

When Hinsdale Central senior gymnast Maddie Sesemann was a seventh-grader visiting Washington, D.C., with her family, she caused a minor national security breach.

Sesemann managed to enter a restricted area of the Supreme Court building.

"I saw a couple of people put in the security code for the door and so I was like, 'Oh, I have to go to the bathroom,' so I put it in and walked through the door -- and mass chaos (resulted)," Sesemann said.

"Then a year later (I returned). The security was completely different. They boosted the security so that's a positive."

When it comes to gymnastics meets, Sesemann is just as adventurous. She's never afraid to approach teammates just moments before their routines to offer encouragement or humorous words to help them relax.

"I talk to everyone, before the meet, during the meet," Sesemann said. "It's kind of like a little confidence booster because sometimes girls are nervous. I always say something really, really goofy and stupid so they stop concentrating so hard and stop freaking out. I never get that nervous before events but I know a lot of other people do."

On Monday, Jan. 19, Sesemann was among seven Hinsdale Central seniors to be honored on Senior Night against two-time defending state champion Lyons Township in the final regular-season home dual.

Although the Red Devils lost the dual 142.90 to 138.80, they achieved a season-high score and Sesemann and first-year team member Brigid Cultra, the Red Devils' two varsity seniors, both had personal-best meets.

Cultra was second in all-around (36.80) and won the uneven parallel bars (9.4). Sesemann was fifth in all-around (34.20).

"I think we kind of went into the meet knowing that winning on varsity might be a little far-fetched. I think just the pressure was totally off and I had fun," Sesemann said. "I knew it was my last home dual meet so I'm like, 'I'm just going to have fun

and do it,' and evidently just having fun and not caring about falling helps a lot."

The Red Devils' other seniors are Carly Gallo, Toni Marano, Melina Megaridis, Tia Nelson and Claire Pocius. Gallo and Pocius competed for the junior varsity II team, which beat LT 108.15 to 107.10 to remain unbeaten in Silver duals. Marano and Megaridis competed for the junior varsity I team, which lost 126.15 to 124.45, the team's first conference dual defeat.

"(Sesemann and Cultra) did a great job today. It was really nice to see both of them do so well," Hinsdale Central coach Kim Estoque said. "All of our seniors on the JV levels did good so that was nice."

Senior Night underwent a few changes. The meet originally was supposed to be Jan. 15, the evening after the last day of final semester exams. When two days of school were canceled the first week of January because of frigid temperatures, the final exam schedule was moved back and so was the meet.

There was no school Monday in observance of Martin Luther King, Jr., Day. The meet started at 4:30 p.m. rather than the usual 6 p.m. To accommodate parents for Senior Night, the seniors were honored at the halfway point of the meet after vault and uneven bars rather than beforehand.

"I thought it was going to be weirder (like that). I thought it was (going to be) a longer break before beam but it wasn't that bad actually," Cultra said.

"I didn't even realize that it was our last home meet until Maddie told me or what Senior Night even meant. I didn't really feel the difference. It was cool, though. Everyone else felt it so I felt it for them."

Cultra continues to gain strength and confidence after an early-season bout with mononucleosis.

Before Monday, she hadn't even reached 36.00 in all-around, scoring 35.90 twice. Even with rough warmups, she hit every event.

Besides winning uneven bars, Cultra was second on vault (season-high 9.5) and floor exercise (9.2) and tied for third on balance beam (8.7).

"At the last meet, I was like a tenth away (from 36.00) so I'm glad I made it this time," Cultra said. "I'm pretty close to 100 (percent)."

Cultra won uneven bars over LT senior Kelsy Kurfirst (9.25), the two-time defending state floor champion and 2012 co-state champion on uneven bars. Kurfirst won all-around (37.55) and the other three events Monday -- vault (9.6), floor (9.5) and beam (9.2).

On uneven bars, Cultra landed her double back flip dismount after adding a blind full change toward the end of her routine for the first time.

"It just wasn't consistent enough to compete it before," Cultra said. "Actually in warmups I did a lot of turns and I only made one of them at the very end so I was glad I made it in the meet."

Cultra's improving health and conditioning perhaps shows most on floor. Cultra opened by landing both of her pike Yurchenko vaults. On beam, she stuck her standing back flip solidly and is on the verge of inserting a flight series.

"That (standing back) was a problem for me, too, in warmups, and my round off," Cultra said. "I'm supposed to do a flip flop before the back tuck and connect it for my series. Hopefully (soon)."

Before Monday, Sesemann had broken 33.00 in all-around this season with a previous best 33.60 at Hinsdale Central's Red Devil Invite Dec. 13. Last season, her all-around bests were 33.50 and 33.475 at regionals, probably her best overall meet as a junior.

Sesemann was slightly disappointed that she could have scored higher because she counted a fall on her difficult beam mount, an automatic .5 deduction. Sesemann uses a springboard to land on the beam standing up.

"I think it's definitely one of my top (all-around) ones for sure," Sesemann said. "I would have gotten a 9 (on beam) if I hadn't fallen. So upsetting, but that's OK. I can always get it next time."

Sesemann opened with a season-high 8.85 on vault for fourth place. She followed with an 8.0 on uneven bars, an 8.5 on beam to tie for fifth and a season-high 8.85 on floor, her favorite event.

"I thought I'd have a good meet and once I got the 8.85 (vault), I was like, 'I'm going to go for my best meet ever.' It definitely boosted my confidence for the rest of the meet," Sesemann said.

"Once I started (floor), I knew it was one of my better ones. That makes me happy. Especially now that all of the girls know my routine, while I'm going on the sidelines you see them doing it so you see them smile, which makes you smile."

Younger Red Devils also had plenty to smile about. Freshman Amanda Leon was fifth on floor (8.95) and shared fifth with Sesemann on beam (8.5).

Leon (34.15) and freshman Jenny Sims (32.05) were sixth and seventh in all-around. Freshman Lily Jones, usually the Red Devils' other all-rounder, was sixth on uneven bars (8.45) but she injured her left ankle during warmups and did an easy exhibition vault and scratched from floor. Freshman Jessica Elliott replaced Jones in the vault lineup and performed exhibition routines on uneven bars and beam.

"(The seniors) definitely help us a lot. They kind of show us," Leon said. "Since Maddie has been on the team since freshman year, she's able to tell us when we need help or when we're down. She's always able to bring us back up. The same with Brigid. Even though she's new to the team, she still is bringing us up. They're both funny."

Cultra plans to attend a Big 10 university and would like to pursue special education with plans to teach at the elementary level. Last year, she began working with SEASPAR (South East Association of Parks and Recreation).

"I coached Special Olympics gymnastics. I really liked working with those kids," Cultra said.

Sesemann would like to return to Washington, D.C., on a more permanent basis. She would like to pursue a career in national security or intelligence analysis,

possibly working for the Central Intelligence Agency or military intelligence. Her short list of dream schools includes George Washington University, located in Washington, D.C, and James Madison and Northeastern universities.

"My grandpa's worked in government for a while. I've wanted to do that forever," Sesemann said. "I love D.C. It's where I could imagine myself living. To me, it's the only city with historical value to the United States. I love the museums, the Library of Congress. It's where I want to be."

Sesemann was visiting her grandfather in D.C. back when she went to the Supreme Court building and caused the brief chaos for security agents.

"They just stopped me. They're like, 'How did you know (the passcode)?' They freaked out a little bit and then they changed all of the codes," Sesemann said. "I was totally Ok, though. I didn't get in huge trouble. It's kind of a running joke in my family now."

--by Bill Stone