

The Palatine girls gymnastics team's annual success at the Naperville North Invitational has a tasty reward.

Afterwards, the Pirates drive about a mile west on Ogden Avenue to Portillo's and enjoy its most famous dessert.

"We get some chocolate cake on (coach Terry Theobald)," senior Nicole Kuksuk said.

Kuksuk and the Pirates tasted plenty of success at the invite Saturday, Jan. 5.

Kuksuk competed as an all-arounder for the first time this season and won balance beam as Palatine finished third of 12 teams with 138.225 points, right behind second-place Prospect (139.10) while Glenbard West (141.70) won the title for the second straight year.

Kuksuk scored a season-high 9.225 to win beam at the invite for the second year in a row. Senior Abby Alden tied for second in all-around (36.175) and had the Pirates' high score on the other three events. Alden tied for second on beam (9.125), just .1 behind Kuksuk, and was sixth on the uneven parallel bars (9.15), 12th on vault (9.075) and 15th on floor exercise (8.825).

Kuksuk's accomplishments are even more impressive considering when hyperextended her elbow the day before Thanksgiving, she initially was not projected not to return until mid-January.

"I was shooting for much later than this. We kind of figured we'd get my endurance up and get some more meet experience if I competed all-around today," Kuksuk said. "It's a little hard to get back into the swing of things. I didn't do all of my regular routines and I was not quite in shape, but I'll get

there eventually.”

She’s coming along well. The three-time state qualifier still managed 11th in the all-around with a 34.925 after taking third at the invite in 2012 with a 35.725.

Kuksuk won last year’s invite on beam with a 9.275 and she shared first on uneven bars with a 9.125. This beam victory was highlighted by the inclusion of her aerial walkover for the first time this season.

“I landed that, which was good,” Kuksuk said. “(The routine) was a little shaky, but it was fine.”

Healthy or not, the Pirates and several other teams were a little rusty in the final weekend of winter break. For Palatine, it was from focusing on improving or adding specific tricks rather than repeating routines.

“We did no routines during break. We played all new stuff, new tricks and it showed. But everyone’s in the same boat,” Theobald said. “We did all right (at the invite). We’re walking out healthy. That’s half the battle.”

The Pirates competed with four all-arounders – Alden, Kuksuk, sophomore Claudia Przystal (32.975, 18th place) and senior Megan Hedstrom (31.725, 25th). Sophomore Andrea Ori competed on three events, and sophomore Morgan Anderson competed on uneven bars.

Even with some holiday rust, Palatine had a team-best 34.625 on beam and its 34.625 on uneven bars was second to Glenbard West’s season-high 36.525. Palatine was fourth on vault (35.65) and sixth on floor (33.575).

The Pirates still scored higher than last year's second-place 137.45 to Glenbard West's 140.45 at the invite.

"We were a little shaky, but overall it was pretty good, especially on (uneven parallel bars) we really picked it up," Kuksuk said.

Kuksuk hardly looks like an injured gymnast when she performs, but she's made amazing strides. She returned to the lineup for Senior Night Dec. 11, she competed on beam after receiving medical clearance to return only the day before. In the next meet, the Palatine Invite Dec. 15, she added a conservative routine on uneven bars and scored a 9.1 on beam.

Besides her beam title at Naperville North, Kuksuk tied for 10th on uneven bars with sophomore Claudia Przystal (8.65). In her debuts on the other events, Kuksuk and was 16th on vault (8.9) and had an 8.15 on floor.

Kuksuk had problems keeping her energy level for her floor routine, but her first complete routine only was the day before. She began vaulting the day before that.

"She came back really quickly from her injury. She always bounces back easily, which is awesome," Alden said. "I was really proud of her today. I think it's amazing."

Two big reasons for Kuksuk's return are her amazing determination and the work of first-year volunteer assistant coach Rachel Plummer, also a personal trainer for Kuksuk. Still, Theobald remains cautious so that Kuksuk can be at her best for the postseason.

"I think looking how good our team is doing year (motivated me). That

makes me really want to get back in there and help out the team, get a higher score, move up in our rankings,” Kuksuk said. “It’s a little frustrating because I just want to be able to do more, but I know I’ll be there eventually. I’ve just got to give it time.”

When the injury first happened, the postseason was all Theobald and Kuksuk were worrying about. The Pirates’ last regular-season meet is Saturday, Jan. 12 at Fremd’s Mari-Rae Sopper Invitational. The Mid-Suburban League Meet is Jan. 25 at Palatine.

“She wasn’t supposed to be back until the 15th of January,” Theobald said. “She’s done the skills for years so that makes a difference. She’s a 9.5 beamer and a 9.5 vaulter. Once we get the endurance, she’ll be fine.”

In all-around, Alden finished behind Glenbard West sophomore Mackenzie O’Keefe (36.80) and shared second with Glenbard West freshman Amber Broucek. On beam, Alden (9.125) tied for second with York junior Meghan Davidson, who was seventh at state in 2012.

The Pirates’ other counting beam scores came from Ori (8.3, 19th) and Hedstrom (7.725, 27th). Ori just missed her season high of 8.6.

“I stuck the back flip so that made me really excited. I just wanted to stay on and help the team,” Ori said.

On vault, Ori was 15th (8.95) and Hedstrom tied for 21st (8.725). Przystal tied for 19th on floor (8.475), and Anderson was 24th on uneven bars (8.175) after executing giant swings for the first time in a meet.

Theobald said he began the chocolate cake tradition just prior to the last

time Palatine won at Naperville North in 2008. The Pirates' gymnasts in those days included 2007 graduate Elise Ference, now the first-year varsity head coach for Fremd.

"Definitely chocolate cake (after this invite). That's a good thing," Theobald said. "They've got to go somewhere. It's on the way home."