

The Lyons Township girls gymnastics team had even more of a reason to celebrate after beating Hinsdale Central Dec. 17 going into final exams later that week.

After three meets over six days, the Lions finally were getting a break from competition.

“Oh my gosh. We are physically and emotionally drained, especially with finals (starting Dec. 19),” LT senior Maren Craig said after the meet. “These past two weeks, I’m glad we made it out alive. We’re just physically and mentally (drained). I think that these three meets have made us stronger.”

The Lions have proven themselves to be among the top teams in the state, and they hope to look even stronger by the time they return to action Saturday, Jan. 5 at the Lake Forest Invitational at 6 p.m.

LT defeated Hinsdale Central 144.25 to 139.20 after winning its second annual LT Invite Dec. 14 with 148.85 points, topping second-place Glenbard West by 4.25 points. Just two days earlier, the Lions also defeated Glenbard West 148.75 to 144.60 Dec. 12 also in La Grange in the showdown for the West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual standings lead.

“I metaphorically told the girls that we just need to get off the roller coaster,” LT coach Kari Karubas said. “Three meets in one week, we survived. We came out of this alive. I could not have asked for a better performance from them (at Hinsdale Central). Now we’ve got some time to recover and work on some harder skills.”

Against Hinsdale Central, LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst won all-around (37.55) and all four events – vault (9.65), floor exercise (9.45), balance beam

(9.25) and the uneven parallel bars (9.2).

Junior Michelle Cozza was third in all-around (35.80), second on vault (9.6) and third on floor (9.25) and uneven bars (9.15). Senior Maren Craig was third on vault (9.3) and fifth on floor (8.85), junior Katie Carling was fourth on floor (8.9) and beam (8.7), sophomores Kelly Ryser and Olivia McGann were fourth (8.75) and fifth (8.65) on uneven bars and Ryser was fifth on beam (8.55).

The Lions only counted two falls off beam but the scores from two state-level judges was consistently tight.

“It was hard, but I think that it definitely gave us kind of an idea of what’s going to actually happen at the state meet because these are state judges,” Craig said. “It kind of gave us an eye opener, a lot of things to work on and what the state judges are looking for. I think it’s going to help us during winter break to work on those things.”

Craig enjoyed one of her finest moments at the LT Invite. Her season-high 9.65 won beam by .25 over Glenbard West sophomore Mackenzie O’Keefe. Kurfirst won all-around and the other three events.

Craig didn’t dwell too long on her beam victory after she scored a 7.95 at Hinsdale Central with a fall.

“It was great (winning the invite). I just think it was solid,” Craig said. “I think that it was a huge confidence booster but then (against Hinsdale Central) it was kind of the opposite.”

Kurfirst, who scored a school-record 38.65 in the dual against Glenbard

West, followed up at the invite with a 37.90. Cozza was a close second thanks to a season-high 37.75.

Never mind the Hinsdale Central dual. Simply coming back to compete two days after arguably the most emotionally-charged dual of the season was challenging enough for the Lions.

“It was a tornado from my end (organizing), but my girls performed really well,” Karubas said.

“It was definitely tough. I think we did well for that (invite),” Kurfirst said. “We got another (high) team score, which is exciting, and continued to learn from our mistakes and really focus on fixing them each meet. That was definitely a good learning meet.”

Kurfirst (9.8), Cozza (9.65) and Craig (9.5) swept the top three places on vault. With junior Alyssa Lancaster also earning a top-five finish in her one event by tying for fourth (9.45), the Lions scored a season-high 38.40, not even including McGann’s ninth-place 9.2.

Kurfirst (9.6), Cozza (9.5) and Carling (9.35) went 1-2-3 on floor. Kurfirst also won uneven bars (9.6) by .05 over O’Keefe and tied for eighth on beam (8.9).

Four of the Lions’ five vaulters posted season-high scores. Cozza earlier had posted the team season high of 9.8 Dec. 6 in the home dual against York to help LT score a season-high 149.00.

On the record board in LT’s gym, Cozza’s 9.8 appeared to have equaled the highest score on the event by her older sister, Carolyn, a two-time all-stater

in the event. The board, however, has not been updated.

“Carolyn actually had a 9.85. She just told me that,” said Michelle Cozza, a first-year high-school gymnast. “I actually stuck (my layout Yurchenko) so I think it was one of my best ones ever. It was really exciting for me because it was my first home meet. It was just really exciting for me to finally land it and not take a step.”

At the LT Invite, Cozza also was third on beam (9.35) and uneven bars (9.25). Carling also was sixth on beam (9.0), Ryser tied for seventh on uneven bars (season-best 8.8), tied for 10th on floor (8.75) and tied for 12th on beam (8.8), senior Jessica Lyons was ninth on uneven bars (season-high 8.7), McGann was 10th on uneven bars (8.6) and Craig also tied for 10th on floor (8.75).

“It’s insane. We’ve had so many meets in the past couple of weeks. For all of that exhaustion, we did well and finished strong (at Hinsdale Central),” Kurfirst said. “A break – we’re looking forward to it, but it’s good because we can get in the gym and actually work on new skills and perfecting our old ones. By January, I think we’ll be putting in new skills and I think we’ll be a lot farther along.”

At Lake Forest, the Lions will compete against three state heavyweights for the first time this season. The field includes three-time defending state champion Carmel, defending state runner-up Prairie Ridge co-op and the host Foresters, fifth at state last year.

With their 149.00, the Lions held the state’s highest score this season until Prairie Ridge co-op scored 149.95 Dec. 21 at Libertyville.

Lake Forest (season-high 145.90 Dec. 10) and Carmel (season-high 144.925 Dec. 14) also are among the 16 teams that have broken 140 so far. Fremd, fourth at state last year and competing at the Lincoln-Way Invite Jan. 5, owns the No. 3 season-high score at 148.55.

“I can always say that I’m never really satisfied because I see them individually at their really wonderful moments. I still have yet to see that come together in a meet,” Karubas said. “As a coach, I have a lot of work ahead of me and as a team they have a lot of work ahead of them. What I see and what’s happening (in competition), it’s still very separate. I look forward to get back in the gym and pound out some details.”