

For Lyons Township junior Kelsy Kurfirst, the competition at Downers Grove North's Mike Williams Big Purple Invitational Saturday, Dec. 7 perhaps was the easiest part of a whirlwind week.

The individual state champion on floor exercise in 2013 and uneven parallel bars in 2012 entered the 12-team meet facing adversity on both events.

Kurfirst spent most of the week breaking in new grips for the uneven bars. She and LT head coach Kari Karubas also didn't complete the new choreography for her already altered floor routine until Friday after 6 p.m.

"The past week or so has been kind of a mental roller coaster just because there have been a lot of distractions inside and out of the gym for everyone," Kurfirst said. "I think we've done a pretty good job of dealing with those."

Kurfirst nearly didn't even compete as an all-arounder, but she walked away as the champion as well on two events in helping the Lions win the team title for the second year in a row with 111.30 points.

Seniors Michelle Cozza, who won vault (9.6), and Katie Carling also had multiple top-five finishes. Junior and first-year team member Jackie Fuller competed on three events, and junior Olivia McGann competed on uneven bars.

Kurfirst not only won all-around (37.625) by .55 over Fremd senior Christine Jensen (37.075) but her two events titles happened to come on uneven bars (9.55) by .05 over Carling and on floor (9.575) by .275. Uneven bars was LT's final event.

"Considering all of the distractions this week on those two events, I'm definitely proud of myself for kind of stepping up and getting those two events done and accomplished," Kurfirst said.

"I didn't know until warming up that I was going to compete bars. We kind of

kept going back and forth (about sitting out events), possibly bars because of the grips, if we hadn't finished the floor routine or else I was kind of having aches and pains in my shin. I felt good (Friday) so we decided to do it."

Most meets allow five competitors per event with the four highest scores going toward the team total. On Saturday, teams only had four competitors with the top three scores counting.

LT won its first state team championship last year. Fremd, third at state last year, was second at the invite (108.80) for the second straight year.

Had all four of the Lions' routines counted Saturday, they would have scored 145.875, well ahead of their 144.25 at the season-opening Hornet Invite Nov. 26 at Hinsdale South.

"Tonight's goal was to learn how to compete as a team, which is a strategy within itself," Karubas said. "We did count some falls. We also are throwing some things together, new skills, new choreography, new connections so it was a good place for us to learn and to take risks. We are leaving knowing exactly what needs to happen in the (practice) gym."

As a freshman at the Big Purple, Kurfirst won all-around and every event but beam. Last year, her only title came on vault (9.775).

Kurfirst initially entered this season with a new floor routine, but she and Karubas re-evaluated it after a first-place 9.1 at the Hornet Invite.

Changing her uneven bars grips after roughly 1 1/2 to two years also proved to be time consuming. Kurfirst already owned a new pair, preparing for the inevitable change, but she even came in early Saturday morning so that she could break it in further.

"Although the anxiety must have been unreal, she handled it like a champ, as

usual," Karubas said.

"I told her (Friday) night that I didn't think she should do all-around and she fought me. She really wanted to. She knew it might not have gone well. She's so passionate and so determined that I wasn't going to fight with her. I just made sure that she was going to be safe and there wasn't going to be an uncalculated risk, and she proved to me that it was under control."

Uneven bars was the Lions' strongest event. Kurfirst and Carling (9.5) went 1-2, and Cozza and McGann shared fifth (9.25).

On floor, Kurfirst won with Jensen (9.3) second. Carling (9.2) and Cozza (8.975) were third and fifth and Fuller was 14th (8.45).

"There were just parts of (my routine) that we felt didn't flow as naturally. We didn't really realize that until I completed it (at Hinsdale South)," Kurfirst said. "We're like, 'Maybe we can fix this part and that part.' I like it a lot better now. And then from there we made some more adjustments."

The Lions opened on beam and counted two falls, each an automatic .5 deduction. Kurfirst (9.05), Carling (9.0) and Cozza (8.95) finished fourth, fifth and sixth behind Fremd's Sydney Plichta (9.325), Naperville North's Michaela Robert (9.175) and Jensen (9.1).

On vault, Cozza (9.6) and Kurfirst (9.45) finished 1-2 with layout Yurchenkos. Carling (9.2) and Fuller (9.175) were eighth and ninth.

"It was great (to win) because vault's my favorite event so I like to go as hard as I can," Cozza said. "I hope to even pop even more for a layout, want to try and improve that, but I was happy with it. I think it's better than last year at this rate. We're working on (my distance) because last season I (landed) a little close to the vault."

This is the second high-school season for Cozza and Carling. At last year's Big Purple, Cozza won all-around (36.75), tied for first on uneven bars (9.35) and placed or shared second on the other three events.

Saturday was triumphant for her in a different manner. Cozza counted two falls on beam and floor at the Hornet Invite but bounced back with much stronger routines this time, which happened to be the Lions' first two events.

Cozza fell once off beam at the end of her flip flop layout series. On floor, she landed her double back flip and only stepped out of bounds for a .1 deduction after her powerful third and final tumbling pass.

"I kind of wanted to redeem myself and show what I do in the gym in a meet. I've been working out a lot on floor and beam in the gym so I was ready to compete again," Cozza said.

"I think I let my nerves get the best of me (at the Hornet Invite). This meet, I especially realized how well our team momentum works in our favor because I really felt that today after beam."

The invite also was a chance for the Lions to continue unifying as a group. Besides Fuller, senior Mackenzie Stotz and sophomore Cat Mossing are first-year team members, junior veteran Kelly Ryser still is working her way back from a late start because of state diving. They were on hand Saturday to assist and support their teammates.

"We were just a lot more aware of each other than at the Hornet Invite and it was nice to see that. I like to feed off what they're doing and just show in our routines that we can perform better from that," Cozza said.

"(We're progressing in) communicating with each other before events to see how we're feeling. Knowing what other people need before an events helps, whether they need to be calmed down or fired up."