

After junior Jessica Hawken and her Hinsdale South girls gymnastics teammates won the 2012 West Suburban Conference Gold Division Meet to secure the overall title, coach Jennifer Fichter had a surprise waiting for them.

During the bus ride back from Addison Trail, Fichter presented her athletes with special T-shirts to commemorate the program's first conference championship since 2007.

On one side was written, 'Conference champs.' On the other was, 'Small team. . .One big heart,' enclosed by a heart.

"I was so happy with that. None of us knew. (Fichter) did it on her own and it was so sweet," Hawken said. "We worked so hard for that. We all were so dedicated and we just pulled it off."

While the Hornets enjoyed quite a breakthrough, this season so far has been even better.

They're more talented, confident and deeper. And besides once again competing for the Gold title, the Hornets are in contention for being a host team for regionals for the first time in recent memory and advancing to sectionals as a team for the first time since 2006.

Hawken, juniors Taylor Daley, Shur Batmunkh and Jorie Smith and sophomore Lauren Haney return with varsity experience. The lineup also has received a boost from freshmen Maddie Nowak, the team's top scorer, and Erica Meyer.

"As a team, I think we can definitely win conference, hopefully go to

sectionals,” Daley said. “We’re more prepared this year, and I think we’re going to do a lot better. We’re definitely more motivated because we won conference. It feels great, just knowing that I’m part of a team that can win and is good.”

The Hornets, and everyone else, got the message right away. After never scoring higher than 131.375 points last season, the Hornets opened Nov. 21 with a 131.40 to finish third at its annual eight-team Hornet Invitational and earn a team plaque behind perennial powers Lyons Township and Hinsdale Central.

“(Other teams) just gave us these weird looks like, ‘Where did they come from?’ From the past few years, we haven’t had very good scores so it’s just fun to see their faces,” Hawken said.

“Now that we have Maddie and some of us have gained a lot of new skills, we just have better chances (to succeed).”

The Hornets have scored as high as 133.75 at Hinsdale Central’s Red Devil Invite Dec. 8 at least 130.35 in all six of their meets thus far. Their seeding average of their three highest scores (132.3833) currently is No. 6 among teams assigned to the Hinsdale Central Sectional.

Seed averages are submitted to the IHSA Wednesday, Jan. 9 based on results through Tuesday. The Hornets need to be among the top four seeds to guarantee a chance to be a regional host, and the Lincoln-Way Invite Saturday, Jan. 5 is their final chance to boost their average. The Hornets need to score at least 134.96.

“We really want to host a regional,” Fichter said. “We want to defend the

conference title again. We're not letting it go for a long time. That's the plan."

The overall Gold title is a 50-50 combination of dual and Gold Meet standings. The Hornets are trying to repeat since winning three in a row from 2005-07.

This time, the Gold Meet will be at Hinsdale South at 5 p.m. Jan. 26. Once again, the main competition will be rival Downers Grove South, which scored its season high of 130.45 also at the Red Devil Invite.

So far, the Hornets are 2-0 in Gold duals with victories over Leyden (130.35 to 115.70 Dec. 13) and Morton (132.00 to 107.50 Nov. 27) and Downers South is 3-0. The Hornets and Mustangs meet Jan. 17 in Darien.

"We still want to win conference again. It kind of sets the stakes higher because we knew that we'd have a better team because of Maddie," Haney said. "Our first team score was already higher than our team score was at the end of last year so it's more fun."

Nowak has made quite an impact with her score and demeanor, even as a freshman. The transition has been easy because during the club season all of the returning full-time varsity Hornets and Nowak attend Action Gymnastics, which trains at Hinsdale South and whose co-owner is Hinsdale South assistant coach Jody Raymond.

Fichter and the Hornets were enthusiastically awaiting Nowak's arrival to high school.

"I'm glad to be competing with my friends. It's been easy considering I have

Jody still as my coach and Mrs. Fichter, who I've known for the last few years. It's a good transition," Nowak said.

"I feel like in club it wasn't really a team effort because we didn't really count team scores so much, but now it's a team effort and we're all coming together as friends and as teammates just to do the best we can."

Nowak began strong at the Hornet Invite, taking second in all-around (36.10) to LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfist (37.60), the defending co-state champion on uneven bars. Nowak also was second on uneven bars (9.35) and third on vault (9.0) and shared third on beam (9.05).

Nowak also shined at the Hornets' other two varsity invites, posting season bests in and vault (9.35, 1st place), all-around (36.65, 2nd) and uneven bars (9.55, 2nd) at the Red Devil Invite and on beam (9.05, 6th) at the Homewood-Flossmoor Invite Dec. 15, where she was fourth on uneven bars (9.3) and all-around (36.05). She scored a season-high 9.4 to win floor in the Hornets' last meet, a 130.95 to 110.40 dual victory at Riverside-Brookfield.

Besides her scores, Nowak already is emerging as a team leader.

"Even though she's quiet in nature, when it matters, she tries to get the team fired up," Fichter said. "The other day, she said 'Commit,' when they were on beam. I thought that was really good. She's only a freshman, but she's trying to lead these (older) girls and her work ethic definitely helps them get motivated. The other ones feed off her energy."

There are only three seniors in the program, co-captains Cristina Chavez and Catherine Nowicki and Amy Hickenlooper. The Hornets still have experience on their side.

Hawken and Daley have been full-time varsity performers since they were freshmen. Smith and Batmunkh have seen varsity action since freshman year, although they spent most of last season on the junior varsity I level.

Last season, Hinsdale South's varsity lineup usually consisted of just four all-arounders that included Hawken, Daley and Haney. That meant every score counted toward the team total, even at the Gold Meet.

Despite that pressure, the Hornets posted their season high 131.375 at conference and took three individual titles – Haney on floor (8.8) and uneven bars (8.125) and Hawken in the all-around (33.675). Smith joined the vault lineup at the Oswego Regional, where the Hornets scored 130.525.

Hawken was an individual sectional qualifier in all-around, uneven parallel bars and balance beam, and Haney was a qualifier on uneven bars.

At the 2011 regionals at freshmen, Hawken and Daley were two of the Hornets' three all-arounders. Hawken earned the team's lone sectional berth as an individual qualifier on beam.

"That was the coolest thing ever because I did not expect anything to come out of freshman year because I was really new," Hawken said.

Hawken has reason to be excited about accomplishing even more this season. The past two meets, she has scored her first 9s on floor (9.05 and 9.0) with the addition of a more difficult tumbling pass. On vault, she has progressed to a tuck Tsukahara, scoring a 9.0 at the Red Devil Invite. She also had season highs in all-around (33.50) and uneven bars (8.4) at that invite with a season-best 8.4 on beam at the Hornet Invite.

“Now that I’m into my junior year, I’m looking towards college and finishing out my career. I’ve really grown,” Hawken said. “I’ve gotten a lot of new skills. It’s just trying to incorporate them and keep my endurance up and get through all of the routines.”

Haney is hoping she can return to sectionals and in more events or hopefully as an all-rounder. Her season high on uneven bars is 8.5. At Leyden, she had a strong meet with season bests for all-around (32.25), floor (8.55) and beam (7.9).

Daley feels that she has maintained her performance level from last season and hopes to benefit from winter break in terms of adding skills. Over the past two meets, she has posted season-high scores on three events, including 8.5 on floor and 8.55 on vault, and in all-around with a 31.70.

“(I want) just to improve little bits. Each tenth counts,” Daley said. “On each event, I have little things. On floor, I wanted to get a full. On bars, we’re talking about a bail. On beam, flip flops. I’m doing a half-half (vault), but I’m working towards a half full.”

Batmunkh and Smith, both varsity specialists as freshman, gained valuable experience competing on more events as sophomores as key contributors for the JV I level.

As freshmen, the two competed for the varsity at the Gold Meet as well as a combined three events at regionals with Smith on vault and floor and Batmunkh on beam. Chavez (uneven bars) and current junior Brenna Budaitis (beam) also were part of the 2011 regional lineup.

Smith had varsity season highs at the H-F Invite on her two events, vault

(8.3) and floor (7.65).

“Freshman year, I was just doing routine after routine after routine and nothing new. Last year, I got a lot of new stuff so that really helped me improve,” Smith said. “Freshman year, almost everyone on varsity was a freshman. Just to see how much we grew within a year, that was a really big improvement, and it was really nice to see everyone get to that next level and win conference.”

Batmunkh had no gymnastics background when she joined the program as a freshman. She took to beam right away, perhaps because her background as a figure skater helped her maintain balance.

After beginning as a beam specialist, she added vault and floor last season and she still might add uneven bars this season. At R-B, Batmunkh enjoyed a career-best 7.85 on beam without a fall.

“I think I’m more consistent on beam, especially just because that’s my event. That’s what I work on most,” Batmunkh said. “It just comes naturally to me, more so than any other thing. I think it takes a lot of years to do tumbling well. I just love beam.”

Meyer found her way back to gymnastics this summer. Another key all-arounder for the JV I, Meyer worked all-around for the varsity against Morton and scored a varsity season best on uneven bars (7.2) in her one event against R-B.

Meyer had made the school’s fall cheerleading squad, and the Hornets practiced in the gymnastics room. Meyer began to think about the sport she had competed from the time she was 4 until around fourth grade.

“I kept seeing the people on bars and beam and floor do all of the stuff, and I was like, ‘I really miss it. I miss doing all of the different apparatus,’ so I wanted to do it again,” Meyer said. “It was really weird (at first). I lost a bunch of my stuff, but I’ve gotten all of it, plus a little more, back.”

What will the Hornets do if they can defend their Gold title? That remains to be seen, but if it happens this season, it won’t be a surprise.

“I’m waiting for (our best) meet to come,” Hawken said. “We’re like family. We love each other. It’s awesome. (Nowak) gives us that extra bonus that we needed last year. But now that she’s here, we’re like blown away.”