

Glenbard West senior Maggie Phillips immediately felt the fringe benefits from competing on more than the uneven parallel bars during Oswego's Tumble for the Troops Invitational Saturday, Dec. 28.

"Usually I'm holding mats when I'm not competing, but now I get to stand with (my teammates) so it's real fun," Phillips said.

Limited to one event to protect a back injury, Phillips added vault and balance beam to her repertoire for the first time this season and helped the Hilltoppers finish ninth with 126.85 points.

Sophomore Mia Connolly and Amanda Rosch and freshmen Cailey Cranny and Kylie Lach comprised the rest of the lineup as all-arounders. The Hilltoppers competed for the third straight meet without sophomores Amber Broucek and Sarah DeStefano.

"We don't have Sarah and Amber with us today so I just took their spot on vault and beam. I felt really good doing it so I think I'm going to keep doing them," Phillips said.

"Honestly, it's a lot easier (working multiple events) because I can focus on that one event rather than spending the whole meet trying to focus on one routine on bars. It keeps me distracted from bars, which really helps me focus more on what I'm doing."

The invite was in the middle of the Hilltoppers' winter break. Their next meet is at home against defending state champion Lyons Township Wednesday, Jan. 8.

This was their first meet with a regular scoring format since the Conant Invite Dec. 14. They competed at Wheaton Warrenville South's Illinois Best Invite Dec. 21, but that only allowed an all-arounder and one specialist per event.

"I thought (Saturday) was a solid meet. I thought they did a fine job," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said. "We're looking cleaner. We're looking more consistent, which is really all you can ask for at this time of year."

The additional work appeared to work for Phillips. If not for her previous

events, Phillips would have waited until the final rotation to compete on uneven bars.

Phillips delivered an 8.775 to finish seventh, the Hilltoppers' lone top-10 finish on any event. Phillips had a fall on beam but still had a counting 7.55 and her half on, half off vault earned a team-high 8.45 to tie for 25th.

Any possible additions to the lineup competed in the invite's junior-varsity level the previous day. Glenbard West's JV finished second (114.025) with junior Catherine Daflucas taking second on beam (8.0).

"(Phillips) knew she could fill in as a fifth kid and we're taking it easy with her at practice. We're not overdoing the training, but just enough to have her ready and prepared to compete for us," Fuentes said. "She had a fall on beam, but still a good outing for not having competed all year and then a nice vault score for us. And she made her bars routine, which was good because she's had a couple of misses the last two meets so that was good for her, good to get her on the right track."

Connolly had a team-high 32.40 in all-around to tie for 21st, followed by Cranny (30.70), Lach (30.10) and Rosch (28.525).

Connolly had team-high scores on beam (8.175, 20th) and floor exercise (8.5, 22nd) and tied for 21st on uneven bars (7.775). Cranny tied for 25th on beam (7.75).

Even as the first team to compete on beam, the Hilltoppers had the seventh-highest event score (31.15). They counted just one fall as Connolly, Cranny and Lach (7.675) stayed on.

Several Hilltoppers also were excited about their performances on floor (31.90) with only four entries. Connolly was followed by Rosch (8.125) and Lach (7.8) with season-high event scores and Cranny (7.475).

"I thought floor and beam were good. They continue to impress me on beam," Fuentes said. "When you only have to count one fall, the name of the game is staying on and they're really learning how to do that. It's been maybe two or

three meets in a row where those three have stuck on beam. Sometimes that's the hardest thing to teach, to stay on the beam. It's really an attitude and they're learning how to do that."

While Phillips basically specialized on the uneven bars last season, but there was hope of her adding events for a much more inexperienced lineup this season, and for her senior year. However, a chronic back problem not only has limited her training for the uneven bars on that event, much less the other three.

She's using a prescription of lidocaine patches to ease the back pain. She also has a stress fracture in her right foot dating back to the 2012 Conant Invite, when she flew off the uneven bars during warmups.

"I keep pounding and vaulting on (my foot) so it's not going to heal," Phillips said. "I just started doing beam like two weeks ago, and I only vault like maybe three times twice a week.

"I can't take any hard landings. I can't go backwards on the beam. I used to Tsuk (on vault), but I can't do that anymore because the landing hurts my back. It sucks because I really like doing Tsuks. I really like doing beam. I'm doing as much as I can and as much as my body's letting me."

Rosch has been battling a hip injury the past month but she continues to have a strong first varsity season. She just recently returned to competing on uneven bars.

She competed at the invite after opting to miss another family trip to California and staying behind with her mother.

"I was supposed to be on some sort of physical rest for four to six weeks but I told my doctor I want to finish gym season first," Rosch said. "I think we have two weeks between season's end and summer practice. I think I'm going to use those two weeks to my advantage."

Rosch's best performance at the invite came on floor, especially considering that she just had a rough start on beam.

"I just kind of put everything I had into floor. I had to make up for my beam routine. I had to come back," Rosch said. "Actually it was a watered-down (floor) routine so it was kind of easy to do. I haven't been able to do as much but I think my jumps have improved a lot."

Other Hilltoppers also have reaped the benefits of their varsity opportunities. Cranny and Lach have become all-around regulars as freshmen and have been gaining consistency through much more competition than their days in club.

"It's a lot (of competition) compared to last year. I was in the GIJO league (at GymNasti), which was like five meets, but this is like 20 meets so I'm not used to it," Lach said.

This was among Lach's best meets of the season. Besides staying on beam, Lach beat previous season-high scores of 7.75 on floor and 7.15 on uneven bars (7.25) from the Conant Invite.

"Just the team cheering everyone on (was the highlight). It really helped us out a lot," Lach said.

"I was pleased with my floor routine. It was like, 'Whoa.' I made everything. It's been going up so it's been good. Making my beam routine was really surprising because it was like, 'Oh my gosh.' It was just crazy. (The goal was) not being wiggly and making everything and hopefully getting a good score."

Cranny just missed two season-high scores at Oswego. Cranny said she was most pleased with her half on-half off vault, which was just shy of her 8.4 season high. Her beam score just missed her 7.8 season high.

"I think we're working on adding more difficulty, but I have to keep nailing my routines so I can add more difficult and things," Cranny said. "I need to get better at bars, just pointing my toes and stuff, and then I just need to keep working on everything, just keep getting better as time goes on."

Connolly is showing the benefits of her training and meet experience on the

varsity as a freshman.

Beam, often a hindrance last season, arguably has become her strongest event. Her floor score was her highest since the Nov. 26 season opener.

"(My consistency) is a lot better than last year I'd have to say," Connolly said. "I have been sticking a lot of routines in practice and just working on refining my skills and it's really shown up in the meets.

"I'm trying to add a couple of new skills into my routines and I need to get them so I can add bonus and just better quality to my routines. One of my goals is definitely to make my vault a lot better. I'm hoping to get a like a mid-8. On beam, I just have to add a few new things in and then that should be good. I haven't incorporated them yet."

Connolly isn't alone. The Hilltoppers are collectively working on refining skills to add to their routines, but Fuentes said there really is no guarantee they will appear in their first meets of 2014.

"We'll just have to see how things come along in practice. It's just hard to tell how much they're progressing as we're moving along," Fuentes said.

"We haven't really upgraded too much yet. We might have a couple of things that we might add within the next month or so but I think they're performing well. We have youth and experience and every one of these meets is giving us more experience so I think we're on the right track and just continue to do these things. The scores will continue to creep up, incrementally, very slowly, but they'll get there."

Besides practicing in the morning, the winter break practices are different in that weight and strength training, a strong component of the program, is emphasized even more.

"I think that we do more strength during break, a lot more strength, more endurance," Connolly said. "It's good because we do need a lot of endurance for floor routines and just trying to push through them."