

Lyons Township senior Olivia McGann gave an inspirational gymnastics performance Wednesday, Jan. 21, even though it didn't officially count.

While it may have been only an exhibition routine on balance beam, McGann competed for the first time all season on Senior Night against Oak Park-River Forest in La Grange. The Lions won 142.65 to 129.40.

McGann, one of seven seniors honored, has been recovering from surgery to her right labrum in late September. With limited skills she could use Wednesday, she scored a 6.45.

"Yesterday (LT coach Kari Karubas) asked me if I wanted to compete and I said absolutely, just for fun. No flight series, just leaps," McGann said.

"It felt like the same thing (as before). I felt really good just competing out there again. It felt like home. Definitely, I was proud of it, which people usually aren't (for a 6.45)."

The other seniors also gave emotional and strong performances, even though the LT varsity was competing for the fourth time over the 10 days and fifth over 12 days.

Four-year varsity seniors Kelsy Kurfirst and Kelly Ryser were keys to the varsity victory. McGann joined the program as a sophomore.

Kurfirst (37.85) and Ryser (36.05) finished 1-2 in all-around with freshman Julia Cozzi third (34.45).

Kurfirst also won all four events – vault (9.6), floor exercise (9.55), uneven parallel bars (9.4) and beam (9.3). Ryser was second on uneven bars (9.15), floor (9.0) and beam (9.0) and shared third on vault with Cozzi (8.9) behind freshman Sonia Slusarczyk (9.0).

"It was a lot of fun. I saw a lot of people in the stands tonight and then just the support from all of your teammates, the signs, the pictures, everything like that," Kurfirst said. "I definitely felt more adrenaline tonight because it was Senior Night. I wanted to hit all of my routines."

Seniors Grace Flynn, Colette Kocek, Maggie Taylor and Mary Jo Thometz also have been four-year program members. Flynn, Kocek and Taylor helped the junior varsity I team prevail 124.20 to 96.10 and complete a 5-0 Silver dual season. Thometz competed on beam for the junior varsity II team, which won 104.55 and 79.45 and finished 4-1 in Silver duals.

"It's been really wonderful. They've all been family," Karubas said. "Senior Night was everything I wanted it to be. My favorite part, though, is that we're hosting the regional on Monday, Feb. 2 (at 6 p.m.) so for my (varsity) seniors, that's their Senior Night in our gym."

Before regionals, the Lions will try to defend their West Suburban Conference Silver Division title at the Silver Meet at 11 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 31, at York. Because the Lions went 5-0 in Silver duals, they only need a top-two finish Saturday to gain at least a share of their third straight conference title.

In the meantime, the Lions get to train non-stop for a while. Although Karubas disagreed with some of the routine scores Wednesday, there was no denying the quality of performances and the momentum gained heading into the final push before the postseason.

"I'm very pleased with the gymnastics that happened tonight. A couple of little hiccups, but for the most part we've been on this train of four meets in a week and a half," Karubas said.

"We survived. We got smarter. I'm convinced the gymnastics, given a chance to kind of relax a little bit and hit the reset button, will only get better. The wisdom gained these last four meets I think is the most valuable piece we're going to take away."

Kurfirst, Ryser and McGann have been part of the 2014 and 2013 back-to-back state championship lineups. Kurfirst and Ryser also were part of the sixth-place state lineup in 2012 that used five all-arounders.

For Senior Night, LT's already quaint gym area was packed to the brim with fans, parents and former gymnasts.

"It was sentimental, but then I feel like once vault started, it was just like -- meet. It's not Senior Night anymore," Ryser said. "It was a bit crowded today. We had nowhere to stand. That wasn't fun. (But) there's a lot of memories in this gym."

Ryser and Kurfirst agreed that many of their home gym memories come from during practices maybe even than the meets. Besides the approaching postseason, the Lions are in the process of choreographing their gymnastics exhibition for the annual all-school assembly in the north campus gym that features winter activities.

"(I remember) both the good days and the bad days and even the days when we're in here not practicing, just hanging out (such as) working on the all-school assembly dance. We have a picnic (with sandwiches) and practice the dance," Kurfirst said. "Even when we're not in gymnastics, this place still feels like home and that's why it is so special to us."

Besides child pictures of the seniors and signs of motivation and inspiration, there were several signs with the score 11.5. Kurfirst's boyfriend, who often attends meets and holds signs, created an 11.0 sign to signify performances even better than a 10.0, the highest score possible. He then attached a .5 to the side with a piece of notebook paper, similar to those attached to the end of score flashers during meets when only two digits are available.

"I actually got an 11.5 at Fremd," Ryser joked. "It was 9.15 and then the 9 fell down so it was (showing) a 1."

Cozzi tied her season-high vault score and also was third on beam (8.6) and uneven bars (8.6). Freshman Sarah Halm was fourth on floor (8.6) and Slusarczyk (8.4) were fourth and fifth on floor and Halm was fifth in all-around (33.75) and vault (8.8).

"I think we feel pretty good about tonight. It's exactly what we needed heading into kind of the bigger meets," Kurfirst said. "Tonight was definitely a huge confidence booster. We can't really focus on the scores but just the fact that we hit our routines and we've been cleaning up some stuff and everything like that."

Because the seniors are the only varsity gymnasts with previous high-school gymnastics experience, they have become used to competing at a breakneck pace

like recently.

"It's not like club, where you have a meet like every month," Ryser said. "I think we just got smarter competing because once we got tired, we needed to really focus on technique and we can't think about fatigue or what hurts. I think now we're really excited for time to practice actually and work towards the bigger meets."

McGann is hopeful she can contribute in the postseason -- and with routines that can count toward the team score.

"I'm going to the doctor next week so we'll see if I get cleared. Hopefully I'll be able to do more stuff," McGann said. "Because it's our home gym, I've always felt so relaxed in here. It's always like a pleasure to compete in here and I love practicing in here. It always brings back good memories of my teammates and hard work."

McGann has continued to be a great leader in the gym and contributes in any way possible, such as overseeing the floor music at meets. Karubas said McGann trains as hard, if not harder, than anyone else in the gym as far as conditioning and skills that she's permitted to do.

"Every day, she does a little more with that shoulder. We can't push it, but let's say she does get released officially, she will slide right back in seamlessly," Karubas said. "Her perception is exactly where it needs to be, her strength, flexibility. I would say, if anything, the minute she gets the green light, we're going to see her go, but we're not pushing it."

-- by Bill Stone