

Last girls gymnastics season, Amber Broucek became the first Glenbard West event finalist at the state meet on any event as a freshman when she finished 10th on balance beam.

Broucek already senses the breakthrough personally at the start of this season.

"I feel more relieved. Being varsity your freshman year, it's like a lot of pressure. State freshman year, that was the most fun experience," Broucek said.

"I love beam honestly now. I don't get shaky. I think being the only person (performing) with everyone watching you at the state finals got all of my fears out. There are not as many eyes on you (otherwise) so it doesn't make you as nervous."

The Hilltoppers also are optimistic that the progress from their seventh-place state finish can help them return to the eight-team state meet for the fourth time in the past five seasons and the fifth time ever.

Senior Maggie Phillips and sophomores Broucek, Sarah DeStefano and Mia Connolly return from last year's state lineup, which scored 143.425 points, just .25 behind sixth-place Lake Forest.

Key all-arounder and two-time state competitor Abbie Garchitorena and state vaulter Rachel Gathof graduated. Junior Mackenzie O'Keefe, an all-state fifth on the uneven parallel bars last season and a two-time state qualifier, also opted to return to club gymnastics full-time and not compete this season.

The Hilltoppers opened their season Nov. 26 at home by scoring 129.30 against Lake Park (132.85), Addison Trail (123.40) and Willowbrook (107.40).

Glenbard West scored 140.45 in last season's opener and as high as 146.00 in winning the District 87 Invitational. The Hilltoppers won the Glenbard West Regional (144.90) and qualified for state at-large with a

second-place 143.30 at the Glenbard West Sectional, the sixth-highest advancing score. At state, they finished .25 behind sixth-place Lake Forest.

"Going to state freshman year makes you want to push yourself harder to go to state every single year. It makes you want to work harder than you did the year before," Broucek said.

"It's going well, but it's kind of different without Mackenzie and all of the other seniors (graduated). It takes getting used to having a whole new team, but we're working well together."

The Hilltoppers' focus this season is patience.

Coming off strong offseasons, Broucek and DeStefano return as all-arounders, and Connolly competed on beam and floor exercise at state. Phillips, however, could possibly be limited to the uneven bars because of her chronic back injury as well as having her offseason training affected when she was diagnosed with mononucleosis in August.

Primary candidates to join the varsity are sophomore Amanda Rosch from the junior varsity I lineup and freshmen Cailey Cranny and Kylie Lach. Rosch and Lach (cheerleading) and Cranny (tennis) all played fall sports.

"We're relying so heavily on underclassmen. (But) I don't want people to mistake youth as not being talented because we have talent. In time, that'll really show," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said.

"I think we're accustomed to starting with really, really big high scores, but each year's different. As a coach, it's my job to analyze the good athletes that I have and seeing how I want to peak them, whether it's going for a 140 the first meet of the year or going for a little less right now."

Phillips, the team captain, was part of the Hilltoppers' 2011 state team that also was seventh (144.65), and she reached state in 2012 on the uneven bars and one of the team's three individual qualifiers.

This season, she is among a handful of seniors in the program and probably the only one who will compete for the varsity.

"We're really positive about everything. It's awesome. I feel like I'm their mother, kind of, and their big sister," Phillips said.

"I love them all so much. They're like my little sisters. I'm friends with all of them. We hang out after practice. When we come into practice, it's really no different. We act like we would outside of practice. I didn't really do anything to prepare for being the captain. It just kind of comes naturally."

Broucek, DeStefano and Connolly also have transitioned well into their roles after shouldering big responsibilities last season. The success and fun that they experienced through the state run only served to motivate them in the offseason.

"It feels a lot different (so far). It's just that we're more into it. Last year, you're all nervous because it's your first year and then this year I go into competition and I'm not nervous at all. I think it's more fun this year," DeStefano said.

"After your freshman year, you realize there's a lot of good people in high school. You kind of want to be like that. You go into state, state finals, everyone is just amazing and then you come out like, 'All right. This offseason I need to work hard so I can be there next year.' "

Broucek qualified for state on beam after winning sectionals (9.275), and she was a sectional qualifier in all-around and the other three events. DeStefano was a sectional qualifier in all-around, uneven bars, beam and floor.

Broucek's 36.525 in all-around for the team at state was well above the 36.125 at-large state cut, but she only scored 35.60 at sectionals. Broucek's 9.025 on uneven bars at sectionals just missed the 9.1 state cut.

So far this season, they both plan on upgrading to Yurchenko vaults. On uneven bars, Broucek has improved her bail and DeStefano has added a bail and also may include a Higgins.

"When you just look at them in the gym, they take this seriously. They come in, they do their work, they work hard, they put in the time and it reflects in their gymnastics," Fuentes said.

"They know if we work hard, the results will be around. They come in with the same idea. The fact that they have each other and have been best friends for almost their whole lives, and trained together at the club for almost their whole lives, they're really about as bonded as you can. It's really two peas in a pod. If one's struggling, the other one picks her up."

State event qualifiers among the top 10 preliminary scores advance to the state finals with the results based only on that score. Besides Broucek, the only other freshman to make the finals on an event was Barrington's Abby Hasanov, who then scratched finals because of illness.

Broucek had the fourth-highest preliminary beam score (9.475) and a 10th-place 8.875 in the finals after a fall early in her routine, an automatic .5 deduction. A 9.4 earned fifth place, the final spot that receives an all-state medal. Four of the 11 beam finalists were seniors.

"I want to try and make it again (to finals). Maybe on other events, hopefully. I'm going to try," Broucek said.

"I think (the beam finals) really did a world of difference for her confidence," Fuentes said. "I think she always thought she was a pretty good gymnast. Making it to the finals, knowing that she's in elite company of the top 10 and being only one of two freshmen, that really set her apart.

"She's allowed herself to try a lot bigger, new skills so she's doing a couple of new things this year. I said, 'We can make it back with this (beam) routine that we had in the finals, but if we want to really give

ourselves a chance, we need to upgrade it even more.' We tweaked a couple of things, and just cleaned up a couple of the other little things. She hit 37.00 (in all-around once) last year. She's starting to believe she can do that on a consistent basis now."

DeStefano's state meet was triumphant in another fashion. On floor, the Hilltoppers' first event, she rolled her ankle but she persevered through the next three events, including vault right afterwards, yet had a team-counting scores on that event (9.0) and beam (8.825).

"That didn't feel too good. (But) that was one of my favorite memories," DeStefano said. "I didn't know that (Fuentes) knew because I ran down the vault runway and he's like, 'Oh, is (your ankle) OK?' and I was like, 'Yeah,' and it hurt so bad. Then later I found out that he found out. It was just so funny."

A stronger floor routine should be among the highlights of DeStefano's season. Fuentes said the start value of her uneven bars now is up to 9.7 and while her usually strong beam routine currently is the same, it's much crisper.

"She's always had such a large bag of tricks. I think we're finally starting to hone in on those couple of ones that we need," Fuentes said. "I think what she's going to do (on beam) is be more confident. She might add a back flip. We actually train it in practice. (On floor), she should really put herself in elite company in terms of having three advanced passes, where most people have one."

Phillips and O'Keefe were the anchors of last season's powerful uneven bars lineup. Phillips won sectionals with a career-high 9.6 and was 39th at state (8.2). Phillips was 33rd at state in 2012 (7.875).

During the regular season, Phillips filled in occasionally on vault and beam. Even with medication for her back pain, Phillips is trying to get through her senior season and will limit, if not eliminate, those additional events.

"We want her to be that leader in the gym, and I think she'll be looking at some nice bars scores by the end of the year," Fuentes said. "She's really just getting back in just good physical shape, let alone gymnastics shape."

After she was diagnosed with mono, Phillips also was required to not do any pre-season training. The layoff affected her conditioning significantly, even though she resumed strength training as early as possible.

"(My back is) definitely not as bad as freshman year. I've taken a lot out of my (uneven bars) routine, which I'm not so happy about, but it's what I have to do to compete. I just want to compete," Phillips said.

"It is getting worse. It's slowing me down, but I'm going to push through it and do the routine that I have now and maybe add a few things. I'm just going to try and push through it."

The Hilltoppers need a team effort to help overcome the losses of Garchitorea and O'Keefe. By taking fourth at state on uneven bars (9.4), O'Keefe became just the fifth individual to earn all-state in program history and third on uneven bars. O'Keefe also was 10th in all-around at state (37.25) after a school-record 38.125 to win the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet at Glenbard West.

The team found out during the summer that O'Keefe would not be returning for this high-school season.

"It was something that was kind of always in the back of our minds that she might go back (to club). In the end, we just want her to be where she's going to be happiest and most successful. We would hate for her to stay in high school and always have that doubt in her mind, 'Should I have gone back?' " Fuentes said.

"I think you can look at it two ways. (I told her), 'Wee got two great years out of you. You helped our program, you helped us continue some of that success that we had and we're happy with that.' We're not unhappy what we didn't get from here. We got two great years out of her. We got another (team state-qualifying) banner in the gym. There's nothing to be

sad about that."

While not having O'Keefe certainly will affect the Hilltoppers' score, Fuentes and returning gymnasts said her decision did not affect their training outlook or schedule directly. The high school season could not officially start until Nov. 11.

"I don't think the girls were surprised. At that point, they knew a lot was expected of us, but they always knew that. They're still expected to score big and we always have high expectations at Glenbard West," Fuentes said.

"We all just kind of took it as like, 'OK. I guess we just need to work a little harder to just get everything done.' It really hasn't affected us too much," Phillips said.

Connolly's offseason effort certainly helps in that regard. The Hilltoppers' first state performer on floor (counting 8.1) and beam, Connolly will move into a larger role.

"I've definitely gotten a lot stronger physically and mentally. I'm used to (Fuentes) now and I think that my skills are definitely improving. (And) I'm getting bigger skills," Connolly said. "Personally, I just need to get stronger and just be more consistent."

In the season opener, Connolly competed as an all-arounder. Her 7.9 on uneven bars already exceeded last year's season high of 7.75.

"I think (having experience) paying off because we're used to how (Fuentes) coaches and everything from last year. We kind of have an idea how to score this year," Connolly said. "I think that we have a good bond this year, all of us. We spend a lot of time together so that really helps a lot of the teamwork."

In similar fashion this season, Rosch, and even more so Cranny and Lach, will have to acclimate quickly to varsity competition.

Rosch was among the top JV I competitors for the Hilltoppers last season. In 2012, she alternated her cheerleading obligations with summer training at Palmer's Gymnastics in Bloomingdale, where Fuentes also coaches.

This past summer, Rosch was able to increase the quantity and quality of her workouts. Even then, Fuentes told her she probably would be joining the varsity lineup.

"I wasn't really thinking about (varsity). I was probably just thinking, 'I'm competing JV I again,' but then I worked a lot with (Fuentes) over the summer at Palmer's," Rosch said.

"It's definitely getting a lot better compared to the beginning. Everyone's already improving. It's a lot harder (than JV I), that's for sure. I feel better at practice. I feel like I'm getting better."

In the opener, Cranny competed on everything but floor and Lach competed on beam and floor. Another early varsity possibility, especially for vault, is junior Catherine Daflucas, who was among four JV I all-arounders in the opener.

"They're going to get a chance to go in and compete. I like them to compete as much as possible (whether varsity or JV I)," Fuentes said. "The more times you get out there (helps). It's the only way to get better at gymnastics, to get used to it. The nerves will never go away. You just get more accustomed to them being there."

Fuentes said he already has seen the kind of leadership from his varsity returnees to ease the transition for the newcomers.

"I can already see (progress) in Amber and Sarah only being sophomores, just how seasoned they are already, having gone through it one year and learning how to practice and compete. Having Maggie as a senior, that'll be invaluable, but (our returning sophomores also) have gone through it," Fuentes said.

"They know how to go through the grueling schedule but they also know

how to prepare themselves mentally. I think that'll push over and help girls like Amanda, Kylie and Cailey, just to prepare for the season."

Defending and first-time state team champion Lyons Township is heavily favored to once again win the outright West Suburban Conference Silver Division title. The Silver Meet is at Hinsdale Central Feb. 1.

Glenbard West, the 2012 outright Silver champion, finished second (145.40) at the Silver Meet and second in the final overall standings, a 50-50 combination of dual-meet and Silver Meet standings. Broucek tied for third on beam (9.475).

LT (149.625 at state) probably also will contend for the state title along with the other two 2013 trophy teams – runner-up Prairie Ridge co-op (149.30) and third-place Fremd (146.05). New Trier (145.375), Geneva (145.225) and Lake Forest (143.675) were fourth through sixth and St. Charles co-op (141.675) was eighth.

The lowest at-large sectional score to qualify was Lake Forest's 142.45.

"I think if we push ourselves hard enough and we get our score up, we could maybe make it as a team. That's what we're hoping," Connolly said.

"(State) was awesome last year. It was such a great time. At the state meet, you've already made it so you don't even have to worry about whether you do amazing. You're just getting out there and having fun and trying to do your best."

All six teams except Lake Forest are among those expected to contend this year's state berths while other early projected contenders include Prospect, which had the ninth-best sectional score, and Barrington.

Geneva and St. Charles joined Glenbard West in qualifying for state via the Glenbard West Sectional with St. Charles co-op getting the automatic state berth as sectional champion (143.775). This year, the teams probably will compete against each other again in the sectional at Wheaton Warrenville South.

"(Overall) a lot of the traditional powerhouses might not be quite as strong as they were. You get some dropoff and we don't know the rest of the field yet, who's come back, who's picked up kids. Then we'll go from there," Fuentes said. "You just never know. There have been some big scores that haven't qualified to the state meet before, even qualified for to the sectional."

The Hilltoppers ascent into toward the state's elite will be a gradual one. Fuentes said he generally emphasizes clean routines without misses, especially to start out the season, and then incorporate skills along the way.

Even with their lower team score than usual in the season opener, Fuentes said the Hilltoppers' percentage of hit routines was 16 out of 20.

When recently cleaning his desk, Fuentes found an article about one of his teams that won the Silver Meet after losing to LT and Hinsdale Central in the regular-season dual meets.

"I think time will tell (our potential). My biggest concern right now is time. I have a lot of teaching to do," Fuentes said. "I'll take it one day at a time. I can't say how far we'll go or what we'll score.

"Having done this long enough, I know how long a marathon the season that high school is. I think we have the athletes. We have a lot of skills that are really close (to adding). Once we put it together, I think we can make some noise."

-- by Bill Stone