



LOCKPORT BOYS SECTIONAL GOLF



By Randy Whalen

Ben Sluzas allowed himself a moment of reflection.

"Yes, on my last putt I was having flashbacks," the Lockport Township senior said of the final shot of his illustrious high school golf career. "It's been a lot of fun. I'm going to miss it."

Sluzas deserved to have some flashbacks. He entered this season as the two-time defending Class 3A individual Golf State Champion. But the Illinois High School Association canceled this season's State Finals due to COVID-19 concerns. So he didn't get an opportunity to 3-peat, although he would have had one because he would have gone to state again this season.

That's because Sluzas tied for third overall and helped the Porters to a third-place finish on Monday, Oct. 12 in the Class 3A Pekin Sectional at Lick Creek Golf Course in Pekin.

Under the usual parameters, the top three teams out of a sectional would advance to the State Finals and the Porters, who placed sixth last year and third in 2018, would have gone for a third straight season. Even if the trimmed down specifications which were in place for the regional round of the top two teams advancing along with the top five individuals, not on those teams, Sluzas would have qualified as an individual.

The State Finals being canceled nullifies any other opportunity for Sluzas, he will continue his golfing career at Northern Illinois University. At the sectional, he tied Lincoln-Way Central junior Juney Bai for third with a 4-over 76. But Sluzas won't get an opportunity to become the second-ever person to 3-peat as an individual champion.

Mason Jacobs from Massac County in Metropolis, is the only person to win three straight individual titles in state history. He did that with a pair of Class A championships in the fall of 2005 and 2006 and added another one in Class 3A in 2007.

"In the beginning, I was pretty upset," Sluzas said of not having the opportunity to win another state title. "But then I thought it through and I have no control. It is what it is."

"If state was happening I'd feel that I'd have the best chance because I'd been there but every tournament I just go out and play my best. (At the sectional) I just didn't have the best putts. I saved some pars but didn't make birdies."

Sluzas, who was the individual sectional champion on the same course last year, finished with 12 pars, five bogeys, and a birdie. He finishes his high school career joining Brad Johnson, who repeated as wrestling state champion in Class 3A in 2011 (189 pounds) and 2012 (195), and John Meyer, who won the Class 3A track and field shot put individual championship for three straight years between 2016-18, as the only repeat individual champions in Lockport history.

As a team, Lockport had a 322 total, which was good for third. Lincoln-Way Central finished with a 312 to win its second sectional in the past four years. Sandburg (316) was second and the Porters third as the

SouthWest Suburban Conference swept the top three spots. Pekin (324), O'Fallon (337), Quincy (341), Marist (359), and Minooka (371) rounded out the 8-team field.

Lincoln-Way Central's Sean Curran was the medalist. Curran defeated fellow senior, Mason Minkel from Pekin, with a birdie in a one-hole playoff on the 10th hole.

Curran was the state runner-up to Sluzas in 2018 and placed 16th last year. Being within miles of each other, both he and Sluzas squared off many times. When asked after the sectional what that was like to among the best golfers in not only the area but the state, both golfers commented that they "loved competing against each other."

Junior Brody McCarthy (81), freshman Joey Sluzas (82) and senior Vincent Greci III (83) were the rest of the carded scores for Lockport, which also received a 91 from freshman Nathan Kwiatowski and a 101 from junior Dylan Dorian.

Certainly graduating Greci, Sluzas, and Michael Thompson as seniors off this seasons squad will be hard to replace. But four of the sectional golfers should return, including McCarthy who is already a 3-year varsity veteran and will look to lead the team next year.

McCarthy finished his round at sectional with a birdie and an eagle.

"I finished pretty well," McCarthy said of the conditions. "I wish I could have had the front 9 back but I still clawed my way back. It (the conditions) was a bear to start. The wind gusts were bad and there was some rain. Then it cleared up and wouldn't have been that bad except for the leaves blowing."

But he finished strong.

"In the end, I just wanted to help the team catch Sandburg," McCarthy said. "I made a 12-foot putt on 17 for birdie and then hit a 4-iron flush down the middle of the fairway on my tee-shot on the last hole. I rolled the next shot up to within 7-feet and had a pretty good look for an eagle.

"Our conference and our area have a lot of good competition. I've made a lot of friends and there are some really good players."

In a normal season, three SWSC teams would have advanced from the sectional to state. Last year there were two as the Porters won the sectional and Lincoln-Way Central was third. But that's not the case now as this was not a normal season.

"I think it took a hit to the team knowing that we were not having state," McCarthy said. "Yes, this is what we aimed for ever since we found out that sectional was it. But it's always hard to know that you're not going to be able to compete for your goal of a state championship.

"I think it's going to be hard not having Ben and VJ (Greci). But if everyone puts in the work we should all be good next year. It's just going to come down to that extra work."