

In 2012, Hinsdale South junior Maddie Nowak enjoyed quite a high-school gymnastics debut at home for the Hornet Invitational.

Her return to the Hornets for the season-opening invitational Wednesday, Nov. 26, also was a return to gymnastics since she missed her sophomore club season recovering from elbow surgery.

"I remember my Hornet Invite as a freshman and I just wanted to do as well as I did," Nowak said. "There was a little bit of pressure but otherwise it was almost like a fresh start and I just focused on doing the best that I could."

Nowak accomplished something she didn't as a freshman – winning an event – to lead the Hornets' fourth-place finish in the eight-team field.

The Hornets (124.525 points) finished just behind third-place Waubonsie Valley/Metea Valley co-op (124.90). Two-time defending state champion Lyons Township (132.60) won the invite for the third year in a row with Hinsdale Central second (121.25).

Nowak took first place on the uneven parallel bars (9.4) and was second in all-around (34.95) and floor exercise (9.15) and third on vault (9.3). Senior Lauren Haney also had a top-10 finish, taking sixth on uneven bars (8.125).

LT senior Kelsy Kurfirst, the two-time defending state champion on floor and 2012 state champion on uneven bars, won all-around and the other three events and was second on uneven bars (9.25). Kurfirst had won uneven bars at the invite the past three seasons.

"(Winning bars) was a little shocking to me because my routine is really simple at this point because I just wanted to come out at the Hornet Invite with a solid score for my team. I was glad that it was really clean and I'm happy with the score that I got," Nowak said.

"It is good validation that I am making progress, even though I had skipped a whole year of gymnastics by not competing. It shows that I am still progressing as the years are going on and I can hope for better things even next year, too."

The Hornets competed with just four all-arounders – Nowak, Haney, junior Erica Meyer and freshman Kaitlin Hall – meaning that all of their scores would count toward the team total. In most meets, including Wednesday, teams are allowed five entries per event with the top four scores going toward the team total.

Like Nowak, Haney and Meyer felt like newcomers. They also competed for the team two seasons ago but did not last season.

“I really love it (being back). I missed it last year. I didn’t really get to do much of it at all. It feels nice getting back to the team,” Meyer said. “We could have done a lot better. We know that this isn’t going to foreshadow what our entire season is going to look like. We have a lot of room for improvement but we can get that.”

The meet also marked the debut as Mia Tritch as head coach after being an assistant the past four seasons. She previously was an assistant girls gymnastics coach in Minnesota, but this is her first time as a head coach.

“For most of the girls, it’s their first meet in two years. The nerves really did get to them, and then we have a freshman on the team, too,” Tritch said. “As a team, I told them when we were done with the meet, they need to think about the positives to take away from the meet and they all had at least one positive. Lots we have to work on, but it’s OK.”

The Hornets had the second-highest team score on vault (34.65) and were third on uneven bars (30.575) and fourth on floor (31.15). Their four-up, all-count lineup affected them on beam, where every gymnast fell at least once, an automatic .5 deduction, and they counted a collective six falls. Their 28.15 ranked seventh.

“It was a little bit rough (overall), but it’s the first meet. We definitely have a lot of stuff to clean up,” Tritch said. “Definitely I think the nerves got to them a little bit today.”

The Hornets competed in the order of vault, uneven bars, beam and floor, followed by Hinsdale Central in each rotation.

At the Hornet Invite in 2012, Nowak was second to Kurfirst in all-around (36.10) and uneven bars (9.35) and third on vault (9.0).

On Wednesday, Nowak landed her double back flip dismount on uneven bars to score even higher and win by .15.

“It was a good landing, but maybe a little out. Maybe I’ll bring it a little bit towards the bar,” Nowak said. “I liked my bar routine. I was happy with my floor routine as well. The landings were good, I thought. I need to clean up the landings, but otherwise I thought I had good height and distance on my tumbling.”

On vault, Nowak landed her tuck Yurchenko on the first of her first of two attempts and then just missed landing her layout Yurchenko.

“I’m glad that I tried a layout Yurchenko. I was a little short on that one,” Nowak said.

Haney competed as an all-rounder at the Hornet Invite in 2012 and 2011. Her uneven bars finish was her first top-10 Hornet Invite finish on any event. She also had her highest all-around finish for the invite (12th, 30.325) and tied for 17th on vault (8.4).

Meyer was 13th in all-around (29.85), and Hall tied for 14th (29.40). Hall tied for 11th on vault (8.5), tied for 14th on beam (7.6) and was 18th on floor (7.5). Meyer tied for 13th on vault (8.45), tied for 19th on uneven bars (7.25) and was 20th on floor (7.4).

In 2012, Meyer competed at the invite on uneven bars and floor. On Wednesday, Meyer said those were the routines with which she was most pleased. For everything but uneven bars, she was the team’s first performer.

“I definitely want to move up and I have some skills that I have on the back burner that I want to put in. I was just a little nervous,” Meyer said. “(Uneven bars) was just really clean. I had good body position through the whole thing and I didn’t fall. I didn’t make many mistakes.”

Whether the Hornets add gymnasts to their varsity lineup remains to be seen. On Wednesday, the Hornets counted a combined six falls off beam, each an automatic .5 deduction, with each gymnast counting at least one fall.

The Hornets' next meet is a home dual against Riverside-Brookfield Thursday, Dec. 4, which also is the season opener for the junior varsity I and II teams. Their next meet in which only the varsity competes is the Homewood-Flossmoor Invite Dec. 20.

"Something we need to work on is competing and pressure sets and working under pressure but overall they did well," Tritch said.

"We know with us only competing four girls on every event, it does add to the pressure. We'll look into adding a fifth girl just to kind of take that pressure away from them, but for right now I think four is what we're going with the next few meets."

Nowak agreed that she will focus on more pressure sets in practice, especially for beam. Considering her return to the sport, and that she missed the first week of practice to compete at sectionals for diving, Nowak already is off to a good start.

"I feel caught up and I'm ready to add more difficulty to my routines and just focusing on executing them well," Nowak said. "I definitely learned that I need to do more pressure sets because how I practice and how I compete are two completely different things, and I need to know of make those the same thing."

-- by Bill Stone