

Glenbard West freshman gymnast Amber Broucek easily could have panicked during her uneven parallel bars routine Saturday, Jan. 12, during the District 87 Invitational at Glenbard North.

After already beginning her performance, she and Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes realized that the bars setting were incorrect for her.

“Right before my bail, (Fuentes) noticed the low bar was lower than usual so that kind of really scared me because it wasn’t set right, but I still went for it and it’s all good,” Broucek said. “Maybe just at the moment, but otherwise I wasn’t too scared at all.”

Broucek landed her bail. Despite the height discrepancy, she didn’t even drag her feet on the mats below. She ended up taking first place with a season-high 9.55.

Broucek and fellow freshmen Sarah DeStefano and Mia Connolly have had a lot thrown at them as varsity gymnasts since Day One, but they’ve more than handled the challenge. It’s one of the reasons the Hilltoppers once again are contenders to qualify for the eight-team state meet despite graduating several key components.

By no coincidence, the freshmen have posted many of their highest scores this past week as the Hilltoppers enjoyed plenty of success. Glenbard West won the District 87 Invite with a season-high 146.00, topping its previous best of 144.80, after scoring 144.10 against Downers Grove North Jan. 9.

“The freshmen are really doing a nice job. They’re learning,” Fuentes said.

“(Broucek) said she saw the low bar as she was going and she had no choice. The only thing she could do was to continue on and try to catch the bar as best she could. She did and just kept going. The only place where it would have made a difference was on the release move. After that, it wouldn’t have changed anything. Once she got past that, she knew I just have to finish my routine.”

Broucek had a season-high 36.50 all-around total Saturday after a season-high 36.80 against Downers North. She had a season-high 9.225 vault Jan. 5 at the Naperville North Invite and has season highs of 9.3 on balance beam and 9.65 on floor exercise.

DeStefano had her two best all-around scores so far in the past two meets, going 35.05 against Downers North and improving it to 35.80 Saturday behind season-high scores on beam (9.4) and uneven bars (9.3). She’s also scored in the 9s on floor (9.3 high score) and vault (9.1).

On her usual two events, Connolly scored a season-high 8.25 on beam Saturday and went 8.4 on floor, just missed her 8.45 best at Naperville North.

“Over the meets, the first couple, since you’re a freshman, you’re not really used to it, but as it goes on, you get more used to it and more confident,” DeStefano said. “As time goes on, we’ll be more confident. We usually make it better the next meet.”

Although pleased with handling her bars incident at Glenbard North and significantly beating her previous best score of 9.1 from three days earlier, Broucek said she should not have received such a high score. She also was upset about falling on a beam skill that she thought she should have saved.

“(Our coaches) say don’t worry about the scores. Just worry about staying on the events. That’s kind of what I’ve learned (so far),” Broucek said.

“When I was in (USA Gymnastics club meets), I used to always be like, ‘What did I get? What did I get?’ I wanted a high score, but now it’s about staying consistent and on the beam.”

With so many competitions and routines placed upon the freshmen, they’re also learning to take success and disappointments. Whatever happens at one meet, there’s another one usually about three days later to continue or improve what happened in the last one.

“I feel we’ve learned a lot of discipline throughout the year,” Connolly said.

“When we don’t do well, (Fuentes) makes sure that we work really hard with a lot more routines and then we understand it more. We fix our corrections.”

Fuentes said one of his joys as a coach is watching a gymnast evolve from a nervous freshman to a solid senior performer.

Beam already is becoming that way for DeStefano. She had a strong stretch in mid-to-late December, including a 9.0 at the Oswego Invite Dec. 28, but then a couple of rough routines, especially at Naperville North.

“Now she stuck on Wednesday (8.7) and she stuck again today. She’s put it past her and moved on,” Fuentes said at Glenbard North. “It’s great to see that. Looking to the future, (I hope) that’s how she’s going to be. If we can get past those things this year in freshman year, she’ll be great the next three years.”

Usually competing on beam and floor, Connolly has emerged as a key contributor as the first performer on those events. It's a role currently shared with two seniors, all-arounder Abbie Garchitorea on uneven bars and first-year varsity performer Rachel Gathof on vault.

"(Connolly is) really growing into that role. We need a table setter. Everybody does, and she's doing that job for us," Fuentes said. "We're working (Connolly) hard. She doesn't have the same high-level difficulty as the other girls, but she still has the same kind of work ethic and dedication to the team."

While gaining varsity experience can be frustrating at times, the rewards can be huge. Sophomore standout Mackenzie O'Keefe was injured for the start of last season before she joined the lineup in mid-December on a couple of events and eventually, an all-arounder. She ended up qualifying for state in all-around, uneven bars and beam.

Add another year of training and experience, and O'Keefe now is among the top all-arounders in the state. On Saturday, she scored a school-record 37.90 total.

"Freshman year helped me out a lot. The seniors totally walked me through it," O'Keefe said.

"I was kind of nervous and didn't really know what was happening so that helped a lot, too. At regionals, I just went out and did it. I wasn't even thinking, 'I have to do this to make it to sectional.' Now I know that, but now I'm just as calm as freshman year."