

Lyons Township junior Michelle Cozza has been a regular at the season-opening Hornet Invitational, but only as a spectator.

When Cozza arrived at Hinsdale South Wednesday, this time she was taking part in the eight-team meet in her first season with the LT gymnastics team.

“(I’ve watched) both of my sisters, and even before that I would come to watch LT. It was fun finally being the one competing,” Cozza said. “I’ve always imagined myself finally being out here and it was good to finally compete.”

Cozza made it worth the wait. Cozza won vault and LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst captured all-around, the uneven parallel bars and balance beam as the Lions easily captured the team title with 141.25 points.

LT won the meet for the second time in three years by nearly eight points over second-place Hinsdale Central (133.50). Hinsdale South (131.40) edged Oswego co-op (131.325) for third.

“We were happy about that. We were all a little nervous for the first meet, but we’re happy with what got done,” said Cozza, whose 9.5 won vault by .3.

“It was really fun. I love being part of a team and it went well. I was happy.”

The Lions used seven gymnasts -- Kurfirst, senior Maren Craig and sophomore Kelly Ryser from last year’s lineup that finished sixth in state, and four making their high-school debuts, Cozza, junior Katie Carling, sophomore Olivia McGann and senior Jessica Lyons.

Kurfirst, the defending state co-champion on uneven bars, won that event (9.45) as well as beam (9.6) with the highest score posted by any gymnast on any event. Kurfirst easily won the all-around (37.60) by 1.5 points over second-place Hinsdale South freshman Maddie Nowak and also was second on vault (9.2) and floor (9.35) to Hinsdale Central senior Erin Morgan (9.55).

Fifteen of LT's 16 scores that counted toward the team total earned top-10 finishes in their respective events.

"We have room to improve on, but I think for the first meet of the season, we all did really well," Kurfirst said. "We all learned a lot about each other, too, as competitors. I think we'll get really far by the end of the season."

Cozza is hoping to follow her older sisters with LT teams that qualified for state. 2011 graduate Carolyn Cozza earned three all-state medals for top-five finishes by taking third on floor and tying for third on vault as a senior and tying for fifth on vault as a junior. 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.

For this Hornet Invite, Michelle's sisters were the ones in the stands watching her compete.

"They just told me don't let my nerves get the best of me and just to have fun. Yeah, it was fun," Cozza said.

Cozza won vault by landing her layout Yurchenko, which has a 10.0 start value, on each of her two attempts. She also tied for third on beam (9.05) and was sixth on floor (8.8) en route to taking fifth in all-around (35.30).

“(Vault) was good. Just one step (on the landing) so I was happy about that,” Cozza said.

Craig, LT’s third all-arounder, was eighth (33.45). Craig was fourth on vault (8.95), 10th on floor (8.55) and 12th on the uneven bars (8.0). McGann was seventh on vault (8.85), tied for seventh on beam (8.4) and ninth on the uneven bars (8.3), Ryser was eighth on uneven bars (8.35) and 11th on floor (8.5), and Carling was ninth on floor (8.6) and beam (8.3).

Are the newcomers making a difference? On floor, LT’s first event, Kurfirst attempted a double back flip for the first time on her first floor pass and landed it, thanks to an emotional boost when Cozza pulled off the same trick on the previous routine.

“I’m like, ‘OK. If Michelle can make it, I can make it,’ ” Kurfirst said. “I was pretty nervous going into it, Michelle Cozza and I were both nervous, but we made a promise that we’re both going to make this. We’re both going to stick it, and we did it so I couldn’t be prouder of us.”

Kurfirst and Carmel senior Lauren Feely, a two-time champion on beam, are the only underclassmen who won individual state titles last season. On uneven bars Wednesday, Kurfirst kept out one key element from her 9.6 routine that shared the state championship with graduated Amanda Quinn of Glenbard North.

“I think I did well just getting through the routine and hitting it,” Kurfirst said. “I think I’ll be able to add my half in-half out (release move) son and hopefully a toe shoot. I think I’ll get back to where I was at state and hopefully ahead of where I was, too.”

By the end of last season, the Lions went with a lineup of five all-arounders handling all 20 routines – Kurfirst, Craig, Ryser and Kalen Iffert and Ali Stuck, the only two seniors in the program last year. The Lions stayed healthy and rose to the occasion by scoring a season-best 144.475 at the state meet after their next two season-best totals won the LT Regional (144.345) and the Hinsdale Central Sectional (144.05) to automatically advance to the eight-team state field.

Last season, the Lions opened at the Hornet Invite with a second-place 135.40 to Waubonsie Valley/Metea Valley co-op's 135.55, using just four all-arounders with Craig sitting out because of injury.

Kurfirst made an immediate impact at the invite with a victorious 37.25 all-around total. She captured uneven bars and floor and took second on vault with 9.45 scores.

"I think (our depth this season is) going to help us because there's a little less pressure on us all-arounders because if someone's a little off, then someone can take her place. It's really nice to have more girls on the team, too, because they're all amazing competitors," Kurfirst said.

"I'm really hopeful for this year. Last year, (the Hornet Invite) was different because that was my first high-school meet ever so I didn't really know what to expect and didn't know what my other meets would be like. This year, I have a little more experience. I'm excited for the rest of the season. I think it will go well."