

Seniors Amber Broucek and Sarah DeStefano have come full circle as Glenbard West gymnasts in the best way possible.

After enjoying their first state meet experiences when the Hilltoppers last qualified as a team in 2013, they are making their last once again with their teammates.

The Hilltoppers earned a berth to the eight-team state meet at-large with a second-place 146.175 at the Glenbard West Sectional Thursday, Feb. 11.

The state meet is Friday and Saturday, Feb. 19-20, at Palatine High School.

"It's awesome, just to experience it (as a team) freshman and senior year. It's a good way to start and a good way to end," DeStefano said.

"It feels really good to contribute to such a huge picture. It's been a long but wonderful season."

Freshman Maddie Diab automatically advanced to state individually in all five events with top-five sectional finishes. She won vault with a school-record 9.925 Kasamatsu and also was second in all-around (38.075), floor exercise (9.45) and balance beam (9.25) and tied for third on uneven parallel bars (9.45).

Broucek was third on beam (8.95) and advanced at-large with her scores in all-around (36.30) and vault (season-high 9.375). Advancing at-large were DeStefano on vault (9.35) and uneven bars (9.15) and junior Alison Oakes on vault (career-high 9.375). Other lineup members were senior Amanda Rosch and freshman Katherine Hoban, both individual sectional qualifiers, and junior Cailey Cranny.

DeStefano equaled the at-large cut on vault. Rosch's 9.025 on uneven bars missed by .025 and Broucek's season-high 9.15 on floor missed by .05.

Broucek will be making her fourth state trip and DeStefano her third.

"It's wonderful. All of my hard work and our team's hard work, it all pays off honestly," Broucek said. "It's just a wonderful way to end your senior year. I'm kind of nervous because it's my last meet of my career. I have lots of emotions for it. It's kind of sad but exciting at the same time."

There also is plenty of excitement because the Hilltoppers should contend for their first top-three team state trophy in their fifth state appearance overall. Glenbard West finished fifth in 2010 and seventh its other three trips (2005, 2011 and 2013) – all of them under coach Carlos Fuentes.

Prairie Ridge co-op (149.55 sectional score) is heavily favored to defend its state title. The Hilltoppers had the fourth-highest sectional score behind DeKalb/Sycamore co-op (school-record 147.525), the Glenbard West Sectional Champion, and .1 behind Carmel (146.275). The rest of the state field is Barrington (144.95), Fremd (144.60), which counted numerous falls at sectionals, Lake Park (144.35), third at the Glenbard West Sectional, and Downers Grove South (143.875).

The team's 38.025 vault score at sectionals from the four state qualifiers is an unofficial school record.

"It's something that motivates us, to be in that (trophy) conversation," Fuentes said. "We're a program that's learned to get to the state meet. That's the next level we'd like to take the program.

"We know that from second place up to fifth, scores will be really tight. It'll come down to who has a great meet that day. As far as consistency, we can do as well as anybody as far as hitting routines day in and day out."

Few in the state have been as consistently strong as Diab this postseason, and it could result in Glenbard West's first individual state championship and multiple top-five, all-state medals. As seniors at state, Becky Mladucky was second on uneven bars in 2010 and Maggie Duvall had three all-state performances in 2005 to finish with a program-best four all-state medals. Diab's vault victory, which broke her previous 9.9 school record, even defeated DeKalb/Sycamore junior Aleah Leman (2nd, 9.825), who won last year's state title with a 9.825 layout Yurchenko.

"I feel like for vault my chances (at state) are pretty good. I'm really hoping to go to finals for that and I feel confident in that," Diab said.

"I thought they were going to be judging a lot harder (at sectionals). I kind of felt that my vault was going to score high, but I didn't think it was going to be that high."

Diab, second to Leman (38.425) in all-around, posted the state's fourth-highest sectional total and a fifth straight meet of at least 38.00 (9.5 average), including a school-record 38.50 at regionals Feb. 3. Diab's sectional scores on the other three events also rank among the top 10. "She's obviously a special athlete. It takes a special athlete to put together physical ability, mental strength and consistency. She's a total package," Fuentes said.

"The greatest thing to see as a coach or teammate is she just loves to compete. Both of her brothers had tremendous success (for the boys program). Both of her parents were college gymnasts. Maybe for her it's just a natural progression and it's just another gymnastics meet. It's great to see her not get too wrapped up in the moment."

One big help for Diab is that she plenty of experience with high-school competition. She's already competed in 14 meets -- and that's with missing two meets when she traveled during winter break.

"Just like in practice, we constantly do routines. I've just been making my routines in practice so it kind of shows up in the meet," Diab said.

"I felt a little more nervous (at sectionals) just because there was a lot more at stake. In club, it's so easy to make it to state so I thought almost everybody went to state (in high school), but then throughout I kind of learned how hard it was to go."

At state, team competition, the all-around finals and individual event preliminaries are Friday. Qualifiers among the top 10 preliminary scores advance to Saturday's individual event finals, which are held one event at a time (vault, uneven bars, beam, and floor). The final event standings are based solely on Saturday's scores.

Broucek reached the beam finals as a freshman and was 10th (8.875) after a 9.475 in

preliminaries. In 2014, Broucek was the Hilltoppers' lone state representative in all-around and beam. Last year, Broucek advanced on all-around, beam and floor and DeStefano earned her first individual berth for uneven bars.

For the rest of the lineup, competing at state will be a whole new experience.

"I feel like every freshman doesn't really understand how hard it is to get into state. You appreciate it a lot more (as a senior)," Broucek said. "Honestly (the key is) just to hit your routines, just go out there and have fun. (Sarah and I will try) just to keep (our teammates) calm and not have them worrying about what everyone else is doing on the other teams. Just to keep them focused and do what you do at practice and at the other meets."

Rosch is the last of three sisters who were Glenbard West gymnasts but the first who will compete at state. 2008 graduate Katie and 2010 graduate Stacy were part of the team's 2008 conference co-championship team while Rosch helped the Hilltoppers win this year's West Suburban Conference Silver Division title, the program's fifth and only second outright conference title ever.

"I've been in the stands at state, but I've never actually been a competitor. It's a huge thing. This is the best senior year ever," said Rosch, a four-year team member.

"(Sectionals at home) was fun. Obviously, moving the stuff (afterwards) is a hassle, but it was worth it. Kind of like our song this year is, 'Welcome to Our House.' It was cool because more people got to come. A lot of the freshman's friends were here. It was calming, kind of. It was nice."

This is Oakes' second season with the Hilltoppers after a two-year layoff from the sport. Her progress and experience showed Thursday especially with vault and by contributing scores on beam and floor, her other two events.

"I'm really excited. I'm feeling like (state is) going to be so great because you know that every team that's there worked so hard. It's going to feel really good to be a part of that," Oakes said.

"I came out last year for my first time of high school gymnastics and I didn't know what to expect. (Fuentes) told us this year that our goal was to go as far as possible so I guess I thought (state) was possible."

This incredible season already has seen a school-record 148.45 in the Jan. 27 regular-season finale, the Naperville North Invitational title and conference and regional titles. Fuentes has said that the calming influence of the three seniors and Oakes, as a second-year varsity veteran, has helped the team stay the course.

"We were pretty confident (at sectionals) because leading up to here we've had 20 for 20 (in hit routines), 19 for 20, pretty consistent," DeStefano said.

"Freshman year we were throwing huge tricks and hoping to make (state), but I feel like we were pretty confident making it. And going in the last sectional, you kind of knew what you needed (to score)."