

Despite entering their dual meet Monday, Jan. 12, dressed as Star Wars characters, it became apparent at the halfway point that no type of force would help the Hilltoppers defeat two-time defending state champion Lyons Township.

The Hilltoppers responded with a strong set on floor exercise and by sticking all five balance beam routines for the second meet in a row.

"We already knew that (we wouldn't win), but that didn't stop us from doing our best or anything," junior Amber Broucek said. "I think we did solid today."

Glenbard West's finish resulted in its second highest score of the season, although the Lions won the meet 144.85 to 139.25 in La Grange.

Junior Amber Broucek was second on balance beam (season-high 9.3) and floor exercise (9.2) and third on vault (9.1) and all-around (season-high 35.90). Juniors Sarah DeStefano and Amanda Rosch and sophomores Alison Oakes and Cailey Cranny also had top-five finishes.

The Hilltoppers were just .4 from their season-high 139.65 from Dec. 10 and ended with a season-high 35.20 on beam.

LT scored a season-high total by 1.8 points. The Lions had season-high event scores on beam (36.60) and vault (36.65), which helping to establish a 72.25 to 68.75 lead after vault and uneven bars.

"We know how great LT is a team. To catch them would be really hard points-wise, but we want to make sure we still compete at a high level when we're going against other high-caliber teams," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said. "We don't back down from anyone. We want to compete at our best against anybody."

The meet featured the two best teams in the West Suburban Conference Silver Division. As a result of the loss, the Hilltoppers now will basically have to win the Silver Meet for any chance of sharing the overall title with the Lions.

The high score, however, solidified the Hilltoppers' No. 4 seed for the Glenbard North Sectional because scores for sectional seeding have to be submitted

Wednesday, Jan. 14. As a top-four seed, the Hilltoppers can be a host school for one of the four feed-in regionals.

"We're really happy. We're just trying to push for that 140," junior Mia Connolly said. "We need to clean up some things and we can all contribute to getting a 140."

The dual originally was supposed to be the first meet after winter break for both teams Wednesday, Jan. 7, but school and all activities were canceled because of frigid temperatures.

Both teams had to come back Monday after competing at invitationals Saturday and having no formal practice in between. The Hilltoppers were second at the Naperville North Invite (138.825) and LT was third at the Lake Forest Invite (142.275).

"I feel like we thought it was a lot but LT also had an invitational Saturday so we felt it was equal," Oakes said. "They didn't have practice yesterday. We didn't have practice yesterday so it ended up being an equal playing field. If they didn't have an invitational, I would feel a little intimidated but I think it's good that we were in the same boat."

Like the original date, the Hilltoppers dressed up for the introductions. With a 1980s theme, the Hilltoppers took Star Wars complete with Fuentes as Darth Vader and the gymnasts holding masks of Chewbacca and storm troopers.

"We didn't quite coordinate it entirely with LT. There was some miscommunication to us getting together (after the rescheduling)," Fuentes said. "They were supposed to do all-neon but they didn't quite get to it."

In previous years, the Hilltoppers and Lions used to annually dress up for their duals, usually taking opposing sides such as Cops and Robbers or Cowboys and American Indians.

"I think they stopped that the year before I came. They used to do that all of the time. We were trying to bring it back," Broucek said.

“That was funny. It was hilarious, (Fuentes) as Darth Vader. I was kind of sad that (LT) didn’t decorate.”

Broucek also was a little sad afterwards that her season-high all-around total just missed a 36.00 – a 9.0 average for the four events.

“So close, but yes, I’m getting there,” Broucek said.

Broucek only was outscored on floor (season-high 9.7) and beam (9.6) by LT senior Kelsy Kurfirst, the two-time defending state champion on floor and 2012 state co-champ on uneven bars. Kurfirst also swept vault (season-high 9.75) and uneven bars (9.4) en route to a season-high 38.45 all-around total.

DeStefano was fifth in all-around (34.40). Oakes tied for fourth on beam (9.0), Oakes (9.1) and Rosch (8.65) were fourth and fifth on floor, DeStefano (8.9) and Broucek (8.3) were fourth and fifth on uneven bars and Oakes and Cranny (8.8) shared fifth on vault.

The 35.20 beam set by Broucek, Oakes, DeStefano (8.7) and Connolly (8.2) beat the Hilltoppers’ 34.525 at the Oswego Invite Dec. 27 with one counted fall. The Hilltoppers also counted no falls at Naperville North and scored 33.925 as the first team on the event.

“On Saturday, under pressure being the first team in the meet and then today going against a good team (5 for 5 is a highlight),” Fuentes said. “Five for five two meets in a row, that’s what we live by. We have to learn to stay on the beam and we can kind of clean up the rest as we get there.”

On floor, Oakes once again easily executed the layout-layout combination at the end of her second pass for the second meet in a row.

Known by the nickname Lay Lay because of the combination, Oakes made it for the first time in a meet at Naperville North and scored an 8.9 to tie for eighth. Her season high is 9.4 Dec. 10.

“I’ve been working really hard on that, even since summer (training). I think it’s just the right time, enough practice that I’ve put in, that it shows in the meet,”

Oakes said. "I'm really excited with that. I was worried that if I hit it once in the invitational, that doesn't mean I'm going to hit it today, but I think hitting it twice in a row gives me a lot more confidence."

Connolly returned to the lineup after not competing at Naperville North. Fuentes said because she missed practice time over break, and then bad weather cancelled two practices during the week, she instead worked out with the junior varsity Saturday morning.

"(Returning today) was just like a regular, usual (meet). I just tried to stay really confident and I think it paid off because I didn't do anything that I majorly regretted," Connolly said.

"I was kind of bummed about (missing the invite) but it gave me a chance to practice more. I got an extra practice in before today and I think it really paid off. I basically hit everything. There are some things I can still fix, but I'm pretty happy with today."

The Hilltoppers started on uneven bars, usually one of their stronger events. They scored 33.30 after a season-high 35.375 Saturday, but Fuentes was encouraged by the effort in the midst of some adversity through the routines.

"Amanda had a noticeable error and so did Amber, but they continued to fight through those routines and still finish them. To me, that's more important than maybe (thinking), 'I'll just jump off the equipment. I'm a little off,'" Fuentes said.

"In hindsight, it's maybe only a .1 difference (in score), but the mentality, kind of the grit of fight, that's really important to me and what we really train in practice. You have to have mistakes to learn from and get better. I say it's not that they're errors, they're opportunities to learn how to work through those things in the future."

With last week's school cancellations also affecting final exams schedules, the Hilltoppers' home dual meet with Downers Grove North Jan. 21 has been moved to Thursday, Jan. 22 at 6 p.m.

-- by Bill Stone