

Glenbard West sophomore Amber Broucek smiled with joy and relief after another solid routine on balance beam at the York Invitational Saturday, Jan. 25.

When a score of 8.6 was flashed, her expression changed.

"I was speechless," said Broucek, who finished 10th on beam at last year's state beam finals. "I don't remember what face I did, but I was just like, 'What?' "

As it turned out, Broucek's flashed score was incorrect. The score actually was a much better 9.1 to take fifth place on the event.

The Hilltoppers' team score also continues to improve almost just as rapidly.

With their most complete lineup in more than a month, they boosted their season-high score to 138.15 to finish third in the 10-team field behind Naperville North (140.525) and Lincoln-Way co-op (138.425), which also achieved season highs.

Broucek also took second on floor exercise (9.45) and uneven parallel bars (9.275) with season-high scores to Naperville North's Michaela Robert (9.475) and (9.55) and third in the all-around (season-high 36.55) to Robert (37.775) and Naperville North's Anneli Kawaoka (37.025).

Senior Maggie Phillips and sophomore Sarah DeStefano, competing for the first time since Dec. 11, had two top-15 finishes apiece.

"I'm so proud of all of us. We've been working our butts off and with the help of Sarah back, we're back together. I had a feeling we were going to score higher just with the help of Sarah coming back," Broucek said. "We're all contributing. We're all doing our best just for the team, just trying to get our high score is what we're aiming for. And we're so happy."

Broucek, Phillips, DeStefano, sophomores Mia Connolly and Amber Rosch

and freshmen Cailey Cranny and Kylie Lach competed together as a varsity group for the first time this season.

The Hilltoppers dusted their previous season-high score of 134.30 from Jan. 13 against Lyons Township behind season-high team event totals on floor exercise (34.90), beam (34.825) and uneven bars (34.325). Eight individual performances achieved or tied season highs. The scores also were the average of two judges.

"It's definitely nice, a good team effort all the way around. It's nice to see what we can do when we put them all together and get them out there competing," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said.

"We were really pushing forward and really working hard in practice because we knew we could get that high. I definitely would have believed (we could score this). Especially with Sarah back, we were capable of this and I definitely think we can get higher."

Broucek, in her fourth meet back in the lineup, once again excelled at the York Invite. In 2013, Broucek won beam with a 9.625, still her career high, and took second in all-around with her career high of 37.00 to former teammate Mackenzie O'Keefe's 37.60. The Hilltoppers won the team title with 144.075 points.

"She's right on track of where she needs to be and the team is peaking right where we want, when we want," Fuentes said.

"(Broucek is) solid and consistent. She's our top all-arounder and a great leader in that and keeps the team calm, just does her work, goes out there, competes, doesn't get too high, doesn't get too low."

Broucek would have challenged the beam title captured by Kawaoka (9.5) on Saturday had she connected her gym-macro, roughly a .4 deduction.

Otherwise, the routine was solid. Just as a confused Fuentes was about to view the judges' sheets to see why Broucek scored only an 8.6, the official scorer noticed that the higher of the judges' scores (9.25 and 8.95) was

misread as an 8.25.

"Thank God whatever the score guy was doing. (Fuentes) came over and he was looking right at me when he was saying it," Broucek said.

Floor and uneven bars went even better. Broucek significantly improved upon her previous season high on floor of 9.225 from Jan. 11 and ~~9.25~~ on uneven bars back on Dec. 11. Her tuck Tsukahara vault with a slightly rough landing tied for 11th (8.725).

"Bars (was the highlight) because I got credit for my bail handstand – finally," Broucek said. "I was shocked (about the 9.45 on floor). I ~~didn't~~ expect to score that high, I guess, but I did. I added a changed a few things so I was kind of iffy about it, but it worked out well."

DeStefano couldn't have asked for a much better return to action. Competing on everything but vault with conservative routines, she was seventh on beam (8.9) and tied for 15th on uneven bars (8.425) and was 19th on floor (8.7), both with season-high scores.

"I thought I was going to be really, really nervous but I was just trying to be like, 'All right. I'm just doing what I do, I guess,' " DeStefano said.

"It was nice (to compete again) but it was so weird because I'm not doing everything that I used to do. I'm slowly getting back into it, but it was nice. I'm relieved, kind of, now that it's over."

DeStefano returned to practice Jan. 14 after being hampered by a shoulder injury since the preseason. Simply the addition of her previous and new skills over the next couple of weeks should provide a boost to the Hilltoppers' goal of surpassing 140 points. DeStefano has not been an all-arounder since Dec. 2.

"She was competing at the skills based on the routines that she did last year. All of the stuff that she learned this summer, we haven't even added in yet," Fuentes said. "She can put together a vault for us. She can upgrade on beam, floor and bars still. There's still a lot left in the tank for

her, and she's eager to put that difficulty in there, but as always, we preach clean, hit routines first and then we go from ~~there~~."

During the absence of Broucek and DeStefano, other Hilltoppers stepped up their game and have continued that trend.

Phillips tied for 11th on uneven bars (8.55) and was 14th on beam (8.575). Connolly was 18th in all-around (33.20), tied for 21st on beam (8.25), tied for 23rd on floor (8.45) and was 24th on uneven bars (8.075). Rosch was 25th on uneven bars, tying her season high of 8.0.

Connolly tied her season-high all-around total from Dec. 14 even without a season-high event score. Now part of the lineup on three events, Phillips only was competing on uneven bars until Dec. 28, when the Hilltoppers went to the Oswego Invite with five gymnasts, minus Broucek and DeStefano.

"It's really great. We're really pushing forward and really working hard in practice because we knew that we could get that high (of a team score)," Phillips said. "I definitely would have believed it (beforehand). Especially with Sarah back, we were capable of this and I definitely think we can get higher. I'm really excited to go back to practice so we would put some new stuff in our routines."

On floor, the Hilltoppers beat their previous season best by 1.225 points with scores from Broucek, DeStefano, Connolly and Rosch (8.3), who tied her season high.

The Hilltoppers improved season bests on beam by .575 and .125 on uneven bars. Counting scores came on beam from Broucek, DeStefano, Phillips and Connolly and on uneven bars from Broucek, Phillips, DeStefano and Connolly.

"We all know we can stick (routines) in practice. We do five in a row, and we really work on it and it's just really great to have everyone contributing at their strongest events," Phillips said. "We fight for (lineup) spots. We do, but we know even if we're not competing here, not

competing there, we know that it's best for the team and we can still make up that score."

Once again, the Hilltoppers did not have to count any falls off beam, each an automatic .5 deduction. Cranny, who opened the team set, had a fall early in her routine but finished strong from there for a 7.775, which is .575 shy of her season-high score.

"What we always preach is never let one fall become two falls, never let one fall make you shaky for the rest of your routine," Fuentes said.

"(Cranny) composed herself and scored really well. She kept her composure and she knew how to fix it. When we add difficulty next year and the following year and she has higher-level skills, she'll still be able to translate that over to doing really well. She did a great job."

-- by Bill Stone