

Sarah Halm and four other Lyons Township freshmen are improving as gymnasts under challenging circumstances.

While competing for the varsity as freshmen on any team can be tough enough, they are part of a program trying to reload after winning the last two state team championships.

"It's really fun because we're growing as a team, but then it's really stressful because we knew we need to keep that state title (history) or whatever going on," Halm said. "(LT coach Kari Karubas) really wants us to get to state and do really well so it's kind of a lot of stress, but we need that sometimes."

They and the Lions continue to handle what's thrown their way beautifully. On Monday, the key word was survival as they pulled off a 142.90 to 138.80 victory at Hinsdale Central in West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual action.

Senior Kelsy Kurfirst won all-around (37.55), vault (9.6), floor exercise (9.5) and balance beam (9.2) and was second on uneven parallel bars (9.25).

Senior Kelly Ryser, Halm, and freshmen Julia Cozzi and Sonia Slusarczyk also had top-five finishes. Junior Natalie Cozzi, sophomore Regan Iffert and freshman Lydia Bruni also competed in the lineup or as an exhibition entry.

LT was coming off competing at the Fremd Invitational Saturday and earning second place with 144.65 points. They also have Senior Night and their final regular-season meet at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 21, against Oak Park-River Forest at home in La Grange.

"I'm glad we're walking out of here on two legs so that's always a plus," Kurfirst said with a smile. "We've had a lot of meets in the past couple of weeks and I think we're all a little bit tired and banged up. It wasn't our best meet ever, but for as many meets as we've had, I think we did pretty well."

Even with a slightly conservative approach, the Lions still surpassed 142 points for the fifth consecutive meet. Halm, Julia Cozzi and Slusarczyk beat or equaled individual season-high scores.

"I think we all want to succeed and when we do, it gets scary and we become really good," Slusarczyk said. "We've been working really hard to just be the best that we can be."

Because of rescheduled meets, this marked the second week in a row in which the Lions competed on a Monday after being at an invitational the previous Saturday.

Monday's meet had to be rescheduled from Thursday, Jan. 15 after frigid temperatures canceled school the previous week. The school closures pushed back the dates of Hinsdale Central's final exams schedule last week.

With school being out in observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, the meet also started at 4:30 p.m. rather than 6 p.m. To help parents arrive in time for Senior Night ceremonies, the Red Devils' seven seniors were honored in the middle of the meet between the normal dual-meet transition from vault and uneven bars to beam and floor. Hinsdale Central also recognized all of the Lions' seniors.

Kurfirst said just about any dual meet, however, has its adjustments.

"It's definitely a different feel. There's a big difference between dual meets and invites," Kurfirst said. "At invites, it's a little more high energy and you have more adrenaline going. There are a lot of teams and competition there. For dual meets, you have to kind of calm yourself down and just kind of make it through the night healthy and safe and do what you do and you should be fine."

There were still many big-time highlights. Julia Cozzi and Halm tied for third in all-around (34.95) behind Hinsdale Central senior Brigid Cultra (season-high 36.80), a first-year high school gymnast who helped the Red Devils post a season high.

On vault, Halm was elated to land her tuck Tsukahara for the first time, scoring a season-high 8.9 for third place. The vault was so good that she waved her second attempt.

"This was like the first time I've landed a vault in like a year and a half or two years. I never even land it in practice so I was surprised," Halm said. "My coach gave me a correction to put my shoulders back. I tried making that correction and

it worked."

Ryser (9.05), Halm (8.75) and Julia Cozzi (8.5) were third through fifth on uneven bars.

On beam, Julia Cozzi posted a season-high 8.95 for second, and Halm tied for third (8.7).

"It was good. I think if I didn't take those (extra) steps, it would have been higher," Cozzi said. "(My coaches) thought it was a really good routine but they said, 'I wish you didn't take as many steps.' "

Against Glenbard West Jan. 12, Slusarczyk landed her pike Tsuk vault but then was disappointed about floor routine.

On Monday, she was unable to land her pike Tsukahara vault but then came back with her highest floor score, a 9.05, for third place. Julia Cozzi was fourth (9.0).

"I was excited (about floor). I guess my leaps and jumps were good," Slusarczyk said. "I really wanted to get tenths back for my team (after vault) so I was like, 'Let's do it on floor.' "

Slusarczyk still shared fifth on vault with Ryser (8.7). To be safe, Ryser, usually an all-rounder did not compete on beam, the Lions' final event.

As an exhibition entry on vault, Natalie Cozzi had a 7.85, higher than her official season best of 7.8.

-- by Bill Stone