

Lyons Township freshman Sonia Slusarczyk missed landing both of her vaults at the Lake Forest Invitational Saturday, Jan. 10.

Despite not having any chance to practice in between, Slusarczyk was determined to try her best again in the Lions' home dual meet with Glenbard West Monday, Jan. 12.

"I was very frustrated (about Saturday) and I just wanted to channel that emotion into my vault," Slusarczyk said. "I just ran hard and did everything they told me to do and I was really excited."

Slusarczyk landed her vault -- both times -- as part of a strong meet for the Lions that yielded a season-high score and defeated the Hilltoppers 144.85 to 139.25.

LT senior Kelsy Kurfirst had her best meet of the season score-wise with a season-high 38.45 all-around total. Kurfirst also swept vault (9.75) and floor exercise (9.7) with season highs, balance beam (9.6) and uneven parallel bars (9.4).

Slusarczyk was second on vault with a 9.3 - her first 9 ever on the event. Senior Kelly Ryser and freshman Sarah Halm also had top-five individual finishes.

"It was the best feeling. I was really excited. It's just so awesome. I was really happy," Slusarczyk said. "I think we were really motivated. I think we did well as a team, too."

Kurfirst and Ryser are the only two returnees from last year's state lineup that competed Monday. Sophomore Regan Iffert was the only other competitor who was part of the program last season.

The Lions easily surpassed their previous season high of 143.00 from Dec. 19 before winter break behind season-high team scores on beam (36.60) and uneven parallel bars (36.65).

In their return to action Saturday, Jan. 10 at the Lake Forest Invite, the Lions still scored 142.75 and finished third despite a rough team set on vault and five counted falls overall.

"We talked at length on the bus ride home Saturday just about their mindset. It just has to be gymnastics and not other things, factors that we can't control," LT coach Kari Karubas said.

"The team is still young and we have to do a lot of mental coaching, but they're really stepping into their mental toughness. They're elevating their expectations. (But) we still have a lot to work on."

LT further secured its hold on the No. 1 seed of the Hinsdale Central Sectional with the seed scores to be submitted Wednesday, Jan. 14.

Monday's victory also gives the Lions the inside track on defending their overall West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet. Glenbard West has been the second-highest scoring team in the Silver with a season-high 139.65 Dec. 10.

Like the Lions, the Hilltoppers competed Saturday, but at the Naperville North Invitational (2nd, 138.825), and had to come back Monday without having a practice.

"Especially after Saturday didn't go so well, this was a huge boost of confidence. We just had to get ourselves together, focus and just bring all we had for this meet," Ryser said. "I don't think we were really thinking about how hard it was (not having a practice). I know we just came here hungry and had a job to do."

Kurfirst dominated the meet and should only get better. Still competing conservatively in terms of incorporating skills into routines, Kurfirst built upon her previous high of 38.125 at Lake Forest.

She scored 9.75 with her layout Yurchenko vault for the second straight meet. The two-time defending state floor champion also edged her previous season best of 9.65 from Dec. 6.

"I'm happy with how I did tonight. I think definitely as a team, too, we've progressed so well over the season and tonight really showed that," Kurfirst said.

"I actually have areas on every event that I want to improve or work harder skills on. I think I'm close to wrapping, twisting my dismount off beam, which I've

competed before, and hopefully twist on (my Yurchenko) vault soon, add my half-in, half-out again (on uneven bars) and kind of play around with my floor routine."

Ryser also continues to make progress. She again was unable to land her vault but she stepped up on the next three events for a second-place, season-high 36.35 all-around total.

"I knew that I had tenths to make up because obviously I let my team down a little bit on vault so I had to make it up on all of the other events," Ryser said.

Ryser was second on uneven bars (9.05), tied for second on floor (9.2) and third on beam (9.25) with a flight series added for the first time this season.

Her beam score was a season high and floor score tied her season best. Even with her vaulting troubles, the fourth-place 8.85 was a season high.

"I still didn't make my vault, which is a bummer, and I didn't connect my flight series on beam, which is a bummer, but I pulled floor together better than Lake Forest (8.35) and bars (9.1)," Ryser said.

Halm was third on uneven bars (9.0) and tied for fourth on beam with a season-high 9.0. Freshman all-arounder Julia Cozzi had sixth-place scores of 8.15 and 8.75 on those events, respectively, and was sixth on floor (8.6) and all-around (34.25).

This was Halm's second straight meet as an all-arounder after previously being used on uneven bars and beam.

"Oh my gosh, Sonia's vault, she got two to her feet. On bars, Sarah's had two competition routines that went her way," said Karubas as she rambled off highlights. "We're cleaning up the form, getting a little more of the connections. We're starting to fight for the tenths, not just surviving the night, fighting for the little things."

-- by Bill Stone