

Junior Amber Broucek and her Glenbard West girls gymnastics teammates were looking for a breakthrough at the District 87 Invitational.

They showed improvement in a big way.

Broucek won all-around with a career-high 37.50 and the Hilltoppers had a season-high score by more than two points with a first-place 142.10 Friday, Jan. 16 at Glenbard West.

"I think we were all feeling it because we've been working really hard. We were all just in a good mood and we just felt it," Broucek said.

"It's our high score so, of course, we're excited and we did our best tonight and our hard work showed. It's my highest (all-around) ever so yeah, I was really excited about that."

Broucek won all-around by .25 over Glenbard North junior Allison Wahrman (37.25). Broucek also won vault (career-high 9.55), shared first on beam with Wahrman (9.35) and was second on the uneven parallel bars (9.25) to Wahrman's 9.6 and second on beam (9.35) to Glenbard North senior Katie Murphy's 9.4.

Juniors Amanda Rosch and Sarah DeStefano and sophomores Alison Oakes and Kylie Lach joined Broucek on the awards stand with top-five finishes. Sophomore Cailey Cranny and junior Mia Connolly added top-10 finishes.

Glenbard West easily exceeded its previous season best of 139.85 from Dec. 10 to defeat Glenbard North (141.10), Glenbard East (129.00) and Glenbard South (128.45).

The Hilltoppers had scored 138.825 and 139.25 in their past two meets. Their huge jump over 140 included season-high team event scores on floor (36.55), balance beam (35.70) and the uneven parallel bars (35.70). The team's 34.15 on balance beam counted one fall.

"We knew we'd hit it eventually, get past a 140, but I guess it's kind of a surprise we went 142 just because we were hoping for the 140 and then we went so over it," DeStefano said.

"We knew we could do it, but the fact that it actually happened, it was amazing," Rosch added. "We basically had (scores of) 9s and 8s, half and half, almost more than 9s than 8s and that's really insane for us."

The District 87 Invite has special personal meeting to Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes. It's part of the reason that he worked to resume the invite about a decade ago.

Fuentes is a Glenbard East graduate who competed for the Rams and has coaching ties to the other three girls head coaches Friday. As an assistant coach at his alma mater, Fuentes coached Glenbard South girls gymnastics coach Lee Wood.

As a girls coach, Fuentes coached Glenbard North coach Kristin Nordquist in the high school program at Palmer's Gymnastics Club, where Fuentes still coaches, and was a coach at the Lombard Park District when Glenbard East coach Jessica (Stob) Bugajsky trained there.

"I was telling the girls this is one of my favorite meets of the year just because this is the first meet I've ever competed in, the District 87 on the boys side," Fuentes said.

"They brought me up as a sophomore to compete as a freshman and I did pommel horse. In 1992, I competed for the first time. I got a whopping 2.4. The girls get a kick out of that."

The Hilltoppers got a bigger kick out of their performances and beating rival Glenbard North. Many of the Panthers train alongside the Hilltoppers during the offseason at Palmer's.

The Panthers won last year's invite with 139.10 points.

"We're friends with all of them so I feel like being friends with them doesn't make

the competition as intense," Broucek said. "We knew they were good and we knew they were really good competition and it was really close."

Uneven bars turned out to be a major factor in the Hilltoppers' victory. They outscored Glenbard North (34.70) by 1.0 while both teams had the same beam total and the Panthers had higher scores on floor (36.80) and vault (35.75), but only by a combined .30.

"We knew that to beat Glenbard North, our bars scores really had to do their job. They felt the bars squad let us down at Lyons Township (33.30 Jan. 12). They really made it a point to do well on bars today," Fuentes said.

"It's a great accomplishment for them. It's always that measure, that barometer for all high school teams. If we can get a 140, then we're not pretenders anymore. We're contenders. I'm happy for them. They've really just dedicated themselves to it. They didn't want to have any regrets (this season). I think they've been doing a great job so they deserve to get that 140."

Broucek set the tone for her meet on vault, the Hilltoppers' first event. She went with two pike Tsukaharas on both attempts for the first time this season after usually opening with a tuck Tsuk followed by a pike.

She landed both of her pikes Friday, easily surpassing her previous season high of 9.15, which she had achieved twice.

"It's something I've been building up to. I was shocked with it," Broucek said.

"(After vault) I had a feeling like I was going to have a good day. It just put me in a really good mood."

On uneven bars, Broucek beat her previous season best of 9.1 even without her double back flip dismount. Beam was a season best by .05.

"I think (the success) just motivated me to just keep on working really hard, do my best out there to keep up my 9s," Broucek said.

"She's getting stronger as the year goes on," Fuentes said. "We get stronger and stronger. Our conditioning, our training really starts to kind of bear out and Amber has just been building up steam, quietly inching up those tenths every

single meet. We've been adding almost a skill the last three or four meets."

Rosch earned her first individual gymnastics medals ever with the Hilltoppers. She was fifth on uneven bars with a 9.15 -- a career high by .15 -- with a more conservative but cleaner routine and also shared fifth on floor (9.1).

"Even on JV I (last season) I never placed on the podium so this was like, 'Wow.' I never expected getting two podiums," Rosch said.

"I was really, really surprised because I didn't compete the first half of my routine. I thought I wasn't going to get as many points for showing (skill) composition because there's not as much pizzazz. I was thinking, 'Maybe I'll get an 8.8, 8.9,' and then I get a 9.15. I was like, 'Is this real life?' I was so shocked. I feel like it was a real clean routine so that was good. Obviously a few flaws that I've got to fix."

DeStefano also had a season high on uneven bars (9.2) for third place en route to fourth in all-around (34.95). She also was seventh on beam (8.25) and eighth on floor (8.9) with a season high by .2.

"I'm really excited. I can't wait to hit 9s on other events," DeStefano said.

Lach earned her first varsity medal. As the Hilltoppers' first competitor on vault, Lach scored a career-high 8.8 on her half on-half off to earn fifth place.

"With North participating, I thought that I couldn't do it, but apparently this is my highest score and I got a medal. I'm so happy," Lach said. "I placed higher than some people that did Tsuks. I was surprised. I was like, 'Holy crap, what's going on?' "

The JV I champion at the 2014 conference meet, Lach and Cranny have made tremendous strides from last year's varsity experience.

Lach also had a counting score on uneven bars Friday with a seventh-place 8.1, .1 shy of her season high. She said she is on the verge to adding a free hip handstand and giant swings to boost her score.

"I've really improved majorly from last year. Mostly I think I have improved bars a lot," Lach said. "Bars was just basic last year and this year it's more difficult."

Oakes, a first-year high school competitor, added to her medal collection by taking fourth on beam (8.55) and floor (9.2). On Jan. 10, Oakes earned a beam medal at the Naperville North Invite with a fifth-place 8.875.

"This is the first time I've gotten there twice (on the podium) so that was really nice," Oakes said. "I think the beam medal means more to me because we work so hard on beam. We just do rounds and rounds of routines that we have to stick."

Oakes not only was the Hilltoppers' final competitor on floor but the final performer in the invite. With the team victory in hand, Oakes was free to complete all out and again comfortably hit her layout-layout at the end of her second pass after nearly keeping it out to play it safe. Her season-high floor score is 9.4.

"I was happy to put the lay-lay in there and get rewarded with a medal. That was awesome," Oakes said. "It feels so good, especially at home meets when we end on floor so I'm the last. Everyone's there watching you so it feels good to end strong."

Cranny shared sixth on vault (8.75). Even Connolly's 7.9 on uneven bars, which wasn't part of the team total on the event, tied for 10th.

As it turns out, all four district schools will see each other again at the Glenbard West Regional at 6 p.m. Monday, Feb. 2. The Hilltoppers and Panthers are the No. 4 and 5 seeds in the Glenbard North Sectional and are expected to be among the six qualifying teams in that sectional's field at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 10. Regional champions automatically advance to the sectional as a team.

While the Hilltoppers and Panthers currently are considered dark horses to reach the eight-team state meet, they often have qualified in years past at the other team's expense.

"It's always fun to go against North," Fuentes said. "With us, it's really a rivalry. For the longest time, even in the sectionals (to qualify for state), there's a lot of

tough memories to go with that. One person's greatest day of joy is the other person's biggest disappointment so that makes it tough as well."

-- by Bill Stone