

Plenty has happened since Lyons Township sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst dominated last year's Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational at Fremd.

She earned a co-state championship on the uneven parallel bars, and now scoring in the 38s in all-around is becoming commonplace. She's also acquired a new nickname.

"We call her the machine," LT coach Kari Karubas said. "She is just a little rock star when it comes to competing. She loves it. She's really calculated. She's on a mission so we're really looking forward to it."

Kurfirst and the LT girls gymnastics team enjoyed more success at the Sopper Invite Saturday, Jan. 12. Kurfirst swept all-around and all four events and the Lions won the meet for the first time by scoring 148.525 points.

LT won easily over defending champion Fremd (147.80), which finished fourth at state last year. St. Charles co-op (142.425) was third in the 10-team field.

Kurfirst won all-around (38.35), just .30 shy of her school-record total Dec. 12, by sweeping vault (9.75), floor (9.65), uneven bars (9.6) and beam (9.35).

With four lower event scores in 2012, Kurfirst also won all-around at Fremd (38.10) and took titles on vault (9.65), uneven bars (9.55), floor (9.5) and beam (9.4).

"I'm happy with the outcome, but I definitely wasn't expecting that at all (again)," Kurfirst said. "Throughout the meet, I didn't really focus on scores as much. I really just focused on hitting my routines and fixing the mistakes I made last meet."

“It went pretty well (for our team), but, as I always say, there’s definitely room for improvement,” Kurfirst said. “We’ve got 30 days (before the state meet) and I think once we just kind of figure ourselves out and figure out our mistakes, we’ll do a lot better.”

Junior Michelle Cozza was second in all-around (36.70), and junior Katie Carling was fourth (36.10). Senior Maren Craig and sophomore Olivia McGann had top-10 event finishes, and senior Jessica Lyons and junior Alyssa Lancaster had top-20 event finishes.

If the Lions aren’t strong enough, the invite allowed six entries per event, rather than the usual five, with the top four scores still going toward the team total. Karubas was elated to take advantage, and so were many of the Lions.

They led the meet with impressive team scores on three events – vault (37.75), uneven bars (37.675) and floor (37.525). The uneven bars score was .025 from their event season high.

Then there was beam. LT again competed last at an invite on the event and counted three falls, each an automatic .5 deduction, and finished with a 35.575, second to Fremd (36.40), which competed third on beam and ended on floor.

For the second invite in a row, the Lions, sixth at state in 2012, beat a team that finished higher at state. Fremd was fourth at state behind Carmel, Stevenson and Prairie Ridge co-op.

“We won it with falls. The girls handed me the trophy and I was like, ‘Did we

deserve this?’ and they weren’t happy either. And it’s hard because we had good highlights,” Karubas said.

“We’re not denying that, but they really get the idea that unless we all do well (we’re not satisfied), and I like that about them. They need to get into each other’s heads because that’s part of being a teammate. You’ve got to hit beam, your teammate had to hit so what do we do about it? I wish I had the answer. And each day is different.”

At the Lake Forest Invite Jan. 5, the Lions also were the final team on beam and counted three falls, including Kurfirst. The result contributed to their finishing second by just .325 to Prairie Ridge co-op for the team title – 150.00 to 149.675 with the two highest scores in the state this season. Carmel was third with a then season-high 145.625.

On Wednesday, Jan. 9 in La Grange, the Lions nearly beat that total by beating Oak Park-River Forest 149.45 to 128.65 with help from tying their season-high of 37.95 on beam.

Not surprisingly, Kurfirst hitting her beam routine at Fremd – the final one for the invite – was her biggest highlight.

“I’m happy about beam. I hit my routine pretty well and I added a new dismount. I put that together and hit that so that was exciting,” Kurfirst said. “Before I just had my flip-flop layout (flight series) and a different dismount and now I combine them (for a flip-flop layout full dismount).

“We did well (on beam against OPRF) and I know we’re completely capable for all of us to hit. We’ve done that before. It’s just a matter of handling those nerves and really getting up on the beam and breathing and not getting too worried about the pressure and everything. We’ll get there. I

know we will.”

The Lions certainly were impressive on the other events. One benefit of their event rotation was that it gave them another chance to set the tone with great floor sets.

“It’s my favorite, having floor first,” said Cozza, who finished seventh on floor (9.425). “I like just going out there. It’s really fun on floor.”

Cozza also had another strong performance on uneven bars, taking third (9.475). She also tied for eighth on vault (9.2) and tied for 13th on beam (8.6).

“I think my highlights were my floor routine and bars,” Cozza said. “(Uneven bars) just felt clean and I like it. It went how I do in practice so I’m glad the practice shows at the meet.”

Craig continued to make progress with her recently upgraded floor routine, posting another season high (9.45) to place sixth. Craig also was seventh on vault (9.3) and tied for 18th on beam (8.4).

Craig debuted her new routine at Lake Forest, which features a 1 1/2 full twist on her first pass. However, she stepped out of bounds landing the skill and scored a 9.15. Against OPRF, she improved to a then season-best 9.35.

“I was just kind of having fun out there (at Fremd). I was kind nervous about that (1 1/2 full) and I’m glad it went well,” Craig said. “I just kind of thought about every little thing, one skill at a time. I think that helped me.”

Carling excelled in just her third all-around performance. She finished fourth

on vault (9.5) and uneven bars (9.45) and was sixth on beam (8.95).

Before the Lake Forest Invite, Carling hadn't even competed on vault and uneven bars as she worked her way back from labrum surgery following the club season. Recently, those have been her stronger events. She posted season highs at Fremd after tying her best beam score (9.6) against OPRF.

"It's really impressive, especially because I've been competing floor and beam for so long and I definitely did better on bars and vault," Carling said. "It boosts (my confidence) and also motivates me to get even better skills and try harder and fight for all of the little tenths.

"Sometimes (my shoulder area) aches a little, but I keep doing therapy and it's getting a lot better. I've been a little shaky (on uneven bars), but today I felt confident. I've just been working really hard and throwing all of my skills right and doing what I needed to do to try and make it."

Also on bars, McGann took sixth (season-high 9.15), and Ryser, battling sore ankles, took 10th (8.975). McGann topped her previous best of 9.1 from Lake Forest, and Ryser just missed her 9.0 against OPRF.

"It was probably one the best routine I've done this season so I was happy with it," McGann said. "I hit my handstands. I was happy about that. Usually they're not quite high enough so I was happy that I could finally do that."

Sometimes an uneven bars specialist, McGann competed on three events in the expanded format. She also was 12th on beam (8.975) and tied for 17th on vault (8.9).

McGann provided a counting team score on beam after nearly not being

part of that event's lineup. Karubas said McGann still needed a round-off full for her dismount.

"She got it, something she's been working towards. She was on a mission. And she rocked it (at the invite)," Karubas said. "She so wants to compete. She's so hungry for this. Having that option of six (per event) with this team and this year is really good for us."

Lyons also proved that on floor. Usually a specialist on uneven bars, Lyons shined with a 9.0 to tie for 12th. Lyons also tied for 23rd on uneven bars (8.3), and Lancaster tied for 20th on vault (8.85).

"I loved it. Floor is my favorite event so being able to compete again out there was just amazing," Lyons said.

Getting a chance to compete on floor against OPRF, Lyons added to her performance at Fremd. On her final pass, she climaxed a round-off and layout with a full twist rather than another layout.

"Jessica, as well, is rising to the occasion. She's just a beautiful performer and she loves to salute the judge and do a good job," Karubas said.

Against OPRF, Kurfirst again scored in the mid-38s to win all-around (38.55) as well as vault (9.7), floor (9.7) and uneven bars (9.6).

Cozza and Carling shared first on beam (9.6), and Cozza (37.55) and Carling (36.70) were second and third in all-around.

The Lions swept the top four spots on all four events and the top five on three.

Cozza (9.25), Ryser (9.0), McGann (8.6) and Carling (8.5) were second through fifth on uneven bars, Craig (9.35), Carling (9.25), Cozza (9.1) and Ryser (8.8) were second through fifth on floor, Cozza (9.6), Carling (9.35) and Craig and Lancaster (9.0s) were second through fourth on vault and Kurfirst (9.55) and Craig (9.2) were third and fourth on beam.