

Glenbard West junior Amanda Rosch saw the 8.45 flashed as her score on uneven parallel bars Monday and was hoping for better.

It's a sign of how much she's improved as a gymnast. That was the second-highest score she's ever had on the event following an 8.7 in the Nov. 25 season opener.

"Things have gone really well. All of the scores I'll be disappointed about this year are scores that I would have been excited for last year," Rosch said. "It's weird. I spent a lot of time on bars (in the offseason). That's definitely way different than last year."

The Hilltoppers also continued their better start as they defeated Oak Park-River Forest 132.35 to 128.65 in Glen Ellyn in their West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual opener.

Rosch tied for first on uneven bars with an adjusted 8.65 and sophomore and first-year team member Alison Oakes won floor exercise with an 8.7. Their scores helped the team beat those event totals from the opener.

Overall, the Hilltoppers finished just shy of their 132.85 opening score. While far from full strength, they already are ahead of last season's first two scores of 129.30 and 129.75.

"I just think nerves-wise we looked a little more calm today. They looked a little bit more like they do in practice in terms of their consistency and form," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said. "It's definitely a step forward. It's still early in the year, but they're starting to look a little nicer."

The Hilltoppers had season best event totals on floor (33.80) and uneven bars (33.05). They are still awaiting the full return of junior all-arounders Amber Broucek, a two-time individual state qualifier, and Sarah DeStefano, who only has been competing on uneven bars and balance beam.

"Especially when Amber and Sarah completely heal and are able to compete again, their score are going to help a lot, obviously," Rosch said.

"They're amazing. It's just a great team overall. I'd say last year we were kind of not as energized at practice. The first two weeks we were like, 'Oh, we're sore. It's hard to push through,' and this year we've been like, 'We want to do better. Who cares if we're sore?' We've just been pushing ourselves a lot more and better at pushing others to do their best."

For the first two meets, junior Mia Connolly and sophomore Kylie Lach have been the team's lone all-arounders and sophomore Cailey Cranny and senior Grace Frazer also have been seeing action.

Uneven bars specialist Maggie Phillips was the only graduate from the 2014 regional lineup. The Hilltoppers' second-place 137.50 at the York Regional missed advancing to the six-team Wheaton Warrenville South sectional by only .275. It was their first time not at sectionals as a team since 2002.

Frazer and Oakes are the only Hilltoppers in Monday's lineup without previous varsity experience.

"We all want to make it (to sectionals) and we're all working our butts off trying to get there. We're just really excited for this season," Connolly said.

"I think we're definitely improving. The first couple of meets are kind of iffy, but I feel like we're really getting strong. I think we've been working a lot harder and hitting our strength a lot and just working really hard each practice so I think that's really showing up in the meets."

Rosch entered the season knowing she'd improved on uneven bars. Still, the 8.7 for first place in the opener came as quite a surprise.

"(Fuentes') goal for me this season was an 8.5 on bars so to get an 8.7 the first meet, I was like, 'Is this real life?' It was crazy because last year my high score was an 8.0," Rosch said.

"Two years ago, her season high was, I think, a 5.6 as a freshman," Fuentes added. "We just know uneven bars is so unforgiving. It's really hard for a high schooler to improve much, if at all. That's really a testament to what she's done, just how she's grown through our program also."

On Monday, Rosch's initial uneven bars score would have finished second to the Huskies' Alyona Jochaniewicz (8.65). Fuentes made a formal inquiry about the 8.45, and the judge gave Rosch an additional .2 for not crediting for a Higgins change near the end of her routine.

"Really? Oh I like that (8.65) a little better," Rosch said when told about the score change. "I was kind of bummed about (the 8.45) but it's still a good score. I've got to work on that extra swing in the beginning and the tiny things."

Jochaniewicz won all-around (34.35) and every event but floor, where her 8.5 was .2 behind Oakes. Connolly (32.60) and Lach (31.10) were second and fifth in all-around.

Connolly (8.45), Rosch (8.4) and Lach (8.25) were third through fifth on floor, and DeStefano (8.55) and Connolly (8.0) were third and fifth on uneven bars.

On beam, DeStefano (8.45), .05 behind Jochaniewicz, Oakes (8.1) and Connolly (7.7) were second, third and fourth. Oakes tied for second on vault (8.5), .2 behind Jochaniewicz, and Cranny and Connolly tied for fourth (8.45).

"(Everyone) just filled in, one score somewhere. It seems with the nice depth that we have everybody has their strength somewhere," Fuentes said. "When somebody faltered, somebody else was able to pick up the slack right away."

Last season, Connolly emerged as a solid contributor and consistent all-arounder through lineup injuries and absences. On Monday, she improved her all-around total from the first meet by .75 mostly through improving her floor score by that same amount and boosting her uneven bars score by .15. She has scored 7.7 on beam both meets.

"I definitely know what to expect from last year so it's a little less stressful for me. I'm more used to it now," Connolly said. "I feel a lot stronger and I'm hoping to be just as consistent as last year. I've been focusing more on floor and beam, just trying to hit everything and just have no mistakes. Floor and beam (were better) in comparison to last meet, when I fell. I worked hard the last week and it paid off."

Rosch also is determined to contribute more to the team this season. With the scores she has been getting on uneven bars so far, her first individual state berth also is a possibility.

"I feel like I did cheer(leading) and gym last year so I wasn't at all of the summer practices but this year I was at almost every practice. I guess I was just a little more motivated this year," Rosch said.

"Especially not making it to sectionals last year, I really wanted to bring it back this year and go farther in the season. I feel like we have a good chance of making it to state this year."

-- by Bill Stone