

Glenbard West sophomore Mackenzie O'Keefe was able to enjoy her second trip to the girls gymnastics state meet so much more.

"(I learned) just keep calm. I did (get nervous) last year, but this year I was more excited than anything," O'Keefe said.

O'Keefe and the Hilltoppers had plenty to be excited about. O'Keefe became just the fifth all-stater in program history as she finished fourth on the uneven parallel bars (9.4) in the state event finals Saturday at Palatine High School.

Freshman Amber Broucek reached the finals on balance beam and finished 10th (8.875). O'Keefe had a 10th-place finish in the all-around (37.25), which was determined by scores during Friday's team competition and event preliminaries.

Glenbard West also finished seventh as a team (143.425 points) in their third state team appearance in the past four seasons and fourth overall. The Hilltoppers, who finished just .25 behind sixth-place Lake Forest (143.675), posted the sixth-highest qualifying sectional score at sectionals (143.30).

"We got a beam finalist and a floor finalist so what more could you want?" Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said. "My goal was to have one finalist and Mackenzie in the top 10 (for all-around) and to have a good, positive meet (as a team) and we did, nothing that we didn't want."

O'Keefe, one of nine finalists on uneven bars who competed, only was beaten by Carmel senior Lauren Feely (9.625) and Lyons Township junior Michelle Cozza and Prairie Ridge co-op sophomore Rachael Underwood (9.5 each). The other finalists were three seniors and two sophomores.

“It’s really great. I didn’t even expect this at all,” O’Keefe said. “I don’t even remember (my routine) because it happened so fast. I was excited that I stuck my dismount because that was the one thing I was kind of worried about.”

Seniors Abbie Garchitorena and Rachel Gathof, junior Maggie Phillips and freshmen Sarah DeStefano and Mia Connolly also were part of the Hilltoppers’ state lineup. Garchitorena and Phillips also were individual state qualifiers.

O’Keefe is the third Glenbard West gymnast to earn top-five, all-state honors on uneven bars, all of them coming since Fuentes became head coach in the 2001-02 season. Seven of the Hilltoppers’ eight all-state performances also have come since Fuentes became head coach.

“We thought (O’Keefe) had the potential to be a top-five athlete on the uneven bars,” Fuentes said. “We always talk about that to be a state medalist, you have to be consistent, talented and hard-working and she’s all three of those. It’s a good validation for all of the hard work she put in on bars this year.”

Fuentes also saw that another year of experience was a contributing factor to O’Keefe’s success in the final.

“I felt she was really calm, really held her nerves in check in the final and just had a nice, solid bars routine, just exactly as expected, just as she trained it all year,” Fuentes said.

Phillips was making her third state appearance and Garchitorena and

O'Keefe their second. Phillips and Garchitorenna competed for the 2011 state team with Phillips also an individual state qualifier on uneven bars.

Last season, the Hilltoppers had three individual qualifiers, Phillips, O'Keefe and graduated Missy Guzman.

"It was awesome (having the team at state)," O'Keefe said. "I love our team so much. They're so amazing. I'm proud of everybody. Personally I feel really great and teamwise (for 2014). I think we're going to get a couple of freshmen and we're only losing Abbie and Rachel, which is so sad because it's going to be so weird without them."

State qualifiers that finish among the top 10 scores in Friday's team competition and event preliminaries advance to the event finals. While all four events are competed simultaneously Friday, for Saturday's finals gymnasts compete one event and one routine at a time in the order of vault, uneven bars, balance beam and floor exercise. The competition order is determined by a blind draw and preliminary scores and only Saturday's score accounts for the final standings.

On Friday, O'Keefe's 9.525 shared the third-highest preliminary score with Barrington freshman Abby Hasanov, who scratched from the finals because of illness. O'Keefe competed fourth Saturday and posted the highest score to that point.

In her first state trip last season, O'Keefe tied for 14th on uneven bars (9.2), missing the finals cut by .125.

"I was hoping (to make finals this time), but I didn't know. Everybody here is so amazing," O'Keefe said. "It's bolstered (my confidence) a lot. This whole

season was so great. We had a great team, a great year.”

Broucek became the first Glenbard West freshman to reach a state final on any event during Fuentes’ tenure, and probably the first in Glenbard West history. Broucek and Hasanov were the only freshmen to qualify for this year’s state finals.

“It was really exciting, and really nerveracking at the same time, probably the scariest thing this year for me,” Broucek said. “It was crazy, just totally nerves and everything. I didn’t even know what to think.”

Broucek won beam at the Glenbard West Regional and Glenbard West Sectional. On Friday, Broucek had the fourth-best score (9.475) to reach the finals.

“I kind of had an idea of it. If I did an absolute best routine that I ever could (Friday), yeah, I had a feeling that I could make (finals),” Broucek said.

“(State) was definitely something new to me, but I loved it. It’s awesome. (I’m motivated) a lot because there’s a lot of good people out there. Just seeing them do (their skills), I’m like, ‘Dang. That’s good.’ I want to do that.”

Broucek suffered a fall early in her finals routine but finished strong. Stevenson sophomore Alyssa Weisberg won beam (9.525) with Feely, the two-time defending state champion on the event, second (9.475). Four of the 11 finalists were seniors, and four were sophomores.

“It’s a great accomplishment (for Broucek), one of two freshmen in a state final and she’s my first freshman,” Fuentes said. “I told her walking in next year, if you’re lucky enough to make the final again, then it’s a little bit of

peace of mind that you've been here before, you've done this before."

O'Keefe showed the progress from her freshman year. She broke the school all-around record score twice this season with the current record of 38.125 to win the title at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Jan. 26 at Glenbard West.

Besides uneven bars, O'Keefe also qualified for state in 2012 in all-around and beam. This time, she reached state on all-around and all four events. She also tied for 12th on beam (9.125), just .075 from the finals cut, tied for 18th on floor (9.25), .125 from the finals, and was 26th on vault (9.35).

Garchitorenna was 26th on beam (8.675) with her first individual state berth. Phillips was 39th on uneven bars (8.2).

"I thought I kind of blew (my all-around) with beam, but to get 10th, it was really great. That was a surprise," O'Keefe said.

This year's state lineup had an interesting mix of state veterans and four gymnasts who had never competed before at state.

As usual, Garchitorenna, Broucek and DeStefano also competed for the team as all-arounders. Making her third state trip, Garchitorenna also was part of the 2010 state team as an alternate but did not compete.

"It was really sad to know that it was my last meet competing, but everybody did really well, I thought, and we all went out and tried our best," Garchitorenna said.

"(Glenbard West gymnastics) was a really great experience. I've met some of my best friends and having a great coach, too, he's taught us a lot. It's

something I'll look back on and be so proud of later on."

Besides the freshmen, Gathof made first state appearance after working her way up through the ranks of the junior varsity levels. On her one event, Gathof had a non-counting 8.575 as the Hilltoppers' first competitor on vault, .125 from her season high.

"It went well. I just went out there and I tried to start the vault rotation off well. That's basically all I had to do," Gathof said. "It was really different on the other side of the competition. The past three years, I've been watching it (from the stands). This year, I was in it so it was really cool."

The Hilltoppers competed first as a team on floor and had the lowest team score on the event (35.025) as well as vault (36.575). But they bounced back on uneven bars, their strongest event (4th, 35.725) and beam (6th, 36.10), where they counted just one fall.

One big reason for the Hilltoppers' strong finish was DeStefano. She not only overcame an ankle and knee injury suffered during her floor routine that cut her program short, but she performed well on her final three events.

"It didn't start off too good (for me). It got better as it went on," DeStefano said. "I just rolled (my ankle). My knee was just hurting really bad but I knew I had to keep doing the other events so I just did. It kind of helped me focus because I knew how it hurt so much that I had to go harder than I usually do."

On vault, the Hilltoppers' next event, DeStefano delivered a 9.0, one of four 9s for the Hilltoppers on the event along with O'Keefe (9.35), Broucek (9.225) and Garchitorena (9.0). DeStefano followed that with an 8.6 on

uneven bars and 8.825 on beam.

“After that (injury on floor), she came back and did great,” Fuentes said. “I just told her to make sure she remembers that when she thinks of the state meet. Don’t remember, ‘Oh, I messed up on floor.’ Remember how great you did on vault, and then you hit your bars routines and stuck beam. We all dwell on the negative, and she really needs to look at all of the positives that came out of it.”

Broucek (36.525) and Garchitorena (35.125) also had strong all-around efforts. Broucek actually scored well above the 36.125 all-around at-large cut to qualify for state, but her 35.60 at sectionals was shy of advancing.

In their other non-qualifying events, Broucek scored 8.95 on floor and 8.875 on uneven bars, and Garchitorena scored 8.725 on floor and uneven bars. Connolly, who competed on two events, had a counting 8.1 on floor.

Silver rival Lyons Township (149.625) edged Prairie Ridge co-op (149.30) for its first state championship by moving up from second place after Friday during the event finals. Teams improve their scores by the amount individual event qualifiers improve their preliminary scores Saturday.

Fremd (146.05) was third with New Trier (145.375) and first-time qualifier Geneva (145.225) fourth and fifth. St. Charles co-op (141.675) was eighth. At the Glenbard West Sectional, the Hilltoppers (143.30) had finished second to St. Charles co-op (143.775) with Geneva (142.825) third.

“(State) was really fun. It was fun to watch everyone and all of the teams compete since we’ve never seen some of them before,” Connolly said. “I think that a lot of the teams were really good, though, and I think that we

did really well.”

“Walking into state as a freshman, everyone seems so good. It makes you want to train harder this summer so you can come back here and be better,” DeStefano said.

The Hilltoppers have several returnees to keep the state tradition going. Phillips, who scored a career-high 9.6 on uneven bars to win sectionals, has the chance to be among a select few Hilltoppers to compete at the state meet all four years.

“We’re losing Abbie and Rachel so we’re really hoping that we get two other really good girls like Abbie and Rachel. We’re hoping for a few girls who are pretty good. It should be good next year,” Phillips said.

“I’m really motivated. I’m going to work real hard over the summer so I can get more skills in my routine so it can score higher. I have my friends with me so it will be good. They really help me do my best.”