

Lyons Township junior Michelle Cozza had conquered the balance beam so well that she earned one of her three individual berths on the event for the finals of the girls gymnastics state meet Saturday at Palatine High School.

“Beam is where I struggled the most in the beginning of the season so that’s where I’m most proud of (my progress),” Cozza said. “There’s where we work the hardest, too, (as a team).”

In probably the most important beam routine as a gymnast, Cozza gave one last strong performance. Her 9.375 tied for sixth place and just missed earning her a fourth all-state medal.

The performance meant even more to the team.

The improvement in Cozza’s score from Friday’s preliminaries gave her and the Lions the medal they sought most – the one for the first state team championship in program history.

“It was definitely the most exciting thing this season. I was so happy, proud, so happy,” Cozza said. “I think just knowing we had the potential of winning state the whole weekend really motivated me in everything. This group of girls, I get along with everybody, and they’ve really helped me achieve more than I thought I could.”

LT’s 149.625 points edged Prairie Ridge co-op’s 149.30 for the team championship after trailing by .25 points following Friday’s preliminaries (149.30 to 149.05). Teams improve their score by the amount their event finalists improve their scores Saturday.

If that wasn’t climactic enough, LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst captured the

individual state championship on floor exercise with a 9.725 in the final routine of the meet. Kurfirst was the 2012 co-state champion on the uneven parallel bars.

“Last year, I was excited with my win on bars, but it doesn’t even compare to this. A team state championship is the one goal I had, and it’s so, so exciting to win it with these girls,” Kurfirst said.

“It’s not going to sink in for a little while, maybe once I look back at the pictures. But honestly, there’s nothing that can describe it. It’s nice to know that our hard work really paid off and it’s amazing.”

Individual state qualifiers among the top 10 scores in Friday’s event preliminaries and team competition advanced to finals. LT had a team-high eight finalists, and four of them boosted their scores Saturday by a combined .575. Prairie Ridge co-op had five finalists but none had higher scores than the preliminaries.

Otherwise, preliminary scores do not carry over to finals. The competition order of finalists is determined by a blind draw. Finals are held one event and one routine at a time in the order of vault, uneven bars, beam and floor exercise.

After LT junior Katie Carling’s improved beam score of 9.425 actually tied the Lions for first place, Cozza’s score as the 10th of 11 beam performers put them ahead for good.

“We were just really excited, but we were like, ‘We still have one event. (Prairie Ridge) still has another girl to compete,’ so we kept it together,” Carling said. “We couldn’t have done any better. I feel like we went out and did all that we could and that’s all that we asked for this season.”

Kurfirst, Cozza and Carling combined for eight individual all-state medals for top-five state finishes. Seven were top-three efforts.

Other LT state lineup members were senior Maren Craig and sophomore Olivia McGann, who also were individual event qualifiers, senior Jessica Lyons, junior Alyssa Lancaster and sophomore Kelly Ryser.

In 15 previous team appearances since the state meet began in 1977, LT earned four team trophies for top-three finishes, taking second in 1999 and 2010 and third in 2000 and 2002.

“It’s awesome. It’s the first time in history we’ve done this,” Carling said. “Words can’t even describe it right now. It’s just amazing. I know everyone’s so proud of us. It was awesome that we have all of this support.”

This is the second trophy since head coach Kari Karubas took over as head coach in the 2005-06 season. Kurfirst, Craig and Ryser were part of last year’s lineup of five all-arounders that took sixth at state with a season-best 144.475. Cozza, Carling, McGann, Lyons and Lancaster are all first-year team members but with extensive club gymnastics backgrounds.

“I’m going to wake up tomorrow and probably be able to remember a lot,” Karubas said. “I’m just floored my girls came through. They handled the pressure. They fought for everything. I can’t help but be really proud of them.

“Oh my goodness, there are no words. It’s been a long season. I feel an eager coach comes in early, stays late, puts in everything. We really all work hard. We all sacrifice. When I saw that score tied (during beam), I don’t

know, maybe that makes it all worth it and rewarding. I thought back to my girls. They had worked so hard (for this moment).”

This is believed to be the first time that a team went from second entering the event finals to win the state championship since 1991, when Addison Trail (146.10) edged Carmel (146.05) for the title by .05. The Blazers improved by .3 with just two finalists after trailing by .1 (145.90 to 145.80).

The Lions’ 1999 state team (146.575) overtook Oswego co-op (146.55) for second by .025 with a .25 improvement in the event finals but still was nearly four points behind champion Fremd (150.325). LT’s 2010 team (146.775) was second to Carmel (147.25) by .475.

“I couldn’t do it without (longtime assistant coach Courtney Douglas). I couldn’t do it without (first-year assistant coach Jaclyn Messerges),” Karubas said.

“I just remember being on the other side of this (in 2010) thinking, ‘I worked and did everything I could.’ It’s humbling then to finally be on this side of it, knowing that I did everything I could, I pushed as hard as I could, but it worked out. I’ve been (Prairie Ridge co-op coach Lee Battaglia) and other coaches before (in their spots). It’s bittersweet, but I’m going to walk into work Tuesday and please do not deny that there will be a skip in my step, knowing that I teach in a very supportive school with a lot of talent that walks through my door. But I do think with my background and history (as a Level 10 club and college gymnast for the University of Illinois) that I do know what to do with that. I’m very lucky, and very happy.”

The Lions realized the state championship officially was theirs after Prairie Ridge co-op’s last event finalist, sophomore Riley Mahoney, led off the floor

finals with a 9.4, the same score she posted Friday.

Kurfirst suffered a fall during her uneven bars routine in the finals and ended up seventh (9.075), .275 from fifth. Now on floor, she had no additional pressure on her and took full advantage.

Kurfirst exceeded her prelim score by .15 and won the state title by .05 over Carmel senior Lauren Feely (9.675), who performed just before Kurfirst. The only other LT state titles on floor came in 1983 and 1984 by Janne Klepek, who won 12 state titles overall.

“I wanted to finish the meet strong, especially for LT, and I just went out and had fun and it was awesome. It was a blast,” Kurfirst said. “I have Michelle and Katie and all of my teammates to thank. On bars, I did not have the outcome that I wanted, but then on beam to really come back and turn the meet around, I wouldn’t give anything for that, so it was incredible.”

Besides her state title, Kurfirst also was second on vault (9.725) to Feely (9.825). Cozza tied for third (9.7) with Prairie Ridge co-op sophomore Rachael Underwood.

Cozza (9.5) and Underwood tied for second on uneven bars behind Feely (9.625). Carling and Kurfirst (9.425) shared third on beam behind Stevenson sophomore Alyssa Weisberg (9.525) and Feely (9.475), the two-time defending state champion on the event.

The all-around title was determined by Friday’s preliminary scores. Kurfirst (38.55) and Underwood tied for second behind Feely (38.70). Cozza (37.625) tied for fifth with St. Edward senior Abby Madden, just .2 behind fourth-place New Trier senior Kerry Scafidi (37.825).

LT nearly advanced three more of their 12 entries on the four events to finals. With her first state individual state berth, Craig tied for 15th on beam (9.1), only .1 from the finals cut. Cozza (9.3 on floor) and McGann (9.25 on uneven bars) both tied for 14th and were just .075 and .125 from the respective finals cut for their events. Carling was 22nd on floor (9.175).

While Kurfirst had the second-highest advancing beam score (9.55) to Feely's 9.725 Friday, Carling (9.25) and Cozza (9.2) were ninth and tied for 10th and certainly had great potential to improve in the finals.

Another good possibility to improve was on uneven bars, where Cozza (9.425) shared seventh while Kurfirst had the highest score (9.625). Kurfirst shared the third-highest score on vault (9.8) and Cozza was sixth (9.7). On floor, Kurfirst shared the third-highest score (9.575) behind Feely (9.7) and Lake Forest senior Kylie Carlson (9.65), who ended up third (9.625).

“(To improve our score by) .25? That’s hard. It’s finals. It’s pressure,” Karubas said. “I was riding the line of do we just stay safe or do we have nothing to lose? Of course, I visited the routines last night, trying to figure out where exactly our flaws were. I just said, ‘If you’re going to place, if you’re going to find another tenth, you need a better connection or a better landing.’

“They were up to the challenge.”

Despite two all-state efforts on vault, the Lions’ score did not improve. On uneven bars, Cozza began the breakthrough, improving by .075 to get the Lions and their large group of fans jumping.

“After the first time that we actually advanced a little bit, we’re like, ‘Wait,

we're .075 closer. Oh my gosh, this is kind of becoming real,' " Ryser said.

Kurfirst, who performed sixth on beam, did not improve her score despite her solid routine, but Carling did as the eighth performer, sharing third with Kurfirst and knotting the team totals. It's the first time LT has had more than one all-stater on beam at the same state meet.

"Beam is my favorite event and that's what I've been wanting to do this entire season and what I've been thinking about," Carling said.

"It just feels great to be able to hit my routine at regionals, sectionals and state. I know earlier in the season, we wrote down goals and one of my goals was to hit three routines in a row, and I accomplished that goal at the end. It's just so exciting."

With her floor title, Kurfirst joined Klepek as the only LT gymnasts to earn at least four all-state medals at one state meet. Klepek went 20 for 20 in her four state meets, including firsts on everything as a junior in 1984.

"Our attitude coming into today was we have nothing to lose. We're just going to have fun out there," Kurfirst said. "It was definitely the right attitude because we hit our routines and we made it when we needed to make our beam routines."

Cozza joins 2002 graduate Erin Murphy as the only other LT gymnasts to earn three all-state medals in one meet. Murphy achieved the feat as a junior and senior with her highest finish a second in all-around to Fremd sophomore Katie Burke in 2002.

"I definitely surprised myself. I didn't know going into it individually where I

stood,” Cozza said. “Definitely (Saturday) I was much more comfortable being here. I knew that my team needed me and I was just more motivated, too. It was a little nerveracking being the only one out there (performing), but I knew the equipment really well.”

The only event on which Kurfirst wasn’t all-state this season is arguably her strongest, the uneven bars. She worked hard with Karubas on perfecting her new inside-out dismount, which she tried for the first time at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Jan. 26 but fell.

After more tweaking and practice with landing pits at a club, Kurfirst stuck the dismount at sectionals and in Friday’s preliminaries. Even after her fall during her finals routine, Kurfirst completed her routine with another solid dismount.

“Last year, Kelsy was the state bars champ and this year we had the fall, but that’s how it goes. It’s anybody’s night,” Karubas said. “I give her some serious credit for getting up and nailing her dismount. That’s really hard to do (in that situation). A lot of girls can’t turn around (like that). And then she turns around and scores a championship (on floor). Unbelievable.”

Perhaps the Lions’ gutsiest performance went relatively unnoticed Friday. On floor, LT’s second event, Craig badly sprained her right ankle during her routine and had to stop. Karubas said she initially thought the ankle was broken.

Vault was the next event. The Lions could have substituted Craig, but she insisted on competing.

“As soon as she put her foot in the ice bucket, she said, ‘I am vaulting.’ She

was going to find a way to do that vault for the team,” Karubas said.

After icing, taping and some Advil from her mother, Craig proved she was healthy enough to compete safely. She ran a couple of sprints and did back flips off a mat in the practice gym.

“I put (the ankle) in an ice bath for 10 minutes and then (the trainer) just taped it up. And there was a lot of adrenaline,” Craig said.

Craig didn’t just compete. She stuck a solid pike Tsukahara vault and received a 9.4, good enough to pass on her second attempt. The 9.4 improved LT’s team event score by .2.

“(My motivation) was kind of mixed between being a senior and kind of doing it for my team. It wasn’t too bad because of the adrenaline, but when I landed it, it kind of hurt, a lot, but it was fine,” Craig said. “I’m really proud of that, that I could come back and do that for my team. They know I would do anything for them.”

Afterwards, Craig was jokingly being called Kerri Strug by her teammates. Strug is remembered for landing her dramatic vault with an ankle injury at the 1996 Summer Olympics despite an ankle injury to clinch the gold medal for the U.S. in the team competition.

Craig, however, was able to walk from the vaulting area on her own. Craig had the ankle examined Saturday and was told it only was badly sprained.

“Jessica and I were holding the mat at the end of the (vault) runway and we almost started crying because we were so happy for her,” Ryser said. “Jess and I knew that Maren was going to do it. She’s so determined. It’s ridiculous how determined she is.”

“It was just like tears of joy and being so proud of her to be able to continue to vault after what happened on floor,” Lyons said. “I don’t think anyone else would be able to do it, but since it was Maren, I feel like any other person wouldn’t have been able to come back. You could almost see it with her because she has such a great pain tolerance.”

Lyons and Ryser also came through in the clutch. Besides scores from the 12 individual state qualifiers and Craig’s vault, Lyons provided counting scores for the team on uneven bars (8.825) and floor (8.5).

Although her beam score once again didn’t count in the team total, Ryser again set the tone for a great beam performance by going first and hitting for an 8.7.

The Lions went on to post a team-best 37.10 on beam, not even counting the .35 improvements by Cozza and Carling in the finals.

“Karubas said it was the first time she’s ever had five people stick on beam at the state meet,” Craig said.

At the Hinsdale Central Sectional, the Lions competed in the same rotation order with beam first. Ryser opened that evening with a non-counting 8.925 that began the Lions’ 37.325 set.

“I just had to tell myself to calm down, (state) was just another meet and everything went as planned. Sectionals helped me a lot to prepare for (going first for us at state),” Ryser said.

“I’m so happy. We made history today. Last year, we were sitting over there

(in the team area) and we weren't even placing. We were just sitting, watching (the team awards) and being like, 'Wow. I wish that was us. That looks cool.' And it is cool, actually. I really like it."

Despite the setback with Craig's injury, LT still finished with the fourth-best team score on floor (36.55), .775 behind Prairie Ridge. The Lions finished with the second-best score on vault (38.275), just .025 behind Prairie Ridge, and a meet-best 37.125 on uneven bars, not including Cozza's .075 boost Saturday.

Craig is the veteran of the team as a three-year varsity member. This season, she did not compete as a diver, partly because of chronic back problems and also to give her additional training time for the upcoming season.

As it turned out, even a bad ankle couldn't keep her from contributing to a state championship.

"It's just a great way to end my gymnastics career. I'm so proud of Katie and Michelle (on beam). That was probably the most amazing moment ever," Craig said.

"(Personally, vault) was, actually, not a nice way to end my senior year, but it was better than not competing at all for vault. But I know I'll remember it forever."

Lyons has overcome two stress fractures in her back. She was considering giving up club gymnastics for good when she opted to join the Lions this season. She began mostly as an uneven bars specialist before also earning a lineup spot on floor, her favorite event.

“It’s weird to say that I’m done now,” Lyons said. “It’s awesome (to win). I can’t explain in words right now. I’m just beyond excited, being my senior year and being able to finish how we did. It was a great feeling and just being with this team, I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

For Carling and Cozza, the championship was even more special since they could share their accomplishments with older sisters who also competed at state for the LT gymnastics program.

2011 graduate Carolyn Cozza was third on floor and tied for third on vault as a senior and tied for fifth on vault in 2010, her first year of high-school gymnastics. 2009 graduate Catherine Cozza competed at state three times and was a two-time individual state qualifier on vault. Both now attend the University of Illinois, where Carolyn competed for the women’s gymnastics team last season.

“I feel like Catherine and Carolyn helped me to get there. Carolyn and Catherine have helped me with my nerves and they told me I have it. I look to them (for motivation),” Michelle Cozza said.

2010 LT graduate Kristi Carling twice was a state finalist on uneven bars, taking sixth in 2010 and sharing sixth in 2009. Katie Carling couldn’t follow in her footsteps event-wise after she injured her hand practicing beam and was no longer able to compete uneven bars. In early January, Carling had just added vault and uneven bars to become an all-arounder in coming back from labrum surgery following the club season.

“All (Kristi) said to me was, ‘Don’t worry about anything. It’s so much fun.’ So I just took that and gave it my all,” Katie Carling said.

Cozza's hit routine on beam did more than just put the Lions' team score over the top. It also completed a remarkable 8 for 8 state performance for hit beam routines at state.

In the only regular-season meeting between LT and Prairie Ridge co-op at the Lake Forest Invitational Jan. 5, the Lions were in position to win and perhaps even break the documented school-record score of 150.125, which was achieved Feb. 4, 2000 to win the LT Regional.

The Lions' final event was beam and the only event left to be completed. With all eyes on them, the Lions counted three falls, each an automatic .5 deduction. They still ended with a then season-high 149.675, yet they finished second to Prairie Ridge's then state-best 150.00.

"It was a mirror put up to their faces, absolutely," Karubas said. "We're always (competing) against ourselves. In the gym, they were hitting routine after routine and in duals we were hitting, but you get in a big arena and it changes."

Karubas said things finally clicked on the beam as a group beginning with regionals. The Lions had done everything possible to put themselves in position to have the kind of state meet they would be satisfied with – regardless of what place that may achieve.

"Beam has been kind of our Achilles heel throughout the season," Kurfirst said. "I'm so glad it came down to beam, and I'm so glad we beat the beam. We didn't let it beat us today. It was so amazing to finally end it like that."