

Freshman Lily Jones had plenty of Hinsdale Central girls gymnastics teammates to share her emotions with at Hinsdale South Wednesday, Nov. 26.

The annual, eight-team season-opening Hornet Invitational was the high-school gymnastics debut for six of the seven Red Devils that competed.

"I was definitely nervous, but I was also really excited to see how the high school program worked," Jones said. "I think everybody did really well. Going in, especially for our first meet, since everybody's new except for (senior) Maddie Sesemann, everyone was kind of curious to see how it was going to turn out."

The Red Devils nearly won the invite. Their 131.25 points earned second place to two-time defending state champion Lyons Township (132.60 points), which won the invite for the third straight year. Waubonsie Valley/Metea Valley co-op (124.60) was third.

Junior Brigid Cultra and Jones combined for seven top-five finishes in all-around and the four events with Cultra taking second on vault (9.45).

They and Sesemann competed as all-arounders. The rest of the lineup were freshmen Jessica Elliott, Amanda Leon, Jenny Sims and Jessica Sprong.

This was the Red Devils' highest finish at the invite since taking second in 2012 with 133.50 points. In 2013, the Red Devils were fifth with 122.265 points.

"I think it was pretty good for the first meet. There's a lot of improvement still to go, which is good, because we've got a long way to go," Hinsdale Central coach Kim Estoque said.

"I think they were really nervous at the beginning, but they did a good job. They didn't look nervous up there, but I know beforehand they were pretty nervous."

The Red Devils competed in the order of vault, uneven parallel bars, balance beam and floor exercise at the invite in the same rotation with Hinsdale South.

Cultra, opening with a second-place pike Yurchenko vault, enjoyed a personal triumph. She not only was unable to land the vault at the team's Red-White scrimmage meet but also hurt her ankles.

"That's good. I'm happy with that," Cultra said. "I fell at the Red and White Meet so I was glad I made it tonight. I was definitely more focused but I was still nervous because of having that fall behind me."

Newcomer Cultra is a gymnastics veteran. Last season, she was a Level 9 club gymnast for Illinois Gymnastics Institute. Before joining the Red Devils, she was in one meet for her new club team, Action Gymnastics, and injured her toe.

"It's a lot different that club, so I was nervous. It was nervewracking," Cultra said.

"It just felt like a regular meet besides the fact that it's high school. It's pretty different because we usually do a warm up (on events and then), compete so it's hard not to have any touches, but other than that it's similar."

Cultra was third in all-around (33.95) and uneven bars (9.05) and ninth on floor (8.15).

Jones also had a consistent meet, taking fourth in all-around (33.65) and vault (9.05), fifth on floor (8.35) and uneven bars (8.2) and ninth on beam (8.05).

"(Jones) did well on everything. She did really good, had her first 9 in high school," Estoque said.

"(Cultra) looked good. Her feet are hurting her a little bit right now and she's not doing everything she can do yet. And then a lot of the girls aren't throwing their (Tsukaharas) yet so once they start doing those (our score will increase)."

The Red Devils were the first team to compete on vault. They ended up with the highest team score on the event (35.45). They also scored a team-best 32.65 on floor. They were second on uneven bars (32.35) and third on beam (30.80).

On vault, Cultra only was beaten by LT senior Kelsy Kurfirst (9.55), who won all-around and everything but uneven bars. Besides Cultra and Jones, Sesemann tied for 11th (8.5) and Elliott tied for 13th (8.45).

"I've really had a problem with my tuck (Yurchenko) position so when I flipped, it was a lot better position and that helped me stand up for the landing," Jones said.

"A lot of the girls aren't throwing their (Tsukaharas) yet so once they start doing those (our scores will improve)," Estoque said.

On uneven bars, Cultra joined Hinsdale South junior Maddie Nowak (9.4) and Kurfirst (9.25) as the only gymnasts to score 9s. After Jones, Leon was 12th (7.7).

Jones had the Red Devils' highest score on beam as the team's third of five competitors. Leon (7.75) and Sims (7.7) were 12th and 13th.

"Even though it was my lowest score, I was really happy with beam because that was the steadiest I've ever done with that routine. I was also really happy with the vault," Jones said.

Jones was .2 from third on floor. Sims (8.25) tied for seventh, followed by Cultra, Leon (7.9) and Sesemann (7.8) in 12th and 13th.

"I'm hoping to get a 140. That's our goal this year. I think we can do it. We've got a lot of place we can improve," Estoque said. "It's just nice that all of these girls get a chance to compete and be part of the varsity (at this invite)."

The Red Devils' next meet is a home dual with Sandburg/Stagg co-op Thursday, Dec. 6. Because all three levels will be in competition, Estoque said some of the gymnasts who competed Wednesday probably will be with the junior varsity I team and be able to compete more events.

"I would like to do better throughout the season. (But) I thought it was a pretty good first meet," Cultra said.

-- by Bill Stone