

In the girls gymnastics season opener, Glenbard West sophomore Mackenzie O'Keefe when she surpassed the 37.00 all-around barrier for the first time.

After O'Keefe improved her personal best to 37.65 at the second annual Lyons Township Invitational Dec. 14, the bar continues to rise.

"I never even thought about it, but everybody's telling me, 'Oh yeah, so a 38.00 next meet,' " O'Keefe said. "I'm like, 'Oh sure.' I don't even pay attention to the scores, but that would be great."

The Hilltoppers and O'Keefe are heading into winter break with consistently good performances. At the LT Invite, their 144.60 finished second to the host Lions' 148.85 in the five-team field.

O'Keefe, freshman Amber Broucek, who also had a personal-best all-around total (36.40), senior Abbie Garchitorena, freshman Sarah DeStefano and junior Maggie Phillips had top-10 individual finishes.

Just two days earlier in the same gym, the Hilltoppers had scored a season-high 144.80 to finish second to the Lions' 148.75 just two days earlier at the same gym in La Grange for their West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual.

"There were similar performances so I was happy to see that," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said. "At this point, we have high-level, difficult routines, but we're trying to get consistency throughout. For each team, consistency is a different number. I'd say we're at about 75, 80 percent hit routines, but we're really looking for that 95, 100 percent. We like to throw routines that we know we can hit all of the time."

As the Hilltoppers enter winter break, their next meet is the Oswego Invitational at noon Friday, Dec. 28 followed by the Naperville North Invite at 1 p.m. Jan. 5. Their scheduled home dual meet with York Wednesday was rescheduled for Jan. 22.

Hitting routines is hard enough. Competing twice over three days is more difficult, especially considering the importance of the dual meet with the regular-season Silver title on the line. Last season, the Hilltoppers won the overall Silver title outright for the first time.

“Our girls really get up (for that dual). You could just feel the energy throughout the meet,” Fuentes said. “To come back and have to do it again on Friday, it kind of zaps your energy, but I thought they responded well.”

O’Keefe improved upon her 37.20 from the dual and finished third Friday to LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst (37.90) and junior Michelle Cozza (37.75).

O’Keefe’s career-high 9.55 on the uneven parallel bars took second to LT Kurfirst (9.6), the defending co-state champion on the event. O’Keefe also was second on balance beam (9.4) to LT senior Maren Craig (season-high 9.65) and tied for fourth on floor (9.3), .3 behind event winner Kurfirst.

On vault, O’Keefe did not land her layout Yurchenko on either attempt. Her 9.4 still tied for sixth.

“I was really disappointed in vault, but I was really pumped for the last three events. By falling on vault, it really motivated me to do a lot better on all of the other events,” O’Keefe said.

“I guess it’s not really (my best) because I’ve been to other meets and I’ve

hit everything. If I would have hit my vault, and I didn't have a big wobble on beam (it might have). Besides those two things, it was one of my better meets."

At last year's LT Invite, O'Keefe had just returned to the lineup from injury and performed conservative routines on beam and the uneven bars. She went on to qualify for the state meet on uneven bars, beam and all-around.

Now she's already established herself as one of the state's top all-arounders. Kurfirst was ninth at state last year (37.375) behind three seniors, and Cozza is off to an impressive start in her first high-school season after being a Level 10 club gymnast.

"It's great. It motivated me a lot because they're some of the best girls in the state and to compete against them, it's really fun. It's fun to watch their routines and cheer them on," O'Keefe said.

In the dual, O'Keefe was .3 behind Cozza and 1.45 behind Kurfirst (38.65), who scored what is believed to be the highest all-around total ever by an LT gymnast.

With a cleaner vault Friday, O'Keefe may have won all-around. Still, her total is No. 3 all-time in documented Glenbard West history behind Courtney Gonzalez (37.825) and Maggie Duvall (37.75). Last season, O'Keefe's season high on uneven bars was 9.45.

"She's slowly but surely (scoring higher), but she's still got lots to clean up, lots of little areas here and there where she can pick up some more tenths," Fuentes said. "Her bars looked fantastic. That (9.55) is around where we're looking for her to be, getting to the state meet, hopefully getting her into a

state final.”

Seeing consistency out of the freshmen also is a plus. Broucek and DeStefano said they tried to look at Friday as a non-pressure situation where they just tried to perform their best.

Broucek, Garchitorena (35.05) and DeStefano (34.75) were fifth through seventh in the all-around.

Broucek hit beam again for a third-place 9.3 and also was fifth on uneven bars (9.0) and was seventh on floor (8.95) and tied for 10th on vault (9.15). Broucek had scored a 36.15 in all-around Wednesday, led by a personal-best 9.65 floor score.

“Both days were actually really good. They were consistent, both meets,” Broucek said. “I actually thought (Friday) was really fun. I actually had no pressure on me. I was doing what I usually do in practice and just having fun with it.

“(Uneven bars) was shocking for me. Floor was really good for me. I was shocked, especially on Wednesday with a 9.65. I was like, ‘Where did that come from?’ It was surprising.”

With last year’s at-large state cutoff for all-around being 36.575, Broucek could be on the verge of qualifying as a freshman.

“A 36 is a score most all-arounders can look at to possibly get them into state as an individual,” Fuentes said. “We knew she was talented. We knew she had great basics. You never know how she’s going to take to adding all of those things in, and obviously she’s doing really well.”

“I’ve been actually picking it up really fast,” Broucek said. “I thought it was going to be more difficult to get used to, but you just work hard and stay focused on what you need to get. Then it’ll come easily.”

DeStefano once again set the tone for a strong team beam set and was sixth on floor (9.05). DeStefano’s 8.95 for seventh on beam was followed by Garchitorena (8.45), Broucek and O’Keefe.

“Sometimes I’m nervous, a little shaky, but I know I just have to go hit for the team, hit 4 for 4,” DeStefano said. “I try my best to stay calm. At least we’re consistent with it so I was happy about that.”

Garchitorena was eighth on vault (9.3), tied for eighth on floor (8.85). On uneven bars, Phillips tied for seventh (8.8) and Garchitorena was 11th (8.45).

Senior Rachel Gathoff made her varsity debut at the invite and contributed an 8.7 vault. A fourth-year gymnast for the team, Gathoff has worked her way up through the junior varsity II and I ranks. She currently is throwing a half on-half off vault with hopes of moving to a half on-full off.

For duals, Gathoff probably will remain on the JV I level since she is an all-rounder on that level. She is expected to contribute to the varsity on the event for invites, including at Oswego.

“I’ll compete her until someone else passes her up. At varsity invites, she’ll be my fifth vaulter,” Fuentes said. “To kind of work her way up to varsity is a testament to her hard work and my assistant coaches and the good job that they do.”