

Thankfully for junior Jessica Hawken and her Hinsdale South girls gymnastics teammates, there were no surprises during or after the West Suburban Conference Gold Division Meet at Hinsdale South.

Following the awards ceremony, just like last year, coach Jennifer Fichter presented her athletes with special T-shirts.

“They were really cute,” Hawken said. “I’m really thankful she had the idea and that she hoped we would win. She’s made this a really great season.”

Many things are becoming a tradition for the Hornets, especially success. On Saturday night, they secured a second consecutive outright Gold title by winning the conference meet at home with a season-high 136.425 points. Downers Grove South was second with a season-high 134.675 points.

Freshman Maddie Nowak won all-around (36.825), vault (9.55), uneven parallel bars (9.4) and floor exercise (9.45). Hawken and Nowak shared the title on balance beam (8.425).

In the Hornets’ lineup of four all-arounders and one specialist, sophomore Lauren Haney had a top-five finish, and juniors Taylor Daley and Shur Batmunkh had top-10 finishes.

“I was very proud of us. We worked so hard and just knowing that we pulled it off was a great feeling,” Hawken said. “It’s a really great feeling knowing all of our hard work paid off. It’s just knowing that we did our best and that’s all we could ever hope for. We all won, no matter how we scored or how we ended up placing.”

There was one change this season. If the Hornets had any nerves

beforehand, Fichter tried to help them relax and focus by giving them sparkling headbands in the school's black and gold colors.

The box with the T-shirts was unveiled following the meet after the other teams had left as the Hornets remained to take team photos, soak in the moment and celebrate. In the simultaneous junior varsity I meet, the Hornets also won to complete an outright Gold title on that level.

"My husband thought I was playing with karma when I ordered (the T-shirts) last week," Fichter said with a laugh. "They're going to wear their shirts and headbands to school (Monday)."

"There's not much to say except it feels really good. I said to them, 'This is our gym, our meet, our fans, our equipment.' It was our meet to lose. I wasn't really watching scores. I was super busy, but I was trying to keep an eye on Downers South as much as I could."

These are the Hornets' first consecutive titles since their last Gold titles from 2005-07. This one was special because it came at home.

The overall Gold title is a 50-50 combination of dual standings and Gold Meet standings. Because the Hornets finished 5-0 in duals while Downers South was 4-1, the Mustangs could have been co-champions with a victory Saturday.

That certainly was a concern because the Hornets only beat Downers South by .6 in their dual meet Jan. 17 in Darien, 133.80 to 133.20. The Hornets completed the perfect Gold mark with a 132.20 to 113.00 victory at Addison Trail Jan. 23.

"(Being satisfied with sharing) wasn't our goal coming in. We wanted to stick

with our goal of having the title for ourselves,” Nowak said.

“I feel like there was a lot of pressure. I was a lot more nervous than usual because I really wanted to take the all-around title and I really wanted our team to beat out Downers South because we came into this meet knowing that we didn’t want to share the conference title. I know I didn’t do well in the dual meet against Downers South so I wanted to prove myself.”

She did, delivering the program’s most dominating individual conference performance since Becca McLaughlin, the Hornets’ last all-state gymnast in 2006.

“She’s such a competitor, gets in the zone and gets the job done,” Fichter said. “She had a great meet. She hit vault awesome and bars and floor. And beam, where she’s been a little bit nervous lately.”

Nowak won vault by .6 over Downers South senior Kate Moore (8.95), the defending Gold champion, uneven bars by .55 over Downers South junior Inna Dzyuma (8.85), who was injured last season, and floor by .375 over Addison Trail sophomore Casey Boksha (9.075), the only other athlete besides Nowak to score in the 9s on any event.

“I think my floor routine was one of the best I’ve done all season and the same with vault,” Nowak said. “I’m glad that I chose one of the more pressure meets to have a better performance.”

On a tightly scored beam, Hawken and Nowak edged Willowbrook freshman Riley McFarlane by just .025. It was the second individual Gold title for Hawken, who won last year’s all-around crown.

“I was actually kind of shocked (sharing first). I felt Maddie (with her difficulty) was a lot higher than my score,” Hawken said. “It’s cool to know that I tied with one of the best kids in the state.”

There were plenty of other Hornets on the awards stands. Hawken was second in all-around (34.55), third on vault (8.875) and tied for fourth on floor (8.65), and Haney was fifth on uneven bars (8.45).

At last year’s Gold Meet, there was only one 9 awarded for beam. Hawken won the all-around title with a 33.675, a total lower than Saturday. Haney won two titles on floor (8.8) and uneven bars (8.125), a score she improved upon Saturday.

“I don’t have any (place) expectations with these guys over here,” said Haney as she looked at Nowak and Hawken. “It doesn’t really matter if I place individually, as long as we win as a team. I’m not disappointed because I know they deserve it.”

In their dual with Downers South, the Hornets enjoyed a sizeable lead after vault and uneven bars, only to struggle on the final two events and barely survive.

On Saturday, the Hornets beat their previous high score of 135.55 Jan. 9 by nearly a point. They had just two falls, yet at the halfway point their lead was barely more than a point 69.65 to 68.625 despite having meet-best totals on vault (35.275) and uneven bars (34.375).

The Hornets extended the gap thanks to beam, where their meet-best 32.55 was more than a point better than the Mustangs’ 31.625. Downers South had the highest floor score at 34.425, .2 higher than the Hornets.

Besides the Hornets' beam co-titlists, Batmunkh posted a season-high 7.925 for eighth in her lone performance, Haney was 10th (7.775) and Daley was 12th (7.15).

Daley also was ninth on uneven bars (7.925). Haney tied for 10th (8.5) and Daley was 14th (8.35) on vault, and Haney (8.175) and Daley (7.95) were 12th and 13th on floor.

"We did really well. (But) it was really nervewracking," Daley said.

The addition of Nowak and plenty of hard work has taken the Hornets to new heights this season. At the 2012 Gold Meet at Addison Trail, the Hornets had basically a perfect and scored a season-high 131.375, five points lower than Saturday's total, after beating Mustangs in the dual by just .3.

Nowak was among those who saw the Hornets prevail last year at Addison Trail. Duplicating the feat at home made the moment that much better.

"I look at the (Gold championship) banners every single day in the gym and I think, 'Every year we can do the same thing,' " Hawken said. "Just being home and having all of our parents and teammates and peers there, it was a very positive vibe throughout the night. I'm glad we all had that positive energy and performed as well as we did."

"It was definitely an advantage because we knew the equipment and we used it to our advantage. It definitely helped us out in the long run," Hawken said.

The work isn't over. The Hornets will try to advance to sectionals as a team

for the first time since the mid-2000s via the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 31.

“I’m really excited,” Daley said. “I think this kind of boosted our confidence a little bit. Hopefully it’ll carry on to (sectionals).”

Six teams among four feed-in regionals advance to the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 5. The Hornets are the No. 7 seed.

“Really it’s anyone’s opportunity and it’s going to be a matter of who hits at their regional,” Fichter said. “This is the time of the year the girls’ skills are coming together. We’re going into the state series with a ton of confidence. The goal, we’ve always said, is to qualify as a team.”