

Now in her third varsity season, Lyons Township junior Kelly Ryser has grown as a gymnast along with the Lions' approach to big meets.

"I feel like freshman year was a lot of adrenaline and just go for it but this year's it's a lot of strategy, on point, technical," Ryser said. "This year, I know we approach it with our minds on our technique and what we need to do in order to succeed and to stay safe."

On Friday, Feb. 7, the Lions said goodbye to their home gym for the season in a big way as they tied their school-record score of 152.10 points to win the LT Regional in La Grange.

The Lions, the defending state champions, automatically advanced to the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 12. LT is the No. 1 sectional seed and heavily favored to win to automatically advance to the eight-team state meet Feb. 21-22 at Palatine High School.

Junior Kelsy Kurfirst won all-around (38.725), floor exercise (season-high 9.775), vault (9.7) and uneven parallel bars (9.675) and senior Katie Carling won balance beam (season-high 9.65).

Kurfirst, Carling (career-high 38.35) and senior Michelle Cozza (37.825) went 1-2-3 in all-around and comprised the top-three finishers on all four events. Ryser, junior Jackie Fuller and senior Mackenzie Stotz also had top-five finishes and junior Olivia McGann had a top-10 finish.

All eight of LT's gymnasts also advanced to sectionals as individual qualifiers either automatically with top-five regional finishes or at-large by being among the 12 highest remaining scores for the four feed-in regionals.

"A really good evening, good fight in their performance," LT coach Kari Karubas said.

"My favorite part of the night is the pressure is rising a little bit. Even though we're in our own gym, even though it's a place where they can be comfortable on their own equipment, I could still see the nerves. That

being said, I'm very impressed with the way they are handling their nerves and with the kind of depth that their drive for success is bigger than their fear and their nerves. That's rewarding for us because we've done a lot of pressure work in the gym."

Last year, the Lions had their highest score of the season in their final home meet at regionals (149.775) en route to winning state with 149.625 points. On Friday, they tied their 152.10 from a Dec. 11 home dual by climaxing the meet with a 38.425 season-high team score on floor after a 38.20 Feb. 1 in winning the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet.

In the final routine of the night, Kurfirst, the defending state champion on floor, delivered a season-high 9.775. Carling (9.7), Cozza (9.525), Ryser (9.425) were second through third and Stotz (9.025) tied for fifth with Carling and Ryser also achieving season-high scores.

"I think it was a great starting point for the state series and I'm excited for sectionals. We've got room to improve but I think it was definitely a huge confidence booster," Kurfirst said.

"We have so much adrenaline (competing at home). It's an amazing atmosphere, having everyone here cheering for us, especially finishing on floor. It's always a fun event to end on. Our emotions are high and I think that contributes to our performance."

The Lions swept the top five places on vault with Kurfirst, Cozza (9.55), Carling (9.525), Fuller (9.4) and Stotz (9.3). Fuller and Stotz tied their season highs.

Carling led the 1-to-5 sweep on beam with Kurfirst (9.575), Cozza (9.35), Ryser (9.125) and Fuller (8.95).

Kurfirst, Carling (9.475), Cozza (9.4) and Fuller (9.25) were first through fourth on uneven bars with McGann (8.975) sixth.

The Lions posted the state's highest regional score, their fourth 150-point

plus performance of the season and second in a row.

No other team reached 150 points during the regular season. The state's second-highest regional score was 148.375 by Prairie Ridge co-op, second in state last season. The second-highest regional score for teams that feed into the Hinsdale Central Sectional was Lincoln-Way co-op's 138.50.

"We know that the regional scores are typically a little higher so I'm not quite sure what to make of the (152.10). Things are going to change when there are four judges (at state as opposed to two)," Karubas said. "I know they're happy with what they did, and I'm happy with what they did tonight. I'm still unsatisfied. There are still more skills that we're ready to add. We just want to make sure that they're safe."

Carling, Cozza and Stotz also were competing at home for the final time. Carling and Cozza joined the program last year and Stotz joined this year after being away from club gymnastics for three years.

"I feel like this meet was just another stepping stone, something to prepare us for the meets to come," Carling said. "We're all taking it as our last home meet but at the same time we're using it as the block to build up for sectionals and whatever comes after sectionals."

For Cozza and the Lions, having the meet on a Friday night made performing all the easier. As the top sectional seed, LT had the first choice for which night to hold regionals and collectively thought that Friday was the best choice, taking into account the gymnasts' class loads and the coaches' teaching jobs and children.

"I had a lot of tests and quizzes and it was a tough day, but I kind of separate the two so I was ready for the meet. (On a Friday), you can just focus on gymnastics and don't have to worry about anything else," Cozza said.

"I think going into today we were really confident about our routines, more than other meets. I feel like we just came into today knowing we wanted to hit our routines and be as much prepared as we can for

sectionals. I hit my routines, all four, but I still have room to fix some little things.”

Experience and preparation also have been important to the Lions’ progress. For Ryser, that has her contributing to the lineup as the first or second of five entries on beam and floor.

For regionals, Ryser was first to compete on floor and second on beam after Fuller, who fought hard not to fall.

”Being the first person is kind of a mixed emotion. You are nervous but you do know you need to do it for your teammates because often times you do feed off of each other’s energies,” Ryser said. “More often than not, when the first person hits we all hit.”

”(Ryser) contributes a lot. We all feed off of her for routines,” Kurfirst said. “I think we all kind of feed off each other. When someone does a good routine and does well, then we want to kind of continue that momentum and for the most part we do.”

When Ryser and Kurfirst helped the Lions return to state as a team in 2012, they achieved it with the smallest lineup possible – five all-arounders who had to stay healthy and productive.

The varsity has grown since. Cozza, Carling and McGann came out for the first time last year and Stotz and Mossing joined this year -- all as non-freshmen.

This season, gymnasts not competing on events at meets even have specific roles, such as Ryser, Mossing and Stotz moving and holding down mats and McGann overseeing the music that accompanies floor routines.

”Even those who aren’t first (competing can help),” Ryser said. “Kelsy and Cat both calm me down before beam. And then Olivia pumps me up before floor. I always go over there and talk to her about my floor music, make sure it’s loud from the beginning. She just knows what we all need for our floor routines.”

Carling typified the gamut of emotions during her two final strong routines. Her 9.65 as the Lions' final beam competitor topped her 9.6 from Dec. 11 and Jan. 11. On floor, she beat her all-time LT score by .05 and improved her season-best score by .1, which she had equaled at the Silver Meet.

"I'm really trying to figure out what emotions I need to be set at before I go in for my beam routines. It's a lot different than floor so I feel like that (hit routine) set me up to just have fun on floor," Carling said. "I was really excited about floor because I wanted to go all out, give everything I had so I was happy about that (final home routine). I was just ready to put everything I had on the floor."

Every season, Ryser needs time before she can reach competing on floor. She gets a late start because she is a diver in the fall sports season who also has been part of the sectional lineup all three years and qualified for the state meet the past two.

This season, the Lions' first official day of gymnastics practice was Nov. 11. Ryser missed two weeks of preseason practice because the state diving preliminaries weren't until Nov. 22, five days before the Lions' season opener. Ryser finished 25th (155.35 points).

"We definitely knew when she was gone that first week and we looked forward to when she came back," Cozza said. "She's such an important part of the team I feel like (she was back) was right away."

Ryser had to work her way into gymnastics conditioning and didn't make a lineup appearance until a beam routine Dec. 11 in the Lions' third meet of the season. While Ryser said she felt that she quickly transitioned to gymnastics, she has been battling turf toe for about a month.

"We've been really careful and really delicate with her at practice," Karubas said. "We're trying to go right up to the line, not cross it, in terms of too much pounding. We just get her really ready mentally with her technique."

Especially with the high-level skills that many of the Lions are performing or still perfecting in practice, Karubas said that the proper mental approach is essential, whatever way it can be achieved.

"We're still adding skills and we're still adding flare and finesse. It's kind of my silly little coaching way of getting their nerves off the bigger skills," Karubas said. "We're really focusing on leaps, turns and jumps so you kind of forget that your double back makes you nervous or you really want to get your double turn around, a 720-degree turn. I try to give them what I think they can handle and then I'll throw one more little thing at them. It kind of makes them focus on something that might do them in, but I take them the other way mentally."

-- by Bill Stone