

**Glenbard West sophomore gymnast Amber Broucek rose to the occasion on balance beam at the Wheaton Warrenville South Sectional Tuesday, Feb. 11, with her typical approach and routine.**

**"I just said, 'Stick full routine. Stick full routine.' That's just what I always say, just full routine and just staying tight and finishing," Broucek said.**

**Broucek now is in position for the finish she wants. She scored a 9.425 for third place and automatically qualified for the state meet for the second straight year with a top-five sectional finish.**

**The strong routine also helped Broucek advance to state at-large in all-around. Her 36.075 was eighth at sectionals but beat the 36.00 at-large state cut by being among the 12 best remaining scores from the state's four sectionals.**

**The state meet begins Friday at Palatine High School with the individual event finals Saturday for qualifiers among Friday's top 10 preliminary scores.**

**At state last year, Broucek reached the beam finals and was 10th (8.875) as the Hilltoppers' first event finalist as a freshman.**

**"(My goal is) make it to beam finals again, definitely. I've been working so hard. I want to place (all-state) in the top five, definitely," Broucek said.**

**"(I'll try) just to stay more calm and not over think it, I guess, just because it's state. Just do the same thing that you do at practice, just calm yourself and stay focused. Just have a positive mindset and don't freak out."**

**Broucek has reason to be excited, but this state trip won't be the same.**

**The Hilltoppers are not returning to state as a team after they failed to reach sectionals as a team for the first time since 2002. Their second-place 137.50 at the York Regional Feb. 7 to eventual state qualifier St. Charles co-op (147.00) missed the at-large team cut of 137.775 for the two highest-scoring non-regional winners.**

**This time, Broucek will be completely going it alone. Senior and three-time state competitor Maggie Phillips and sophomores Sarah DeStefano and Mia Connolly also were individual sectional qualifiers but did not advance.**

**Last year, Broucek only was an individual state qualifier on beam. Broucek and DeStefano competed all-around for the team at state after Broucek's 35.60 at sectionals just missed the 36.125 at-large state cut.**

**"Even though you can always be a little cleaner, a little sharper and get a couple of tenths back, (Broucek) hit all four routines (at sectionals)," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said.**

**"Coming in and hitting four routines at sectionals is big. Last year, she had a slip-up and she missed at vault (8.4), which knocked her out (in all-around) so hitting four events this time is important. As she gets older and she matures as a gymnast, that's important, to be consistent."**

**After the 2013 Hilltoppers finished seventh in the team competition (143.425), Broucek then was joined by current junior Mackenzie O'Keefe in the event finals. O'Keefe took an all-state fourth on uneven bars (9.4) but opted to return to club gymnastics this season.**

**"It's going to feel weird, since I don't have (O'Keefe) like I did last year, but it's all good," Broucek said. "I felt like my season was kind of over already because it feels weird with (all of my teammates at sectionals but) not competing with me. It's just not the same."**

**Broucek is among five returnees from last year's 11 state beam finalists who advanced this year with three of them earning all-state honors. Stevenson junior Alyssa Weisberg is the defending state champion (9.525), and Lyons Township junior Kelsy Kurfirst and senior Katie Carling tied for third (9.425).**

**Overall results are determined by Saturday's results alone. Broucek suffered a fall in the finals after her 9.475 was the fourth highest**

preliminary score and well above the 9.20 finals cut.

Broucek's sectional score tied for 17th best.

"(The routine) felt really good. I've been working really hard at it and just pushing myself to get to state again. It felt good to actually do a complete routine," Broucek said.

On Feb. 1, Broucek suffered a rare fall off beam at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet (8.45, 8th), but she bounced back to take second at regionals (9.325).

More important, Broucek also compiled a career-high 37.375 all-around total for second place to St. Charles co-op sophomore Rachel Dugan (37.50). Broucek qualified for sectionals in all five categories as she also was second on vault (season-high 9.475) and uneven bars (9.25) and fourth on floor (9.325).

"I thought actually (regionals) was a bigger meet for her. That's when the team was counting on her the most. She had a great meet," Fuentes said. "That shows a lot about her being a leader, about being a team player."

At sectionals, Broucek also tied for eighth on uneven bars (8.7), was 15th on floor (8.975) and tied for 23rd on vault (8.975). She missed at-large state cuts on uneven bars by .075 and floor by .2.

Broucek was in pain afterwards from landing her pike Yurchenko, her final event. She previously had a difficult time on floor when her accompanying music wouldn't play and then began too soft for her to hear.

"I would say it wasn't my best meet but I still did good," Broucek said. "I hit everything, besides complications on floor with my music. I couldn't hear it. I was so behind (sync) on my music but I still went. I was stumbling, tripping over my feet."

Also qualifying for sectionals as all-arounders were DeStefano (34.075,

**tied for 17th) and Connolly (32.825, 28th).**

**In their qualifying events, DeStefano was 16th on floor (8.95), tied for 25th on uneven bars (8.0) and tied for 29th on vault (8.625) and Phillips tied for 14th (8.8) and Connolly was 24th (8.1) both on beam.**

**"I'm so happy (for Broucek). She's so good at beam," DeStefano said. "She worked her butt off. She deserves it."**

**As the last of the four feed-in regionals, the Hilltoppers went into the meet knowing they had to at least tie U-46 co-op's at-large score of 137.775 to advance as a team. Glenbard West had scored 137.375 at the Silver Meet and as high as 138.15 at York for its invite Jan. 25.**

**"Actually Amanda and Mia typed up every single score and found out (we didn't advance). It's OK. We have next year," Broucek said. "It was hard for us, but it won't stop us for next year."**

**"That was pretty hard. I just thought it was going to happen but then it didn't," DeStefano said. "It's disappointing but it's kind of a reality check for next year, definitely, that we got so close. We've just got to do it."**

**DeStefano, Connolly and Phillips were the only other returnees from last year's state lineup. One positive is that Phillips was the only senior in the regional lineup.**

**Sophomore Amanda Rosch and freshmen Cailey Cranny and also competed at regionals. Rosch competed on three events with all of her scores counting toward the team total. Cranny competed on two with a counting score on beam.**

**They and freshman Kylie Lach saw much more varsity experience than expected during the preseason. Broucek and DeStefano both did not compete most of December.**

**"It was a great (sectional) streak while we had it. Some schools have never had a streak like we had or 11 years and it just gives us an**

opportunity to start another one," Fuentes said. "You can let this moment define you to keep going on the downhill or step up and restart it again. It has to start somewhere so we'll do it again."

At the York Invite, DeStefano returned to the lineup for the first time since Dec. 11 after experiencing pain in her shoulder. At regionals, she had season-high scores on uneven bars (8.55, 6th) and floor (8.975, 7th) and was eighth in all-around (33.80) and 10th on vault (9.025).

"It's kind of weird not going (to state) and just watching but I'm kind of happy the season's over so I can finally rest because my shoulder's still bugging me. I feel like it's time to take a break and get ready for next season and work our little butts off and do what we do," DeStefano said.

"I learned that you have to work hard, very hard. Last year, we had a pretty solid team and this year, we had to work as hard."

Connolly's hard work made her arguably the team's most improved gymnast. Last year, she competed at state for the team on beam and floor only and was not a sectional qualifier on either.

At the York Regional, Connolly was ninth in all-around (33.15) and 11th on beam (8.25) to achieve at-large sectional cuts of 33.125 and 8.25. Her 8.525 on floor just missed the 8.65 sectional cut.

"I've definitely improved a lot from last year just being more consistent and just going bigger on my skills," Connolly said.

"(Not qualifying for sectionals as a team) was disappointing at the end, but it's just going to help us improve and want it more next year. I guess I'm just going to try and keep working hard like I've been doing and hopefully just keep getting more skills and putting more skills in my routines for next year and just being consistent."

Phillips advanced to sectionals on beam with a 10th-place 8.275. In her final high-school routine, she beat her season high of 8.65 at sectionals.

**"I'm really glad with my beam routine. It was the like the best routine I've ever done. It's been my highest (beam score) since freshman year," Phillips said.**

**"I'm just really glad that I got to come here with my friends. Sarah, Amber and Mia did really well."**

**Phillips competed at state three times, twice for the Hilltoppers in team competition and twice as an individual state qualifier on uneven bars. Her career-high 9.6 that won uneven bars at the 2013 Glenbard West Sectional remains her greatest personal gymnastics moment.**

**This season, Phillips battled chronic back problems that hindered her uneven bars training and a stress fracture in her foot yet competed on everything but floor the final half of the season.**

**Phillips plans to attend the University of Arizona with hopes of possibly working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.**

**"I've definitely learned to push myself and push my limits and just not to give up. That's definitely been something that gymnastics has taught me and especially with my friends and (Fuentes) pushing me, just getting myself to realize that I could do so much more than I've been doing," Phillips said.**

**"I just really enjoyed these four years. (Fuentes) has been the best coach I've ever had and it's just been great. The program is amazing and the school really helps out a lot with that. My teams have been amazing. I've made so many new friends. I just love them all."**

**Phillips only had been competing on uneven bars until the Oswego Invite Dec. 28, when she added vault and uneven bars.**

**The meet also proved to be a turning point for the Hilltoppers. In the middle of winter break and still without Broucek and DeStefano competing, they finished ninth of 10 teams with a season-low 126.85.**

By the next meet Jan. 11 at the Naperville North Invite, Broucek had rejoined the lineup and the Hilltoppers scored a then season-best 133.50 for fourth among 12 teams.

"We were seeming to gain a point and a half every single meet and those last four, five meets we came on with a lot of steam. Maybe if we had one more meet, we might have got ourselves in there (to sectionals) but we've still accomplished a lot," Fuentes said.

"We hit 17 out of 20 routines (at regionals). That was a pretty good showing. You always want a couple of routines back but it's still a 3-inch bar, a 4-inch beam. It's a good future for us at West with this core that we have."

-- by Bill Stone