

Glenbard West junior Maggie Phillips had a gymnastics routine to remember at the Glenbard West Sectional Tuesday.

She's hoping it'll become even more meaningful by the end of the week.

Phillips scored a career-high 9.6 on the uneven parallel bars to win the event and earn an individual berth to the state meet.

The score also helped boost the Hilltoppers to 143.30 points and second place as a team behind St. Charles co-op's 143.775. The Hilltoppers would have automatically qualified for the eight-team state meet had they won sectionals, but they are in good position to advance at-large after missing last year's at-large cut by just .5.

"We're really hoping that it does turn out that we make it state. But even if we don't, we knew we had a great season," Phillips said. "We're kind of sad we didn't get first, but we're still strong and we're still happy with the results. We tried our best."

Phillips, freshman Amber Broucek, who won balance beam (9.275), sophomore Mackenzie O'Keefe and senior Abbie Garchitorena already have qualified for state as individual entries.

Garchitorena and Phillips competed with the 2011 state team. O'Keefe and Phillips were individual qualifiers last year. Freshmen Sarah DeStefano and Mia Connolly and senior Rachel Gathof also competed at the sectional.

"We'll have four in for sure, and hopefully three more," Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said.

As for the team, the four sectional champions automatically advance as well as the next four teams with the highest scores at sectionals, regardless of site. The state team competition is Friday, Feb. 15, at Palatine High School in conjunction with the individual all-around finals and event preliminaries. The individual event finals are Feb. 16 at Palatine.

“Really, in the end, we have no regrets,” Fuentes said. “Our goal this year has been to go to the state meet. If the at-large gets us in, then our goal is accomplished. A bonus would have been to win the sectionals, and that’s just the way we looked at it from day one.”

With sectionals remaining at Hinsdale Central Wednesday and Stevenson Thursday, the Hilltoppers have the No. 2 at-large score behind Fremd (146.225), which finished second at the Fremd Sectional Monday behind Prairie Ridge co-op (149.525), second at state to Carmel in 2012.

Only four teams at the remaining sectionals scored more than 141 points at regionals – Lyons Township (149.775 at regionals), New Trier (145.30), Carmel (144.85) and Lake Forest (143.45). LT and one of the others will advance as sectional champions. The Hilltoppers may very well advance as the final at-large team, but it’ll work after back-to-back appearances in 2010 and 2011.

Then again, at last year’s final sectional, bubble teams New Trier (season-high 145.95) and Lake Forest (145.375) had phenomenal meets to snag the last two at-large spots. Stevenson (140.175 at regional) would be most likely to have that kind of perfect meet.

While the Hilltoppers just missed beating St. Charles co-op, they did enough to hold off Geneva (142.825), the current No. 3 at-large team. Glenbard

West, which competed in Olympic order (vault, uneven bars, beam, floor exercise) and Geneva (floor, vault, uneven bars, beam) battled for the lead most of the night before St. Charles (uneven bars, beam, floor, vault) emerged with its two strongest events last.

"I feel all three teams have one or two super strong events. It was like a horse race, where one horse kept taking the lead from the other," Fuentes said. "There was no clear favorite. You like to compete in that. Would it be nice to skate through and just win one of these outright? Sure, but this is what you coach for. It's exciting and fun."

The Hilltoppers had the highest team scores on uneven bars (36.75), where they outscored Geneva by 2.55 points, and beam (35.225) despite counting three falls, each an automatic .5 deduction. The Hilltoppers were third on floor (35.35) and vault (35.975), where St. Charles finished with a 37.075 to overcome Glenbard West's 1.25-point lead after three events.

"There is no disappointment in what we could have done. There's a million woulda, coulda, shouldas, but St. Charles had those as well, so did Geneva," Fuentes said. "It's not about one less fall. It's not about one more hit routine because everyone can say that. The girls competed with lots of heart. They really showed a lot of pride out there. I thought they did a really good job out there, and we're talking three freshmen, a sophomore, a junior and two seniors so they still have plenty of time."

If the Hilltoppers advance, it'll truly be a team effort. Several routines automatically advanced to state individually with top-five sectional finishes. Even with an uncharacteristic fall off beam, O'Keefe finished a strong second in all-around (37.30), just behind Glenbard North senior Mariah Matesi (37.375). Broucek (35.60) was eighth with Garchitorea (34.775) 15th and

DeStefano (34.05) 19th.

The Hilltoppers opened with a decent vault set. O'Keefe tied for third (9.525) and Garchitorenna was 10th (9.25).

Then came uneven bars. Phillips electrified the crowd with her 9.6 routine, and O'Keefe followed that with a second-place 9.575. Broucek (9.025) was ninth.

Phillips stuck her double back flip dismount after falling on it at regionals and the conference meet.

"That just lifted the spirits of the team, got us back on track. Maggie hitting that dismount, it was huge," Fuentes said. "Not only did it lift our team, I felt it really put pressure on the other teams. They saw that we were as good as advertised on bars – and don't worry, we still have one more (routine with O'Keefe). It was like the New York Yankees out there."

Phillips, the team's fourth competitor on the event, moved up to a third-place tie with O'Keefe on the all-time program record board. Before Tuesday, Phillips' previous career-high of 9.35 was tied for sixth.

"Oh yeah, (the 9.6) was definitely a shock," Phillips said.

"I was so happy. I started crying, and everyone started running over. My friends were scoring and they were happy, too. My mom started crying. I've been trying to focus a lot more in practice. I've been doing a lot of routines and a lot of doubles, a lot of everything."

Garchitorenna provided the emotional lift on beam. After falls during the

team's first two routines, Garchitorea not only stayed on, but her 9.075 took fifth to earn a state berth.

Broucek followed with her first-place 9.275, duplicating her winning beam score at regionals. O'Keefe (9.025) was sixth.

"How do you come up and be that stopper?" Abbie had a great, clutch routine," Fuentes said. "One of my personal highlights of beam was seeing Abbie make top five. She's been on so many great teams for so many years and she's never qualified for the state meet herself. I just remember her as a little kid on beam four years ago, and now I see her growth and maturity into a great gymnast."

The next crop of freshmen also excelled. Besides Broucek, DeStefano bounced back from two falls off beam to deliver a key 8.875 floor routine as the team's third performer to tie for 12th. That was followed by Broucek (8.9, 11th) and O'Keefe (9.175, 9th).

DeStefano earlier made a great save as the second performer on uneven bars.

"She took three quick steps to save her double back dismount. That could have easily been a .5 fall and she kept herself on her feet," Fuentes said.

The Hilltoppers could have as many as four more individual state berths. Individuals also can advance at-large if they are among the 12 best remaining sectional scores that have already advanced.

After two sectionals, at-large candidates are O'Keefe on beam (9.025, tied for 3rd place at-large) and floor (9.175, 9th) and Broucek in all-around

(35.60, 11th place at-large) and uneven bars (9.025, tied for 11th).

For the Hilltoppers, it'll remain business as usual until they find out their team fate Thursday night. Phillips said none of her teammates plan on making the trip to Stevenson.

Fuentes makes it a point never to attend the other sectionals, but rather find out the results on the Internet.

"Even last year, it was that final refresh (on the SGS website) and being heartbroken," Fuentes said. "I have a hard enough time watching my own gymnasts. I can't do it. I can't watch.

"Hopefully I'll be able to coach another 25 years. There's going to be plenty of years that I just sneak in, and years that I just miss. That's just how the sport is. I'm so, so grateful that I have the talent and girls that are willing to do the work to even be in this position (to qualify). There are so many schools that never get to this position. I could have all of the gymnastics knowledge in the world, but if I don't have the athletes that want to put in the work, it's not just going to be there."