

Days after helping the Lyons Township girls gymnastics team win its first state team championship, the joy still wouldn't go away for senior Katie Carling.

Neither would the pain.

Carling discovered that she had been competing the final weeks of the season on every event but the uneven parallel bars with a broken bone in her left hand, even her balance beam routine that helped the Lions take over first place during the state event finals.

"I had the same swelling in my knee before and it just turned into a bruise so I was like, 'It's just a problem with swelling.' It wasn't," Carling said.

"I went back to club (Flying High) and I was like, 'All right. This isn't getting better.' I stayed off it for a while after that. I'm feeling stronger this year and everything seems to be going well so it'll keep like that, hopefully."

The Lions are in a good, and perhaps, place as they try to defend their title with a lineup of veterans and upperclassmen who are newcomers to high school gymnastics. They opened the season Nov. 27 by winning Hinsdale South's Hornet Invitational for the second year in a row with 144.25 points.

Junior Kelsy Kurfirst is the defending state champion on floor exercise and the 2012 co-state champion on uneven parallel bars.

Senior Michelle Cozza and juniors Olivia McGann and Kelly Ryser also return from the state lineup. Senior Mackenzie Stotz, junior Jackie Fuller and sophomore Cat Mossing also should contribute as first-year team members.

Cozza and Carling also earned all-state medals for top-five state finishes in their first seasons of high school gymnastics. Their beam routines in the event finals were the last two pieces in LT tying and overtaking Prairie Ridge co-op for good to capture the state team championship.

"Sometimes I'll wake up and be like, 'Wait, we're state champions.' It's a cool feeling to remember that and remember how we got to that point because it was just so incredible," Kurfirst said. "I don't know if it ever will really sink in.

It's one of those things that you think about and you're extremely happy that it happened."

"Obviously, last year was great and it was a big accomplishment, but this is a new season and a new team. We're not basing our expectations on last year. I think we have a pretty tight-knit group of girls. We're a very deep team and we have some strong newcomers."

The Lions (149.625 points) pulled out the state title by .325 over Prairie Ridge co-op (149.30) with Fremd (146.05) in third. With those teams also returning most of their lineups, the trio is favored to sweep the team trophies again.

During the regular season, LT only see Prairie Ridge co-op once at the Lake Forest Invite Jan. 11 and will compete against Fremd at Downers Grove North's Big Purple Invite Dec. 7 and Fremd's Mari-Rae Sopper Invite Jan. 18.

The Lions scored at least 149 points last season six times but never hit 150. Their highest score was a 149.775 that won regionals at home.

Prairie Ridge handed the Lions their only loss last year at Lake Forest (150.00 to 149.675) as LT had a rough finish on beam, which turned out to be the event that carried them over the top at state.

"(Winning state again) is not our main goal," Kurfirst said. "Our main goal, as (LT coach Kari Karubas) keeps telling us, is to come in and work as hard as we can and then go into the state meet with no regrets. That's all we can do and we'll see where that takes us."

LT has only earned trophies in back-to-back seasons once, finishing second in 2010 and 1999 and third in 2000 and 2002. Before LT's title, Carmel captured the previous three state team titles, marking already the ninth time that a team had a streak consecutive state titles since the first state meet in 1977.

The Lions have qualified for the eight-team state field in six of Karubas' first eight seasons as head coach. The 2012 Lions were sixth at state (144.475) with Kurfirst and Ryser part of lineup of just five all-arounders.

"I really can't let (our state title) change anything. We enjoyed it but it's a new season with a new group of girls and we have new obstacles," Karubas said.

"I feel that some of them feel that there's a pressure to keep the reigning title, but every year's different. I'm going to do exactly what I did last year, attack it individually, make sure that I look back at the end of the season and say, 'Was there anything else that I could have done. Was there anything else we could have done?' and the answer has to be, 'Absolutely not.' If we don't care to the little things, we certainly can't expect that outcome to arrive."

The Lions' first state championship came dramatically. After the preliminaries, they trailed Prairie Ridge co-op by .25 (149.30 to 149.05), but teams can increase their score by the amount event finalists improve their preliminary scores in the event finals.

LT had a team-high eight routines reach the event finals and Kurfirst, Cozza and Carling improved four of them by a combined .575 while none of Prairie Ridge's five routines earned higher scores in the finals.

"I even get chills thinking about it because it was such a dream," Carling said. "We always talk about how that weekend was such a blur for us because there were so many emotions and things going on. We had to do a bunch of things to help us get through it and thinking about it, we're like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't even believe that happened.' "

With the state team title already in hand, the Lions' final routine was on floor by Kurfirst. She improved her preliminary score of 9.575 for a 9.725 to win the state championship by .05 over Carmel graduate Lauren Feely.

"It was definitely amazing. I have my teammates to thank for that just because I was so excited going into that floor routine and (winning) was just icing on the cake," Kurfirst said.

"Last year was amazing and I'll use it as (personal) motivation, but I'm not going to put too much pressure on myself. I'll work hard each day and see where that takes me."

LT earned eight all-state medals for top-five individual finishes. In the all-around, which is based only on preliminary scores, Kurfirst tied for second (38.55) with current Prairie Ridge co-op junior Rachael Underwood behind Feely (38.70), and Cozza tied for fifth (37.625). The only other gymnast among the top 11 finisher who returns this season is Barrington sophomore Abby Hasanov (7th, 37.575).

In the event finals, Kurfirst was second on vault (9.725) to Feely (9.825) and Cozza tied for second with Underwood on uneven bars (9.5) to Feely (9.625). Cozza also tied for third on vault (9.7), and Kurfirst and Carling shared third on beam (9.425) behind current Stevenson junior Alyssa Weisberg (9.525) and Feely (9.475). Cozza also tied for sixth on beam (9.375) and Kurfirst also was seventh on uneven bars (9.075) after making the finals by being among the top 10 preliminary scores.

After several club seasons at Flying High, Cozza and Carling followed in the footsteps of older sisters who were all-staters for LT.

"I still smile when I think about it, like wow. It's a good accomplishment that we wanted. It's still just exciting when I think about it now," Cozza said.

"Last year I had no idea going into high school what it would be like but now having a background from last year, I think we're going to be even better this year. We're trying our best to forget about (our state title) because we want to start new."

The remnants of how the Lions won their state title, however, will bode well for this season. Besides Carling unknowingly competing with a broken hand, graduated Maren Craig badly sprained her right ankle on floor but insisted on competing on vault, LT's next event.

In the event finals, Cozza and Carling both stuck routines on beam, arguably the toughest event, to pull out the team title.

"When we thought about working extremely hard and everything we need to do, I think we learned from that (state meet) that it really pays off in the end," Carling said.

"I feel like when I did (beam in the finals), it was just like I thought out from what I did the entire season. I was like, 'Nothing to lose here.' I think about that (routine) a lot. It's really motivational to get more through tough days and everything because I didn't know I would be in that position. It was a lot of emotions."

Event finals are conducted in Olympic order (vault, uneven bars, beam, floor) with the order of competitors determined by blind draw.

Cozza improved her preliminary score on uneven bars of 9.425 by .075 in the finals. When Carling improved from 9.25 to 9.425 on beam, the Lions had tied Prairie Ridge's score of 149.30. Cozza soon followed by increasing her 9.2 beam score by .175.

"I definitely am proud of myself to be able to perform so well at such a big arena. I hope I can come back into the mentality to be able to do that again. It's definitely a learning process to get there," Cozza said. "It's still unreal for me to take all of that stress in that situation and be able to perform like my teammates wanted me to."

With her other performances, Kurfirst and Cozza joined 1985 graduate Janne Klepek and 2002 graduate Erin Murphy as the only LT gymnasts to win at least three all-state medals in one state meet.

Klepek won a program-best 19 all-state medals and the maximum five all-state medals in one meet three times. Klepek also captured 12 state titles (3 each in all-around, uneven bars and beam, two on floor and one on vault), including all-around and all four events in 1984.

Kurfirst and Klepek are LT's only gymnasts to win multiple state titles. Kurfirst shared the 2012 uneven bars title with then Glenbard North senior Amanda Quinn (9.6). Kurfirst had the highest preliminary score last year (9.625) but counted a fall in the final.

Kurfirst's quest for another strong season on floor already has begun with work on a new routine.

"I would like to improve my consistency on each event and form and like to upgrade a couple of things," Kurfirst said. "Hopefully, (I will add) maybe a twisting vault by the end of the season (from a layout Yurchenko). I'd like to add maybe a skill or two on bars or beam, but basically overall (my goal is) just stay healthy and stay consistent with my routines."

Among other individual state-qualifying events last season, Cozza (9.3 on floor) and McGann (9.25 on uneven bars) both tied for 14th and were just .075 and .125 from the respective finals cut for their events. Carling was 22nd on floor (9.175).

McGann also came out for high-school gymnastics for the first time last season. Seven gymnasts who finished ahead of McGann in last year's state preliminaries on uneven bars are back this season.

"I would love to make finals, at least on bars, and I think I have the potential to do that, which is good because I have some new skills," McGann said.

"I'm definitely stronger and I think more confident (this season). Since we won state last year, I really wanted to put in a lot of effort this year. It really motivated me to keep moving forward. My bars are definitely better, which is good, and my other events. I have some new skills on floor and vault and I'm working on a new flight series on beam."

Ryser was the Lions' first state competitor on uneven bars and beam. Ryser once again will get a late start to her season after qualifying for the state meet in diving, placing 25th in the Nov. 22 preliminaries (155.35 points).

Another constant this season is three non-freshman newcomers have joined the varsity and could make immediate impacts. Stotz, Fuller and Mossing all bring extensive club experience, although Stotz has not competed since her freshman year. Mossing is coming off a back injury during the summer.

Since many of the Lions already knew the newcomers through club gymnastics and school, the transition has been smooth. At the Hornet Invite, Fuller took fifth in all-around (34.60), Mossing competed on beam and floor and Stotz vaulted.

"(Stotz) can tumble better than I've seen anybody who has taken a three-year break. She's very mature. (But) we're going slow, very slow," Karubas said. "I had no idea (Fuller) was going to be such an amazing competitor. (Mossing is) also a really good competitor. She just fit right in as well, a seamless transition, the team, the personality, the motivation, the work ethic."

The Lions are heavily favored to win their second straight overall West Suburban Conference Silver Division title, a 50-50 combination of regular-season and Silver Meet standings. 2012 Silver champion Glenbard West, seventh at state last year, and usual power Hinsdale Central both were hit hard by graduation and underclassmen that did not return this season.

Hinsdale Central will play host to both the Silver Meet Feb. 1 and the sectional Feb. 12. The date for LT's regional, which probably will be at home, will be determined following the IHSA's gathering of seeding information Jan. 15.

"I'm really pleased with this group of girls. They're so comfortable with each other that they can say things that might be uncomfortable like, 'Stop making the same mistake,' or 'Try harder' and it's all out of respect," Karubas said.

"They're good communicators. They want to get better every day they're in here. Every time I say, 'Can we stay a little longer on Saturday (to practice)?' or 'Would you be OK with more endurance?' every single one of them says, 'If it's going to be good for the team or it's going to be good for us, yes, if that's what it's going to take.' I'm very lucky."

-- by Bill Stone