

When Palatine senior Nicole Kuksuk hyperextended her elbow the day before Thanksgiving, she initially was expected to be sidelined for six to eight weeks.

On Monday, the day before the Pirates' Senior Night home meet, Kuksuk was elated to receive medical clearance to return to practice on balance beam.

"She hits a beam routine and only does a flip-flop with her hand. She comes over and she's all jumping up and down," Palatine coach Terry Theobald said. "She said, 'Can I be in the meet tomorrow?' I said, 'You show me five (hit) beam routines, and I'll think about it.'

"She stayed for 40 minutes and hit five beam routines."

With her one performance, Kuksuk joined the Pirates' other four seniors in the Mid-Suburban League West Division home triangular Tuesday against rival Fremd and Schaumburg. Palatine scored a season-best 140.40 points, but they were beaten by the Vikings (148.50) and Saxons (141.55), who also had season bests.

All-arounders Abby Alden and Megan Hedstrom also competed for the varsity. All-arounder Emily Judson and Rachel Shenfeld competed on the junior varsity level.

Kuksuk, the Pirates' final competitor on beam, contributed an 8.55.

"My second day back. It was (great to compete), especially here at our home court," Kuksuk said. "(My injuries have) been piling up, but it's my senior year so you've got to just not think about it and just do it."

Alden won all-around (37.15) with sophomore Claudia Przystal third (36.20). Alden won beam (9.4), tied for second on floor (9.35), was third on vault (9.3) and tied for fifth on uneven bars (9.1). Przystal tied for fourth on vault (9.2) and beam (9.05) and tied for fifth on floor (9.05).

Hedstrom added a 32.60 all-around total. Sophomores Andrea Ori (vault, beam, floor) and Morgan Anderson (vault, uneven bars, floor) each competed on three events. Sophomore Cindy Feliciano, just promoted to the varsity, competed on uneven bars.

The Pirates will get another good test when they play host to their eight-team Palatine Invitational at 11 a.m. Saturday. The field includes state-meet contender Prospect, Glenbrook South, Libertyville, Naperville North, South Elgin/Bartlett/Streamwood co-op, Wheeling and York.

Palatine's scores Tuesday on vault (36.00), floor (35.90), beam (34.80) and uneven bars (33.70) beat or equaled team totals from its first two meets.

"We're nowhere near where we need to be," Theobald said. "We're going in the right direction, there's no doubt. We're trying to keep them safe. We haven't been pushing them at all. It'll come around when it's ready."

The Pirates have plenty of success of their minds especially after another great finish in the 2012 season, and they realize it's going to take time. Last season, the Pirates finished with a flurry, surpassing the 140 mark for the first time Jan. 11 followed by their three highest scores at the MSL Meet (140.70), in winning the Palatine Regional (140.85) and the Lake Park Sectional (141.35) with the 15th highest sectional score in the state.

Kuksuk and Alden qualified for state individually. In her third state appearance, Kuksuk was 26th on floor (9.0) and tied for 32nd on vault (9.225). She also was a sectional qualifier on floor and beam with her 9.075 at sectionals just missing the state cut of 9.125.

In her state debut, Alden tied for 13th on beam (9.125), just .075 from a spot in the finals for those among the top 10 preliminary scores. Alden also was a sectional qualifier on vault, uneven bars and floor with her 9.125 sectional score .1 shy of advancing.

Both nearly qualified for state as all-arounders, but Kuksuk (36.475) and Alden (36.35) just missed the 36.575 at-large cut.

Alden enjoyed season-high scores for everything Tuesday except her victorious beam routine.

“Personally, I’d like to make state again and then as a team I just want us to all do our best and hopefully for sectionals because I know we definitely can as a team. We just have to get there,” Alden said.

“It’s so exciting to see how good we can become. We see where we start off and then we notice how good we’ve become and how hard we’ve been practicing. It’s worth it. We know we can get there. We just have to keep going.”

Kuksuk again is providing a great example. After qualifying for state on floor as a freshman (33rd, 7.6) as the Pirates’ lone representative, she showed big-meet leadership as a sophomore.

Despite battling back problems before and during the season, she peaked

with a 37.40 in all-around at the Stevenson Sectional to qualify for state in four events and help the Pirates score a season-high 143.625. At state, Kuksuk tied for 14th on floor (9.15), .25 from a finals berth, and was 28th on beam (8.625) and tied for 31st on vault (9.275) in finishing 29th in all-around (35.725).

Unfortunately, this postseason was another tough one for Kuksuk. Her summer training was curbed because she hyperextended her knee.

“She’s a tough kid,” Theobald said. “She worked hard in rehab (for her elbow) and everything. She wanted to come back. That makes a difference.”

Kuksuk is supposed to only do skills that don’t cause pain. Theobald said she probably will remain solely on beam for the time being before cautiously adding the other events with vault being the final one. Returning to all-around by the Naperville North Invitational Jan. 5 is a possibility.

Her personal comeback very well could parallel the gradual improvement of the team.

“Right now we’re a little shaky, but I think that especially after winter break we’re going to get a lot more solid, get some new tricks, stick some more things. I think it’ll be a lot better once we get going,” Kuksuk said.

“I want us to keep following the trends that we have the last two years, where we start off kind of slow and then kind of surprise some people at the end. Personally, I’d like to make it to state again, overcome this injury.”

Przystal and Hedstrom also return from last year’s sectional lineup. Przystal was an individual sectional qualifier in all-around, vault, uneven bars and

beam. Hedstrom qualified on uneven bars and competed on the other three events for the team.

Assistant coach Kathy Blaheta also is back. Varsity boys gymnastics head coach Scott Hagel has returned to the program as an assistant coach. Joon Yun and Rachel Plummer are volunteer assistant coaches.

Hedstrom has received a partial softball scholarship to the University of North Dakota. She will gradually incorporate her past skills into her gymnastics routines, including giant swings on uneven bars, a full twist on floor and a pike Tsukahara vault.

Przystal already has shown significant improvement. On Tuesday, she posted season-high scores on everything but floor.

“She’s figured it out a little better this year. She’s a little more consistent,” Theobald said. “Last year, she was scary to watch. This year, she’s up there doing stuff, hitting stuff. She’s a good third all-rounder.”

The Senior Night festivities included a recent tradition – bobble head dolls given to the seniors by Theobald.

The idea first surfaced when he searched the Internet to acquire a bobble head for retiring Palatine athletic secretary Annie Hernandez. Theobald realized he could easily do the same thing for his gymnasts.

The dolls come plain to Theobald, who then paints them by hand with the appropriate hair and eye color.

“You want to give something the kids can remember,” Theobald said. “It takes a little time to do it, but I don’t mind sitting there doing them.”

Kuksuk remembered the seniors receiving bobble heads last year, but she was impressed to find out that Theobald actually painted them. Taken by surprise, Alden also was pleased with hers, although her statue's blue eyes were a little off the actual hazel color.

"I love the bobble heads. I think they're so cute and it's such a signature Terry thing to do," Alden said.