

**Fenwick sophomore Claire Long's high school gymnastics debut at the York Invitational Jan. 25 was nearly two years in the making.**

**As she prepared for her routine only on balance beam in the 10-team invite, she had another long wait since she didn't compete until the final rotation.**

**"I kind of just thought five seconds before I hopped up there. I was like, 'All right. I have to do this. I have to hit it,' " Long said.**

**"Personally, I try not to think about the routine until the last possible second I need to do so I don't overthink it and get really stressed out about it. It didn't even feel like I was going to compete because I didn't compete the other events."**

**The beam routine was conservative for Long's skill level, but it was the first step forward in her return from a back injury just in time to compete in the IHSA state series.**

**Long scored a 7.35 with one fall to tie for 38th. She competed along with Shepard sophomore Skylor Hilger and freshman Reilly Longawa, who are club teammates with her at Action Gymnastics and are coached for high school by Erica Wolf. Hilger competed as an individual last season and qualified for state in all-around and all four events.**

**"It's nice having teammates that are going through the same thing. Especially if I were by myself, I wouldn't really know the ropes. They just kind of pull me through it," Long said.**

**"(Beam) was OK. It was just kind of doing a routine to do a routine. It was obviously very watered down. All I'm really**

**allowed to do is round offs. I'm not really allowed to do jumps on beam yet, but I just did them. I wish I didn't fall on that full turn, but otherwise it went well. You can't let a fall ruin it."**

**Long hasn't competed since she was a Level 9 club gymnast for Flying High in eighth grade. She recently joined Action, where Wolf is a co-owner and coach, and practices at Hinsdale South High School in Darien, fairly close to her home in Western Springs.**

**Long was hopeful to receive medical clearance early in the week to begin practicing more difficult skills and train all four events. Long also has progressed enough to also resume training on the uneven parallel bars, and she warmed up the event at York.**

**However, Long said that if she tried to do an uneven bars routine, she is not yet cleared to perform any dismount. Long would have had to come to a complete stop before simply letting go of the top bar or coming off with the help of a spotter.**

**"I just feel mentally I'm not really prepared for that," Long said.**

**"I'm happy to be competing again, but personally, I just feel like it's kind of embarrassing to hop up there and do things that I could do so many years ago. I wish I could do (all of my skills). It's really tempting being in the gym and wanting to do that stuff and knowing I'm not allowed to."**

**In the meantime, Wolf said the invite was simply a chance for Long to experience the differences between high school and club meets prior to the postseason and to do so with her Shepard teammates.**

**Long, Hilger and Longawa were scheduled to compete in the Glenbard West at York dual Jan. 27, but that meet was canceled when dangerously cold temperatures closed school that day, and it was never rescheduled.**

**"I'm really happy for her. She was kind of nervous before she went, but I heard her say right when she dismounted, 'Yeah, I haven't competed in over a year,' " Wolf said.**

**"I don't really know her as a competitor yet because she's new to our team and I haven't really gotten to coach her in elite yet, but I noticed after she fell she was able to recover and regain her composure really nicely. It didn't really affect her mentality throughout the rest of her routine."**

**Long received quite an introduction to the operations of high-school meets. Unlike club meets, where gymnasts warm up on an event immediately before competing on it, high school meets have the gymnasts warm up on all of their events prior to the competition.**

**As a result, it was hours between the time Long warmed up beam and performed. After her routine, she found out that she received a score deduction wearing earrings.**

**"You can have one in, but not doubles (at club meets) so I didn't know. You learn something," Long said.**

**"It's a lot different than club meets, just getting used to warm up everything, compete everything, but it's nice just getting the feel for it before the state series so at least I know how high school goes versus club. Even though I only got to compete one event, it's just nice seeing how it is."**

**Long will compete at the Wheaton Warrenville South Regional at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 4, with hopes of qualifying for the Wheaton Warrenville South Sectional Feb. 11.**

**The top five regional finishers in all-around and the four events automatically advance to sectionals as ranked qualifiers. Individuals also can advance to sectionals at-large in an event by being among the 12 highest remaining scores for non-ranked qualifiers.**

**Long will be the first Fenwick individual to compete at regionals in several years and could be the Friars' first sectional qualifier in recent memory, if ever.**

**If all goes well physically, Long will have five opportunities to advance because is determined to compete as an all-arounder.**

**"I just have to be going in every day, working hard," Long said. "I feel like I'm strong enough to do everything. I've been coming into the gym and conditioning every day, and physical therapy has been preparing me for everything gymnastics wise. I think I haven't really lost my strength too much and I'm still just as flexible."**

**-- by Bill Stone**