

Junior Maggie Phillips and her Glenbard West girls gymnastics teammates had a long day and night Thursday, Feb. 7.

The Hilltoppers were awaiting the final word whether they had qualified at-large as a team for the state meet.

“After practice, we kind of realized, ‘Oh my God, we find out in like four hours. We don’t know what is going to happen,’ ” Phillips said.

After a one-year absence, yes, the Hilltoppers are back in the eight-team state field Friday, Feb. 15, at Palatine High School after scoring 143.30 points at the Glenbard West Sectional Feb. 5.

Since the start of the final sectional at Stevenson was delayed about 35 minutes because of poor road conditions, the Hilltoppers didn’t get the official news until roughly 10:20 p.m.

“We all stayed up, and our parents did, too,” Phillips said. “When we finally got the word, we were really happy. And then we went to bed.”

State team competition and individual all-around finals and event preliminaries begin at 5:05 p.m. Friday. Individual event finals are at 5:45 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 16, for qualifiers who are among the top 10 preliminary scores.

Glenbard West senior Abbie Garchitorena, Phillips, sophomore Mackenzie O’Keefe and freshman Amber Broucek also are individual state qualifiers. Senior Rachel Gathof and freshmen Mia Connolly and Sarah DeStefano also were part of the sectional lineup. Phillips (career-high 9.6 on uneven parallel bars) and Broucek (9.275 on balance beam) were event champions at the sectional.

Glenbard West's 143.30 was the state's sixth-highest sectional score. At state, Glenbard West joins the four sectional team champions – Prairie Ridge co-op (149.525), Lyons Township (149.25), New Trier (144.40) and St. Charles co-op (143.775) – and the three other at-large teams – Fremd (146.225), Geneva (142.825) and Lake Forest (142.45).

The Hilltoppers had a long two days to wait after finishing second to St. Charles co-op at the Glenbard West Sectional. With Geneva also qualifying, the sectional yielded a state-most three team qualifiers.

At the Stevenson Sectional, second-place Lake Forest edged three-time defending state champion Carmel (142.425) by just .025 for the final at-large berth. Last year, Lake Forest edged the Hilltoppers for the final at-large spot by .5.

As usual, Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes simply waited for the final results to be posted on the Internet before texting his athletes with the good news.

“(I was) just kind of sitting home, watching TV, waiting for the scores, then keep refreshing, waiting for the scores to come up,” Fuentes said. “We felt pretty strong, knowing what the other scores had been throughout the year for those teams (at Stevenson). If did miss, it would not be for lack of trying.”

This state lineup is a mix of state veterans and newcomers. Garchitorena, Phillips and O’Keefe previously have competed at state while Broucek, Gathof, Connolly and DeStefano will be making their first trips. Garchitorena, O’Keefe, Broucek and DeStefano are all-arounders.

"It'll be a lot more fun because I'll have the whole team with me (this year)," said O'Keefe, one of Glenbard West's three individual state qualifiers in 2012.

"It's a lot longer (meet) and a lot more intense and everybody's really focused and there's two different gym (one for warmups) so that's different. It's really fun, too. It's more fun because everybody's really into what they're doing and it's really serious instead of some of these duals that are kind of casual. It's for real, legit."

This is Glenbard West's third state team appearance in the past four years and fourth overall. They were fifth 2010 (145.65) and seventh in 2011 (144.65) and 2005 (142.40).

This season, the Hilltoppers have scored as high as 146.00 Jan. 12. Their next two highest scores were at their two meets prior to sectionals at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Jan. 26 (145.40) and Glenbard West Regional Jan. 29 (144.90).

Phillips will be competing in her third state meet and Garchitorena and O'Keefe their second.

In 2010, Phillips competed on uneven bars for the team and Garchitorena was an alternate. They both competed at state in 2011 with Phillips also an individual qualifier on uneven bars. Garchitorena competed for the team on everything but uneven bars.

"It just feels different this year. I don't know, but as a senior, it feels different," Garchitorena said. "Everybody was just so excited, finding out that we made it as a team to state. That's just the best feeling."

Last season, Phillips and O'Keefe competed at state as individuals along with graduated Missy Guzman. O'Keefe qualified for in all-around (24th, 35.975), uneven bars (tied for 14th, 9.2) and beam (31st, 8.3) and Phillips qualified on uneven bars (33rd, 7.875).

"It was great to go (to state) with them, but I really would have liked to have my team there with me so it's going to be better this year now that I have all of them," Phillips said. "It's really great, especially because we have three freshmen this year. It's really great that it's their first experience at state."

Individual sectional qualifiers advance to state either automatically with a top-five sectional finish or at-large by being among the 12 highest-scoring remaining performances at sectionals, regardless of site or place. This year's at-large state cuts were 36.125 all-around, 9.475 vault, 9.1 uneven bars, 9.0 beam and 9.175 floor.

Phillips and Broucek advanced on one event each with their sectional titles. Garchitorenna advanced on beam with a fifth-place 9.075.

O'Keefe advanced automatically on three events. She was second in all-around (37.30) to Glenbard North senior Mariah Matesi (37.375), second on uneven bars (9.575) and tied for third on vault (9.525).

After the good team state news, O'Keefe found out at practice the following afternoon that she also qualified at-large on the other two events. Her sixth-place 9.025 on beam, even with a fall, edged the 9.0 at-large state cut, and her ninth-place 9.175 on floor was the final at-large score to advance.

"I had no idea. I felt for sure I wouldn't make it on beam and floor," O'Keefe said. "It just pushes me that much more to do better for the team."

At sectionals, Phillips and O'Keefe got the team pumped up on uneven bars. Phillips, who never scored higher than 9.35, boosted her score by .25 as the team's fourth performer to eventually win the event.

After Phillips was swarmed by her teammates, O'Keefe followed and just missed her career high by .025.

"(For Phillips) to just come in during sectionals with a perfect bars routine was so great," O'Keefe said.

"It was really great to share the moment with them," Phillips said. "We talked about the meet and the bars routine was definitely one of the things we were most proud of."

On the next event, Garchitorena had one of the team's most important routines, a solid beam effort as the Hilltoppers' third performer after falls during the first two routines. The score was high enough to reward Garchitorena with her first individual state berth.

"It just made me want to stick it even more. I just went up there and tried my best," Garchitorena said. "That was really exciting because I've never made it as an individual before. To top off senior year, yeah, it was nice."

The varsity newcomers came through as well. Broucek followed her regional title with a sectional title on beam, even though it took her a while to figure out she won.

"When beam (awards were) going, she kept wondering if she was going to be called up," DeStefano said. "She was like, 'Did I not make it?' And then, 'I

won?' "

"I didn't expect it at all. I was just shocked. I was ecstatic," Broucek said. "It felt really good, though, to hit at sectionals."

As the first performers on events, Gathof (8.425 on vault) and Connolly (8.4 on floor) had scores that counted toward the team total. DeStefano turned in a solid 8.875 on floor after falling twice off beam and earlier saved falling on her double back off uneven bars by taking a few steps backwards.

"We just practice so many dismounts that I always have to practice finding my timing so I'm used to going either back or forward," DeStefano said.

"After you're done with an event, you've just got to move on to the next one. You've just got to do it for the team. I just kind of forgot (about beam), did (floor)."

In all-around at sectionals, Broucek was eighth (35.60) with Garchitorena 15th (34.775) and DeStefano 19th (34.05). Among the Hilltoppers' other non-advancing performances among sectional qualifiers, Broucek was ninth on uneven bars (9.025), just .075 from the state cut, 11th on floor (8.9) and 25th on vault (8.4), Garchitorena was 10th on vault (9.25) and tied for 26th on uneven bars (8.125) and tied for 27th on floor (8.325), and DeStefano was 12th on floor (8.875), 22nd on uneven bars (8.55) and tied for 26th on beam (7.85).

Sectional scores do not carry over to state, but based on all sectional results, Phillips tied for fourth and O'Keefe tied for sixth with their scores on uneven bars and Broucek was 13th on beam. State preliminary scores also do not carry over to finals.

Among the eight qualifying teams, the Hilltoppers had the fourth-highest on uneven bars (36.75) and fifth-highest on beam (35.225) despite counting three falls. They had the lowest team scores on vault (35.975) and floor (35.35).

“(My state goal for them) really is just do what they’ve done all year, just go out there, be consistent, hit routines just like you have before. The scores will bear out in terms of consistency and where we place,” Fuentes said.

“You want to hold sixth (where we’re seeded), but if you can make up some ground, that would be great as well. I think they’re capable of it. I think just having a good, positive experience (is important), especially with them having the opportunity to perhaps go back for another couple of years.”

After sectionals, the Hilltoppers continued practicing trying to maintain the mindset that they had qualified as a team. They received an early indication of what state might be like when they did short performances during an all-school assembly at Biester Gym honoring winter sports athletes Feb. 7.

“It’s 2,200 students. If you can handle the pressure of all of your peers in front of you, I told them the state meet is going to be a walk in the park compared to this,” Fuentes said.

The state scenario is bigger. There are four judges per event instead of two. While there were roughly 45 to 47 competitors per event at sectionals, there will be 64 to 67 per event in the state preliminaries.

Broucek and Connolly have never witnessed the high-school state meet.

"I'm excited because it's obviously our first year going to state," Connolly said. "It's not too stressful, just that a lot of people are going to be watching us. We'll just try to hit as many routines as possible."

DeStefano previously has attended to watch her cousin, 2012 graduate Nicole Pagor, compete for the Hilltoppers. DeStefano's first lasting image was of former Prairie Ridge co-op standout Jenny Covers, who won seven state titles from 2009-11.

"I was like, 'Oh my God. They're all so good,' " DeStefano said. "It looked like so much pressure, but they were all amazing. It was like watching little Olympics."

Gathof has attended the last three state meets as a spectator to cheer on her teammates. She entered the season on the junior varsity I level, but she became a varsity regular on vault after the Oswego Invitational Dec. 28.

"I never expected to be competing at the state meet for gymnastics. I can't even imagine right now. I'm so excited," Gathof said. "I was definitely hoping for them to make it to state. It is awesome going to state with them, being part of their team this year, helping them out a little bit."

Now a veteran, O'Keefe was explaining the state process that was all new to her in 2012 to the freshmen. The hectic night of qualifying news already had not gone well for them.

Broucek did not receive Fuentes' text message because her phone was broken, but she did find out via Facebook thanks to a posting by Garchitorenna.



DeStefano completely missed the hoopla until the next day.

“I go to bed pretty early,” DeStefano said. “I was sleeping so when I woke up I had a bunch of texts to me like, ‘You made it to state,’ so it made my morning.”