

Palatine senior Abby Alden can feel the difference after qualifying for her first state gymnastics meet last season on balance beam.

“It’s good experience to have from last year, the state experience on beam. It just makes me less nervous on beam and more confident so I think it shows,” Alden said.

On Saturday, Alden scored a career-high 9.5 on beam for already the second time this season. The performance gave her the event title at the 24th annual Palatine Invitational and led a great meet by the Pirates, who scored a season-high 140.875 points to finish second to Prospect’s season-high 142.125.

Senior Nicole Kuksuk and sophomores Claudia Przystal and Andrea Ori also had top-five finishes, and senior Megan Hedstrom added top-15 finishes and sophomore Morgan Anderson had top-20 finishes in the eight-team field.

Before winter break, the Pirates have one more Mid-Suburban League triangular meet at home Wednesday against Conant and Hoffman Estates. Their next meet isn’t until the Naperville North Invitational Jan. 5.

“We’re definitely going in the right direction. The kids are working hard,” Palatine coach Terry Theobald said.

“(Alden is) a senior now and she just looks like a veteran. She’s been here before and she knows what it’s about. And it shows. You know how to perform. That’s the bottom line of (state meet experience).”

Last year’s Palatine Invite proved to be a springboard for Alden. She also won the invite title on beam in 2011 with a 9.325, the same score at

sectionals that qualified her for state. She tied for 13th at state (9.125), just .075 from a spot in the finals for those among the top 10 preliminary scores.

On Saturday, Alden went out a winner in her final Palatine Invite as her 9.5 edged Prospect sophomore Maddie Larock (9.45), the all-around and uneven parallel bars champion.

“(There was) a little bit of pressure, but I realized just to take it as it comes, try not to get worried about it,” Alden said.

“It’s definitely nice (competing at home). I love the beam we always compete on. It’s going to be an emotional year, having it be my last because I’ve been doing (gymnastics) forever, but it’ll be OK.”

Alden is the invite’s first back-to-back beam champion since Naperville North’s Shannon O’Brien in 2000 and 2001. Palatine’s last multiple event invite champion was Rachel Corcoran, who won four floor titles from 2003-07.

Alden also was fourth on uneven bars (9.1), fifth on floor (9.075) and sixth on vault (9.025) in finishing third in all-around (36.70) to Larock (37.575) and Prospect senior Gianna Scala (37.25) with Przystal fourth (35.825). Scala won floor (9.775) and vault (9.625), and Larock won uneven bars with a 9.45.

The success for Alden and the team meant even more because the invite scores were from the average scores of two judges, most of them state level judges.

On Dec. 11, Palatine passed the 140-point barrier for the first time with a 140.40 in losing to Fremd and Schaumburg.

“I was just happy for the team score,” Alden said. “It’s definitely a good step forward. I think with each meet we’re getting better and better and this is just showing it.”

Last year, Palatine won the invite for the first time since 2007 but only scored 139.45 points and didn’t break the 140-point barrier until their first dual meet in January.

The Pirates had season-high team scores on beam (team-best 36.00) and uneven bars (33.825), where Kuksuk competed on a second event for the first time this season.

Prospect had the team-best scores on the other three events with 36.025 on floor, 35.825 on vault and 35.475 on uneven bars. The Pirates’ 35.35 on vault and 35.70 on floor just missed season highs of 35.00 and 35.90 from four days earlier.

“I never thought we’d have 140 (at this point). The last two meets have been 140,” Theobald said. “Beam is the killer and for us, it was awesome. We went 36. It was great for us. We’re definitely going in the right direction.”

Besides Alden, Kuksuk was third on beam (9.1), Przystal fifth (8.9), Ori seventh (8.5) and Hedstrom 11th (8.275).

A three-year state qualifier, Kuksuk continues to make amazing progress after hyperextending her elbow the day before Thanksgiving.

Kuksuk initially was supposed to be out six to eight weeks, but she received medical clearance to attempt a return to practice Dec. 10. She competed the

next day on beam on Senior Night.

Falling twice on her leap turn and aerial in that routine, Kuksuk had no falls Saturday, although she slightly grabbed the beam to fight off a fall on her aerial, a .3 deduction according to Kuksuk. This time, her leap turn was perfect.

“I’ve been working that at practice every day. I was like, ‘I’m not falling on this again,’ ” Kuksuk said. “I was really shaky (Dec. 11). I wasn’t as shaky now. Hopefully it’ll just keep getting better.”

Even Kuksuk’s watered down uneven bars routine still managed a 10th-place 8.375. She said she hopes to regain her floor routine and vault over winter break as well as her complete skills on beam and uneven bars. The Naperville North Invite could be her possible return to all-around, if not at least three events.

“She wasn’t supposed to be back until the middle of January,” Theobald said. “She’s a 9.5 vaulter when she’s on, and floor. (Her return has) helped us.”

Przystal improved upon her 2011 invite all-around score by two points with a strong, consistent effort. Besides beam, Przystal also was third on floor (season-high 9.275) to Scala and Larock (9.35) and seventh on vault (9.0) and uneven bars (8.65).

“Last year, she was scary to watch. This year, she’s performing and she’s stepping up,” Theobald said.

Ori also had a top performance by landing her pike Tsukahara for the first time this season to place fifth on vault with a team- and personal-best 9.075. Her beam score also was a season high, and she was ninth on floor (8.8).

Hedstrom was 10th in all-around (32.65) also was 15th on floor (8.55) and uneven bars (7.7). Anderson was 16th on uneven bars (7.55) and tied for 20th on vault (8.25).

Ori didn't practice vault for the varsity last season because she wasn't needed in the lineup. The Pirates didn't graduate much from last season, but the loss of sectional all-arounder Marissa Mallon did leave an important gap.

"Over the offseason, I worked hard, as well as everybody else and just tried to help the team this year," Ori said. "(The 9.05 vault) is exciting for me and good for the team because it adds to the score and we did really well."

With another powerful all-arounder once Kuksuk gets healthy, the Pirates continue looking for strong fourth and fifth scores. Earlier in the week, sophomore Cindy Feliciano was promoted to varsity to help bolster the score on uneven bars, probably the Pirates' weakest event.

So far, the Pirates are ahead of schedule.

"I'm pretty impressed with our team. (Scoring 142.125) – that's pretty good," Kuksuk said. "I thought they were scoring a little more fairly today. Especially having fair scores and having a high score like that (is good for us)."