

Palatine sophomore Claudia Przystal has made the most of her varsity gymnastics experience from last year.

“I learned to not think about it as much and to take it not as a stressful thing, just to have fun, and it’s got me more confident in what I do,” Przystal said.

“I feel more confident and not stressed out as much. (I enjoy) working with my team and stuff. I love the sport with them.”

Przystal and the Pirates have had a stressful, but they had another strong performance at Fremd’s Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational Saturday, Jan. 12. Their 137.00 points earned fourth out of 10 teams behind Lyons Township (148.525), Fremd (147.80) and St. Charles co-op (142.425).

Senior Abby Alden (35.70) and Przystal (34.425) were sixth and seventh in all-around.

Przystal was seventh on balance beam (8.9) with Alden ninth (8.75) and sophomore Andrea Ori 10th (8.725). Alden also was ninth on the uneven parallel bars (9.0) and had team-high scores of 9.15 on vault for 12th and 8.8 on floor exercise to tie for 19th.

The Pirates competed with senior all-arounder Nicole Kuksuk, who injured her right shoulder during the Mid-Suburban League crossover triangular victory over host Elk Grove and Wheeling with 135.85 points Wednesday, Jan. 9.

“It’s hard to see Nicole hurt again, but I think we’re all pulling together and making up for it,” Alden said.

The invite allows six competitors per event, rather than the usual five, with the four highest scores still counting toward the team total. Sophomore Morgan Anderson (32.05), senior Megan Hedstrom (31.15) and sophomore Cindy Feliciano (28.35) also competed as all-arounders, and Ori competed on everything but uneven bars.

“We’re all right. We’ll take a 137 going into finals without a (complete) lineup. Hopefully, (Kuksuk) can come back and help us out,” Palatine coach Terry Theobald said. “We’re trying some new stuff. This meet doesn’t matter for seeding or anything. It was a good day, going across town and all of that.”

This also allowed another regular-season meeting with friendly rivals Fremd. Before the postseason, they usually see each other only once in their MSL triangular meet. It also was one more chance for the Pirates to compete before a long layoff until the MSL Meet at 6 p.m. Jan. 25 at Palatine.

“I love competing with Fremd just because I know everyone and we’re like a family. It’s a lot of fun,” Alden said.

Against Fremd and Schaumburg at the Pirates’ home triangular on Senior Night Dec. 11, Kuksuk made her season debut after dislocating her left elbow one day before Thanksgiving. On Jan. 5, she competed as an all-arounder for the first time at the Naperville North Invitational.

At Elk Grove during floor, the Pirates’ second event, Kuksuk experienced a sharp pain near the end of her routine.

Kuksuk suffered a subluxation, similar to a dislocation but more of a

temporary and partial situation. Kuksuk said her shoulder joint popped out and back in. She still scored a first-place 9.4 on floor after a second-place 8.8 on beam.

“In the air I heard it, felt it. It was weird and then I had a full and a half turn at the end of my routines so I did it with one arm up really weird,” Kuksuk said. “I’m just icing (now). That seems to be my best friend.”

Kuksuk remains confident that she can return to the lineup to compete on at least a couple of events at the MSL Meet. The Palatine Regional is Jan. 30, exactly three weeks after her latest injury occurred.

“She can raise her arm so it’s not devastating,” Theobald said. “She came back after the elbow (injury). They said six to eight weeks and she was back in two.”

“I’m just crossing my fingers and everything. It’s never ending with this sport,” Kuksuk said. “Maybe it’s because I was overcompensating on (my healthy) arm, elbow. This arm couldn’t withstand the amount of weight I was putting on it.”

On Dec. 11, Przystal also enjoyed her highest-scoring meet of the season, going 36.20 in all-around with season-high scores on vault (9.2), beam (9.05) and uneven bars (8.9). She followed with a season-high 9.275 on floor Dec. 15 at the Palatine Invite.

Her higher scores, and the ability to do it meet in and meet out, has helped the Pirates score higher than most expected during Kuksuk’s recovery.

“She’s improved a lot,” Alden said. “She’s a lot more consistent on

everything and she's more calm about meets. I think it takes a while to just get used to the whole high school meet and just competing so I think this year she's learning a lot more about how to compete."

At Fremd, Przystal was excited to finish a team-best seventh on beam with an 8.9. She also tied for 17th on vault (8.9) and was 20th on the uneven bars (8.425).

"It's the first time I actually felt confident (on beam) and stuck my routine so it was the highlight for me," Przystal said.

Even without Kuksuk, the Pirates once again were strong on beam with the third-highest team score (34.625) behind Fremd (36.40) and LT (35.575).

While Przystal, Alden and Ori finished among the top 10, Anderson tied for 24th with a season-best 8.725. Ori also was 13th on vault (9.1) and tied for 26th on floor (8.5). Ori's scores on beam and vault both were season bests, and Anderson also tied her season best on floor with a 7.8.

Alden would have challenged LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst (9.35) for the beam title if not for a fall.

"It's OK. You win some, you lose some," Alden said. "We've been working really hard on beam and we've been focusing on sticking and not just doing routines. We have to make sure we stick them now and that helps a lot."

On Jan. 9, the Pirates' 135.85 easily defeated Elk Grove (123.95) and Wheeling (119.25).

Besides Kuksuk's top-two finishes, Alden won all-around (36.10), beam (9.3)

and uneven bars (9.1) and was third on floor (9.0) and vault (8.7).

Przystal was second on uneven bars (8.65) and fourth on beam (7.6).

Hedstrom was fourth on vault (8.55) and uneven bars (8.15) and fifth on

floor (8.4), Ori was fourth on floor (8.65) and fifth on vault (8.5) and

Anderson was fifth on uneven bars (7.65). Feliciano, the Pirates' only other

all-arounder (29.20) and tied for sixth on uneven bars (7.4) by tying her

season high. Her scores on vault (8.0), floor (7.2) and beam (6.6) also are

season best on varsity.