

Hinsdale Central senior Erin Morgan's final home meet at the Hinsdale Central Sectional Wednesday, Feb. 6 could have been her last as a gymnast.

"I was definitely a little worried knowing it was the last time I'd be competing with all of this equipment," Morgan said. "I just went in with confidence knowing I'd be very regretful if I didn't have a good meet. I was confident I was going to hit 4 for 4 and I did."

Morgan didn't just hit all of her events. She advanced to her fourth state meet in all-around and all four events after a great performance that included a sectional championship on balance beam (9.425) and a co-championship on vault (season-high 9.725) with Lyons Township sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst.

Morgan's second-place all-around total of 37.625 was just shy of her all-time highest total of 37.70. This is the second straight year Morgan has qualified for state in all-around and all four events. Last year, she also earned top-five, all-state honors by taking fourth on beam (9.45).

"I think it's just kind of the pressure of the overall (sectional) meet, knowing this meet is what directly feeds into state that kind of motivates me to do my very best," Morgan said. "I felt very confident with my vault and beam scores. Those are probably one of my tops, I'd say, for my career in gymnastics."

Junior Cayley Brenk also advanced to her third state meet, and she did it in dramatic fashion. In the Red Devils' final event, she qualified at-large with her season-high 9.5 on vault, which tied for seventh place.

"I knew I had to do it because I had a rough time on bars and beam," Brenk said. "I really, really wanted to qualify for vault. It felt so good, though. I just got the biggest adrenaline rush."

The sectional brought out the best in many Red Devils. They scored 140.90 points, their second-highest score of the season, to finish second to state-

title contender Lyons Township's 149.25 in the six-team field.

Seniors Hannah Kapelinski and Anne Zircher and junior Emma Christoph also were individual sectional qualifiers. Sophomore Maddie Sesemann and freshmen Elle Bergevin and Lindsey Riker also were part of the sectional team lineup.

"Our goal coming into this meet was to get a 140 and place second and we did both of those things so I couldn't be prouder of the girls," Hinsdale Central coach Kim Estoque said.

The state meet is Friday and Saturday, Feb. 15-16 at Palatine High School. Team competition and individual all-around finals and event preliminaries start at 5:05 p.m. Friday, and individual event finals are at 5:45 p.m. Saturday.

Individuals qualify for state either automatically with top-five sectional finishes or at-large by being among the 12 highest remaining scores from the four sectionals. This year's at-large state cuts were 36.125 all-around, 9.475 vault, 9.1 uneven parallel bars, 9.0 balance beam and 9.175 floor exercise.

The Red Devils posted the state's 11th-highest sectional team score after a regular-season high of 141.575 Dec. 8 in winning their home invite. The fourth and final at-large cut for the eight-team state field was 142.45.

"Everyone knew it was going to be the last home meet of the season so we kind of all felt that motivation to have a really good meet altogether," Morgan said. "We had a team goal for a long time this season to get a 140 and we got that for the second time so it was a good ending."

Morgan couldn't have asked for a much better sectional after a challenging past few weeks. Besides her sectional titles, Morgan was fourth on floor (9.375) and her 9.1 on uneven bars, which tied for eighth, advanced to state at-large as the final qualifying score.

During winter break, Morgan injured her ankle working beam but continued to train cautiously through it. When the pain increased after competing all-around on Senior Night Jan. 17, there may have been some concerns about her postseason.

“I kind of got better and then it got much worse so I was a little worried about it, but it seems to be doing a little bit better so I hope it’ll stay that way,” Morgan said.

Morgan actually excelled at sectionals on beam, the event she’s said has given her ankle the most pain to perform. Morgan won by .025 over Kurfirst and LT senior Maren Craig (9.4)

“I think just knowing the season is coming to an end makes me kind of just put the pain out of my head and deal with it until next weekend (at state),” Morgan said. “I know I can deal with it. I just have to go out and do one more final meet.”

Brenk also has battled her way back to state after being a 2012 individual qualifier in all-around, vault and uneven bars. On Wednesday, she also was 11th in all-around (35.225), tied for 13th on floor (8.775), was 18th on beam (8.2) and tied for 19th on uneven bars (8.75).

After having her offseason training sidelined by strep throat, Brenk had a scary moment in the Red-White preseason intrasquad meet when she hit her head against the vaulting table.

It’s taken her all season to regain the confidence and form to land the pike Yurchenko that also carried her to state in 2012. Brenk was 34th on vault at state last year (9.125).

“I’m actually writing a paper on my vault for English (class), how I’ve tried to overcome (the landing) and how sports work that way,” Brenk said. “It just feels good to know that I can improve and I can overcome something like

that.”

Teammates beyond even this year’s current Red Devils have helped. Morgan is the last of three outstanding all-state gymnasts from her family, following Dan for the boys and Colleen for the girls. Since Colleen is on a work internship in Oak Brook this college semester, she has been able to attend most of the Red Devils’ recent meets.

Colleen even decorated the family’s kitchen to help Erin get motivated for sectionals.

“She definitely helps a lot. She gets me motivated and when I kind of get down on myself, she kind of knows exactly what to say to get myself back up there again,” Erin Morgan said.

“It’s been great to watch Erin compete (so often),” Colleen Morgan said. “I’ve been the loudest one in the stands for her. It’s been amazing to watch her and I kind of live vicariously through her because I miss gymnastics.”

Unfortunately, Colleen, and Dan also experienced ankle injuries their senior seasons of gymnastics.

“It’s something that I can definitely attest to (with Erin). I was talking to her at conference and some of the dual meets just saying, ‘Do you want it now or do you want it at state?’ ” Colleen Morgan said. “I knew she could do it mentally. It was just mentally if she could handle the pain and perform well.

“Today (at sectionals), you couldn’t even tell she was in pain. She attacked everything and I think that is why she did so well.”

Brenk often gets advice and insight from her graduated teammates on the Red Devils’ 2011 state team. Perhaps the most important this season has been Kristen Grilli, now a freshman at the University of Wisconsin.

“For motivation, I actually talk to Kristen a lot because she did my same

Yurchenko vault and no one on the team (currently) does that kind of vault,” Brenk said. “(Also) at practice, I just did timers for a solid month without flipping, and that actually helped me because the flip isn’t the scariest part.”

Led by the season highs from state qualifiers Morgan and Brenk, the Red Devils posted a season-best team score on vault (37.10) by .65. Christoph (tied for 17th, 9.05) and Zircher (28th, 8.825) just missed their respective season bests of 9.1 and 8.9.

“I always said vault was our strongest (event) and they showed it finally,” Estoque said with a laugh.

Among other Hinsdale Central individual sectional qualifiers, Christoph tied for 16th on beam (8.275) and was 17th on floor (8.725), and Kapelinski tied for 24th on beam (7.85) in her first time as an individual qualifier.

“(My 9.05 vault score) definitely motivates me for next season because I know that I’ve improved this season, even though it wasn’t enough to make it to state,” Christoph said. “It really pushes me to get to that next level so that I’m able to make it to state next year. That’ll really push me this summer.”

Morgan has qualified for state four times on floor and three on vault and uneven bars. At last year’s state meet, however, she made the most of her first event finals after qualifying on beam with the ninth best preliminary score of 9.275.

Morgan also tied for 11th on vault (9.625), .025 from the finals, and tied for 16th on uneven bars (9.15), .175 from finals and was 19th on floor (9.3), .2 from finals. With her preliminary scores, Morgan was 10th in all-around (37.35), .575 from fifth and behind three seniors.

“I’d like to see (Erin) make more than one final. Last year, she made beam, which isn’t really her best event, but she did (hit it well),” Estoque said.

Gymnasts start from scratch at state, but based on sectional results, Morgan shared the fifth-highest scores in all-around and vault and was sixth on beam and tied for 13th on floor.

“I just want to go to state and hit 4 for 4, just end my gymnastics career on a good meet,” Morgan said. “I want to hopefully make it to state finals again because that’s definitely a fun thing -- on anything. I don’t care (which event).”