



GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY RECAP



By Randy Whalen

It was Halloween morning and the Class 3A Normal Community Girls Cross Country Sectional was about to get a surprise trick-or-treater.

The Lockport Township Porters.

Not given much of a chance after the regional the week before, the Porters played a trick on the rest of the field and gave themselves a treat.

A sectional championship.

One week after placing third in the regional and finishing 22 points behind first-place Yorkville, Lockport saved its best for last. With five runners placing in the Top 25, the Porters (68 points) went out and edged Yorkville (70) by two points on Saturday, Oct. 31 to capture the championship of the sectional at Maxwell Park in Normal.

How improbable was this? Well, the Porters came into the race as No. 16, the fourth-highest ranked team in the sectional in MileSplit's rankings. Yorkville was No. 2, with Normal Community at No. 12 and Minooka at No. 15.

"We knew that in the regional we were right behind Minooka, so we wanted to catch them," said Elizabeth Bollinger of the Porters, who had 50 points in the regional on Oct. 24 with host Minooka (49) and Yorkville (28) ahead of them. "But then Megan said 'Let's go after the Yorkville girls too.'"

Megan was Megan Mitchell and go after the Foxes is exactly what Lockport did. Kayla Shea (18 minutes:09.26 seconds), who won the individual title at the regional the week before, placed seventh to lead Lockport. Fellow sophomore Monica Skibicki (18:42.49) was 11th overall

A trio of those seniors, Mitchell (14th, 18:51.42), Josephine Bober (16th, 18:53.93), and Bollinger (25th, 19:14.31) were the Porter placers. Senior Grace Mildice (51st, 19:57.16) and junior Morgan Kesteloot (80th, 20:39.76) rounded out the Lockport lineup.

Instead of running as teams, there were four different flights, each spaced 30 minutes apart. The top runners from the previous week's regionals, along with the individual runners ran the first flight. Based on the previous times, two runners from each school ran each of the subsequent flights. But the overall times were what counted, meaning someone from the second flight could still finish in the Top 10 or even first.

It also made figuring the team scores a little longer. That helped the drama play out as the Lockport coaches checked the results. Then they checked them again and once again to make sure.

Yes, the Porters were sectional champions.

It was the first sectional title since 2013 for the Porters and third in their history, with 1999 being the other one. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this season's State Finals which were originally going to take place on Saturday, Nov. 7, has been canceled.

This would have been the 12th straight season, the 24th time in the past 27 years, and 27th time since 1987 that Lockport had advanced to state.

"It is a great day and we are kind of in shock," Lockport coach Regan Cronholm said. "In a traditional race, you get points for a place but here each group was on their own and then come together as an overall group the way we did. (Assistant) Coach (Courtney Correa) Krieger checked the results on her phone to make sure we got it. Then everyone was checking.

"Then we told the girls and there was just a bunch of tears. We were just focusing on the process. We had it in our heads that these were some teams but we knew we could stay close to them. All the hard work paid off and to beat a team like (Yorkville) is incredible. For this to just be the third sectional title in school history shows how hard our sectional always is."

All the Foxes have done in the past 11 seasons is to capture five State Championships and finish second six times, including the past four seasons in Class 3A after finishing first in Class 2A for five straight seasons between 2011-15. So after winning the Minooka Regional they were favored to win their fourth straight sectional championship. But the Porters had other plans.

"It was crazy and everyone was freaking out," Skibicki said of hearing the news that the Porters had won. "We were all crying, especially since Yorkville was second in the state and we didn't know if we could beat them. But it was just all about the energy in the race."

Shea was hoping to contend for the individual title. But gladly took the team one instead."

"I'm definitely really excited now," Shea said. "We just had to keep in mind that every second mattered. It wasn't one of my best races. I got a pain in my side in the middle of the race and told myself to just push through. This means a lot, especially for our seniors. They pushed us through this entire season. So, to be able to help them do so well in their final meet is so cool."

The seniors certainly did step up as Mitchell came out of the third flight to finish first in that and moved up to 14th overall as Bollinger was third.

"As a senior, it's bittersweet that today is the last race," Mitchell said. "But I'm happy to go out and help the team win a sectional championship this year."

Cronholm certainly appreciated Mitchell's effort.

"Megan had a really awesome race," she said. "She was in the third flight and stepped up and won it."

Although there were only a couple of runners ahead of her in the flight, Bollinger knew what was at stake.

"While I was racing I'm thinking I'm not racing against the girls in this flight, I'm racing against time," Bollinger said. "I like the traditional way better but I'm not complaining, we won it."

"Plus, this is my fourth season on varsity but my first season as one of the top seven runners on the team. So it's so cool to be part of that Lockport tradition and history."

Bober, who is also a 4-year varsity veteran, was the Porters top placer at 34th overall when they took 10th in the state last season. She was fourth in the second flight this past Saturday at the sectional while Skibicki was second. Bober wishes that there was a State Finals again this season, but was overjoyed that the team took first at the sectional.

"It was awesome," Bober said of winning the sectional. "We were thinking we would get in the top three but never first. That's just insane to me. We had a good mindset. I knew this was our last race and I was just focusing on getting out as well as I can."

"There was a girl from Normal Community closing in on me and I just told myself that 'I can't let her beat me.'"

That was Lauren Sanderson (17th, 18:58.05). The senior didn't catch Bober but she helped Normal (130) to third place. The Ironmen edged Minooka (130) on a sixth runner tiebreaker. Edwardsville (132) was right behind in fifth, followed by Lincoln-Way East (162), O'Fallon (171), Lincoln-Way Central (204), Quincy (224), Lincoln-Way West (255) Pekin (306), Homewood-Flossmoor (326), Plainfield North (335), Bolingbrook (392), and Andrew (397) completed the 15-team field.

Normal freshman Ali Ince (17:46.61) was the individual champion and O'Fallon junior Peyton Schieppe (17:53.96) was second. Sophomore Gabby Kics from Minooka turned in a time of 17:58.57 to place fourth overall and was just over a second behind Belleville West junior Alyssa Elliott (17:57.35), who placed third.

All in all, it was a great and memorable Halloween for the Porters in an unforgettable year.

"We really didn't do anything for Halloween," Cronholm said. "We have a secret sister thing which is like a secret Santa. So we did that on Friday (Oct. 30) and we give them candy too. We just told them not to eat it until after the race on Saturday."

Certainly, the candy was good. But the sectional championship was better.