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Maine East dance team overcomes adversity, makes state finals

By HEATHER RULE
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The seven-member Maine East dance team placed 11th at the Class 2A state tournament. (Derek Johnson/Sharp Artistry)

On the first day of the state dance competition, the top 12 teams in each class were announced and moved on to dance another day.

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Senior captain Joselle Portillo and her Maine East teammates had a goal of being one of those top 12 teams in Class 2A. They started to get sad when their name wasn't called, Portillo said.

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That is, until they realized the teams and places were announced in a random order.

"By the time they called us as the last team that made it to the second day, we were all just screaming with joy," Portillo said. "I'm pretty sure I was hugging one of my teammates for at least two minutes."

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Portillo even teared up a couple nights later as she recalled the emotional sequence.

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Maine East finished in 11th place in the finals with a score of 88.90 on Saturday at Grossinger Motors Arena in Bloomington. Maine East was the 10th-best team during the prelims on Friday, earning a score of 88.14.

This was the sixth-year program's best finish, according to coach Sue Kawecki. Her team made state its first year, then spent three years rebuilding the program. Last year, it was a surprise when they won their sectional and returned to state, Kawecki said.

Then came this season which, despite the great result at state, has been a rough year, Kawecki said. Maine East started out with 11 dancers on varsity and ended up with just seven dancing at state. Most other teams have at least 15 on the floor, according to Kawecki, and with seven people there's no back line, making mistakes very visible.

"We were just happy to be here," Kawecki said. "We were just totally ecstatic.

"It's just an example of when you work hard and you push through, that you can do anything."

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A week before competition, Maine East had to change its routine because of the change in numbers.

A sophomore boy was part of the team but went to the Philippines for a family funeral and hasn't returned after his passport expired, according to Kawecki. That same week, another dancer got sick and hasn't returned to dancing yet. A couple weeks later, two seniors quit the team.

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Maine East also dealt with other issues, from discipline issues to grades, Kawecki said.

"The only way that we made it through the whole season was because all we did was just motivate each other and connect with each other as a whole," Portillo said.

Heather Rule is a freelance reporter for Pioneer Press.

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