

Senior Maren Craig and her Lyons Township girls gymnastics teammates are a group of battlers.

On Saturday, they were tested as survivors.

After a rough and even dangerous start on the uneven parallel bars with falls on three of their five dismounts, the Lions could have crumbled. Instead, they gained momentum with each routine and won the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet at Glenbard West with 148.25 points to secure an outright conference title.

"We did a really good job, kind of bouncing back right after bars and vault. We're proud that we did that," Craig said.

"I don't even know what happened to us in the beginning. I think that it was just a little fluke. We were thinking too much into what we were doing, every little thing. Warmups might not have gone exactly how we planned. I think that was just kind of in our heads for the beginning of competition and also just that it was conference and most of our team hasn't really been to conference before."

Sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst defended her conference title on vault (9.75) with junior Michelle Cozza (9.65) right next to her in second. Kurfirst also was second in all-around (37.525) and on balance beam (9.525) with Cozza tying for third (9.475). Junior Katie Carling tied for second on floor exercise (9.55).

Craig and senior Jessica Lyons also had top-five finishes, and sophomores Olivia McGann and Kelly Ryser had top-10 finishes.

Even after their start, the Lions finished comfortably ahead of Glenbard West (145.40), which posted its second-highest score of the season. After a 35.50 team score on uneven bars, which was second to the Hilltoppers' 35.95,

LT had the highest team scores on vault (37.70), floor (37.575) and beam

(37.475), where they counted no falls and missed its season high by .475.

"Rebounding after the bars (was the highlight), being able to finish after kind of four train-wrecked routines," LT coach Kari Karubas said. "To go to vault as a team and be OK and then go to floor and get better and then go to beam and get better, I'm really proud of them."

The Lions have their sights on another state berth – and a top-three state trophy. That journey begins with the LT Regional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 30, in La Grange. The Lions should win their eighth consecutive regional to advance to the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 6.

The overall Silver title is a 50-50 combination of dual standings and Silver standings, and Saturday marked the first conference title for all of the Lions.

Craig, a third-year team member, is the only LT gymnast with more than two seasons of varsity experience. Five of LT's eight varsity members (Cozza, Carling, Lyons, McGann and junior Alyssa Lancaster) are in their first year of high-school competition.

Hinsdale Central won the Silver title in 2011 and Glenbard West captured its first outright Silver championship last year.

"It feels good (to win) because it just kind of gives us a confidence boost going into regionals, sectionals," Craig said.

The Lions did need some words of encouragement Saturday, some of them loud ones after uneven bars. Because they were the first team on vault for the second rotation, Karubas had to wait until after two events to vocally help her athletes regroup.

"I wish I wouldn't have had to yell so much between vault and floor because it's not the side of me that I enjoy," Karubas said. "They needed to be checked, though, because I was afraid of injury. Their heads were all over

the place. We needed to bring it in. It needed to be something drastic so I yelled.”

At last year’s Silver Meet, Kurfirst won all-around and every event but beam. On Saturday, she finished just behind Glenbard West sophomore Mackenzie O’Keefe, who broke her school all-around record with a 38.125 and won uneven bars (career-high 9.6), floor (9.575) and beam (9.55).

Kurfirst is the defending co-state champion on uneven bars. She fell on her new half-in, half-out dismount that she tried for the first time in a meet, one of three fallen LT dismounts on the event. Her 9.1 still earned fourth place.

Kurfirst later fell on floor trying to land the double back flip on her first pass.

”I’m glad that I at least tried (the half-in, half-out),” Kurfirst said.

”Yeah, I’m disappointed, but I think I can turn it around. We’ve got 19 days to state, if we make it there. It’s more of a learning experience. This is definitely what (Karubas) emphasized. This is a meet where we really learned a lot.”

Craig, who does not compete on uneven bars, started the resurgence on vault with LT’s first 9.0, a 9.2 that earned fifth place. That was followed by Carling (9.1, tied for 6th), Cozza and Kurfirst.

”I think we all just kind of needed to bring the tenths back from bars on the other events,” Craig said.

Craig has tried her hardest for this season to be a special one, even though she has had a history of back troubles. This past fall, she did not compete in diving for the first time to help her prepare for gymnastics.

Craig had three fifth-place finishes Saturday. She also was fifth on beam (9.45) and floor (9.375), where she added a new pass for the second time over the past three weeks.

"Every time we go to practice, we try to reel her back," Karubas said. "She competes and you wouldn't think she was in any pain. That's a good competitor."

Carling also continues to strive after recently injuring her hand. She shined again on floor with a 9.55 that finished only behind O'Keefe.

"(The hand hurts me during floor) a little bit but then adrenaline kicked in and I just went for it and it turned out well," Carling said.

Actually it turned out really well. Carling was a last-minute addition on floor and vault Saturday after spending the week basically practicing only on beam. Carling, who became an all-rounder for the first time earlier this month, still hopes to return to uneven bars.

"Yesterday, I tried a floor routine and (Karubas) was like, 'You can go in,' today on the bus," Carling said. "I was like, 'Can I warm up vault?' And she was like, 'Sure,' so I just pulled that vault and floor routine out, which is weird because all I've been doing is beam and I fell twice on that. What are you going to do? It's beam."

Carling was among five 9s on floor for the Lions. Cozza (9.5) and Craig were fourth and fifth and Kurfirst and Lyons (9.15) tied for seventh.

Lyons, who has recently joined the floor lineup, not only scored 9s in both of her events but both were season highs.

Lyons' 9.075 for fifth from the leadoff spot was among the few highlights on uneven bars. McGann tied for eighth (8.8), and Ryser was 14th (8.525).

"That was very nice to see (two 9s)," Lyons said. "I felt really great going into today. I just felt like my warmups were phenomenal so I felt really good going into the meet."

Ryser started the beam set well with a ninth-place 9.025. LT, which also

competed last on beam at its last two invites, very well could be finishing on beam at the state meet.

"Sometimes beam tends to leave us with a bad taste in our mouths in the past, but today it felt really good because we were able to finish strong and kind of put behind the other mistakes we made," Kurfirst said.

"I think we were able to turn that frustration into motivation. We were all so frustrated and mad at ourselves we decided we didn't want to have that feeling again so that's why we turned it around."

Kurfirst hopes to taste latter success from her diet of frustration Saturday. Cozza and Kurfirst have been a great 1-2 combination of double backs on floor since the start of the season so Kurfirst's fall might be a blessing in disguise.

"Now we've got time to make sure that doesn't happen when it really, really matters," Karubas said. "I'm glad it happened here. It's a curse today but a good thing tomorrow."

"That was just kind of a miscalculation on my part," Kurfirst said. "It's really frustrating because it was a good double back and I just kind of opened and found the ground. I'll fix it next time."