

Lyons Township juniors Michelle Cozza and Katie Carling have spent the past few years at the Hinsdale Central Sectional sitting in the upstairs stands as spectators as their older sisters competed for the Lions.

“We’ve been doing that for a while,” Carling said. “Catherine (Cozza competed for LT) was a year before Kristi (Carling, my sister). She’s a senior in college now so it’s been a while. Ever since then we’ve been talking about it.”

Now it’s finally their turn.

On Wednesday, they helped the Lions advance impressively as they won the LT Regional in La Grange with a season-high 149.775 points – the highest regional score posted by any team in the state.

The Lions, the No. 1 seed in the Hinsdale Central Sectional, are expected to automatically advance to the eight-team state meet by winning the sectional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 6, in Hinsdale.

Cozza’s sisters, Catherine and Carolyn, and Carling’s sister are among the several Lions who have competed for LT at sectionals and state the past few seasons.

Carolyn Cozza, the youngest of the older sibling trio, graduated in 2011. As sophomores, Cozza and Carling were in their familiar spot at sectionals last year as LT prevailed and went on to place sixth at state. They both joined the program for the first time this year.

“I always imagined our sisters (competing) and I see how much fun they had and it’s so cool that we’re finally doing it,” Cozza said. “I’m just excited to

get to the big meets, sectionals and state.”

LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst won all-around (38.10) and uneven bars (9.6), Carling won balance beam (9.7) and floor exercise (9.625) and Cozza and Kurfirst shared the vault title (9.65).

Kurfirst, Cozza, Carling, seniors Maren Craig and Jessica Lyons, junior Alyssa Lancaster and sophomores Olivia McGann and Kelly Ryser all advanced to sectionals as individuals either individually with top-five regional finishes or at-large. All 20 of the Lions’ individual routines and both all-arounders advanced.

“I think it was our best meet (so far),” Cozza said.

“It was really rewarding. We’ve worked so hard this season and to have it add up after an important meet, it felt really good. We didn’t make a big deal about (the 149.775). We’ve been more focused on our routines than the scores.”

The Lions are entering sectionals with plenty of momentum from their final home meet of the season. They surpassed their previous best score of 149.675 at the Lake Forest Invite Jan. 5 with a solid, collective effort.

They had no season-high team event scores, although impressive ones for vault (38.075), floor (37.55), beam (37.35) and uneven bars (36.80). The only individual season-bests came from Carling’s beam victory and McGann’s third-place 9.3 on uneven bars.

Still, LT coach Kari Karubas’ normal response after every meet still held true.

“(We had) three falls. Still much room for improvement,” Karubas said.

“Katie Carling had an excellent evening. The entire beam lineup rocked. We also had exceptional performances from Kelsy Kurfirst and Michelle Cozza.”

LT swept the top two spots in all-around with Kurfirst and Cozza (37.70) and were among the top four spots on every event.

On beam, Carling, Kurfirst (9.3), Craig (9.2) and Cozza (9.15) were first through fourth, and Ryser (8.8) was sixth. Carling led a great floor night, in which she, Kurfirst (9.55) and Cozza (9.5) were 1-2-3 with Lyons (8.875) sharing fourth and Craig (8.8) seventh.

The beam title and score was especially rewarding for Carling because she suffered a multi-fall nightmare at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Saturday at Glenbard West.

“It was really rewarding. I was feeling confident so it went well,” Carling said. “I definitely learned from (conference), just the fact that I need to go up and be more confident. On Saturday, I was thinking a million. I just have to go up and do what I need to do.”

Confidence and consistency carried Cozza to a great meet where she barely missed her season-high all-around of 37.775. Cozza and Kurfirst’s co-title on vault was followed by Carling (9.425) and Craig (9.35) in third and fourth and Lancaster (8.8) tying for sixth.

On uneven bars, Cozza bounced back from a rough routine at the Silver Meet to finish a strong second (9.4) to Kurfirst, the defending state co-champion in the event. McGann (9.3) was third, Lyons (8.5) tied for fourth and Ryser (8.2) was sixth.

"I just felt really consistent the entire meet and felt good going to each event, hitting and just bringing it to the next event and just kept going with it," Cozza said. "We all had really good energy because it was a home meet."

That little extra push made the difference for McGann as well on uneven bars. She came out of her blind change into a solid handstand. She also landed her double back dismount that she missed at the Silver Meet.

"I was a little frustrated the last meet. I don't really know what happened, but I was really focused on that (double back)," McGann said. "In the past few meets, I've been a little shy of the handstand so I haven't gotten the bonus. It was overall a good routine."

At sectionals, none of the other five qualifying teams broke 140 with the highest scores coming from No. 4-seed Oswego co-op (139.925) and No. 6 Lincoln-Way co-op (139.175) at Saturday's Oswego Regional. No. 2 Hinsdale Central (138.65), No. 3 Naperville North (137.925) and No. 5 Neuqua Valley (135.20) also advanced.

Since scores don't carry over from regionals, the Lions will start from scratch Wednesday, but they should benefit from their overall approach and execution during regionals, regardless of how well they were performing.

"I think we were (aware), but I also think we tried to stay in the zone, keep it going and at least have fun with it. I think we pulled that off really well," Carling said. "We all hit our beam routines, 5 for 5. We were all happy about that, but we always say there's room for improvement. We still have stuff to take out of it."

Lancaster hopes to do her part in the quest for the perfect meet. She

returned to the lineup on vault at regionals but was unable to land either one of her pike Tsukaharas, although her second one resulted in her putting her hands down as she fell forward.

“I was real frustrated because I didn’t land it, and I would have had a really good score if I did,” said Lancaster, whose season high is 9.45. “My goal is to land it at sectionals and state because I know that I’m capable. If I just make the corrections the coaches tell me, I know I can do it and get a high score.”