

Only two meets into the season, sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst already senses special qualities about the Lyons Township girls gymnastics team.

“I think there’s something our team has and it’s not based on scores,” Kurfirst said. “We have that team harmony and motivation that can get us through anything. I’m so happy to be on this team with everyone.”

On Saturday, Downers Grove North’s Mike Williams Big Purple Invitational was another early example. The Lions couldn’t have felt much lower after a disappointing start on their first event, the balance beam.

The Lions talked immediately and responded by reaching new heights.

The result not only was a strong finish on the next three events but also winning the 12-team invite for the first time in program history.

LT’s 108.05 points ended the remarkable streak of 19 consecutive titles at the invite by second-place Fremd (105.825). Naperville Central (98.15) edged Oswego co-op (98.125) for third place.

LT junior Michelle Cozza (36.75) and Kurfirst (35.925) finished 1-2 in the all-around with Cozza winning the uneven parallel bars (9.35) and Kurfirst winning vault (9.775) with Cozza (9.65) and Craig (9.45) completing a 1-2-3 LT sweep. Junior Katie Carling had two top-five finishes, and sophomore Olivia McGann and junior Alyssa Lancaster, making her high school gymnastics debut, added top-10 finishes on uneven bars.

The Lions opened the season by winning Hinsdale South’s Hornet Invitational Nov. 21. They joined the Big Purple Invite in 2002 and have finished second or third the previous six seasons.

LT was second to Fremd last year (108.075 to 104.275) and in 2009. At the 2012 state meet, Fremd was fourth (146.65) and the Lions sixth (144.475).

“It’s crazy because this is our first time winning it,” Craig said. “It actually feels amazing because (the Hornet Invite) was an easier win for us and Fremd is a really good team. But everything paid off. We definitely bounced back from beam.”

While most meets allow five entries per event with the top four scores going toward the team total, this invite allows just four entries with three scores counting. The invite also uses the average score of two judges, many of them among the state’s best.

Had all of the Lions’ four scores counted, they would have won with 139.35 points, about two points lower than their winning 141.25 at Hinsdale South, and with a slightly smaller margin of victory over Fremd’s 138.275.

LT had Saturday’s top team scores on vault (28.875), floor (27.50) and uneven bars (26.75) and were second on beam (24.925) to Fremd (25.075) even with counting one fall apiece from its three counting routines, each an automatic .5 deduction.

“I’m very pleased in the sense that they’re really good competitors and they were able to take the disappointment of beam and perhaps channel that toward a better outcome on floor. They did a good job with that,” LT coach Kari Karubas said.

“We learned a lot about ourselves, our competition. For the most part, I think we’re going to be smarter the next time we compete. I’m happy with the outcome. A place is a place, but I see what I know they’re capable of and

that's my focus."

This is Cozza's first season of high-school gymnastics. At her first Big Purple Invite in 2011, Kurfirst won all-around (36.875) and every event but beam. The defending co-state champion on uneven bars, Kurfirst competes last for the Lions on uneven bars and floor with Cozza last on vault and Carling, another first-year, high-school gymnast, last on beam.

The LT comeback Saturday coincided with the growing synergy between Kurfirst and Cozza competing back-to-back on floor and vault using the same major skills.

"We're able to give each other advice, what to work on. We build off each other," Cozza said. "I just feel our team has so much more confidence now after this meet, after winning for the first time (at this invite) against Fremd. I think this motivates us to do better now throughout the season."

On floor, LT's second event, both of them landed their double back flips on their first passes. Cozza (9.35) tied for second with Fremd's Christine Jensen right behind Fremd's Emily Pinderski (9.375), and Kurfirst (9.1) and Carling (9.05) were fourth and fifth.

The Lions proceeded to vault. Cozza and Kurfirst both landed a layout Yurchenko, which has a 10.0 start value.

"I see her hit an amazing floor routine. I'm like, 'All right. I can do this,' It's awesome having that double back buddy because we both have to make it and we both have to push each other," Kurfirst said.

"Michelle's vaults are usually amazing so I don't really critique them. I's

more of a kind of we cheer for each other, we push each other, motivate each other to do even better than we did.”

Improvement was on all of the Lions’ minds after beam. Even with their falls, Carling and Cozza (8.4) still tied for second behind Fremd sophomore Sydney Plichta (8.775), and Kurfirst (8.125) tied for sixth. Plichta was seventh on beam at state last year.

Kurfirst, who won beam at the Hornet Invite with a 9.6, said she was disappointed that she fell after landing her standing back flip, a skill she usually hits.

“It’s a quick fix. I think the more I do it, the less nervous I’ll be,” Kurfirst said. “I’m so proud of all of us. It was a rough start on beam and obviously we didn’t want to have those falls, but I think we used it to our advantage and we made it our goal to make those falls motivate us for the rest of the meet. I think we did a really good job of recovering from that.”

On uneven bars, Cozza did a nice job of responding by boosting her Hornet Invite score by 1.4 points.

Cozza’s 9.35 Saturday shared first place with Naperville North’s Michaela Robert, the last competitor on the event. Plichta, who tied for third at state last year, was third (9.175), and Kurfirst tied for fourth (8.925), falling on her dismount after taking several steps backwards to nearly save it. McGann (8.475) and Lancaster (8.175) were eighth and ninth.

“It was more of a personal goal for me to hit this routine,” Cozza said. “I missed my hop hand (a requirement) the last meet, which caused my routine to not be as good as it usually is. It felt good to hit after not hitting it

the last meet.”

For Craig, the challenge was waiting and competing on just one event. Craig usually competes as an all-arounder but the Lions used three Saturday with McGann (13th, 31.60) joining Cozza and Kurfirst.

“A 9.45 is one of the higher scores that I’ve had,” Craig said.

“I thought it was a little bit different because only doing one event because it was more pressure on me. It meant a lot because I knew that I helped the team out a lot with just one vault. I was a little bit nervous, but I’m glad it turned out.”

Should the Lions return to the state meet, Fremd is expected to be one of the other seven teams there. The Vikings only graduated an all-arounder and one event specialist from their state lineup, but just before the season they lost their top all-arounder, senior Shannon Lemajeur, to a torn ACL. Senior Stephanie Gallo, who competed at state on everything but beam, sat out Saturday after suffering a concussion three days earlier.