

Hinsdale South senior gymnasts Shur Batmunkh, Brenna Budaitis, McKinsey Hultmark and Jorie Smith prepared for floor exercise at the Naperville North Regional Feb. 5 knowing they probably would be their final high-school routines.

"I think we just went out there," Smith said. "(It was) just do our best, as usual, just go out there, have fun and enjoy a lot of our last times competing."

The Hornets' season came to an end at regionals with a fourth-place 106.95 points but it proved to be a memorable one.

The four seniors already were the best of friends but grew as gymnasts and leaders, along with senior Melanie Lundgren from the junior varsity I lineup, for a program that ended the season with no juniors.

"I feel like just in general (we contributed) leadership, responsibility and confidence. I feel like this is a huge sport where you need confidence," Budaitis said.

"Overall, everyone on the team was so supportive. I liked how there was no drama at all. We all helped out each other. We didn't take it as offensive if somebody said, 'You should work on this.' We listened to them so we could improve. It was a good learning experience."

Individuals advanced to the Hinsdale Central Sectional Feb. 12 either automatically with top-five regional finishes or at-large by being among the 12 remaining scores from the four feed-in regionals.

Smith (8.5 on vault, 10th place at regional) and Batmunkh (season-high 27.375 in all-around, 8th) were still eligible to advance at-large after the regional but were later eliminated before the final regional Feb. 7 at Lyons Township. Smith missed the at-large sectional vault cut by just .1.

"I think they're just glad to be done. (The seniors) were like, 'That's my last routine.' They just enjoyed it," Hinsdale South coach Jennifer Fichter said.

"They had such a good season and they kept saying this was their favorite year. I was just sitting here with (assistant coaches Mia Tritch and Katie Lennox) saying I'm going to miss them so much. They really led the team in so many ways. Their leadership was just incredible."

Smith and Batmunkh were the only returnees from last season's all non-senior lineup that won a second straight West Suburban Conference Gold Division title. They and Budaitis competed for the Hornets all four years while Hultmark and Lundgren returned this season after first competing as sophomores but sitting out their junior years.

At regionals, the Hornets used the same lineup of five all-arounders that they used at the WSC Gold Meet Jan. 31 at Leyden – Smith, Batmunkh, Budaitis, Hultmark and sophomore Eva Bucke.

Team-high scores on other events came from Batmunkh on beam (7.175, 12th), Budaitis on floor (7.775, 15th) and Bucke on uneven bars (5.175, 16th).

Batmunkh hadn't competed as an all-arounder until adding uneven bars Jan. 16. Batmunkh (7.65) and Bucke (7.625) both had season-high scores on floor, and Batmunkh tied her season high of 7.8 on vault.

"I personally thought we really improved on bars and vault (especially)," Budaitis said. "At the beginning of the season, it was a little shaky because we didn't have the people from last year. We had some skills because we don't do (gymnastics) year round. We just do it during the season. It was surprising how much we improved actually. We worked really hard and we worked well with each other."

The seniors will get to have one more high-school sports season this spring. Smith, Hultmark and Budaitis will be teammates in track along with Bucke. Lundgren will play water polo.

"We were a really cohesive group," Smith said. "I think our presence is very reassuring to the underclassmen. They look up to the seniors so

much. We've been working hard this past week going into conference and then this week coming into regionals. I think it's just all paid off."

Bucke already is optimistic about next season after finishing on a strong note. She had her best overall performance at the Gold Meet, where the Hornets scored 108.825 to finish fourth ahead of Morton (104.725) and Leyden (104.65) and take fourth in the final overall Gold standings after losing their dual with Leyden Jan. 9.

"I'm just going to take what I did this year and really hope to just keep using it for next year," Bucke said. "It really helped me this year being on varsity because I pushed myself really hard so now I can bring it into next year. Where the girls may not be able to push themselves, now I'll be like, 'I'm going to push you.' "

Smith had the Hornets' lone top-10 finish by sharing 10th on vault (8.35).

In all-around, Smith (27.70), Bucke (27.20) and Batmunkh (26.85) each had season highs to finish 13th, 15th and 16th. Budaitis (26.40) and Hultmark (25.10) were 17th and 19th.

Batmunkh was a team-best 13th on beam (7.2) and Smith was a team-best 14th on floor (7.75) with Batmunkh 17th (7.325). Bucke had a team-high 5.525 on uneven bars for 18th and had season-high scores on floor (7.575) for 16th and beam (6.9) to tie for 16th.

"I didn't fall off (beam). That was nice. I think it was (the highlight) just because I've been working so hard and now that I finally stuck you're just like, 'Yes!' " Bucke said.

"(Floor) was great. (Fichter) said, 'Just have fun out there,' and I was like, 'All right,' and when I had fun out there, it's like less nerves and I feel like I perform better."

-- by Bill Stone