

Lyons Township junior Olivia McGann was determined to deliver a much better routine on the uneven parallel bars, especially her dismount, at the Hinsdale Central Sectional Wednesday, Feb. 12 after problems the previous couple of meets.

"I (practiced) a lot of second halves, like 20 a day, and also I was working on being really aggressive and not holding back," McGann said. "I think was my problem for the past few meets. I was really kind of timid and nervous, but I just got mad before my routine and just swung."

McGann performed well enough to earn a top-five sectional finish, yet she knows she can perform better.

Many other Lions felt the same way even after the defending state champions rolled to their third straight sectional title with 149.875 points to advance to the eight-team state meet Friday, Feb. 21, at Palatine High School for the third straight year and seventh time in the past eight seasons.

LT seniors Katie Carling, Michelle Cozza and Mackenzie Stotz and juniors Kelsy Kurfirst, Jackie Fuller and McGann also qualified for state individually either automatically with top-five sectional finishes or at-large by being among the remaining 12 highest scores from the state's four sectionals. Junior Kelly Ryser also was part of the sectional lineup.

Even though the Lions are heavy favorites to defend the program's first-ever state championship and complete an undefeated season, they aren't taking anything for granted.

"What I always say is we try not to think about it. We try not to think about what other people see us as or think is going to happen," said Kurfirst, a two-time individual state champion. "All we can do is work hard each day in the gym and go into the state meet with no regrets and we'll see where that takes us. As long as we do what we do, we'll be fine."

"I think we're happy with how we did (at sectionals). Obviously it wasn't a perfect meet and we've done better, but I think that's good because we

have a week and a half to kind of work out those kinks and do even better at state."

The Lions will be joined at state by Prairie Ridge co-op (148.525 sectional score), Fremd (147.675), Geneva (146.525), Barrington (143.675), St. Charles co-op (143.15), first-time qualifier Prospect (142.925) and New Trier (142.875).

State team and all-around competition and the event preliminaries begin at 5 p.m. Friday with all four events running simultaneously. Individual qualifiers among the top 10 scores Friday advance to Saturday's event finals at 5:30 p.m.

Top-five individual event finishers, based only on Saturday's scores, earn all-state medals. The event finals are conducted one at a time in the order of vault, uneven bars, beam and floor.

"What first comes to mind (last year) was walking in and kind of knowing what to expect from practices and also from watching my sister do it," said Carling, whose older sister Kristi was a two-time state finalist. "I think it's really cool. It's just a really fun meet in general. It's a really great experience to have. We're all so lucky to be a part of it."

LT won last year's state title with 149.625 points after passing Prairie Ridge co-op (149.30) during Saturday's event finals. Fremd (146.05) earned the last team trophy for taking third. New Trier (145.375) and Geneva (145.225) were fourth and fifth and St. Charles co-op (141.675) was eighth.

This season, the Lions also are the only team to score 150 points and had the state's highest regional score with a 152.10 Feb. 7, tying the school-record score from their Dec. 11 dual.

Sectionals was a good reminder of how close the Lions' state margin still could be as they were hurt by three falls, each a minimum .5 deduction, one of which counted toward the team score. Other less precise routines also received deductions from tighter judging.

**"We had moments of excellence, like wow, but as a whole they were all a little dissatisfied, which is perfect," LT coach Kari Karubas said. "I wish it wouldn't have happened at sectionals because there are girls that I know really deserve a chance to medal (individually). But better (at sectionals) than Friday. We've got time to fix it – as a team.**

**"What are we doing different (at practice) this week? We're pushing a little harder. We're adding a little bit more pressure but we're doing what we've always done. We're going to hope to be very mentally tough Friday. I'm throwing a lot of things at them to toughen them up and make them very uncomfortable so that Friday night is kind of a relief for them."**

**Kurfirst and Ryser are making their third state appearances. Their state debuts were as the Lions' 2012 state lineup of five all-arounders that took sixth with 144.475 points.**

**McGann, Carling and Cozza also were part of last year's state title lineup in their first seasons of high-school gymnastics. Stotz, Fuller and sophomore alternate Cat Mossing are newcomers to the program this year.**

**"It's just a different feeling each time because it's a different team. It's a whole different set of girls," Ryser said.**

**"(Our goal is) 20 for 20 (hit routines), no regrets – We don't want to look back on the season thinking, 'Maybe I could have done more. Maybe if I only practiced this more.' We want to go and give it our all."**

**Kurfirst and Carling qualified individually for state in all-around and all four events. Kurfirst won all-around (38.30), vault (9.625), uneven parallel bars (9.475) and floor exercise (9.675) and was third on balance beam (9.525). Carling was second in all-around (37.70), uneven bars (9.375) and floor (9.65), tied for fifth on vault (9.325) and tied for sixth on beam (9.35).**

**Cozza advanced on vault with a second-place 9.45, floor (9.35, 4th) and**

uneven bars (8.85, 6th). Fuller advanced on her three events – uneven bars (9.225, 3rd) vault (9.35, tied for 3rd) and beam 99.35, tied for 6th). McGann tied for fourth on uneven bars (9.15) and Stotz's sixth-place 9.225 on floor beat the 9.175 at-large state cut.

Cozza and Carling also earned all-state honors last year along with Kurfirst and helped LT win the state title because teams also can improve upon Friday's score if individual finalists improve their preliminary scores. After Friday, LT trailed Prairie Ridge co-op 149.30 to 149.05.

"I think it'll help the emotions a little bit, kind of just knowing even more what to expect when we're going in. But obviously, it's state. It's not going to be a cakewalk," Carling said.

"We really just work up to that moment, just what it's going to feel like when we're in there so I think we treat it differently, but we still use the other meets to practice for what it's going to feel like. It's just a really fun meet in general. It's a really great experience to have. We're all so lucky to be a part of it."

Kurfirst won the 2013 state title on floor (9.725) to further boost LT's final team total after Carling's 9.425 on beam that tied for third place with Kurfirst and Cozza's 9.375 that tied for sixth put the Lions ahead to stay.

Kurfirst also was second on vault (9.725) and Cozza tied for second on uneven bars (9.5) both to graduated Carmel standout Lauren Feely's 9.825 and 9.625, respectively.

Cozza also tied for third on vault (9.7). Kurfirst shared the 2012 state title on uneven bars but counted a fall during last year's finals and ended up seventh (9.075).

In Friday's all-around, Kurfirst (38.55) was third to Feely (38.70) and current Prairie Ridge co-op junior Rachael Underwood (38.55), and Cozza tied for fifth (37.625).

"It definitely gives us a lot of confidence because we know we can achieve

stuff that we set our minds to," Kurfirst said. "Crazy things can happen at the state meet so I think the lesson we learned is we have to be prepared for anything and we have to take advantage of any opportunity we're given. It's going to be different than last year's state meet and the year before that so there's no telling what will happen, but hopefully it will be good."

At state last year, Underwood shared second with Cozza on uneven bars (9.5) and tied for third on vault (9.7). The only other healthy returning all-stater is Stevenson junior Alyssa Weisberg, the defending state beam champion (9.525).

Kurfirst had this season's second-highest sectional totals to Underwood in all-around (38.40), vault (9.75) and uneven bars (9.55) and Geneva freshman Claire Rose Ginsberg on floor (9.7). Carling was third on floor, fourth on uneven bars and sixth in all-around, Cozza shared seventh on vault, Fuller shared eighth on uneven bars and Kurfirst shared 10th on beam.

"Honestly, a satisfying state meet would be just having one of the best meets that we've had this season. For each meet, we've learned something different about how we compete and how things work," Kurfirst said.

"Obviously, I want to do well (individually) and I want to place well but we'll see what happens. Of course, I feel pressure but I just try to look at this as a new year and a clean slate. I am kind of a different gymnast than I was freshman and sophomore year. I'll see where it takes me and I'm excited to see what happens. I know my teammates will be there for me no matter what and I'll be there for them."

Cozza won't be able to completely replicate her 2013 state performance because she just missed qualifying on two events. At sectionals, she fell twice off beam for an 8.3 that missed the 9.15 state cut. Although Cozza still advanced on uneven bars despite a fall on her dismount for an 8.85 that topped the 8.775 at-large state cut, her sixth-place 35.95 all-around total was just .025 from fifth and missed the 36.00 at-large state cut.

**Ryser's eighth-place 9.15 on floor and Stotz's 10th-place 9.225 vault both were just .025 shy of those at-large state cuts.**

**"I hope to do what I do in the gym (at state), actually bring it out for a meet because I let my nerves get the best of me today. It's disappointing and I don't want to feel that way again," Cozza said.**

**"I think we know what we're getting ourselves into this year. I know last year there were a lot of new people on the team so we didn't really know what to expect. This year, we know the mentality that we need to get so we'll work on that in the gym some more."**

**McGann hope to take advantage of her state experience to advance to the individual finals. In 2013, McGann finished 14th on uneven bars at state (9.25), .125 from advancing to finals.**

**"State was definitely the best part of last year. It's really fun and my goal is to make state finals this year," McGann said. "I think definitely the nerves got to us a little bit (at sectionals), but overall I think we still did pretty good. I know I still have work to do on my bar routine. It wasn't my best so I'm excited to get it better."**

**Prairie Ridge co-op and Fremd also will have chances to improve at state. LT had the highest sectional team event scores on uneven bars (37.225) and floor (37.90) and were second on vault (37.75) and beam (37.00) to Prairie Ridge (38.10) and Fremd (37.175), respectively.**

**At sectionals, Prairie Ridge co-op counted one fall off beam and didn't count one of its usually stronger floor routines. Three gymnasts went out of bounds during their floor routines.**

**"The team that wins will be the healthiest team, will be the mentally toughest team and will be the one that has done, I would say, all of the right things and it won't be luck and it won't be bias that wins this year," Karubas said.**

**"I know the coaches and teams going in, and I have so much respect for**

what they do as coaches, as community directors. The ways they feel about gymnastics is very noble. The teams that are being represented are good, quality programs and I'm honored to kind of say we're running neck and neck with them because this sport is one where you just get lucky."

Prairie Ridge co-op hasn't competed with junior Riley Mahoney since Jan. 11. Mahoney suffered a knee injury on her first event, floor, during the Lake Forest Invite, where the Lions won the teams' only head-to-head meeting. At state last year, Mahoney was fifth on beam (9.4) and eighth on floor (9.4).

Fremd has been competing without injured sophomore Lisa Radochonski, part of last year's state team lineup on vault and beam. Prospect and New Trier have gone the entire season without senior all-arounders and previous state event finalists (Gianna Scala and Elana Benishay, respectively). Scala tied for fourth on floor (9.55) at state last year.

As a junior, Carling had overcome offseason labrum surgery to debut as an all-arounder at the Lake Forest Invite, but she had to relinquish her bars spot because of extreme pain in her hand. She found out after state that she had a broken bone.

"It feels really good because last year I obviously wanted to be in that (all-around) position," Carling said. "I'm just glad to be able to get out there and do whatever I can for the team. We just need to put it out there, show that we've been working so hard in practice."

Besides never competing at state, Fuller said she has never previously seen a state meet, much less sectionals or regionals.

Fuller comes to state with plenty of momentum. She equaled her season highs on beam from Jan. 18 and vault for the fourth time this season, including regionals.

"I feel like this is one of my better meets. (My teammates told me) you just have to be calm, do what you know how to do, compete how you always have," Fuller said.

**"I'm at a loss for words. It's just really exciting and I can't wait to go to state and do what we know how to do, stick our routines and hopefully we win. I feel like the girls really got me into (joining). I really enjoy competing with them so that was a big part of me coming out and doing high school gymnastics."**

**- by Bill Stone**