

Senior Shur Batmunkh is taking on an increased workload this season for the Hinsdale South girls gymnastics team.

"I'm going to do more events," Batmunkh said. "It's a huge adjustment. This is the first time in my four years that I've actually committed to competing (on the uneven parallel) bars."

The Hornets are more inexperienced this season but they are just as old. Their varsity lineup will rely on five seniors – Batmunkh, Brenna Budaitis, McKinsey Hultmark, Natalie Lofgren and Jorie Smith – and sophomore Eva Bucke.

Batmunkh and Smith, the only varsity regulars from last season, and Budaitis are fourth-year members of the program. Hultmark and Lofgren did not compete as juniors.

"Because we have five seniors this year, it really helps the underclassmen," Smith said. "I think we five seniors better connect with the underclassmen than in previous years. I feel like I didn't really know the seniors in past year as well, so I think we're connecting better with them. They're more comfortable coming to us if they have any questions or anything. This is a really young team."

Last season, the Hornets won a second consecutive overall West Suburban Conference Gold Division title with a non-senior lineup.

However, five varsity regulars did not return, current sophomore and state qualifier Maddie Nowak, seniors Jessica Hawken and Taylor Daley, junior Lauren Haney and sophomore Erica Meyer.

When Hinsdale South coach Jennifer Fichter had a pre-season meeting at the end of the school year to help select new competition leotards, Batmunkh and Smith were the only varsity regulars who came.

"Jorie and Shur said they were going to come out (this season) and going to come in with an open mind. They were going to treat it as nothing had changed," Fichter said. "I think they assumed they were going to be the leaders."

They've received plenty of help. Budaltis is an experienced team member who competed at regionals as a freshman. Hultmark and Lofgren are back with the team after coming out as sophomores but not competing last season.

"The first positive that comes to mind is the senior leadership that I have, which is so wonderful, so positive," Fichter said. "They are true leaders. I can count on them for whatever we need and they're really leading the group."

Progress and patience will be two keys for the Hornets. Out of the 22 gymnasts on the team, there is only one junior, Aaliyah Amos, and eight sophomores and freshmen. Many have never competed in gymnastics or at least years prior to high school.

"We're going to have fun. And we're just going to look to improve every week," Fichter said. "We're working hard. We're using our practice time. We are conditioning. There will be a big improvement. We're going to start off slow and scoring low and I don't anticipate us scoring super high, but you'll definitely see an improvement score wise. The judges will. We will as coaches."

"I've been coaching for 12 years. It's awesome to win. Of course, who doesn't like to win? But there's so much more. This is high school gymnastics. We're teaching teamwork, dedication, focus, commitment, all of those awesome things that go along with being part of a team and are 100 percent more important."

This season, the team has focused on a different attribute for each of the seven full weeks of the season – communication, positivity, respect, confidence, helpful and encouraging, hard work and passion.

After week one, Batmunkh was voted as the team's award recipient for communication.

"We're really positive and I feel like everyone kind of encourages each other," Batmunkh said. "Even during practices, we're always clapping for each other when we get new skills. It's a better atmosphere than we've ever had."

Last season, Batmunkh was a specialist on balance beam and Smith contributed on vault and floor.

At last year's Gold Meet, Batmunkh scored a career-high 7.925 on beam to take eighth. The Hornets used just four all-arounders on the other three events (Nowak, Hawken, Daley and Haney).

In the simultaneous junior varsity I Gold Meet, Smith and Budaitis were among a five all-arounder lineup for the Hornets, helping them score 113.65 points to win the meet and secure an overall conference title on that level.

Smith was among a three-way tie for the title on vault (8.4). Budaitis was fifth in all-around (26.80) and vault (8.2) and eighth on floor (7.5).

At the Hinsdale Central Regional, Smith competed on vault (8.475) and Batmunkh on beam (7.1). Smith missed the individual at-large sectional cut on vault by .15.

Usually the first or second competitors on events, Batmunkh and Smith now are the anchors for most events.

"Well, there's definitely a little bit of pressure," Smith said. "We're obviously not at the point where we were last year (as a team). We were pretty good, pretty strong as a team, but I just feel like we're just showing the underclassmen what you could be able to do.

"I really didn't have as much experience coming in freshman year and (it shows) what they can learn throughout high school if they stick with it. I just feel like that's more important, to show the team you could be able to do this rather than oh, I need to be No. 1. I need to be the top. That's not what this whole thing is about."

Hultmark studied abroad last school year in Costa Rica. Lofgren, whom Fichter said didn't compete last year because of other activities, got off to a late start because of her swimming season.

"They decided to come back as seniors, which adds even more leadership," Fichter said. "They're such good friends, all five of them, that's what so fun, too. They're leading by example."

There are new faces on the coaching staff as well. Assistant coach Mia Tritch returns while new assistants are Katie Lennox and volunteer coach Mark Kusper, who helps as a spotter.

"I think (our goal is) just to have fun and experience a new sport for most of them. As seniors, we get along with each other so we know it's going to be fun already," Batmunkh said. "We've definitely set more realistic goals and expectations. It's more realistic for (the underclassmen) to get to our level. Even going into competitions, they're going to see really good gymnastics, but then they have us, too."

HINSDALE SOUTH AT A GLANCE

HEAD COACH: Jennifer Fichter (4th season at Hinsdale South; 9th season overall as head coach)

2012-13 RESULTS: Season-high 135.55 points; 5-0 in West Suburban Conference Gold Division duals; won Gold Meet (136.425 points) and overall title; second at Hinsdale Central Regional (132.35)

VARSITY RETURNEES: Seniors Shur Batmunkh and Jorie Smith

VARSITY NEWCOMERS: Seniors Brenna Budaitis, Melaine Lofgren and McKinsey Hultmark; and sophomore Eva Bucke

QUOTABLE: "I've been (an assistant coach) when we won state at Fremd. I have had years where it's a rebuilding year and that's what this is," Fichter said. "We're not going to focus on winning. If we win something, great. In the last 12 years of coaching, it's so much more than that. I was lucky in that my coaches and parents taught me that upbringing. It's not always about winning. It's about doing your best and that's what our goal is. We talk about doing our best, every day."

- by Bill Stone