

Even better than sophomore Eva Bucke's first varsity balance beam routine for the Hinsdale South girls gymnastics team Nov. 27 was her reaction afterwards.

"She was so excited. That smile, you could see it across the gym when she landed her cartwheel," Hinsdale South coach Jennifer Fichter said.

Bucke was among two varsity newcomers who competed -- and had fun -- at the season-opening home Hornet Invitational. The Hornets finished eighth with 96.20 points.

While seniors Jorie Smith and Shur Batmunkh are varsity returnees, seniors Brenna Budaitis and McKinsey Hultmark also were part of the lineup. Budaitis competed on varsity for the first time since freshman year, and Hultmark also made her varsity debut.

"In our team huddle I said to the girls, 'What are we going to do today?' They said, 'We're going to do our best and we're going to have fun.' I said, 'That's my speech,'" Fichter said.

"That's all we can ask for. That's all we can ever ask for. We've got room for improvement, but they sure tried their best."

The invite was quite a leap for Bucke. After being a top competitor on the junior varsity II level as a freshman, Bucke was among the team's three all-arounders.

"It was intense. I'm not at their high level, but I thought it was a lot of fun and it was fun to compete with girls that are so good," Bucke said.

"I just tried to think to have fun, don't take it too seriously because I just like to go out there and try my best."

Budaitis (25.15) and Smith (24.15) joined Bucke (22.60) as all-arounders. Top event scores came from Smith on vault (8.1, 21st place), Budaitis on floor (7.2, tied for 24th) and uneven parallel bars (3.9, 35th) and Batmunkh on beam (7.0, tied for 29th).

Batmunkh competed on vault, beam and floor, and Hultmark competed on vault and uneven bars.

"(Our meet) was actually better than I expected, especially on beam. We had two sticks, which is pretty awesome, and I think we went out there and had fun like we wanted to," Batmunkh said.

"I think (our varsity newcomers) were kind of overwhelmed and a little nervous at first, but then they saw other people go. Once they got started with their routines, they just keep going. You just focus on what you're doing. When you're not worried about what other people do, then you tend to do pretty well."

Bucke has never performed better on beam. She stayed on and earned a career-high 5.8.

"I actually stuck it. That was really exciting," Bucke said. "I was really happy about that. I thought I wasn't going to, but I did."

"She normally doesn't stay on, even in practice, so when her feet were on the beam, she was like, 'Oh my God,'" Fichter said. "Stuff like that just makes my day."

Defending state champion Lyons Township won the invite for the second year in a row with 144.25 points. Like most meets, teams could enter as many as five gymnasts per event. The Hornets used only four on uneven bars, beam and floor.

Fichter said the invite served as an indicator for her gymnasts as they establish goal sheets for what they want to work on individually and as a team.

"They've seen what some of the other teams are doing and they kind of what know their starting point is. I'm going to have them set their own (goals), and I'll help them a little bit," Fichter said.

Bucke said getting to compete on all four events gave her an even better

opportunity about what to expect this season and how she can improve.

"It was nice because then I knew I could redeem on a different event that I was better at or see how good I could do and what my stamina was and all of that," Bucke said.

"If I stuck my beam routine, I know that I can do it and now I can add more skills and stuff. I didn't feel so shaky today, which was really good. It was a good learning experience."

-- by Bill Stone