

Sophomore Amanda Leon has been a consistently strong performer on balance beam for the Hinsdale Central girls gymnastics team, but she knew she needed to improve.

Halfway through the season, she began working on a standing back flip.

"I was working on the low bar and I don't know where I got the guts to do that because that's usually not like me," Leon said. "(Hinsdale Central coach Kim Estoque and I) just kind of looked at each other and I went and did it on high beam. They were looking pretty good. I did it alone and without her standing there so it got better over time."

Leon finally was ready to test the trick in her routine, but she fell trying to land it the first two times at the conference and regional meets.

At the Hinsdale Central Sectional Wednesday, Feb. 10, Leon landed it – and now she's going to the state meet for the first time.

Leon tied for fifth (8.85) and earned an automatic state berth with a top-five sectional finish.

"I don't know what to say. It's just really shocking," Leon said. "I just went out there and tried my hardest and my goal was just to stick my beam routine. I've been working really hard in the gym and trying to stick it and I did pretty good. I'm very proud of myself.

"I think it paid off by adding it. It's difficult, but it's satisfying in the end."

Hinsdale Central (137.05 points) finished third among the six team qualifiers with a lineup of all underclassmen. Sophomores Lily Jones, Jessica Elliott, Jenny Sims and Jessica Sprong and freshman Kylie Torsberg also were individual sectional qualifiers. Freshman Madison Boshardt competed on beam for the team.

The Red Devils nearly scored higher than they did at the 2015 sectionals (4th, 138.80) with essentially the same lineup but minus the graduated Brigid Cultra, an individual state qualifier in her one high-school season, and four-year varsity gymnast Maddie Sesemann.

"I'm very happy with them (this season). I think they've come a long way," Estoque said. "Brigid was a 9-plus (all-arounder) and we're scoring about the same as we did last year. They all kind of pulled together. I think they're excited (for next year)."

For Leon, however, there's still state. She was among the Red Devils who last year watched Cultra compete at state on the uneven parallel bars and floor exercise.

"It was fun to see her bounce around," Leon said. "I know there's a big screen (that shows routines). That's very terrifying. That freaks me out a little bit."

Consistently tight judging on beam throughout the four sectionals had Leon on edge. She was pretty satisfied with her routine but initially thought her season was done when she saw the 8.85. As the meet continued, it became evident that she could advance automatically as a top-five finisher.

After the final sectional the next night at Glenbard West, the at-large cutoff score was 8.85 so she still would have advanced.

"I definitely thought that you needed a 9 for sure in order to qualify for state," Leon said. "I know all of my teammates were like, 'Oh, you're going to make it.' and I was like, 'I don't know.' It felt really rewarding because I know the last couple of meets I haven't been able to stick it, but in practice I've been more consistent with it. Once I stuck it, it just felt like a whole bunch of relief came out and it was so nice."

"She has really started hitting them this week in practice," Estoque added. "Before that, it was very iffy but we knew she needed it so we kept plugging away. I've been telling her for a while

that if she wants to go further she needed a standing back. You can't go anywhere without an aerial (skill)."

Perhaps just as impressive as Leon's standing back was the rest of her beam routine. The trick comes about halfway through so there still remained a lot more she needed to execute.

"There is other things I could possibly fall on," Leon said. "That makes me a little nervous but I just try not to think about it. I don't really think on beam. My brain's just empty basically."

Leon also tied for seventh at sectionals on vault (9.275) and was ninth in all-around (35.225), .075 and .60 from those respective state cuts. She also was 16th on floor (8.875) and 24th on uneven bars (8.225).

Jones also qualified for sectionals in all five events. She was 10th on vault (9.25), 14th on uneven bars (8.6), 16th in all-around (34.075) and 23rd on floor (8.675) and beam (7.55).

Among the Red Devils' other sectional qualifiers, Torsberg was 16th on uneven bars (8.425), tied for 16th on vault (9.025), tied for 18th in all-around (33.775) and was 27th on floor (8.55), Sprong was 12th on vault (9.175) and 26th on uneven bars (7.575), Sims was 15th on beam (8.15) and Elliott was 21st on vault (8.85) and 26th on uneven bars (8.175).

Vault became the Red Devils' strongest event at regionals and sectionals. Jones missed fifth by .075 and the at-large state cut by .1. Sprong, .15 from fifth, was especially disappointed because she had finished second at the conference meet with a career-high 9.45 and landed both of her vaults Wednesday.

"I'm really upset about it," Sprong said. "The first (sectional) vault was really good. Then the few steps (after landing) just messed it all up. My second one I stuck. (But) I bent my knees. I knew that but I was like, 'I bent my knees on the one that I did at conference and I still got a 9.45.'

"When the score popped up, I was just like, 'Wow (a 9.175).' You can't question vault scores so we just had to accept it and that was really hard."

The Red Devils still finished on quite an upswing. After losing to rival Lyons Township in their dual and finishing third at the conference meet, one place behind LT, they scored a season-high 138.575 to win regionals and comfortably defeat the second-place Lions (134.975).

"I think we made a lot of progress as a team, too," Sprong said. "Towards the end of the season, we're just kind of like, 'We're just going to have fun.' When you go out with the mindset of you're just going to have fun, everything else just falls into place.

"Especially at regionals, we're just like, 'You know what? We can beat LT but we're not going to worry about it. We're just going to worry about ourselves. We're just going to have fun,' so that's what we did and we ended up doing extremely well."

Estoque said she was especially pleased that the team peaked for its best and most consistent meets the final weeks of the season.

After the Red Devils helped to clean up the main gym following sectionals, many of them sat in the corner bleachers already talking about next season.

"Last year we thought we were working hard but we kind of had Brigid to lean on. I think this season coming into it, we just wanted it a lot more so that made us work harder," Jones said.

"Now that Amanda made it to state, everyone is just kind of hopeful for next year. During the offseason, we were all talking about what we're going to do. We're all going to work a lot harder and hopefully we come back stronger."