

There were plenty of nerves to go around for a mostly new Lyons Township girls gymnastics team at the annual season-opening Hornet Invitational at Hinsdale South Wednesday, Nov. 26.

Senior and four-year varsity standout Kelsy Kurfirst understood completely.

"I'm always a little nervous for the first meet. I never know how I'm going to do, but I felt pretty confident for the most part with all of my routines," Kurfirst said.

"I try to help them as much as I can and kind of calm them down or make them laugh and relax a little bit because it is nervewracking and I've been there before. The first meet of high school that you'll ever compete, it's very, very stressful so I tried my best to calm them down."

Not everything went right for the Lions, but the two-time defending state champions still won the eight-team invite with 132.60 points. Hinsdale Central was second with 131.25 points.

Kurfirst won all-around (37.45), vault (9.55), floor exercise (9.45) and balance beam (9.2) and was second on uneven parallel bars (9.25).

Freshman Sonia Slusarczyk was fourth on uneven bars (8.45) and freshman Julia Cozzi was fifth on beam (8.3). Also seeing action were senior Kelly Ryser, junior Natalie Cozzi, sophomore Regan Iffert and freshmen Lydia Bruni and Sarah Halm.

Kurfirst and Ryser were the only Lions with previous varsity experience. Iffert was the only other LT gymnast previously with the program.

"None of us thought we were going to win. Individually it wasn't good but I think when the team scores came together it was good," Julia Cozzi said. "I think it was mostly people's nerves and everything. Four of us are freshmen so it's our first high school meet so I think it was the fact that we were all scared. And I know my sister (Natalie), she hasn't competed in three years so she was extra nervous."

LT had the top team scores on uneven bars (33.20) and beam (32.55) and were second on floor (32.50) and third on vault (34.35).

The Lions counted several falls, each an automatic .5 deduction, especially because they entered the minimum four competitors on vault and beam. Most meets allow five entries per event with the top four scores going toward the team total.

"We've got a lot of work to do. We've got a lot of turning these girls into athletes," LT coach Kari Karubas said.

"What did I see that went well this evening? I see a team that wants to be here. I see a team that in just 2 1/2 weeks has already has grown so much from the minute season started on Nov. 10 until now they have grown athletically, they have grown with their skills. I don't know what the rest of the season will look like, but if we keep growing at this pace, it will be very promising."

Kurfirst made her last Hornet Invite a memorable one. With her results Wednesday, Kurfirst won all-around at the invite all four years, floor, beam and uneven bars three times and vault twice.

"I've been having some pretty good practices so I just know that if I went out there and did what I knew how to do then I'd be fine," Kurfirst said. "I'm happy with the results. I think my routines are pretty solid for right now."

As usual, the Lions began the meet on floor, the event on which Kurfirst has won two consecutive individual state titles. When she landed her double back flip to complete her first tumbling pass, it set the tone for a great night.

"It's always a good feeling, definitely," Kurfirst said. "I guess, just in general, I'm happy with my beam routine. It wasn't perfect. None of my events were perfect. There's stuff that I can improve upon, but it was a learning experience for everyone and now we all kind of know what we need to work on to fix for the next meet."

Ryser was 11th on floor (8.0), her one event, and Slusarczyk tied for 16th (7.55).

The younger Lions showed progress as the meet progressed.

On uneven bars, Kurfirst finished second to Hinsdale South junior Maddie Nowak

(9.4). Besides Kurfirst and Slusarczyk, Iffert was 10th (7.95) and Halm was 14th (7.55) on her one event.

On beam, the Lions' final event, Kurfirst won by .8. Julia Cozzi was just .1 from second place and Iffert was 10th (8.0).

Julia Cozzi was the Lions' only other all-arounder (11th, 30.65). She had just battled her nerves during uneven bars but she started a solid team beam set as the Lions' first of five competitors.

"I know my bar routine was not good because I was nervous. I made so many at practice, but right before I went, I got so scared," Julia Cozzi said.

"I was fourth in the (beam) lineup because (Karubas) thought I was going to do really well and I was like, 'No, I'm not going to do good,' so put me first instead. I think it was good because I know I got really scared. I was about to throw up before I went and then, after I saluted, it was like, 'OK, I need to calm down,' and I was really surprised that I did that well because I was so scared. I usually got 7s at club (meets) so I was really surprised."

Vault was the Lions' toughest event. While Kurfirst won by landing her layout Yurchenko, their other three entries did not land either of their two attempts. That included a balked vault, which frustrated Karubas because of the danger of the athlete being seriously hurt.

"I had a girl balk for the first time in my coaching career, which is not acceptable. (Safety) is the reason," Karubas said. "I understand that there's some doubt and when you salute and run there's fear, but to stop mid-skill, I can't even express as a coach how dangerous it is. It's so dangerous. Most of them end up in the emergency room."

Ryser celebrated her birthday with gymnastics. She competed on floor after just returning to practice two days earlier because she still was busy finishing 10th in diving at the state meet Nov. 22.

"I'm still not back to my full ability and I would like to be at some point. I just want to get back in the gym right now," Ryser said.

“She learned her floor routine today at 11 a.m. I was doing the choreographing with her,” Karubas said. “She was determined (to compete) and I have a rule that unless we throw the skills in a full routine the day before at a practice that I can’t trust you will be safe at it. She really wanted to do floor. She’s a beautiful floor worker.”

Another fourth-year varsity gymnast, Ryser did not compete at the 2013 invite after another state-qualifying diving season. Her presence is even more important this season with such a young lineup.

“The minute she came back into the gym, her leadership raised the bar. Her upbeat personality just added a sunshine to the gym,” Karubas said. “I do honor her tri-sport passions, but it’s a disservice to us so I have to be selfish and greedy like any head coach and say, ‘I want you in the gym.’ ”

The Lions will have plenty of gym time before their next meet at Downers Grove North’s Mike Williams Big Purple Invitational Saturday, Dec. 6. In that format, teams are allowed just four entries per event with the top three scores going toward the team total.

“We’ve got a very young team and I think we just kind of needed this meet to see how we all compete,” Kurfirst said. “It was just a big learning experience. If anything, it was good because now we know what we need to work on.”

-- by Bill Stone