

After how the Naperville North Invitational started Saturday, Jan. 5, the Glenbard West gymnastics team easily could have been singing the blues.

Competing first on balance beam, the Hilltoppers counted a combined four falls. They had plenty of time to regroup before their next event, floor exercise.

“We were quiet for a bit, and then we started talking, getting our mind off the meet and talking about other stuff. And we like to sing, too, so that was pretty fun,” junior Maggie Phillips said.

By their final three events, the Hilltoppers once again were singing a winning a tune. Climaxed by a season-high 36.525 team score on the uneven parallel bars, the Hilltoppers won the 12-team invite for the second year in a row and third time in five years with 141.70 points.

Sophomore Mackenzie O’Keefe won all-around (36.80) and uneven bars (9.525) and was third on vault (9.45). Freshman Amber Broucek tied for second in all-around (36.175) with Palatine senior Abby Alden, a 2012 state beam qualifier, and had the highest team scores on beam (9.05, 4th place) and floor exercise (9.025, 10th).

Prospect (139.10 points), Palatine (138.225) and Hinsdale Central (137.25) were second through fourth.

“It’s pretty good (to win), especially since we had a pretty rough beam day,” Phillips said. “We decided that we could win it if we did really well on the next three events, and we did so it was great.”

After a previous best of 36.00 on uneven bars Dec. 5, the Hilltoppers’ 36.525

at the invite was 1.9 points higher than any other team. Their 36.675 team score on vault, just shy of their 36.90 season best, was one point higher than any other team. The 35.575 on floor was second to a 36.60 by fifth-place Barrington. The Hilltoppers' 32.95 start on beam, while still the No. 4 highest score on the event that day, was 3.675 points away from their season best.

After three top-10 individual finishes on beam and floor, O'Keefe, Broucek, Phillips and senior Abbie Garchitorenna combined for seven on vault and uneven bars.

"They responded well and toughened up and just had a great last three events. As a coach, it's really nice to see them respond that way," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said.

"Especially with such a young team, they're going to have to learn if they dig themselves a hole, how to get out of it, and if they are ahead how to maintain a lead. Just having that experience, they did well."

Although the Hilltoppers did not achieve many personal season-high scores, there arguably were a few season-best performances, considering the invite not only used state-level judges but the average scores of two of them per event.

The Hilltoppers' turnaround also received a little lift from their team song of the day, 'Daylight,' by Maroon 5.

"I'm the worst (singer), but I sing the loudest," O'Keefe said. "Whatever song is stuck in our heads (happens). Someone usually starts it, and then everybody starts to chime in. That's usually how it goes."

Winning titles is becoming common for the Hilltoppers and O'Keefe. In their last meet Oct. 28, the Hilltoppers also won the Oswego Invite with 141.65 points, another rough meet in which they actually started well on beam (36.05) but finished rough on uneven bars (35.00).

When O'Keefe won all-around at Oswego (36.775), it was her first all-around title at an invite. Counting falls during her beam and uneven bars routines at Oswego, she scored slightly higher at Naperville North, staying on beam (8.975, 6th) but with some wobbles and counting a fall during her floor routine (8.85, 14th).

"I was really happy. I didn't think I would win (all-around) so it was a nice surprise," O'Keefe said.

Broucek also was up there. Her fourth-place 9.05 on beam was just .175 from victorious Palatine senior Nicole Kuksuk (9.225), a three-time state qualifier. Broucek also was eighth on vault (9.225) and uneven bars (8.875) and had a clean floor routine.

"It's one of my best (meets), just sticking everything because I haven't had a meet in a while without falling on at least one thing," Broucek said.

Since the Oswego Invite, Fuentes said the theme at practice was to attack weaknesses and try to fix mistakes. For Broucek, that meant refining her floor pass with a round-off, back handspring and full and a half twist. She fell during that pass at Oswego.

"(Broucek) continue to do what she does. That (floor) was definitely a nice improvement for us," Fuentes said.

Other strong routines got even better. On uneven bars, O'Keefe had one of

her best performances on the event, only .025 shy of her career-high score, to win by .2 over Naperville North's Michaela Robert.

"I was a little off on a couple of things, but I stuck my (double back) dismount so I was super excited about that," O'Keefe said. "(Still winning) the all-around's always sweeter than everything."

"A judge commented today on how great her bars looked, and she saw Mackenzie three weeks ago, just to see the improvement of how much she's continuing to hammer out those little tenths," Fuentes said. "She's trying to put herself in that elite rank of those top 10 kids that go to the state finals and give herself a chance to maybe be a medalist (for top five) at the state meet."

Other strong sets on uneven bars preceded that. Just before O'Keefe, Phillips once again had a solid performance with a 9.275, just .075 shy of her season best, for fourth place.

Phillips also was fourth at the invite last year, scoring a team-best 9.0.

"(This routine) was better than most that I do. I stuck the dismount (double back), which was nice. My Higgins was a lot better than it has been in meets and my double was better," Phillips said.

Garchitorenna started out the bars set with a ninth-place 8.85 – a season best by .3 that tied her career best from junior year. Six teams at the invite didn't have one gymnast score that high on the event.

"That's a lead score. There's not going to be a lot of teams in the state that can lead off a bar team with an 8.825," Fuentes said. "It's the same routine

she's been doing since the beginning of the year. She's just working out all of those tenths (deductions) to score as high as she can."

Garchitorena came through on vault as well. Since she has been having trouble landing her Kazamatsu in meets, she switched to a more reliable tuck Tsukahara and stuck that twice for a 10th-place 9.175. As the season progresses, Fuentes said Garchitorena will be upgrading to a pike Tsuk and probably again the Kazamatsu.

"I'm very fortunate that in her repertoire of skills she can do a tuck Tsuk, a pike Tsuk and the Kazamatsu. Today, we just wanted to play it safe," Fuentes said.

Freshman Sarah DeStefano and Mia Connolly also contributed to the comeback. On floor, Connolly posted a season-high 8.45 to tie for 21st place as the team's first competitor, and DeStefano had an 8.95 to tie for 11th. DeStefano then placed 17th on vault (8.825) en route to 19th in the all-around (32.975).