

Glenbard West junior Sarah DeStefano added several new tricks to her gymnastics routines at the Oswego Invitational Dec. 27, and they didn't work out well.

"I was so mad," DeStefano said. "That was a bad meet. I practiced more and look what happened."

In the team's first meet since then at the Naperville North Invitational Saturday, Jan. 10, DeStefano responded with a season-high all-around total and helped the Hilltoppers finish second in the 12-team field with 138.825 points, their second-highest total this season.

DeStefano, junior Amber Broucek and sophomore Alison Oakes earned individual medals for top-five finishes and junior Amanda Rosch had a top-10 finish.

Broucek tied for third on balance beam (9.025) and was fifth in all-around (35.55), DeStefano was fifth on uneven parallel bars (season-high 9.15) and Oakes, a first-year team member, tied for fifth on beam (8.875).

About the only disappointment for DeStefano was her 35.20 all-around total was sixth, just behind Broucek, and barely missed a medal.

"I'm so mad now," DeStefano joked. "I'm really excited. It was really good (for us). It was really solid, 19 out of 20 hits (for our routines)."

The Hilltoppers only finished behind Barrington (144.675) in the 12-team field and had the second-highest team event scores to the Broncos on all four events. Hinsdale Central (136.35) was third.

They posted a season-high 35.375 on uneven bars and broke 137 for the second time this season, only to their season-high 139.65 from Dec. 10. They had scored 136.00 at the Oswego Invite.

"We weren't looking for the score today. We were looking for hit routines. By our accounts, we hit 19 out of 20," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said. "It's a really great meet for them, a great positive attitude by all of them, kind of just picking themselves up, fighting through routines, not letting anything stop them."

Broucek and DeStefano were the team's two all-arounders. Oakes and sophomores Kylie Lach and Cailey Cranny competed on three events, junior Amanda Rosch on two and senior Grace Frazer on uneven bars.

The Hilltoppers were supposed to resume action after winter break with their most important dual meet of the season at two-time defending state champion Lyons Township, but their Jan. 7 meet was canceled when school was canceled that day because of sub-zero temperatures. The meet now is at 6 p.m. Monday, Jan. 12, at LT's north campus in La Grange.

Saturday's performance gives the Hilltoppers some momentum, especially considering the scores were the average of two judges per event, some of them state judges. Junior Mia Connolly also did not compete after missing practice time during winter break but is expected to return Monday.

"I've said it from the start of the year. Right around New Year's, we'll be ready to go," Fuentes said. "A year ago at this meet, we weren't at full strength (4th, 133.50). We didn't have all of our players: They're training so well. They have such good attitudes. With the exception of Alison, it's almost the same exact team with much different results scoring wise and attitude wise."

Last year's invite marked Broucek's return to the lineup. She was third in the all-around (36.00) and second on floor (9.225) and fourth on beam (8.825).

She would have surpassed 36.00 Saturday if not for a fall at the end of her second floor pass, where she attempted a layout, full tuck combination for the first time.

"I did pretty well. I did new things today. I tried a pike (Tsukahara) on vault, a different floor pass and a totally different bar routine so I'm proud of myself," Broucek said. "(Our goal was) just to hit all of our routines and have a good, solid meet. Don't worry about winning or anything, just hit your routines."

The Hilltoppers began the invite well with five stuck routines on beam. They finished on uneven bars as the only team to record three 9s.

Besides DeStefano, Broucek (9.1) and Rosch (9.0) were sixth and tied for eighth, respectively, with season highs. Lach added an 8.125.

"It was nice ending on that note. Amanda went and she got a 9.0 and then (Broucek) finished and it goes 9.0, 9.1 and 9.15. We were all so close to each other," DeStefano said.

Broucek, a 2013 state finalist on beam, and Oakes led the beam set. DeStefano (8.55) tied for 12th.

Broucek and DeStefano tied for eighth on vault (8.8), Lach tied for 17th (8.6) and Oakes tied for 19th (8.575). On floor, Oakes tied for eighth (8.9), DeStefano tied for 12th (season-high 8.7) and Broucek tied for 15th (8.625).

"I'm pretty sure it's the first time we've hit 5 for 5 (on beam), which is really exciting because we work really hard to hit all routines," Oakes said. "We focus a lot on sticking routines and we try to get routines in a row stuck so I think that's what helped us stick all five of ours today."

DeStefano started her season slowly, working only uneven bars and beam. This was her third straight meet as an all-rounder with season highs on everything but beam. She scored 33.95 Dec. 16 and 33.625 at Oswego.

"I think (Oswego) got me more motivated just because I was so mad how bad I did," DeStefano said. "I had to come here and redeem myself. Mostly bars (is exciting). It's just getting easier to make it."

"The first couple of days (after Oswego) were a little rough. She had kind of a lull from that had then a couple of days later, she just kind of picked herself back up," Fuentes said. "She's a kid who trusts her training. She knows if I put the numbers in and do enough good work in practice, I believe I will do well."

Experience also helps. Fuentes said DeStefano was slightly off during her uneven bars routine when she caught her bail to a handstand on the lower bar, a transition on which she has fallen before.

"I could see it, but she swung right through it, kept the routine going," Fuentes said. "You would never know. Both of us knew that she was off so it was great (how she adjusted)."

Broucek also cited uneven bars as her highlight. Despite her nerves, she handed her new routine and scored in the 9s for the first time this season.

Their scores could have been higher. For the most part, the Hilltoppers were cautious Saturday and kept the double back flip dismounts out of both DeStefano's and Broucek's routines. Had they landed them, they would have scored higher, and Broucek also would have picked up .2 in bonus scoring.

"Those are two routines that we hope would have a good chance to make state finals," Fuentes said. "I've got a pretty good three-headed monster on bars, and Kylie Lach is doing a great job as that solid (fourth) score for us. She's really getting close to getting a handstand, which would get us .2. If she could put it up to an 8.3, 8.4, that would be a great fourth score for us."

For Rosch, it was her first 9 ever on the event after an 8.95 Dec. 16. Rosch had achieved her first 9 ever Dec. 10 with a 9.25 on floor.

"I was really surprised. I was really happy," Rosch said. "I was not expecting it with that routine. I didn't think it was one of my stronger routines. Obviously, we got rid of the extra swings and everything. We worked really hard for that. The Higgins was really late and I didn't make the handstand in the clear hip so I was expecting like an 8.4."

The Hilltoppers dusted their previous season high on uneven bars of 34.05 Dec. 16 by more than a point.

Barrington scored 36.125 Saturday behind third-place Abby Hasanov (3rd, 9.475), who won all-around (37.425), vault (9.525) and beam (9.375).

"I think probably most outstanding thing for us (this meet) was our three 9s on bars," Fuentes said. "At West, we typically hang our hats on being really good on beam and bars. It's the two events we go to every day (at practice) without fail. That's where we want to earn our money, so to speak."

In the Nov. 25 opener, Oakes achieved a season-best 9.2 on beam for first place. Saturday's effort earned her first individual event at a meet.

"I didn't think I was going to place on beam. I wasn't expecting it so it was a good surprise," Oakes said. "I think this is one of the better beam routines I've done. They're legit judges so I'll accept the score."

Oakes followed on floor by executing back-to-back full layouts on her second pass for the first time in a meet -- and making it look pretty easy. On her new second floor pass, Broucek just missed completing a front layout, front tuck.

"Our strength and conditioning program is really paying big dividends at this point of the year," Fuentes said. "Usually at this time of year, teams start to break down and get some of those nagging injuries. We seem to be getting a little stronger."

On vault, DeStefano landed the second of her tuck Tsuks with a slight step. Broucek followed by making her tuck Tsuk and then attempted a pike Tsuk but fell forward.

"Making my vault (was a highlight) because I didn't face plant. I'm getting really excited about bars because I seem to be placing at meets," DeStefano said.

Cranny took over Connolly's leadoff spot and scored a counting 7.475. Lach, who was out of town for the Oswego Invite, just missed her season highs on uneven bars and vault by .075 and .1 and had a season high 7.45 in being added to the beam lineup.

"It was clutch for (Cranny and Lach) to go and hit two beam routines right at the start," Fuentes said.

"I thought we actually had not a great warmup today. Just so so. But some of the older girls were saying it doesn't matter. If we don't have a great warmup, it's just a warmup. Let's just go hit it in the meet. They really showed that. Some of their experience (on varsity showed) even though they're all sophomores and juniors."

--by Bill Stone