

Junior Taylor Daley and her Hinsdale South gymnastics teammates were huddled on the floor exercise mat after their huge showdown with Downers Grove South Thursday, Jan. 17, anxiously awaiting the news.

The Hornets weren't sure if they won.

When the final scores were announced, the margin was close but good enough. By just .6, the Hornets prevailed 133.80 to 133.20 on their Senior Night in Darien to take a giant step towards defending their overall West Suburban Conference Gold Division championship.

"We were really nervous throughout the whole meet so just to win by a small amount, I'm just really happy," Daley said. "It was really good because we worked so hard. Last year we won so this year we kind of had a little more pressure on us, like, 'We've got to keep the streak going.' It was just hard."

Hinsdale South freshman Maddie Nowak won all-around (35.10), vault (9.4) and the uneven parallel bars (9.5) and junior Jessica Hawken won balance beam (8.9).

The Hornets competed with the usual four all-arounders (Nowak, Hawken, sophomore Lauren Haney and Daley) and junior Shur Batmunkh on beam. Hawken was second in all-around with a season-high 34.75, and Haney (33.00) and Daley (30.90) were fourth and sixth.

Last year, Hawken, Haney and Daley helped the Hornets secure their first overall Gold title since 2007 by winning the dual by just .3 over the Mustangs (129.50 to 129.20) and then capturing the Gold Meet with a season-high 131.375.

This year's Gold Meet will be at Hinsdale South at 5 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 26.

"If we have a good meet, like we have been, there's no way we should lose," Hawken said.

"It was just a good feeling (to beat Downers South). I was so proud because we really depend on each other. We really need each other to do well and just hit whatever routines we were doing at the time."

The overall Gold title is a 50-50 combination of regular-season and Gold Meet standings. The Hornets will finish 5-0 in duals if they win their final one at Addison Trail Wednesday. That would guarantee themselves of at least a share of the overall title with a second-place finish at the Gold Meet.

"We've got some stuff to work on. (But) we're not tying for conference. We're going to win it. Our goal is not to tie," Hinsdale South coach Jennifer Fichter said.

"It was a hard week for them, but we pushed through. Our goal all season is to win conference. We want to go to sectionals as a team. We want to send some girls through to state. We're just not done. Today was the start of a winning trend, hopefully, from this point forward."

If a week of final semester exams wasn't enough, the Hornets underwent enormous pressure after seemingly having the meet in control. They led by 3.45 points following vault and the uneven parallel bars (68.65 to 65.20).

"I was thinking (at that point), 'We're going 137 today,'" Fichter said.

On beam, however, the Hornets counted four falls off beam and two during floor, each an automatic .5 deduction. While the Hornets were concluding with a 32.80 on floor, the Mustangs actually scored a point higher on beam with a 33.90. The Hornets had scored 32.35 on beam.

“I had no idea (if we won),” Hawken said. “I was pretty sure after a couple of events and then it was like, ‘Oh my God, they’re catching up.’ We just did not do so well towards the end.”

Several strong routines by the Hornets were the difference. They scored a season-high 33.65 on uneven bars climaxed by Haney and Nowak landing their double back flip dismounts.

Nowak (9.5) and Haney (8.45) finished 1-2 with scores both .05 shy of their season bests. Hawken was fifth (8.0).

“That was really exciting because (landing) that doesn’t happen every meet. When I actually was on my feet, I was like, ‘Yes,’ ” Haney said.

On vault, Nowak (9.4) continued her high scores with a strong pike Yurchenko and Hawken with a season-high 9.1, landing her tuck Tsukahara on her first attempt and not using her second. Daley was fourth (8.3) and Haney had an 8.2 for a solid 35.00 total.

Of her three season-high scores Thursday, Hawken was most excited, if not surprised, for beam. Her steady, precise performance for a season-high 8.9 earned her first on the event in any dual or invite that she could remember. Haney was fifth after an early fall (8.25), just .2 shy of her season best.

“It was a shock (to get first). Normally I’m all over the place on beam, but I just had a good day,” Hawken said. “We work hard on beam. It’s a huge

thing for us to work beam and stick it. It was a big accomplishment for me just to stay on the beam.”

Nobody reached the 9s on floor either, but Hawken (8.75) and Nowak (8.55) took second and third. The previous week, Hawken continued her ascent into the 9s on floor with a season-high 9.1.

“There are a lot of things that I can improve on (overall),” Hawken said. “It’s been a long struggle to even get to place where I never thought I’d make it. I’m just happy that I can even do some of the stuff that I do.”

Before the meet, the Hornets honored their three seniors – co-captains Cristina Chavez and Catherine Nowicki and Amy Hickenlooper, who all competed as all-arounders on their respective levels.

Chavez tied for second in all-around (27.25) and uneven bars (6.8) as the JV I team won 111.65 to 105.85. Nowicki won all-around (24.25), floor (7.45), uneven bars (4.7) and shared first on vault (7.4) in the JV II team’s 90.70 to 71.60 victory. Hickenlooper tied for second on uneven bars (4.6) and was fourth in all-around (21.80).

On varsity, the Hornets’ returnees all have made improvements to help the score this season. At the 2012 Gold Meet, Hawken won all-around (33.675) and Haney won floor (8.8) and uneven bars (8.125), but no gymnast scored in the 9s on any event.

The addition of Nowak has been the biggest boost, a 9.0 threat on every event who scored well enough Thursday to win all-around even with an uncharacteristic two falls on beam and one on floor.

Downers South returns basically its entire team from last year, including senior Kate Moore, the defending Gold vault champion (8.75). Key additions have been freshman all-rounder Emily Tom, freshman Gabby Henderson, who won floor Thursday (8.8) and junior Inna Dzyuma, who missed last season with a knee injury.

The emotions the Hornets experienced Thursday may very well be repeated at the Gold Meet.

“We have Maddie this year so she’s a big help,” Haney said. “(But beating Downers South) was more stress this year because everyone’s better. This year it was like no one knew if we were going to win. Last year, we knew. There was a lot of tension this year. That was scary.”