

Fenwick sophomore gymnast Claire Long battled and recovered enough from her back injury that she wanted to compete all-around at the Wheaton Warrenville Regional Tuesday, Feb. 4.

When Long found out she was medically cleared for only one of the four events, balance beam, she nearly reconsidered.

"When (my doctor) first told me, I was really mad," Long said. "I was just thinking, 'You know what?' It's not really worth it to compete anything because I really wouldn't have much of a skill level."

Long decided to put together the best routine possible and push the envelope as much as she reasonably could. In her first high school postseason, it nearly was good enough to advance to sectionals.

Long's ninth-place regional score of 8.15 just missed the at-large cutoff score of 8.2 for the Wheaton Warrenville Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 11.

"I just didn't really have my hopes up at all because (coach Erica Wolf) told me the cutoff's usually an 8.35 or something around there," Long said Saturday after she was officially eliminated.

"I didn't even think, when I first hurt myself, that I'd be able to do any high school meets this whole year so it was better than I expected. At least to be able to something and getting the experience in was good. I was considering not doing it at all, but I'm glad that I did. It was nice to see how everything works in high school."

While top-five regional finishers automatically advance to sectionals as ranked qualifiers, gymnasts also can advance at-large by being among the 12 highest remaining scores from the four feed-in regionals.

Long, who competed in the first feed-in regional, still was in contention to advance until final regional Friday at Lyons Township. Long was the 14th at-large candidate.

"It sets her up nicely for the next two seasons because at least she has this to kind of fall back on. She'll know what it feels like to go to a regional meet and represent Fenwick," said Wolf, co-owner and coach at Action Gymnastics, Long's club team. "I think it says a lot for her to still want to represent her school and take pride in that."

Long returned to gymnastics this season after formerly being a Level 9 gymnast at Flying High Gymnastics but taking off her freshman year. Long will train this season for Action Gymnastics.

Long competed in one regular-season high school meet, the York Invite Feb. 25. She scored 7.35 on beam with one fall, an automatic .50 deduction, and warmed up on uneven bars. Another chance to compete in a dual at York two days later was canceled because of cold weather and not rescheduled.

"Even though my back did hurt a lot in the beginning, I didn't think it was really that bad. I thought it was something I'd be able to work through," Long said. "My back isn't constantly hurting, so it's just frustrating not being able to do the skills I want to do because I know if I do them, then it will start hurting. It's frustrating because I want to be back."

On Jan. 30, Long was evaluated by her doctor, and Long said that she still experienced slight pain in her back. The doctor told Long that she would need another four to six weeks to fully recover but could still slowly add new skills under the recommendations of her physical therapist.

After Long's initial frustration, Wolf encouraged Long to continue training and improving her beam routine. Besides being Fenwick's first gymnast in at least a few years, Long knew just the experience of competing at a high-school regional should pay off the next two seasons.

"It's nice to be able to just do something. I'm happy I did it just to see the way things go, since it's a lot different than club meets and I haven't competed for a while," Long said.

"It was nice to get the experience to kind of see how it is, versus club

meets, because regionals for club is a huge deal. I thought it would be a lot more stressful, I guess, but it's not as bad as I thought."

In less than two weeks since the York Invite and even with her physical limitations, Long was excited about how she and Wolf had increased the difficulty of her beam routine.

"I'm happy I got to upgrade things a little bit. I kind of figured out my routine yesterday and kind of went from there," Long said. "I added a front walkover, round-off. I kind of figured that out halfway through beam yesterday. And then I added a Gainer full. I'm not really allowed to do it, but I just decided to chuck it. I just add in some more jumps for bonuses."

Long still cannot perform the standing back flips on beam that she regularly used as a Level 9 gymnast for Flying High Gymnastics. Wolf added another skill to give Long a comparable requirement to her routine.

At regionals, Long cautiously handled the turn that she fell off at the York Invite but she fell later in the routine during her switch leap series.

"I'm assuming when she's fully healed, she'll want to do something with a standing back or something along those lines," Wolf said.

"My goal for her was that we had this experience now so that next year when she's in better competitive shape as far as skills, she'll feel like it's no big deal."

Long already feels as though she's made strides in adjusting to the structure of high school competition. At York, she competed with fellow Action gymnasts Skylor Hilger and Reilly Longawa, who were representing Shepard, and had to wait practically the entire meet until the fourth and final rotation to perform on beam.

Another lengthy wait happened for Long at regionals. Vault and uneven bars are performed first, followed by beam and floor. This time, Long was by herself because the gymnasts representing Shepard were assigned to a

different regional.

It was the first time Long could recall competing by herself since Level 9 club state as a seventh-grader.

"It's different. It's a lot quieter. It's nice having your teammates with you to help you get through it," Long said.

Long is looking forward to joining her Action teammates for the club season. As for now, it will be solely for training. With her physical therapy ending the final week of February, she might even be able to sneak in a meet, although probably not as an all-arounder. Long is about to be fully cleared to practice uneven bars.

"I shouldn't have anything holding me back, hopefully. I can just work towards next season, getting everything that I was hoping to add this season," Long said.

"We believe very much in the process of everything and whether the results happen right away or not, we know that she trusts her training over the next year and definitely the results will be there for next year," Wolf said. "In order to have good summer training, we can't push it now. Sometimes you've got to think long term."

-- by Bill Stone