

Lyons Township senior gymnast Kelly Ryser has worked hard to compete as an all-arounder for the first time since freshman year.

On Saturday, she was rewarded with and two top-five individual medals and her first 4-for-4 event performance of the season at Fremd's Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational.

The Lions scored 144.65 points, their second highest total of the season, to take second behind the host Vikings (season-high 147.825). St. Charles co-op was third (142.45).

Ryser's 36.70 all-around total not only earned a spot on the top-five awards podium but third place behind only senior teammate Kelsy Kurfirst (38.10), who won two events, and Fremd junior Carly DeFilippo (36.925).

"Especially here, yeah, I'm excited. I'm really excited," Ryser said.

"This year definitely (it's my best meet) and probably all of high school. Actually it hasn't been frustrating. It's just been difficult and that's always expected when you're going from doing one or two events to all of them. It's a difficult thing getting back in there, but it's worth it."

The Lions also have put themselves back in the talk of the elite state teams after losing most of last year's lineup that secured a second straight state championship.

Saturday's score is second only to their 144.85 the previous meet Jan. 12 and is their fourth straight meet above 142 points.

Earlier in the week, the officially earned the No. 1 seed for the Feb. 11 Hinsdale Central Sectional, whose champion earns automatic berth to the eight-team state meet Feb. 20-21 at Palatine High School. The LT Regional will be Monday, Feb. 2 at 6 p.m. at the north campus.

"Definitely, I think we're finally kind of figuring out our groove," Kurfirst said.

"We've learned how to compete and that's definitely showing through these meets because we've been improving, we've been hitting our routines, we've been upgrading. Honestly, I think there's even more to come, but as of now we're

extremely proud and extremely excited about how far we've come since the beginning of the season."

Kurfirst once again had a great showing at the invite, which is named in honor of Sopper, a former Fremd gymnast who was among the airplane victims of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Kurfirst, the two-time defending state champion on floor exercise, won that event by tying her season high of 9.7 and vault with a 9.65. She also was second on uneven parallel bars (season-high 9.5) and fifth on balance beam (9.25).

Kurfirst won all-around and all four events at the invite as a freshman and sophomore but inserted a couple of dismounts last year and was third in all-around (37.50) and did not win any events.

This all-around title was special because she shared the award with Ryser at her side.

"Amazing. It's awesome. I'm so proud of her," Kurfirst said. "It feels so much more exciting and it means so much more to be able to go up to the podium with a teammate. I'm so proud of her and I think she kicked butt today."

Other Lions also did as well, contributing to season-high event scores on vault (36.90) and uneven bars (36.25).

Freshmen Sarah Halm, Julia Cozzi and Sonia Slusarczyk had top-15 finishes. Because of the invite format, eight Lions were able to compete counting routines with junior Natalie Cozzi, sophomore Regan Iffert and freshman Lydia Bruni also seeing action.

Unlike regular meets, the invite allowed six competitors per event, rather than five, with the top four scores going toward the team total. In dual meets, the Lions sometimes put up six competitors per event, but one is labeled beforehand as exhibition and the score cannot be used for the team total.

"I'm really seeing their harmony and cohesion get into a nice shape. Today was a step in a very positive direction," LT coach Kari Karubas said. "However, you

know me, never quite happy (completely). We have a lot of work to do. Once again, what I see in the gym and the potential I know is there has yet to match."

Despite still competing somewhat conservatively for her, Kurfirst was the most consistent and top-scoring competitor Saturday. She was the only gymnast with top-five finishes on all four events with DeFilippo the only other one with top-five finishes on three.

"I've always liked this meet actually. It's a lot of fun to watch the Fremd girls. They're amazing gymnasts and that kind of pumps me up also," Kurfirst said. "It's a tough meet. There's a lot of competition but it's always a fun meet and I'm glad we've been able to do well here."

Kurfirst won floor by .1 over Fremd senior Chrissy Radochonski (9.6) and vault by .2 over St. Charles co-op junior Devon Ross (9.45).

Fremd freshman Abby Moran won beam (9.6). On uneven bars, Fremd senior Sydney Plichta (9.55) won by .05 over Kurfirst.

For uneven bars, Kurfirst returned to her double back flip dismount. She landed it while taking a couple of steps, costing her precious tenths, but she had struggled with her recently added half in-half out dismount at the Lake Forest Invitational Jan. 10.

"Over the past couple of days (at practice), they haven't been going as smoothly as I would have wanted. I have some more time (to include them again)," Kurfirst said.

"They're two completely different dismounts," Karubas said. "(Kurfirst's) technique was actually too good for a double back today so we took the .2 step (deduction) on that landing but it's also a good thing because when the half-in, half-out is ready to get in there, (that dismount will) be better because of the technique we've been working."

Last season, Ryser competed for the Lions at state on beam and floor. At the 2014 Fremd Invite, Ryser was returning from injury and competed on two events, tying for ninth on floor (9.1) and tying for 13th on uneven bars (8.7).

On Saturday, Ryser hit beam and had a solid floor routine after some problems at Lake Forest. She finished seventh on beam (9.1) and tied for sixth on floor (9.15).

Although she said her first two events didn't necessarily give her momentum, Ryser then landed her tuck Tsukahara vault for the first time in a meet after missing her first of two attempts.

Her season-high 9.15, her first 9 vault this season, tied for 11th. She finished with a season-high 9.3 on uneven bars for fourth.

"My coach gave me a correction after my first vault and that's all I thought about. Once I did it, it was like a light bulb moment. I was just happy," Ryser said.

"As I go from event to event, I don't think ahead to the next event. I don't think back to what my previous events were. It didn't matter that I just did floor and it didn't matter that I still had to do bars. I was just vaulting in the present."

The strong all-around effort also pleases Ryser in her hopes to help as a team leader. She and Kurfirst have been part of the Lions' last three team state qualifiers. When they were freshmen, LT finished sixth at state with a minimal lineup of five all-arounders.

"It's always good to be a role model for your team, get them to want to do all-around and things like that," Ryser said. "So far everyone's been trying to get back in the lineup and are really hungry for those few spots that we have. We're never going to be satisfied because we know we're a better scoring team. We have to really solidify who needs what, when we can be a good teammate and really cohesive. I don't think we'll be happy until the end."

LT's younger all-arounders continue to emerge. Halm was 10th (34.80) and Julia Cozzi tied for 14th (34.15).

Halm also tied for eighth on uneven bars (9.15), Slusarczyk tied for ninth on vault (9.2) and Cozzi tied for 15th on beam (8.7).

For the past three meets, Halm has joined Cozzi as a fellow freshman all-

arounder.

"It helps a lot. It's sort of like a friendly competition between us to see who can do better on which event," Cozzi said. "We can compare our thoughts together (as all-arounders). We think the same because we know we have to compete every event and we have a lot of fun work. We're in the same boat."

There were many other team victories. On vault, the Lions landed seven of their 12 attempts overall after Kurfirst was the only one to cleanly stick her attempts at the Lake Forest Invite.

"Jokingly, we are going to officially start calling the Lake Forest Invite the Face Forest Invite based on how many vaults we faced," Karubas said.

That wasn't the case Saturday. Besides the two seniors, Julia Cozzi posted a season-high 8.9 by landing both of her tuck Tsukaharas.

"I've never landed a vault at a meet by myself (this season) so it was really exciting," Cozzi said. "I tried to take a deep breath and not be so nervous about it because when I get nervous, I lose all technique and just go. This time I took a deep breath and thought of my technique and reached and stuff."

"We trained really hard this week in the gym for vaults. We went back to the basics, literally Drills 101," Karubas said. "They were hungry. They wanted them, too."

Uneven bars began with quite a moral victory. Natalie Cozzi not only officially competed the event for the first time as the team's first event entry, but her 8.3 also counted toward the team total.

Until Friday, Natalie Cozzi had been working her routine in halves but never as a complete set.

"I have my routine but at practice I never really had it as a full (one). I would always get my bail and then stop going into my second half because of endurance," Natalie Cozzi said. "Today I went for it and I made it, surprising."

"I told her, 'I can't technically put you in the lineup until I see you fulfill all of the requirements,' " Karubas said. "She did two full routines at practice and it was an amazing moment."

Perhaps Cozzi's crowning moment was when she battled to get over the high bar and complete back-to-back giant swings without having to count a fall.

"I did (fight). You could see me kicking for that (second giant)," Cozzi said.

"I was kind of disappointed in it. I also surprised myself, too, because that was my first time doing it. Today was kind of a long shot. I thought I'd try it. I didn't know what was going to happen basically. Making those giants was actually very rewarding for me."

Against Glenbard West Jan. 12, Cozzi competed on all four events but all were as an exhibition entry. Every score had a chance to count Saturday.

"When I competed in every event for exhibition, I still got the same nervousness. I went out there thinking I was just like everyone else," Cozzi said. "I don't think I can go out there thinking, 'Oh, it doesn't matter how I do,' because then it's not the same. I wouldn't compete as well probably."

On beam, Bruni returned to the lineup for the first time since the season opener and scored an 8.15 with no falls.

"I was really excited to be able to compete again. I liked that a lot," Bruni said.

At the Hinsdale South Invitational Nov. 26, Bruni broke a bone over the top of her left foot crashing her second attempt on vault, the Lions' second event that night. Bruni received medical clearance to return to practice Monday. She currently only is working beam and uneven bars.

"I wanted to compete last week our home meet because I was really anxious to get back to competing," Bruni said. "I felt that I could have done better, but I was happy that I stayed on."

--by Bill Stone