

If the Lyons Township girls gymnastics team is in contention for a state trophy in February, if not its first state title, the determining factor probably will be balance beam.

The Lions got a taste of that pressure at the Lake Forest Invitational Saturday, Jan. 5.

After putting together their best meet of the season over the first three events, the Lions counted three falls off beam, each an automatic .5 deduction, as the final team still competing in the 11-team field.

LT still scored a season-high 149.675, but the overall result was a second-place invite finish by just .325 to Prairie Ridge co-op's season-high 150.00 in their first head-to-head meeting this season.

They are the two highest scores in the state this season.

"Especially it's a bittersweet feeling because beam was our last event and there's a bad taste left in our mouths. Unfortunately, it's what cost us the meet this time. We (still) got our season high, and I think we've got even more room to improve," said LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst, who had one fall on the final beam routine.

"It was hard ending the meet like that on beam, especially with all of the mistakes we know we can make. I'm beating myself up a little bit (too). We know we shouldn't be having those mistakes and those falls, and it did result in second place for us. If anything, it's just a learning experience for the team because we'll really fix those mistakes and learn how to deal with our nerves a little better, handle the pressure. Hopefully next time, it won't happen like that."

The ending didn't completely overshadow many great performances by the Lions, who surpassed their previous season high of 149.00 Dec. 6 behind season highs on floor exercise (38.325), their first event, and uneven parallel bars (37.70).

Kurfirst (9.85) and junior Michelle Cozza (9.775) finished 1-2 on floor with season bests, and Cozza won the uneven parallel bars (season-high 9.7). In all-around, Kurfirst (37.95) and Cozza (season-high 37.775) were third and fourth and junior Katie Carling was eighth (37.175) in her all-around debut.

Senior Maren Craig competed on three events, sophomore Kelly Ryser on two and senior Jessica Lyons (uneven bars) and sophomores Alyssa Lancaster (vault) and Olivia McGann (uneven bars) on one.

Ryser was fourth on beam (9.175), also had a top-five individual finish, and Craig and Carling also had top-10 individual finishes. All eight Lions scored a 9 on something or achieved a season-high score.

"We've got to get back in the gym and fix a lot of things. I love this meet because it gives us a barometer, a little bit of a gauge about what needs to happen next," LT coach Kari Karubas said. "I'm really proud of the girls. They're coming together as a team. I'm seeing some amazing cohesion between them, and I also see that they are not satisfied tonight, which is good as a coach."

Prairie Ridge, third in state last year to three-time defending champion Carmel and Stevenson, and LT competed in the same rotation with Prairie Ridge always competing just before the Lions. LT had the higher event scores on floor (38.325 to 38.20) and vault (37.70 to 37.55) while Prairie

Ridge was higher on uneven bars (37.90 to 37.70) and beam (36.35 to 35.90). Third-place Carmel (season-high 145.625) had the highest vault score (37.90).

On beam, the Lions were nearly two points below their season-high score of 37.95.

“They look really good in the gym (on beam) so we’ve got to figure it out,” Karubas said. “I don’t even know what to call it. They could have been remedied if the nerves weren’t there, I think.”

The Lions shined on floor, topping their previous best of 38.15. Besides Kurfirst and Cozza, Carling tied for seventh (9.5), Ryser tied for 18th (season-high 9.2) and Craig tied for 20th (9.15).

“It was definitely our best performance of the year on floor altogether,” Kurfirst said. “We really showed it off and hit our passes. We were all really excited to start off the meet like that.”

That the Lions scored so high on floor performing so early in the invite further emphasizes how well they did. The score was punctuated by Carling trying a new routine and Ryser and Craig adding new passes.

“It was one of the best floor routines from Michelle. She got her connections. She was dancing it up a little bit. The tumbling was right on,” Karubas said. “Kelsy, as always, the epitome of consistency, is having more fun with her dance. Her tumbling is really high and tight, and Katie had one of the best floor routines I’ve seen in a while.”

Cozza enjoyed another triumph on uneven bars as she won the title by .05

over Prairie Ridge's Rachael Underwood (9.65). Kurfirst tied for third (9.6) with Prairie Ridge's Riley Mahoney, and Carling tied for seventh (9.3), McGann tied for 12th (9.1) and Lyons tied for 23rd (8.7), all with season-high scores.

Cozza dusted her previous best of 9.45 and was only disappointed that she had to make an impromptu, but fluid, change to a lesser skill during her routine.

"That (first place) was exciting. I didn't see that coming. My routine was very clean. It went how I wanted to go. I didn't have any mess-ups in it," Cozza said. "All of our bars routines were actually really clean. It was nice to see our winter break work pay off for that."

On vault, Kurfirst (9.65) and Cozza (9.6) were fifth and sixth, Carling tied for eighth (9.45), Craig tied for 18th (9.1) and Lancaster was 21st (9.0). Even with falls on beam, Craig tied for eighth (8.95), Carling was 11th (8.925), Kurfirst tied for 12th (8.9) and Cozza was 19th (8.75).

Plenty has happened to the LT lineup since its last meet Dec. 17 and two weeks of skills training over winter break. One major change is Carling going from strictly beam and floor to all-around. Because she underwent labrum surgery at the end of last club season, Carling and Karubas went into the season thinking she probably would only contribute on a couple of events.

"Honestly, I didn't think I was going to be able to do (all-around) by now, but it worked out well so we just decided to try it and it worked out pretty well," Carling said. "It was definitely something new, a new mindset, but I liked it and I think it's going to work out well. I'm going to keep trying and get even better at it."

“We knew coming into the season, she might not ever swing bars, and it was, ‘Let’s try a kip today. (Then) let’s try two kips,’ and if we could stack the progression safely and slowly,” Karubas said. “She did a routine yesterday and looked good and we went with it. We figured the sooner we could get her into all-around, the better.”

Ryser had her best overall meet so far. After a slow start to the season, partly because of a late start after qualifying for the state meet in diving, Ryser is becoming a key contributor early in the team’s performance lineup.

“It was more I just had to get into the right mindset and start working harder and smarter mainly so I could reduce injuries,” Ryser said. “I’m close to where I want to be. There’s always stuff that I can improve on and I’m always going to want more out of my gymnastics.”

“She’s such a strong lead-in person. She’s realizing her value to the mentality to the rest of the girls,” Karubas said. “She’s such a beautiful, phenomenal gymnast. She thrives on competition. She’s just really risen to the occasion so I’m very pleased and we’re going to throw some more at her soon.”

Lancaster got vault started on the right foot by landing both of her pike Tsukaharas. Although shy of her 9.5 at the LT Invite Dec. 14, Lancaster also took a step forward toward consistency.

“One of my goals this season was to land two of my vaults in competition. I accomplished that today so I was proud of myself,” Lancaster said. “I feel like they have been (improving). I made the corrections made by my

coaches, and that really helped.”

Just before winter break, Prairie Ridge scored a then state-best 149.95 in a Dec. 21 dual at Libertyville. The Wolves put out their best lineup at Lake Forest with sophomores Mahoney (38.35) and Underwood (37.975) finishing 1-2 in the all-around. Mahoney’s 9.45 won beam.

This was the first time this season Underwood competed all-around and only the second for Mahoney. Prairie Ridge coach Lee Battaglia said that they probably will not compete all-around again until regionals to help them rest and train for Level 10 club competition after the high-school season.

Underwood was third in all-around at state last year behind two seniors, and Mahoney was sixth behind another graduated senior and fifth-place Carmel senior Lauren Feely, the two-time defending state beam champion.

On vault at Lake Forest, Feely (9.85) and senior Sarah Cohen-Smith (9.8), the defending state champion, finished 1-2. Cohen-Smith (37.625) and Feely (37.25) were fifth and sixth in all-around.

“I told the girls, ‘Forget about Carmel does, what Lyons does. We have no control over what they do. Focus on what you do and that’s it,’ ” Battaglia said. “We want them to hit, but we also want to hit. We want to beat them at their best day. Obviously, that would be the ultimate.

“Lyons is a tough team. I did not know they were that good, a very, very good team. Right now, at this point, as I look at them, I’d say they’re better than us.”

Battaglia graded his team’s performance a B-plus. He mostly was

disappointed in that all four of his first performers on events missed their routines.

“Our first person is a solid 9. That’s the start. When the first person misses, that puts a lot of pressure on the next four,” Battaglia said. “On beam, we had a lot of problems. The positive was that we won, but the downfall was those first four people, and that surprised me. (Beforehand) I would have said impossible.”

The Lions know that a state championship is a possibility, but there’s still a lot of gymnastics left. LT will get another strong test Saturday, Jan. 12, at Fremd’s Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational. The host Vikings have the third highest season-best score at 148.55, almost three points higher than No. 4 Lake Forest’s 145.80.

“I’m a bit superstitious and I don’t put the cart before the horse,” Karubas said. “The thought has crossed my mind. This team deserves it more than any other team I’ve ever worked with -- the sacrifice, the dedication, the work ethic -- but anything can happen on any given day. We just have to work very smart, be very clever in our training and in our competition.”