

The odds appeared stacked against Lyons Township freshman Olivia Kalata qualifying for the girls gymnastics state meet.

Kalata was down to her final event and her final vault at the Hinsdale Central Sectional Wednesday, Feb. 10 – and she had struggled all season landing second vaults.

“My first vault I stuck, but it wasn’t enough. I took two steps and I knew it was make it or break it,” Kalata said.

“I had to push myself past my limits. I got my mind straight, focused on my goal and I knew I had to make it or else I wouldn’t have my goal.”

Kalata didn’t just land her pike Tsukahara well. She scored a personal-best 9.325 to tie for fourth and automatically qualify for state with a top-five sectional finish.

The state meet is Friday and Saturday, Feb. 19-20, at Palatine High School.

“I was euphoric. It was the best feeling ever,” Kalata said. “Seeing my score when I came back, I was happy, crying. I was so happy.”

The Lions did not advance as team to sectionals but had five individual qualifiers in Kalata, sophomores Julia Cozzi and Sarah Halm, junior Cara Rasmussen and senior Michelle Flaws in her only high-school season.

In 2015, Cozzi and Halm were individual state qualifiers on balance beam and floor exercise, respectively, and also competed with the team as the Lions finished fifth.

Halm was not an individual sectional qualifier on vault Wednesday, but her 9.3 for her tuck Yurchenko as part of the all-around competition was a great finish to the meet for the team.

“When Sarah stuck her vault, that made the meet so much better,” Kalata said.

Halm’s vault was an eye opener for herself, especially after she just missed qualifying for state on uneven bars and floor.

“Before I started the meet, I planned on not doing gymnastics this (coming) year,” Halm said.

“This was going to be my last meet so I decided to give it my all. After I landed that vault, it reminded me why I love gymnastics so I’ve decided to stick with it.”

The first season for Kalata has been filled with challenges and personal growth. She had a rousing start as she won vault at the season-opening Hornet Invitational Nov. 25 with a 9.1. Kalata struggled at times with consistency but began peaking near the end of the season and emerging with the team’s top all-around totals. At the conference meet, she was fourth in all-around (35.475) with help from her eighth-place 9.175 vault – her highest score on the event until sectionals. At regionals, she won beam (8.7) and was second in all-around (34.95) with a 9.05 vault.

Kalata gave the credit for her success to LT coach Kari Karubas and Kacey Childs, her club coach from Flying High Gymnastics.

“I’ve definitely learned a lot (this season). I’ve learned from both my club gym and LT that you just have to have a positive mindset and growth mindset or you won’t get anywhere,” Kalata said. “A lot of ups and downs from that first meet to the last meet but without a positive mindset I wouldn’t be anywhere I am today.”

Kalata did not know that she had qualified for state until after the meet. Had she not finished top five, she would not have advanced because the at-large state cut after the final sectional the next night at Glenbard West was 9.35, .125 higher than Kalata's score.

"I would have still been pretty satisfied (even without qualifying) but I don't know what I would have done with myself because I put everything into that second vault," Kalata said. "I didn't know what to do to make it better. (Karubas) really helped me get my mind on track." The plan at state is to continue doing the vault better. Kalata's score shared 32nd among all state qualifiers in the event.

"My goal is just to improve. If I could just get .1 higher or .025, improve on my score, my attitude, anything that I can," Kalata said. "I just want to end knowing that I pushed myself hard as I can the next five days and end stronger than I began."

Halm barely missed advancing. Her 9.15 on floor at sectionals shared seventh and barely missed the 9.20 the at-large state cut. She also could have made the 9.05 at-large cut for uneven bars if not for a fall on her toe-shoot dismount, resulting in an 8.55 for 15th. Cozzi's 8.65 on beam, which tied for eighth, was .20 from the state cut.

"I was really disappointed that I didn't make it to state, especially for bars. I kind of made it up for vault," Halm said. "I like floor a lot more now that I'm throwing a 1 1/2 (full twist) in the beginning. It's a lot more exciting to start it because I'm now doing bigger skills. (But) I feel like there's a little more I could have done. I feel it's a good way to end the season, even though I didn't make state."

In their other qualifying events, Kalata also was 11th on beam (8.575), 12th in all-around (34.80), tied for 20th on floor (8.75) and was 27th on uneven bars (8.15), Halm also tied for 13th in all-around (34.625), and Cozzi also was 17th in all-around (34.925) and 20th on uneven bars (8.3). Flaws tied for 26th on beam (7.45) and Rasmussen was 30th on uneven bars (7.85). Halm said she might just compete on uneven bars and floor next season, but she's taking a good lesson from vault. Most of the season, she did a timing Yurchenko for her first attempt with no flipping and then the tuck Yurchenko on her second. At sectionals, she did two tuck Yurchenkos, and actually received a higher score for her first one.

"I took a chance flipping the first one. I just went for it," Halm said. "I listened to coach, always take the safe one out, and just took a chance and it paid off."