

Lyons Township freshman Sarah Halm has spent the past few months recovering from torn ligaments in both ankles.

Halm started her first high-school season only competing on the uneven parallel bars without an actual dismount, coming to a complete stop before coming off the apparatus.

Next she added balance beam in mid-December. By the Lions' first meet after winter break Saturday, Jan. 10, at Lake Forest's Robin Straus Invitational, Halm suddenly had emerged as an all-arounder.

"I didn't even think I was going to compete floor or vault and then I just got my floor routine yesterday," Halm said. "I forgot it on the floor (while competing). If you saw I was really confused, that's why. I wasn't planning on doing that, but I'm really happy that I competed all-around. It's like a starting point, I guess, I can just build from there."

The Lions are hoping for the same. After taking third with 142.275 points despite far from a perfect meet, the two-time defending state champions proved that they are legitimate contenders to return to the state meet for the fourth straight year and eighth time in the past nine seasons.

Seniors Kelsy Kurfirst and Kelly Ryser are the only returnees from last year's state lineup who competed Saturday. They and Halm had top-15 individual finishes.

Kurfirst finished second in all-around with a season-high 38.125 to Prairie Ridge co-op senior Rachael Underwood (38.15), second on floor exercise to Underwood (9.65 to 9.6) and third on vault (season-high 9.75) and balance beam (9.45).

The Lions counted no falls as the last team on beam and the last team to compete overall but counted five over the other three events, including three for vault. They posted season-high team scores on beam (36.05), uneven bars (35.975) and vault (35.45).

LT only was beaten by state title favorite Prairie Ridge co-op (149.325) and Wheaton Warrenville co-op (143.40) both with season-high totals.

"We crashed and burned (on some routines). I can't be completely negative because we're coming along," LT coach Kari Karubas said.

"We did our team beam (well at practice) a couple of days ago. When I do see them in the gym, they look so good (overall). They have these unbelievable moments. I am a little unsatisfied because that's what I want to see here and now. I am I can't wait to see the beautiful things that happen in practice happen in competition."

The Lions were scheduled to compete against Glenbard West Wednesday, Jan. 7, in La Grange but school was canceled that day because of frigid temperatures and the meet was rescheduled for Monday, Jan. 12.

Working ahead of schedule, Halm held her own as an all-arounder, taking 12th (35.05) just behind Ryser (11th, 35.15).

Halm scored 8.5s on both floor and vault, where she was unable to land her tuck Tsukahara either time.

"For the past week, I've been working on getting a vault back. I didn't really think I was going to do it this meet, maybe next week, but I just got in the lineup I guess," Halm said.

Floor was even more of a surprise because of the last-minute addition to the lineup. As it turned out, the Lions competed first on floor.

"We put her floor routine together yesterday so the fact that it came to fruition, I'm really proud of her," Karubas said.

"She's had this huge turnaround over break. She really tackled some fears and just kind of realized physically what she can handle and just opened the floodgates and let it go."

After floor and vault, Halm was seated with a bag of ice over one ankle and another tucked into her lower back.

Looking as though she may not continue, Halm went to uneven bars and threw a

personal-best and team-best 9.35 for sixth place, just .05 shy of a top-five finish. She landed her toe-front dismount that she tried for the first time Dec. 19 and had to put a hand down to save.

"I was really surprised. I did not expect that (9.35)," Halm said. "When I landed the dismount, because I've never landed a dismount while competing, and I could see all of the team there (cheering), I was just really happy."

"My ankles have always had problems, but I wouldn't not do anything because of pain. I have to at least get over the meet and then I can rehab all I want."

Kurfirst gave another determined effort and would have won all-around and probably uneven bars if not for falling while landing her more difficult dismount that she added for the meet (7th, 9.325).

Kurfirst finished behind Warren senior and first-year high school gymnast Emily Basara (9.85) and Underwood (9.8) on vault and Carmel sophomore Sammi Lococo (9.55) and Basara (9.5) on beam.

"The Lake Forest meet was a little shaky (for me). I wish I would have landed my dismount, but at least I threw it," Kurfirst said.

The Lions scored higher than any invite team on beam. Besides Kurfirst, Ryser tied for 12th with a season-high 9.0, followed by freshman Julia Cozzi (8.9, tied for 17th) and Halm (8.7), who both just missed season highs.

Ryser also was 12th on uneven bars with a season-high 9.1, and Cozzi was 18th in all-around (33.875). Sophomore Regan Iffert competed on three events and freshman Sonia Slusarczyk vaulted.

The Lions are determined to return to state but how much more they can improve remains to be seen. Kurfirst and Ryser continue to add skills while their less experienced teammates do as well while gaining confidence and competition savvy.

"It's just in their own hands at this point. (Assistant coach Courtney Douglas) and I are hitting them hard, hoping they grasp some things that we're throwing at

them," Karubas said.

"We need to work on our retention. We really need to be stronger, more flexible, more resilient so I don't know what more can be done at this point of the season, but we're going to be going down swinging."

The area-wide school closures also resulted in the Lions' dual meet at Hinsdale Central being moved from Thursday, Jan. 15, to Monday, Jan. 19 at 4:30 p.m.

"Our schedule has not been in our favor this year," Karubas said. "I'm just reminding myself this is gymnastics. We're shooting to be ready at this time (down the road). Everything else between then and now has to be strategy, regardless of what's thrown at us."

-- by Bill Stone