

Sophomore Mia Connolly grew last season as a key specialist for the Glenbard West girls gymnastics team but she never competed as an all-arounder.

On Wednesday, Connolly finished first in all-around in helping the Hilltoppers to their highest score of the season in defeating visiting Hinsdale Central 130.20 to 126.05 in West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual action in Glen Ellyn.

Connolly's 32.80 all-around total included a first-place, season-high 8.2 on balance beam.

"I have most of the same skills (as last season), but I've added a few new things," Connolly said. "I'm just really trying to improve my consistency and sticking routines and making everything a lot cleaner."

Sophomores Amber Broucek and Sarah DeStefano, the only returning all-arounders from last year's seventh-place state lineup, only competed two events apiece. Broucek won floor exercise (8.85) and the uneven parallel bars (9.25) with senior Maggie Phillips second (8.9).

"I definitely felt a lot more pressure. I knew I had to step it up and hit routines," Connolly said. "Of course, I didn't want to fall because I didn't want to let the team down."

There was even less room for error because the Hilltoppers had the minimum four competitors on floor and beam, where they counted just two falls.

Their only other all-arounder was a freshman, Cailey Cranny, who was fourth (30.90) with her first plus-30 performance. Still, they surpassed their 129.75 from Dec. 2 at Oak Park-River Forest.

"We might be able to piece together a pretty good score by the end of the year," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said. "It's just taking time. Every good cook knows how to cook everything at different (times) to get it all ready at the end."

**Last season, Fuentes may have wanted Connolly to simmer a little more on the junior varsity I level to gain competition experience, but the dividends already are showing.**

**Her 8.2 beam performance is just .05 shy of her all-time best for the Hilltoppers. Connolly also was third on floor (8.3) and fifth on uneven bars (season-high 7.95) with a score already past what she scored last year when she rarely competed on the event.**

**"She had a solid meet for us. Coming in and hitting 4 for 4, Mia had a nice meet for herself," Fuentes said.**

**"You want to be able to develop athletes from the beginning and get them to be better competitors and you really see that from her. She's really kind of building that confidence. I think this is maybe the second or third meet in a row where she's hit beam now, and beam was kind of her nemesis last year where she couldn't find a way to stay on beam. We're really starting to see that (progress) now, which will be good for the other girls to see how she prepares herself, how she trains and then the results you get from it."**

**Connolly, sophomore Amanda Rosch and freshman Kylie Lach also could have been distracted because they also had to participate in a mandatory high school orchestra and band concert across the street from Biester Gym.**

**Lach left immediately after vault, the Hilltoppers' first event, but planned to return as the team's fifth beam competitor, had her choir obligations allowed her. Connolly and Rosch, who competed on everything but vault, left immediately after the Hilltoppers finished their meet on floor.**

**"I wasn't really focused on the concert because I knew Amber and Sarah didn't do two events," said Connolly, a violin player since fourth grade. "I just concentrated in that moment on the meet and then just focused on the concert."**

DeStefano tied for third on uneven bars (8.1) and also competed on beam. Cranny tied for third on vault (8.5) and was fourth on beam (7.6), and Rosch was fifth on floor (7.9).

The Hilltoppers had season-high scores on vault (33.50) and uneven bars (34.20). Even with just four on floor, their 32.60 just missed their season best by .05.

"When we finally put a full lineup together and get everybody healthy, I think we'll be a surprisingly good team," Fuentes said.

"I think we have good gymnastics in us between Sarah and Amber being our top all-arounders. I think once we get them at full strength and get them competing, they're going to be tremendous all-arounders and have huge scoring potential. With other girls, give us about another month to develop some of those skills that are coming."

Hinsdale Central also had a season-high score after a 124.40 in its previous meet Dec. 5. The Red Devils have just three specialists from last year's team after two seniors did not return, including three-year state qualifier Cayley Brenk.

- By Bill Stone