

# Local Athletes Win State Championships In Level Four Artistic Gymnastics Meet In DeKalb

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EDWARDSVILLE - A pair of gymnasts from the Artistic Gymnastics Institute in Edwardsville won Illinois state championships last weekend the Level Four Compulsory meet held in DeKalb.

Allie Chong, 11, took home a gold medal in the vault, scoring a 9.70 to win the title, while 10-year-old Kenlee Evers won the uneven bars, with a score of 9.55, and the floor exercise with a score of 9.65. In addition, Evers and Chong finished second and third respectively in the all-around competition, with Chong coming in second with a score of 38.050, missing out on first place by only a 15th of a point, and Evers was third with a score of 37.575, missing out on the title by a 175th of a point in a very close competition.

AGI president and head coach Amanda Verhaeg was very proud of her team's efforts over the weekend.

"I am," Verhaeg said in an interview, "especially with the early end of our seasons, so it was nice to see success at the end of the season, seeing how it got cut short."

The remainder of the season was cancelled after the meet over the weekend, due to the continuing concerns over the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic around the world.

The championships were the second straight that were won by both Chong and Evers, and were also the club's 49th and 50th state championships since the AGI was founded in 2015. The club has also produced four United States Artistic Gymnastics Federation national TOPs qualifiers in its five-year history.

"Kenlee was a champion last year, so she repeated, although at a more difficult level," Verhaeg said. "And Allie's another hard-working kiddo, and she repeated as well, so it was great to see them repeat their success this year."

In addition, Lilyann Thacker came in second on the balance beam with a score of 9.65, and placed sixth in the all-around, scoring 37.275. Natalie Kaiser placed sixth in the floor exercise with a season's best score of 9.25. Another teammate, Londyn Saenz, was forced out of the lineup due to illness.

Verhaeg coaches the team along with her husband Greg, and she credits the hard work put in by the gymnasts as the key to their success.

"These girls are training 20 hours a week," Verhaeg said, "and are now reaching the optional level. It's definitely the upper level of our sport."

Verhaeg also feels that her team shows a lot of promise to compete at higher levels as gymnastics becomes more popular around the country, including in college.

"I think the kids have a lot of promise to take it all the way to level 10," Verhaeg said, "or even collegiate gymnastics. There's a lot of great participation in gymnastics, and with the increase in teams at the Division-I and Division-II levels, there are more opportunities."

Verhaeg is also looking to the United States Olympic Trials, which are scheduled to be held June 25-28 at Enterprise Center in St. Louis, as an inspiration for budding gymnasts in the area.

"We'll have another world-class event that'll inspire not only our team," Verhaeg said, "but any future competitors."