

Leave it to English class to compose a great ending for the story of Lyons Township senior Jessica Lyons' gymnastics career.

Last spring, Lyons was a club gymnast who simply training but not competing as she recovered from a stress fracture in her back. She just happened to catch the attention of her English teacher, Kari Karubas, who also happens to be the LT head girls gymnastics coach.

Now Lyons is part of the LT lineup as it competes at the eight-team state meet Friday, Feb. 15, at Palatine High School.

"I actually was supposed to quit. My doctor did not want me competing gymnastics anymore, but I can't give up the sport," Lyons said. "I know I'm not doing it in college, so this is my last season. That's tough, but it's a great season to finish on."

Lyons is among five new varsity gymnasts this season, none of them freshmen, who have improved the depth and changed the dynamic of the lineup.

After qualifying for state last year with the lowest sectional score, the Lions are expected to be in contention for their first state championship along with Prairie Ridge co-op, third at state in 2012.

Prairie Ridge (149.525) and LT (149.25) had the two highest sectional scores in the state, at least three points higher than any other team, after LT posted the state's highest regional score (season-high 149.775) in winning the LT Regional Jan. 30.

At state last year, LT finished sixth (season-high 144.475) with current

sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst sharing the individual state title on the uneven parallel bars.

Senior Maren Craig and sophomore Kelly Ryser also return from the 2012 state lineup. Other varsity newcomers are juniors Michelle Cozza and Katie Carling and Alyssa Lancaster and sophomore Olivia McGann.

"They get along and are polite and courteous. They want to do well for each other," Karubas said.

"I can honestly say with this team that we're going to keep doing what we know how to do as coaches and hope that they keep being the wonderful girls that they are. We already feel like we've succeeded as a team, whatever that means -- second place, first place, third place. It's just we've seen them grow."

Many of the newcomers were expected to join the Lions from their various clubs. They already were club teammates or knew each other through competition or school.

Cozza and Carling had older sisters who were outstanding LT gymnasts but based on the training rules of their club, Flying High Gymnastics, had to wait until their junior years to also compete for their high school.

Picking up five strong, older gymnasts in one season still could be a bit overwhelming.

"I had an idea because I've done gymnastics with all of these girls before whether by club or camps over the summer, except Jess," Cozza said. "We all know each other's gymnastics really well so we know how to help each

other, which is nice.”

The addition of Lyons truly happened by chance. Karubas said she initially wasn't aware of Lyons' background, but soon noticed that she may be a gymnast. The strong, calloused hands and powerful shoulders gave Lyons away.

“I was like, ‘You're a gymnast.’ She's like, ‘Absolutely.’ We just started talking,” Karubas said.

Lyons received further input during the summer when she attended gymnastics camp in Cincinnati with Craig and Kurfirst and was getting tempted to join. Unfortunately, Lyons soon was diagnosed with another stress fracture in her back on the opposite side of her earlier one, which hadn't completely healed.

“I wasn't sure if my back was going to be able to handle another season or if I just wanted to be around gymnastics but not really compete it,” Lyons said. “In a way, I was thinking of quitting an amount of times, but every time I got my head around to quitting, I missed it too much and I just had to come back.”

“I'm glad she gets to be here and part of this team,” Karubas said. “She gets to walk away from the sport rather than the sport being taken away from her. I'm glad we connected in the English classroom last year.”

It's been quite a transition for the entire LT team. Early last season, Karubas decided that the LT varsity lineup would be simply five gymnasts competing in all four events as all-arounders. Kurfirst, Craig, Ryser and graduated Kalen Iffert and Allison Stück not only managed to stay healthy, they had their best

meets at the end of the season.

“It definitely wasn’t just luck. We worked hard and peaked at the right time and I think that was all planned out,” Kurfirst said. “I guess we were determined to show we can make it far with only five girls and we did so that was definitely special.”

The construction of this year’s lineup is quite different. All eight Lions competed at sectionals with Kurfirst and Cozza the lone all-arounders. Carling and Craig competed on three events (vault, balance beam, floor exercise), Ryser and Lyons competed on two (uneven bars and floor) and Lancaster (vault) and McGann (uneven bars) one each.

“It’s basically whatever’s best for the team. I’m pretty OK with (the lineup),” Ryser said. “As long as I do my job, I know others will do theirs, and it will all culminate into a good experience.”

The lineup also has been a transition for the newcomers, especially with their club backgrounds. In club meets, gymnasts almost always compete as all-arounders. Going from four events to two or one in meets can be a big change physically and mentally.

“It was a disappointment when I only got to do one event, but now I’m trying to turn that around and focus more on vault and just make it as good as I possibly can,” Lancaster said. “When I’m not competing, I just try to focus on my teammates and support them as much as I can.”

Lyons, who attended Ariel Gymnastics Club, said her club required its gymnasts to compete as all-arounders and her back injury made it impractical to compete, much less practice, every event consistently. With

some strong persuasion, she said she did get to compete in one less prominent meet only on floor.

“There’s some events, like vault, where some days I can do without pain and other days that I just can’t bear running down that runway,” Lyons said.

There still is quite a club-like structure to LT practices. Karubas was a Level 10 club gymnast at Illinois Gymnastics Institute and competed strictly in club gymnastics and never for her high school, Waubonsie Valley. She then competed at the NCAA Division I level for the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Longtime assistant coach Courtney Douglas contributes an experienced and slightly different perspective since she was a high-school gymnast for Barrington and competed on the NCAA Division III level for Wisconsin-LaCrosse.

“We bring such an eclectic mindset and reality and background to these girls. There’s something for somebody somewhere that we can connect with,” Karubas said.

“I regret not competing for my high school. I competed (for Illinois) and it was, ‘Oh my God, a team,’ and it was amazing. It was important to me that I could bring the club cult mentality to a public high school. At the same time, I have the compassion of not only a mother but I’m a high school teacher. It’s a very delicate balance.”

One consistency between LT practices and most club programs is that everybody is expected to train as an all-rounder, regardless of the lineup. Injuries and illness could strike at any time, even during warmups, and that

way the Lions are ready.

“It doesn’t bother me. That’s good for me because it pushes me more to really want to do the event (in competition), just show it to (Karubas) that I can do this,” McGann said. “Sometimes we’ll do six people to warm up (for the five spots). I’m usually there to step in, in case something happens.”

Karubas said the main reason for everyone to train all-around is that she expects her gymnasts to return to their clubs. She wants them to retain the same skill level, if not higher, and have routines for all of their events.

“Just because I’m not competing doesn’t mean I’m not improving and doesn’t mean my efforts are going for nothing because I’m still doing club,” Lancaster said. “When I practice other events (than vault), I like improving on the skills I already have. Even though I’m not competing, I know when I go back to club, I’ll be competing those events.”

That doesn’t mean LT practices don’t have their moments, whether it be a crazy aerobics day or practicing for the school pep assembly. As the team has strived to improve on beam, Cozza said even the parents came to practice one day to help.

“They tried to distract us. My dad had a cow bell and was trying to distract us. It kind of worked out,” Cozza said.

Karubas and the Lions have taken advantage of the team’s depth and flexibility. The Lions especially were excited at Fremd’s Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational Jan. 12, because teams were allowed six rather than the usual five.

Two additional routines actually impacted the team score. McGann posted an 8.675 on beam and Lyons, who was only a regular on uneven bars at the time, had a 9.0 on floor.

Otherwise throughout the season, gymnasts have received chances on other events, either as exhibition routines or to give teammates a chance to rest or protect an injury.

Karubas said she appreciates the importance of gauging her athletes' health, reflecting on her constant pain of competing her final years of college gymnastics.

"The sport requires a lot from you. I really feel like that's one of my specialties, when to pull back, when to push, how to work around the injury, how to work with the injury," Karubas said.

"We're always extremely cautious, especially as it gets close to the end of the season, but last year we had five girls and that was it," Kurfirst said. "It's the same thing with this year, though. We have eight girls, but all of us contribute and we can't risk any of those injuries."

That approach certainly helped Lyons not only to be capable of competing, but doing so consistently and consistently well. She had perhaps her best meet so far at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Jan. 26. She had two 9s in taking fifth on uneven bars (9.075) and tying for seventh on floor (9.15).

A smart approach has contributed to that success.

"I'll say I'm fine but (Karubas) knows my limits, probably more than I like to

tell her," Lyons said. "I'll beg her to do floor one day and she'll say, 'No we need you for this weekend. We need you rested.' "

Lyons also had a special Senior Night meet Jan. 9 against Oak Park-River Forest. She thought she was going to be sitting out because of back pain and was "crushed." She ended up competing on everything but vault as exhibition routines.

"Right after we stretched and warmed up, Karubas told me, 'How do you feel about competing bars and beam?' I was like, 'I would love to do that,' " Lyons said. "Then she's like, 'Get ready for floor. It's Senior Night and I want you to compete those three events.' "

"It was a good experience. I loved it. It was a great night."

Together, the Lions are hoping for a great finish at the state meet. The Lions have finished second twice and third twice over their 15 previous state trips. This is LT's sixth state trip in Karubas' eight seasons as head coach with a second-place finish in 2010.

"I know there's somewhat of a target on our backs regarding that, 'You will win, you can win, this is your year,' " Karubas said. "What's more important to me, because I have more than 20 years of coaching ahead of me, is good relationships and the connections I have with them, win or lose.

"It's a lovely, wonderful group. I hope I have teams like this forever. If I don't, I will never forget this group. They are the most unbelievable group."