

For senior Michelle Cozza and the Lyons Township girls gymnastics team, Fremd's annual Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational Saturday, Jan. 18, was full of surprises.

One aspect remained the same. The Lions once again finished a meet competing on balance beam.

"I think we're getting used to it now. I think we're comfortable now having beam last," Cozza said. "It's not really a challenge for us anymore. I think actually prefer it last. I like it last."

The defending state champions stuck all of their beam routines to clinch winning the 10-team meet for the second year in a row with 149.90 points.

Fremd, third at state last year, was second with 147.65 points and Naperville Central was third at 137.30.

LT senior Katie Carling won uneven parallel bars with a career-high 9.7, and Cozza tied for first on vault with her 9.7. Juniors Kelsy Kurfirst, Jackie Fuller, Olivia McGann and Kelly Ryser also had top-10 individual finishes and senior Mackenzie Stotz and sophomore Cat Mossing competed on one event each.

The invite was the Lions' fourth meet over an eight-day stretch beginning with the Lake Forest Invite Jan. 11, where LT was, yes, last on beam in defeating Prairie Ridge co-op, second at state last year.

"A good way to end the full week," Cozza said. "I think last year we had one (week) with three meets in a row. I think we were ready, though. I'm proud of our team for being safe and getting it done. I think we just had to know our bodies more, know what to stretch and being more aware of our bodies to be safe."

Although the Lions were aware of possible meet fatigue, that doesn't mean they were timid. Fuller contributed a floor routine and competed as an all-rounder for the first time since the Nov. 27 season opener at

Hinsdale South. Kurfirst tried new dismounts on both uneven bars and beam for the first time this season.

LT coach Kari Karubas threw in a couple of twists herself, including switching the regular order of beam competitors, but the team's 37.35 proved to be .75 higher than Fremd.

"We love competing at Fremd. They do a good job with their pageantry. It's always nice to be in a beautiful setting with great equipment so it feels something like the state meet," Karubas said.

"(With numerous meets lately) it was really important to get to our heads and be safe. For every gymnast, every skill was really thought out whether that meet at that time would be ideal to throw it. What was the safest choice? A lot of coaching thought had to go into each athlete. It's not always to win. I always look at them in the long run. I don't want to win a battle and lose the war."

There were many LT victories Saturday. Carling once again had a career-high score on uneven bars to win the event by .05 over Fremd senior Christine Jensen.

Hardly competing on uneven bars last year after labrum surgery in the offseason, Carling won the event at an invite for the first time.

"I stuck my dismount so that was good. I just tried to stay tight and confident and just sticking it was icing on the cake," Carling said. "I just felt like I had a really good routine and I was happy to stick it. I've just been working really hard to fix my form. It felt really good, and I was happy about it, happy I could do it for the team, too."

Her score now is just .05 shy of the career best of older sister Kristi, a 2010 LT graduate and two-time individual finalist on uneven bars at the state meet. The documented school-record score is Erin Murphy's 9.8 from 2002.

"The first meet we had at Hinsdale South, (Kristi) was like, 'When did you

get a bar routine?' I've just been working on it so she's proud of me," Carling said.

Karubas said Carling is trying to add a full blind change before her double back dismount.

"She just gets stronger every day and she's one of the most mentally tough kids I've ever met," Karubas said. "Saturday's routine was exceptional just because she hit so many handstands. That also helps the rest of it. You get about two inches taller and then your swing is two inches bigger, two miles per hour faster so she's kind of understanding the whole technique and momentum behind it."

Cozza's effort in making her already solid layout Yurchenko even stronger also was rewarded with a co-title with Glenbrook South freshman Hannah Hartley.

"Vault is my thing I guess. I've done a lot of vaults over winter break and working on trying to make my layout more of a layout and I think it's paid off," Cozza said. "(The key has been) just repetition, just being more aggressive and more aware of where I am, more confident."

It's hard to imagine Cozza's vault that being that much better, but that was the task over break. Karubas said she worked with Cozza on having her hands hit the vault table sooner, which will enable her to open up her hips more.

"She's just been really getting a foot higher and able to pop the hips a little bit so it's gotten more flare in the air, which then is easier to stick," Karubas said.

"There was nothing wrong with them (before). It was just we could have added a little more flare and what we were asking her to do just didn't comprehend (at first) because they felt safe, felt good and they were solid. We kind of had to un-program and program her a little bit. She responded well after a couple of emotional, mental, psychotic, flip-out moments because that has to happen."

These were the first two Fremd Invite titles for Carling and Cozza, who joined the program for the first time last season. At her previous two Fremd Invites, Kurfirst swept first place in all-around and all four events. She scored 38.35 last year, when the Lions won with 148.525 points, and 38.10 as a freshman.

On Saturday, Kurfirst was part of a 2-3-4 all-around finish with Carling (37.80), Kurfirst (37.50) and Cozza (37.35) behind Jensen (38.25) – the only four all-arounders to eclipse 37.00.

Fuller (36.35) was sixth with three season-high scores. The first-year high-school competitor was a 34.60 all-arounder in her LT debut at the Hornet Invite.

"I missed it. It's fun to just get back out there and help these guys do what they know how to do," Fuller said.

Cozza's co-title on vault was followed with Kurfirst (9.6) a close third and Carling (9.45) and Fuller (9.4) fifth and sixth.

On uneven bars, Carling was followed by Fuller's 9.4 in third and Cozza (9.05), Kurfirst (9.0) and McGann (8.95) in seventh through ninth. Ryser (8.7) tied for 13th.

Carling (9.45) tied for second on floor with Fremd's Carly DeFilippo behind Jensen's 9.5. Kurfirst (9.4) was fourth and Cozza (9.3) tied for fifth and Ryser (season-high 9.1) was ninth.

Kurfirst was a team-best third on beam (9.5) behind Jensen and Hartley (9.6), the final performer on the event. Fuller (9.35) was fifth, Cozza (9.3) tied for seventh, Carling (9.2) was ninth and Ryser (8.85) tied for 13th.

On uneven bars, Kurfirst inserted her half-in, half-out dismount for the first time this season, and it contributed to a fall earlier in the routine. The automatic .5 deduction cost Kurfirst a chance to contend for first place in the event and possibly the all-around title.

"This year didn't go as well for me (at this invite), but I think I still learned a lot about myself from this meet," Kurfirst said. "I was thinking ahead too much (on uneven bars) because I knew I was going to throw my new dismount and I really wanted it to go well so I was a second ahead of where my mind should have been. It was a mistake that I know I won't make again."

Fremd's invite is named in honor of Sopper, a gymnast for the Vikings' state championship teams in the mid-1980s who was among the victims killed in the airline terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

One feature of the invite that worked to the Lions' benefit is that six gymnasts may compete per event rather than the usual five.

McGann, who usually competes solely on uneven bars, opened the lineup on vault. Ryser, often a contributor on beam and floor, also was able to open the lineup on uneven bars.

"Sometimes it's really nervewracking just having to think of doing one event (uneven bars) and having to do really well on it. It just feels nice to be able to do more than one event," McGann said.

"Personally, I know it's really good to get out there and get some meet experience, even if I'm not the best bars worker on the team," Ryser added. "It's good to get out there and just kind of get a good range of where you are and what your abilities are. As a team, it just felt like a lot of people. It was more together. We were all competing as a team."

That especially held true on beam. Fuller began the set with a 9.35 – her first 9.0 beam routine of the season.

"It was really exciting to make my beam routine and then watch (my teammates) all hit. I thought it was all fun," Fuller said.

In her one routine of the meet, Mossing followed with an 8.3.

"For me, I did OK. It was more fun watching everyone else do really well, too," Mossing said.

In a little lineup twist, Ryser was followed by Kurfirst and then Cozza and Carling rather than Cozza, Kurfirst and Carling. Karubas said she wanted to show them that their order of competition doesn't really matter, although she admitted she was curious how it would affect each gymnast's individual score. It's a thought that Karubas probably will try again.

"My favorite part about this team is we're not done improving, we're not done polishing and we're certainly not done adding skills," Karubas said. "We're starting to see it come together (on beam) and we're starting to see each (athlete) able to have the mindset they need on the beam. And they're kind of having fun, too, which is something I've been enjoying. It's a different mentality than it's been in the past and a very mentally, emotionally mature approach to it."

Kurfirst took another step toward upgrading her beam dismount as she went from flip-flop, layout, step out, layout off the beam to flip-flop, layout, step out, full twist off the beam. Kurfirst threw that dismount the second half of last season but has been safely working back towards resuming it.

"This year, it's a little bit trickier. I think I've grown a couple of inches so it's harder to get consistent," Kurfirst said. "It's definitely something I want to put in and get consistent at so I can do it every time."

On uneven bars, Kurfirst fell as she bailed into her handstand onto the lower bar roughly halfway through the routine. Given 30 seconds before she has to resume the routine, Kurfirst went to the chalk tray and was accompanied by Karubas, who wanted to make sure Kurfirst still would throw the half-in, half-out dismount.

"I was more just frustrated at the time. If anything, it made me focus more and say, 'OK, now I have to get this done because I can't give any more tenths away,'" Kurfirst said. "(Karubas) handled it well and kind of

gave me the option. I just kind of said I was planning on doing it so I'm just going to finish out my routine and she how it goes and take that risk, and I'm glad I made it, at least."

"I feel like she's harder on herself than most so I wanted to make sure she was in the right mindset and wasn't leveled by missing the bail," Karubas said. "I said, 'Do you want to do this? Where's your brain?' I could tell she was flustered. Then I just watched her literally (recover) because she's so mentally strong and she's like, 'I'm going to get this.' She got it."

Kurfirst, the state co-champion on uneven bars as a freshman, already is ahead of schedule. Last season, she didn't instill the half-in, half-out dismount until the conference meet, and she fell on it.

"I've got to put it in some time so I'm glad that I put it in there and I'll work out the kinks," Kurfirst said.

What exactly the Lions would do began during warmups. That's when Fuller found out she would be competing on floor, the team's first event, for the first time since Dec. 7 at Downers Grove North.

"It was really exciting. I was really frustrated with my ankle and I just wanted to get back. Being able to compete all-around again was really nice," Fuller said. "That was exciting to get back on beam. The same with floor. My passes were watered down but it was just exciting to compete all-around again and get back out there."

Karubas has been keeping Fuller out of the floor lineup because of an ankle injury that initially came landing a vault short Dec. 11 but could be aggravated mostly by floor.

"I'm like, 'You're doing floor.' She's like, 'OK,'" Karubas said. "I didn't tell her she was doing floor until (Saturday) so that it was not mental. She's a competitor. She salutes and she goes so I'm really proud of her."

"It's definitely frustrating (sitting out events) but I know where she's coming from and it's just a safety issue," Fuller said.

Other injuries also are on the mend. Ryser showed her recuperation from turf toe on her right foot by beating her surpassing her previous season high on floor of 8.95 from Dec. 16. Ryser did not compete on beam Jan. 13 but returned on beam and floor Jan. 16.

"It's still pains but it's not anything important. I think I'm all the way back right now," Ryser said. "It's fine. It just hurts."

McGann had both of her vaults voided because she was touched by Karubas' spotting, but it's a sign of her overcoming a strained left hamstring that arose during preseason training.

"It was hurting a little bit every day during the offseason and I probably should have listened to my body better. But I thought I would just be fine and then it just started hurting really bad," McGann said.

"I had to take it really easy for about a month, doing absolutely nothing but bars and some basic stuff, like turns, dance-throughs, some jogging."

It wasn't until the beginning of the month that McGann said she finally felt a breakthrough of improvement. Her long stint of additional physical therapy was scheduled to end Monday.

"Now I don't notice it when I walk and when I stretch it feels fine, too," McGann said. "I was nervous that it wasn't going to ever feel better. I'm starting to do stuff. I can tell that I'm still guarding it a little bit, but it definitely feels a lot better."

The Lions had an addition to their invite lineup, Ellie the Elephant. The stuffed mascot was a Christmas present for Stotz, who first brought Ellie to the Lake Forest Invite Jan. 11.

"She had her own chair. I just brought her for fun, but then we did really well at that meet and she was always watching us every time we'd look over there," Stotz said. "She's part of the team now. We did really well at

that meet so (my teammates) said that at away invites I've got to bring her now."

-- by Bill Stone