

At her first West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet last season, Lyons Township senior Katie Carling had a balance beam routine to forget.

"Oh yeah. I fell like 13 times," recalled Carling with a slight exaggeration.

"I bring it up more as a joke now. We talk about it, just having a few rough patches at conference last year. Yeah, I fell three times on beam, but I just use it as motivation."

Upon her return to the Silver Meet Saturday, Feb. 1, at Hinsdale Central, Carling and the Lions couldn't have performed much better.

The Lions roared to the team title with 150.15 points to secure a second straight outright overall title after an undefeated record in league duals.

This time, Carling won beam (9.25) as the team's final performer on the event. Junior Kelsy Kurfirst won all-around (38.075) and the other three events -- the uneven parallel bars (season-high 9.7), floor exercise (9.7) and vault (9.675).

Seniors Michelle Cozza and Mackenzie Stotz and juniors Olivia McGann and Kelly Ryser also had top-five finishes, and junior Jackie Fuller had multiple top-10 finishes.

Kurfirst, Carling (37.825) and Cozza (37.625) swept 1-2-3 in all-around.

"I was really happy (personally). I was extremely proud of my teammates because we all hit our routines and we did what we needed to do," Kurfirst said.

"It's a huge confidence booster (for us). Even when everything obviously wasn't perfect, we know that we can still get an outcome that we're happy with. We're excited to go into the postseason now."

LT now begins the quest for a second straight state team championship as the top-rated team. The Lions play host to the LT Regional at 6:30 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 7, in La Grange before heading to the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 12.

LT is expected to win its ninth straight regional title. With another sectional title victory, the Lions would automatically qualify for the eight-team state meet for the third straight year and seventh time in the past eight seasons.

"I think we were taking this meet as a practice for the rest of the state series to come," Carling said. "Obviously, conference is important and it was our first really big meet so we were trying to put into perspective what else is coming in the future."

The Lions are headed to the postseason with plenty of momentum. They're the state's only team so far to reach 150 points this season. Saturday was the third time LT has achieved that, and this was the first that came from average scores from two judges for each event.

LT even achieved season-high event scores on floor (38.20) and uneven bars (38.175), beating previous season bests when they scored a school-record 152.10 in a home dual Dec. 11. While beam scores were consistently tighter, the Lions counted no falls and their 36.075 outscored the other five teams by at least three points.

"Yes, a good score, yes, conference, but we still have a lot of work to do and it's slowly coming together," LT coach Kari Karubas said. "We are still far from where we need to be, at least with what I am seeing in the gym. As usual, I am happy. I am not satisfied."

The Lions won comfortably over second-place Glenbard West's 137.375. At the 2013 Silver Meet, the Lions captured the title with 148.25 points but more important had several missed and rough routines along the way.

With a much better beam performance Saturday, Carling captured her first Silver title Saturday after tying for second on floor as a junior (9.55).

Carling was followed by Cozza (9.1) and Kurfirst (9.0) in second and third and Ryser (8.725) in fifth. Fuller was 11th (8.15). Carling and Cozza joined the program last year.

"It was awesome (to win beam). It felt good. I was proud of our lineup. I think we all fought (to stay on)," Carling said.

"I definitely learned something there (from that beam routine) so that was good. I think I learned what I need to focus on during practice and what I had to do to put out a good routine at a time. I'm still working on improving that."

Kurfirst now has captured nine individual Silver titles over three varsity seasons. She has won vault three times and won everything but beam as a freshman.

"Freshman year was so long ago. It's kind of hard to compare (those four Silver titles) because that meet, I was doing different routines. I think both times were exciting and I was happy with the outcome both times," Kurfirst said.

"There were a lot of highlights. I was proud of myself for twisting my dismount on beam. It's been a little shaky this year, but I think I did it well this meet. I think floor was just a lot of fun. It was fun to end on that event (as a team) and we all nailed our routines so it was awesome."

There were packs of Lions on the awards stand.

LT swept the top four places on floor with Kurfirst, Carling (season-high 9.6), Cozza (9.525) and Stotz (season-high 9.375). Ryser (season-high 9.225) was sixth.

Kurfirst, Carling (9.675) and Cozza (season-high 9.525) also went 1-2-3 on uneven bars with McGann (9.275) and Fuller (9.225) in fifth and sixth.

Kurfirst and Cozza (9.475) were first and second on vault with Carling (9.3) and Stotz (9.25) fourth and fifth. Fuller (8.825) was eighth.

Stotz is in her first high-school gymnastics season as a senior and hasn't competed since she was a freshman. She earned top-five medals for both of her routines in her best overall meet of the season.

"After not placing the last few meets, it feels good. It's kind of a dream come true in a way. It's a happy feeling," Stotz said.

"I came in kind of nervous and being able to contribute, it just felt so good. It was a lot of fun. I thought I was going to come in more nervous, it's conference, but you've just got to go and do your thing. You do what you do. That's our motto this year."

At the 2013 Silver Meet at Glenbard West, current Glenbard West junior Mackenzie O'Keefe won all-around, uneven bars, beam and floor. The 2013 all-stater on uneven bars did not come out for high school gymnastics this season.

Kurfirst was the 2012 co-state champion on uneven bars as a freshman. On Saturday, she was excited to win the event but more so with a solid routine with a double back flip for her dismount rather than her half in-half out that probably will make an appearance at the state meet.

"We kind of knew this week I would do the double. I've been a little bit off lately so I just went for the double," Kurfirst said.

Kurfirst debuted the half in-half out in competition at the Fremd Invite Jan. 18 and landed it, although she fell on another skill earlier in the routine.

Last year, Kurfirst debuted the half in-half out at the Silver Meet, and she fell landing it. The result was a fourth-place 9.1, .5 behind O'Keefe, who won the all-around by .6 over Kurfirst (38.125 to 37.525).

"It was a nice confidence booster (to win bars)," Kurfirst said. "I've been a little shaky the past couple of weeks or just doubting my technique, but

today I proved that I know what I'm doing, so I got my confidence back. I'm looking forward to added the half in-half out as soon as I can."

Cozza also had a much better time on uneven bars than the 2013 Silver Meet. She significantly improved upon her previous season high of 9.4 after finishing 19th on the event last year.

That was another routine that's far back in the rear-view mirror. By the state meet, Cozza and Kurfirst reached the state event finals on uneven bars and Carling did as well on beam.

"We tried not to think about last year too much because we're a different group and a different team. We have different jobs and roles to do," Kurfirst said. "Last year wasn't our best (conference) meet, obviously, but we still learned a lot from that met and I think we learned as much this year, even though we got the better outcome."

Another thing the Lions have learned is that it's nice to have regionals on Friday night. As the No. 1 seed in the sectional, LT had the first choice to play host Monday through Friday. While there may not be as much practice time before sectionals, Karubas said a Friday regional was a unanimous group decision.

"We talked about (Friday) as a team. (Assistant coach Courtney Douglas) and I talked about it as working mothers and as teachers because those are our jobs first. It works with us," Karubas said.

"I'm an English teacher and when I host a regional, the next day I'm an ineffective English teacher and I've got kids so then I'm an ineffective mother. I needed to try to make this work for my life and Courtney the same way, and my gymnasts the same way. They're all (advanced placement class) students and scholars. It was more of a decision to fit with what we need as athletes and to balance all of the things around to survive and exist within your worlds."

-- by Bill Stone