

The Naperville North Invitational always seems to bring the best out of Hinsdale Central senior gymnast Maddie Sesemann.

As the four-year varsity gymnast left the annual invite for the last time Saturday, Jan. 10, Sesemann exited with a little something extra -- a team plaque.

The Red Devils had just finished third in the 12-team field with 136.35 points. It was the first time that they earned a top-three plaque in Sesemann's four trips to the invite since a third-place 135.775 in 2012.

Sesemann is the only returnee from last year's lineup, which was 11th (125.85).

"This is the first time we placed top three (in while) so that's exciting," Sesemann said. "I knew we did well. I didn't realize how well so that makes me really happy."

Senior Brigid Cultra wasn't quite able to handle the toss of the plaque from Sesemann on the floor mat after the meet, but Cultra was spot on during the competition.

Cultra was fourth in all-around with a season-high 35.90. She was second on the uneven parallel bars (season-high 9.525), fifth on vault (9.125) and tied for eighth on floor (8.9).

Sesemann and freshman Amanda Leon tied for 10th on beam (8.575).

Freshman Lily Jones (33.80), Leon (33.20) and Sesemann (33.05) were 11th, 14th and 15th in all-around. Freshmen Jessica Elliott and Jenny Sims each worked two events.

Cultra was a bit frustrated that she just missed her first 36.00 all-around total in her first season of high school competition, a 9.0 average over the four events.

"I think we're improving every meet. We can definitely see it," Cultra said. "I know I'm .1 away or something (from 36.00 in all-around). That's frustrating but I think once I get my series back on beam that will help and then I'll make it."

The Red Devils' first meet after winter break was supposed to be at Oak Park-River Forest Wednesday, Jan. 7. The meet was canceled after school was canceled

that day because of frigid temperatures. The meet has been rescheduled for Tuesday, Jan. 27.

With cold temperatures also canceling school Thursday, the Red Devils had just a mild practice Friday before the invite. They also had a light practice Tuesday in anticipation of competing Wednesday.

"We like to kind of not go too hard the day before a meet. (And) a lot of them didn't work out those two weeks (of break)," Hinsdale Central coach Kim Estoque said.

"It's kind of weird not having that much practice (beforehand). I went to open gyms and stuff but we didn't really practice before the meet. We had only like one day," Cultra said.

Besides the unexpected cancelations, the Red Devils planned five days without practice during break. The team had some struggles Saturday but they also posted season-high team scores on uneven bars (34.45) and beam (33.60), where they were the last team on the event and hit 4 out of 5 routines.

"I think we've been really consistent on beam this year, probably more than any other year," Estoque said. "I think they're a consistent bunch (overall). More than anything, they're consistent. If we can just get a few more things that I know they can do, I suppose we can be a little bit better."

Sesemann started the beam set with a season-high score. It brought back memories of the 2014 invite, when she scored a career-high 8.675 to place ninth.

"I don't know. I did really well last year, too," Sesemann said. "I think it's just this meet. I honestly don't know. I think it's just the equipment, I guess."

Cultra appears to have nearly fully recovered from the heel injury and mononucleosis that hampered her training.

On uneven bars, she easily landed her double back dismount and surpassed her previous best score of 9.425 Dec. 13. She only was beaten Saturday by Naperville North senior Michaela Robert (9.625).

"I personally thought the score was kind of too high, but I guess my bail was better. It felt tighter," Cultra said. "In warmups, I wasn't making over my pirouette before the bail so I was glad I made it in the routine. And I stuck it so that was good."

Cultra's beam routine still is conservative and she tied for 20th (8.35) with a stuck routine. On vault, she landed her tuck Yurchenko vault on her first attempt and did not use her second attempt.

If anything, she had too much power on floor. She successfully completed her first pass but went out of bounds in the process, losing tenths to her score.

"I went out of bounds so that's frustrating. That was the first time I made that full routine so I was happy with that," Cultra said.

Jones tied for 13th on uneven bars (8.5) and tied for 15th on vault (8.625) and floor (8.625). Leon was 16th on uneven bars (8.425).

They were among the Red Devils are working their way back to full strength. Elliott had missed the past two meets with an ankle injury. After Leon went into winter break battling the flu and missed the team's last meet Dec. 20, Jones caught it during break and was sidelined.

"I call it the plague because they needed to stay far away," Sesemann said. "We only had one practice over all of break that everyone was there (Jan. 3)."

With the school cancellations also affecting this week's schedule of final exams, the Senior Night home meet against two-time defending state champion Lyons Township has been moved from Thursday, Jan. 15, to Monday, Jan. 19 at 4:30 p.m.

--by Bill Stone