

Seniors Katie Carling and Michelle Cozza already have left quite a mark on the Lyons Township girls gymnastics program.

Actually, they do during every meet for the Lions with the abundant amounts of chalk both use.

Moments after LT's 149.20 to 130.65 Senior Night victory over Hinsdale Central Thursday, Jan. 16, in La Grange, Carling glanced at the floor exercise mat where the team had its final event.

"You can still see my hands," Carling said with a smile. "Michelle is avid on chalk also.

"I think honestly it's just a nervous habit. I just do it and it helps in case I slide."

The defending state champions easily chalked up another West Suburban Conference Silver Division victory to move to 4-0 in league duals and remain undefeated on the season. They now prepare for their last regular-season invite, Fremd's Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational, Saturday, Jan. 18. The host Vikings finished third at state last season.

Carling scored a career-high 9.65 to win uneven parallel bars and also took first on balance beam (9.5).

Junior Kelsy Kurfirst won all-around (38.35), vault (9.7) and floor exercise (9.6). Cozza, who was third in all-around (36.85), and junior Jackie Fuller also had top-three event finishes and senior Mackenzie Stotz, juniors Kelly Ryser and Olivia McGann and sophomore Cat Mossing had top-five finishes.

And the chalk was flying everywhere, including once again on LT coach Kari Karubas and assistant coach Courtney Douglas.

"Who doesn't like chalk? Even I like to color with it. I use it in coaching," Karubas said. "(After meet) I'm covered in it. I love it. Everyone's like, 'Oh it's salty outside,' in the winter and I'm like, 'That's not salt on my boots.' It's chalk."

Lately, the Lions have been enduring the gymnastics version of working in the

salt mines. Defeating Hinsdale Central came in their third meet over six days, and the Sopper Invite will be their fourth over eight days. Monday's victory over Glenbard West originally had been rescheduled for Jan. 8 but was moved after school was closed the previous two days because of dangerously cold temperatures.

"We're kind of in survival mode right now. We have to kind of ride the ups and downs of the demands of the sport," Karubas said. "We are exhausted, so the fact that we could still keep a level head and be safe. Those were our obstacles tonight so I can't really say (our evaluation) was performance based. We're facing a different demon right now."

Before the meet, the Lions honored their eight seniors – the three varsity members and Katie Gilrea, Maddy Hamilton, Kate Longo, Abby Shoneman and Marta Stankiewicz. Gilrea, Hamilton, Longo and Shoneman have competed for the program all four years.

Cozza and Carling joined the program last year and were instrumental in the Lions' first state team title. Stotz is competing for the first time this season.

The varsity will have one last home meet when it plays host to regionals at 6:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 31, as the No. 1 seed for the Hinsdale Central Sectional. The Red Devils will be among the other three competing teams.

"I think I was more focused on the gymnastics part today (than Senior Night). I didn't really think about it too much, but I think it'll hit me more at regionals," Cozza said.

"I hit two out of four events so I have a lot of work to do. As a team, we did pretty good. It was kind of a roller coaster throughout the meet and we did a good job of trying to get back on track, just keep going."

Another fixture for the Lions the past two seasons has been their own portable chalk box constructed by Douglas' husband, Chuck, with help from their son, Alexander.

Karubas believes the Lions are the state's only team with their personal chalk

box.

"The box does come in handy. Oh, I need it," Cozza said. "It's convenient just to have our own part of the gym when we go to away meets especially."

Karubas said about seven or eight seasons ago, Chuck Douglas constructed a large team chalk box, affectionately known as The Sandbox, where multiple Lions could "hang out and get their feet all un-sweaty" for practices and home meets. The box, however, was slightly too large for easy mobility at away meets.

The new chalk box is designed for gymnasts to use one at a time.

"We realized when we went to meets, we were that team who were at bars and dropping (chalk) on the floor and we felt really rude about it. We thought we could make one that's a little smaller and with a handle," Karubas said.

Last season, Carling took it upon herself to paint and decorate the chalk tray in LT's blue and gold school colors. That tray was given to LT superintendent Timothy Kilrea as a memento of the program's first state championship.

Carling also decorated this season's chalk tray, using blue and gold spray paint, and has drawn LT Lions with a lion's paw for the covering panel. One side of the box is signed by all of the varsity team members. Last year's tray had two handles on the side, but this year's tray has just one handle for the covering panel.

"It was a progression of we've got one in our home gym so how can we make it a mobile box and then it just evolved," Karubas said. "We paint it and put glitter on it and it's really fun."

The Lions also had a fun night with the competition. LT finished first through fifth on all four events, even though Hinsdale Central significantly topped its previous season high of 127.075.

Kurfirst, Carling (37.85) and Cozza (36.85) were at least three points ahead of all of the Red Devils' four all-arounders.

Carling won career-high 9.65 on uneven bars as the Lions' one season-high score of the meet. Carling had achieved 9.5 three times before this season, including at the Lions' previous meet Jan. 11 at the Lake Forest Invite. Kurfirst was second with a 9.6, followed by Fuller (9.25), McGann (9.1) and Cozza (9.05).

At Lake Forest, Karubas complimented Carling's ability to make adjustments within the flow of her uneven bars routine. Carling felt this routine was cleaner and among her best ever.

"I was straighter with some of my skills so I think that helped," Carling said. "It's hard to say (if it's my best) because even after it I was like, 'Aw, I did this wrong,' but then I saw my score and I was like, 'Well, my form was good.' I don't know. Like we always say, there's more to correct and I felt that but it feel like a good routine for sure."

On beam, Kurfirst (9.45) also was second to Carling by .05 with a strong effort, followed by Cozza (9.35), Ryser (9.0) and Mossing (8.45). Kurfirst and Cozza (9.6) took 1-2 on vault with their layout Yurchenkos and Carling (9.4), Stotz (9.15) and Fuller (8.8) were third through fifth.

The Lions finished with perhaps too much enthusiasm heading into floor. Kurfirst won (9.6) and was the Lions' only gymnast not to count a fall during her performance. Carling (9.3) and Cozza (8.85) both fell at the end of their powerful first passes after routines by Ryser (8.7) and Stotz (8.5).

Carling's fall during her floor pass, an automatic .5 deduction, kept her from surpassing her all-around personal record of 38.15.

"I didn't think I was going to have enough gas. I think I overdid it," Carling said.

"(Senior Night is) emotional but at the same time, we know we have a lot more to go through together. Karubas said, 'Your real Senior Night is regionals here.' Now it's time to focus on that and this was just a building block for that."

The Lions got a good taste of the regional atmosphere as they played to a pack gym, including several former LT and Hinsdale Central gymnasts still in town

during winter break from college.

"We kind of had some pressure with some new faces in the stand and I liked it because they had to kind of deal with seeing people that they have in math class and with grandmas and grandpas," Karubas said. "To have that pressure, I thought, was very positive. We had some really good things and some really safe things, but there are also some issues we have to handle when it comes to high-pressure situations. It was a good time of the season to start learning those things."

Cozza's admirers included older sisters Catherine and Carolyn, both former LT gymnasts that also competed at the state meet. Carling's older sister, Kristi, also is a former LT state standout but didn't attend the dual.

"I like when they watch me because they know me, they know my gymnastics really well so I feel I can go to them if I need to ask questions or something about my gymnastics," Cozza said. "They tell me things, give me advice. It's nice to hear another point of view besides my teammates."

-- by Bill Stone