

When sophomore Kelly Ryser found out the Lyons Township girls gymnastics team would open on balance beam at the Hinsdale Central Sectional Wednesday, Feb. 6, that meant she would be the Lions' first competitor.

"I try to stay calm for everything. It kind of keeps my emotions better," Ryser said. "I wasn't really nervous, I don't think. It wasn't really nerveracking. I just knew that I had a job to do, and I needed to get it done and then everything else would fall into place."

When Ryser stuck her routine for an 8.95, little did she know that it would lead to the Lions' best meet of the season. LT hit all 20 of its routines and scored 149.25 points to win the six-team sectional and automatically return to the eight-team state meet at Palatine High School Friday and Saturday Feb. 15-16.

LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst, the 2012 co-state champion on uneven parallel bars, won that event (season-high 9.7) as well as all-around (38.35) and floor (9.525) and tied for first on vault (9.725).

Kurfirst and junior Michelle Cozza earned individual state berths in all-around and all four events, and senior Maren Craig (balance beam), junior Katie Carling (beam, floor exercise) and sophomore Olivia McGann (uneven bars) also were individual state qualifiers. Senior Jessica Lyons and junior Alyssa Lancaster also were part of the sectional lineup.

Individuals advanced to state either individually as sectional qualifiers with top-five sectional finishes or at-large by being among the 12 highest remaining scores from the state's four sectionals. This year's at-large cutoff scores were 36.125 all-around, 9.475 vault, 9.1 uneven bars, 9.0 beam and 9.175 floor.

“It’s just really exciting. There’s nothing else to say about it. We’re all really excited to go to state,” Carling said. “That overpowers nerves for us right now, being ready to go have fun and go do our best.”

Ryser, Kurfirst and Craig are the lone returnees from last year, when the Lions finished sixth (season-high 144.475) after entering with the lowest qualifying score, the smallest lineup of five all-arounders and Kurfirst their lone individual qualifier.

This time, LT enters with the second-highest sectional score to Prairie Ridge co-op (149.525), third at state in 2012. The five Lions joining the returnees for this state trip are first-year high school gymnasts.

“We had five people (last season) so we were just taking what we could get. This year, we have such a good chance, such a good purpose to be there and it’s going to make it a lot better,” Ryser said.

“I’m sure there’s a little more pressure this year because, obviously, we have a good chance. There is more pressure, but I think we’re going to use that pressure to our advantage to get a lot of adrenaline. We’re just going to go all out for it.”

What the Lions are aiming for is their first state team championship. They and Prairie Ridge co-op have posted the state’s top scores most of the season and did so again during regionals, when the Lions posted a season-high 149.775 and Prairie Ridge was second overall with a 147.175.

The third-highest sectional score from Fremd was more than three points lower (146.225). The rest of the state field is New Trier (144.40), St. Charles co-op (143.775), conference rival Glenbard West (143.30), first-time

qualifier Geneva (142.825) and Lake Forest (142.45).

The lone head-to-head meeting this season between LT and Prairie Ridge was Jan. 5 at the Lake Forest Invitational. LT led most of the invite but finished with a nightmarish set on beam and ended up second to Prairie Ridge by .325 (150.00 to 149.675).

“A lot of coaches say I want first, I want second, I want third. I just want improvement between now and next week,” LT coach Kari Karubas said. “It’s not about hitting anymore. It’s about cleanliness and competing well. If we do those things, we should be fine, whatever that means. And the better team will win that night, whoever that is.”

“It’s not going to be handed to us. It’s a high-pressure situation. I’ve got some girls that are very green when it comes to competition. I’m doing a lot of work in their heads so hopefully I’ve got what it takes as a coach.”

Even for the returnees, nothing is for sure. Kurfirst posted the state’s highest sectional scores for uneven bars and all-around, but everything starts from scratch at state.

Team competition and the individual all-around is determined Friday, starting at 5:05 p.m. Qualified individuals among the top 10 scores Friday advance to Saturday’s event finals, beginning at 5:45 p.m.

Kurfirst shared the 2012 state uneven bars championship with graduated Amanda Quinn from Glenbard North (9.6) after having the second highest score in the prelims (9.625).

Kurfirst also reached the vault finals and just missed a top-five, all-state medal, tying for eighth (9.65) behind four seniors and .075 from fifth. She

was ninth in all-around (37.375) behind three seniors, .55 from fifth.

“Hopefully, it’ll be as successful as last year, if not more successful,” Kurfirst said. “I try to think of it as a new year, separate from last year. Last year definitely gives me some experience of what to expect and everything, but we have different team goals, different individual goals. We’re going to work hard next week and go in with no regrets and whatever happens, happens.”

Kurfirst could have done a more conservative uneven bars routine, but instead she ended the sectionals with a bang.

She inserted her half in-half out dismount for just the second time in a meet this season and landed it perfectly. Kurfirst attempted the dismount at the conference meet but fell.

“I talked with Karubas and (assistant coach Courtney Douglas) a lot before and I’m like, ‘Are you sure sectionals is going to be the right meet?’ ” Kurfirst said. “We all just kind of decided this is the time to throw it. I can’t hold back and I’ve really got to trust myself and do what I know how to do.”

Since her sectional score was .6 higher than the at-large state cut, Kurfirst probably would have advanced even with a fall. But she certainly didn’t know that at the time of her performance and dismount.

“I’m extremely happy that I threw that at sectionals, as opposed to just waiting until state and playing it safe,” Kurfirst said. “It was kind of a risky decision to throw it, but I decided I was going to and it definitely paid off. That was definitely my favorite bar routine of the year.”

“Probably the best part (of the sectional) was seeing Kelsy stick her half-in,

half-out and all of us going crazy after that,” Lyons said. “Just that to finish the meet off was amazing, and she did a great job at it. I just think the emotional after that was powerful.”

The Lions certainly got a lift from their sectional performance. They counted no falls off beam for the second time in a row to set the tone for a great meet. Their 37.325 on beam was followed by a 37.10 on floor, 37.925 on vault and 36.90 on uneven bars.

McGann said her teammates’ success gave her confidence to even qualify for state after having to wait until the final rotation to compete.

“I was telling myself not to worry, bars was the last event, but I think it kind of helped me calm myself down because everyone was doing well,” McGann said. “It was making me less nervous and more excited to hit my routine. I was pretty pleased with it, and I really liked (landing) my double back at the end.”

Based on a blind draw by the IHSA Jan. 3, LT will have the same event rotation at state – beam, floor, vault and uneven bars. Prairie Ridge will perform in Olympic order – vault, uneven bars, beam and floor.

“If we have fun, we just do better. Once we started hitting our routines (at sectionals), it made it more fun and kind of sped up the energy more and it was easier,” Ryser said. “Usually for beam, you have to wrangle all of the energy, but after beam, since we did it first, we could just go crazy on all of the other events.”

On beam, Ryser was followed by consecutive state-qualifying routines from Craig (9.4), Cozza (9.2), Carling (9.325) and Kurfirst (9.4).

Craig and Kurfirst tied for second behind Hinsdale Central senior and 2012 beam all-stater Erin Morgan (9.425), Carling was fourth and Cozza seventh. Ryser (8.925) was ninth and missed the at-large state cut by .075.

Kurfirst won floor by .075 with Cozza fifth (9.35) and Carling (9.25) tying for sixth to also advance to state. Craig tied for eighth (8.975), and Lyons was 26th (8.4).

Kurfirst (9.725) and Cozza (9.7) both landed their layout Yurchenko vaults. Kurfirst shared first with Morgan's handspring front, and Cozza was third. Carling and Lancaster tied for 10th with 9.25s and Craig was 14th at 9.175.

With LT's final routine on uneven bars, Kurfirst won by .025 over Naperville North sophomore Michaela Robert. Cozza (9.3) and McGann (9.125) were sixth and seventh to advance at-large. Lyons (8.775) tied for 17th with Ryser (9.75) 19th.

Kurfirst won all-around by .675 over Morgan. Cozza (37.55) tied for fourth with Shepard freshman Skylor Hilger, an individual competitor who is her school's first state qualifier.

"I just went into sectionals relaxed. Kelsy especially has told me, when you're relaxed, everything works out better for you," Cozza said.

Over the four events, LT has five state-qualifying individuals for a combined 12 routines. Prairie Ridge has six in a combined 12 events with three all-around qualifiers, sophomores Rachael Underwood, Jada Berkland and Riley Mahoney. At last year's state meet, Underwood was second in all-around (38.10) behind two seniors, tied for second on beam (9.55) and reached the

finals on the other three events.

The Lions have earned four top-three trophies in their previous 14 state trips. They were second to Fremd in 1999 and third in 2000, 2002 and 2010, when Carolyn Cozza, Michelle's sister, and Kristi Carling, Katie's sister, were members of the team. Carolyn Cozza also competed at state in 2011 as an individual qualifier in 2011 after the team missed advancing by .2.

"If we do what we did at sectionals, we'll be successful at state, too. We did everything we could do at sectionals," Cozza said. "Right now, the team is more important to me. I think of (all-state honors for) individuals, but going to state, all I'm thinking of is hitting my routines and just seeing where that gets me. I don't really know what to expect."

As a third-year varsity member, Craig is the veteran of the lineup. She set the tone for her strong sectional meet by landing her beam routine to earn her first individual state berth.

"Last year, I fell at sectionals and I was like, 'I do not want to do repeat that again.' How do I want this meet to go?' I just kept kind of picturing myself in the gym at practice and I think that kind of helped," Craig said.

"Sectionals was kind of a mini-state, but there's a whole different feeling. I'm excited for the new team members to experience it and how great it really is to compete there."

Carling and Cozza have been state spectators, particularly to watch their sisters compete. McGann has watched the state's live feed on the Internet.

The newcomers have enjoyed the additional recognition that has come with

the team's success. The Lions will take their traditional limousine ride around the school Friday before heading to state.

"I'm just really excited to compete and get the experience everyone says it is and to be at the state meet because it's such a big accomplishment," Lancaster said. "A lot of people never knew that I was involved in gymnastics now know. People are really interested in LT gymnastics, like, 'When's your next meet?,' 'I want to come,' or 'Good job,' or 'Good luck.' People are more aware, even people you're not really friends with, and it's just really a fun experience."

State also can be an emotional experience, especially for the seniors. Craig is hopeful that her previous state experience can contribute to the Lions performing at their best.

"I think it will (help) because I think I can try to lead in like calming the team down," Craig said. "It's really no different than any other meet. You shouldn't be more nervous for state."

Lyons nearly quit gymnastics for good after battling injuries during her club career. Her rebirth as a gymnast for LT also comes to an end with her first high-school state experience.

"I'm really just looking forward to making my last meet of gymnastics and my last day of gymnastics the best I ever do," Lyons said. "I just want to finish on a good note and do what I've been training for the last 14 years of my life, going out there and having fun."