

As Lyons Township senior Mackenzie Stotz became timid about returning to club gymnastics following injuries and surgery, one year off suddenly turned into three.

Stotz's decision to return to the sport this season on the high-school level with the Lions came on a whim.

"Maybe (in October), two weeks before we came for our meeting before tryouts, they were talking about it on the announcements and I was like, 'You know? I want to do it. Let's do it. Let's go for it,' " Stotz said.

"I love the coaches and (assistant coach Courtney Douglas) was my teacher in grade school. I love the girls and I've competed with some of them in club and I just through it was a good atmosphere."

Stotz enjoyed her best overall meet for her current two events, vault and floor exercise, as the Lions defeated Glenbard West 149.30 to 134.30 in West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual action Monday, Jan. 13, in Glen Ellyn.

Junior Kelsy Kurfirst won all-around (38.20), vault (9.7), uneven parallel bars (9.5) and floor exercise (9.7). Senior Michelle Cozza won balance beam (9.6), and Cozza (37.65) and Carling (37.40) were second and third in all-around.

The rescheduled dual was the Lions' second meet in three days coming off winning Lake Forest's Robin Straus Invitational Jan. 11.

"I think (the back-to-back meets) was challenging but it was good for the team, getting a day of rest kind of in between," Stotz said. "We just got to rock it out both days. It was really nice. I liked it. It was a fun challenge."

Stotz had a season-high 9.3 on vault as she landed both of her tuck Yurchenkos after landing her first attempt at Lake Forest for the first time in a meet. Stotz also had a 9.0 on floor, just shy of her 9.2 best Dec. 11, when LT scored a school-record 152.10.

"Falling on the second (tuck Yurchenko) at Lake Forest kind of stunk, but landing both at Glenbard West felt really good," Stotz said. "Blocking off more (helped). I got bigger distance off the vault. I got a bigger pop with my shoulders and I went up way higher than I usually do so I got to land better, with my chest forward.

"(On floor) I'm putting some little bigger skills into my routine so I'm making my way up. Right now, it's just kind of being more confident in myself and my tumbling. I'm starting to get up there with my mind and my body so that's good."

The Lions are in survival mode this week. Besides this back-to-back, LT has two more meets this week, Wednesday's Senior Night home meet against Hinsdale Central and Saturday at Fremd's Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational.

"Here we are, two days after an invite where it's a long day, a lot of starting and stopping and therefore, I was nervous. I did, on some girls, pull some skills that I just didn't think were worth the risk," LT coach Kari Karubas said.

"It was a dual meet. It was on a Monday night and as a coach you need to look at all of the factors. It was a continual question I would ask myself every turn watching them. If you compete hard, if you compete right, the next couple of days you really feel it. I've also spent many years as a gymnast. I know what they're going to feel like when they're my age."

Safety concerns resulted in the meet with Glenbard West being moved from Jan. 7. Both schools were closed the previous two days because of dangerous sub-zero temperatures and the teams were unable to practice.

"I feel like it would have been very unsafe," Karubas said. "It was the lesser of the evils. A Monday night meet is rough anyway, but after all of those days off it would have been worse so (Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes) and I made the right choice."

Stotz feels as though she has made the right choice rejoining gymnastics after being a club gymnast since she was 5, most recently at Balance

Institute of Gymnastics (BIG). She works at Illinois Gymnastics Institute in Westmont so once she decided to join the Lions, she was able to attend a few open gyms and begin working her way back into the sport.

"I just want the team to do their best. I want to do my best, too, especially since I feel like I have something to prove to myself. I just want to end the year right and the team as well," Stotz said.

"It's way different than club. It's more of a team and that's what I love. It's bonding. I love all of the girls and it's really awesome. It's more of being together instead of just a single person. Not just me, it's everybody. We're always together and that's what I love about it."

Stotz needed time to recover from bad wrists and then surgery to her left hand for a broken metacarpal, resulting in four permanent screws. During her recovery, Stotz conditioned with her team and worked non-hand skills, such as leaps and jumps. When she tried to return full force, she became discouraged while trying to regain her strength.

"And then two (years off), then three. And then I was ready to come back," Stotz said.

"It was basically everything I was afraid of (upon returning). Initially I was scared of my injuries and my wrists, coming back and maybe my body not catching up with everything. I was sore a lot in the beginning because my body wasn't used to it so that's something that scared me, but I wasn't going to give up. I was going to keep going."

Her progress is showing. Stotz landed her tuck Yurchenko vault at Lake Forest after doing only a handful of flips in practice and during warmups.

Stotz finished fourth on both of her events Monday as part of LT sweeps.

Stotz was fourth on vault behind the layout Yurchenkos of Kurfirst and Cozza (9.6) and Carling's pike Yurchenko (9.45). Stotz also placed right behind Kurfirst and Cozza and Carling (9.3 each) on floor.

Kurfirst was coming off a career-high 9.825 vault at Lake Forest. On Monday, she took a bit of a stinger when she landed her first vault slightly short but then nailed her second attempt.

"The second one was a little bit better," Kurfirst said. "(The first one) was a little bit of a low landing. It didn't hurt that much. It was just more frustrating because I don't like landing like that.

"We competed hard Saturday night, did well, and then had a day off Sunday and then had to come back and compete. Of course, it was a bit challenging to find that energy but none of us really watered down and we performed our routines well. I think we stayed safe and did what we needed to do."

Beam reunited three of the four event finalists from last year's state meet. Cozza won the event Monday by .1 over Glenbard West sophomore Amber Broucek (9.5), 10th at state last year, with Carling and Kurfirst sharing third (9.3).

Playing it safe, the Lions only went with four competitors on beam. Ryser initially was scratched as she recovers from turf toe with Fuller taking her place.

Fuller, however, has been recovering from twisting her ankle landing a vault Dec. 11. When the injury was slightly aggravated after Fuller's routines on uneven bars and vault Monday, Karubas removed her from the beam lineup.

"She's a very passionate, very determined gymnast and it was very hard to tell her that it was in the best interests of her and her team not to put her up (on beam)," Karubas said. "She was not happy with me for pulling her. If she would have had her druthers, she would have competed. I'm sure she would have been fine. (But) it's not worth perhaps changing her technique a little bit and then getting another injury or furthering the swelling that was happening."

Mossing ended up opening the varsity beam set and delivered an 8.6. It

was just .2 shy from her highest score Dec. 11, when she filled in for Fuller at the last moment after her initial ankle injury.

"There are just some things I need to fix, but otherwise it was pretty good," Mossing said. "Right now I'm just kind of working on beam to get it nice and clean and ready.

"I knew how to rest and come back stronger. It was fine. We have more (meets) in a shorter amount of time than club does. Having three in one week is new, but it's all right. I love competing so it's fun."

LT swept the first five places on uneven bars with Kurfirst, Carling (9.35), Cozza and junior Olivia McGann (9.15) and Fuller (9.1).

Stotz admits some occasional soreness in her hand, but otherwise she also is thriving on the competition. Her gymnastics return has come with a rejuvenated outlook on the sport and herself as she hopes to help the Lions defend their team state championship.

"I think I'm more confident. Before then, I think it was kind of like a breakdown for me and now I'm finally starting to build it up," Stotz said. "I'm different now. I'm stronger, I feel like, and tougher emotionally. Being here now, I'm raising it up, trying to bring myself up and keep a good attitude and keep going."

-- by Bill Stone