PM as the Porters and Plainfield North will see Lincoln-Way Central in a triangular at Mistwood.

The last invite of the season is tentatively scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 3 as Lockport will host the Bob Allen Invite starting at 8:30 AM at Woodruff Golf Course in Joliet. Beyond that, there is still hope for a State Tournament.

"This is an outstanding group," Eber said of his team. "We hope that there will be a State Finals and these guys will have the opportunity to make history down the road."

