

During her first three seasons with the Hinsdale South girls gymnastics team, senior Shur Batmunkh always practiced on the uneven parallel bars but never enough to compile a routine.

When the Hornets worked out at a gymnastics club during winter break, Batmunkh took advantage to learn and perfect a flyaway dismount.

"I've never worked on it before winter break. I tried them into the (landing) pits and they were working out so I just came here (to Hinsdale South) and did it," Batmunkh said.

On Senior Night, Thursday, Jan. 23, Batmunkh not only was among the four seniors in the Hornets' varsity lineup against Willowbrook but also an all-rounder for just the third time ever. That was among the many highlights for the seniors despite the Hornets losing the West Suburban Conference Gold Division Meet 122.25 to 102.00 in Darien.

Before the meet, the Hornets honored their five seniors – Batmunkh, Brenna Budaitis, McKinsey Hultmark, Melanie Lofgren and Jorie Smith.

"It's been such a fun season," Batmunkh said. "I don't think I'm going to regret anything because I've finally gotten my beam routine to where I'm happy and I'm doing all-around now. I couldn't be happier. It's awesome."

The Hornets went with five all-arounders on varsity – Batmunkh, Hultmark, Lofgren, Smith and sophomore Eva Bucke. Lofgren usually competes on the junior varsity I level but she was promoted because Budaitis missed the meet to be in Peoria to participate in the Illinois Music Education Association All-State Festival.

"(The best part) was just being with all of my friends, just goofing around with them and cheering each other on. The flowers were really nice, too," Hultmark said. "People were all really happy and cheerful. Everyone was excited to do their routine rather than apprehensive and tired so it was good."

Following the meet, the Hornets' four-year program members (Batmunkh, Budaitis and Smith) were presented with frames that included team photos from all four of their seasons. Hultmark and Lofgren received frames with team photos from this season and as sophomores, their other season with the

team. Budaitis also missed this season's photo day to compete in the IMEA district and qualify as a percussionist in the all-state ensemble.

"I really like it. I've gotten (presents) for other Senior Nights and this one's really awesome," Lofgren said. "I like how it's very sentimental and meaningful, and I'll definitely keep it forever."

"It's something that can go to college with us," Smith added. "It's a picture for your dorm room, a good memory so that's nice."

While it's been a tough season in terms of wins and losses, the Hornets have shown tremendous progress and had plenty of fun doing it. Most of the athletes in the program are freshmen and sophomores with little or no previous gymnastics experience and have grown through the examples set by the seniors.

"I had to hold back tears tonight, which I haven't done before. (The seniors) mean so much to me in terms of their leadership and work ethic," Hinsdale South coach Jennifer Fichter said. "They're such a wonderful group of girls. I really enjoy working with them and I can't imagine not having them on the team next year."

It's been an emotional ride for the seniors especially because they also are close friends away from the sport. They also are having some of their greatest moments in the sport this season.

For the senior introductions Thursday, Fichter was pleased that Batmunkh listed one of her best gymnastics memories was competing as an all-arounder for the first time Jan. 16 at Morton.

"She was, not me, reluctant to put (uneven bars) in a meet and she was nervous," Fichter said. "This is the first year she has actually gotten a few skills. If a girl wants to do something, I'm not going to hold someone back; if they're ready."

Batmunkh actually had the Hornets' highest all-around total Thursday (27.40). Smith (26.15 all-around) was third on vault (8.35), Smith (7.6) and Batmunkh (7.4) were third and fourth on floor and Batmunkh was fourth on beam (7.5). Bucke equaled her season-high all-around total of 24.50.

Batmunkh boosted her all-around total from Neuqua Valley (26.10) by 1.3 points as she tied her season-high score on floor and raised her uneven bars score from 4.2 to 4.9.

"It's actually really fun (on uneven bars), better than I expected," Batmunkh said. "I love flyaways. I think that's what is making bars for me right now. If I didn't do a flyaway, I'd be like, 'Ahhh,' but I like the feeling of just going for it."

The Hornets' progress is showing in all individuals and collectively. After a season-high score of 103.60 Dec. 19 going into winter break, the Hornets have exceeded that mark in their three meets of 2014 with a full lineup.

In their return to action after break Jan. 9, the Hornets hit their season high so far despite losing 115.30 to 111.10 at home to Leyden. They then posted their first victory of the season by winning 104.90 to 100.60 at Morton and finished eighth at the Neuqua Valley Invitational Jan. 18 with 105.75 points.

"We really have made a lot of improvements. It's hard because as you age, and I can speak first hand (as a former gymnast), you get more scared of things. When you're a senior, I don't know how much you're willing to try new-wise," Fichter said.

"They've all added at least one thing (to routines), but not only that. We've tweaked and cleaned up everything else. You can see it in our scores, just little things, finishing with straight arms and sticking our landings. That's what we work on in practice because all of those little tenths are reflective in our team score and their individuals scores, too."

Most of the Hornets agree that while it was not their highest score, the Neuqua Valley Invitational was probably their best performance. They celebrated afterwards with ice cream at nearby Maggie Moo's in Naperville.

"For Neuqua, we all made goals and stuff individually and we all made them so that was a really good accomplishment individually, and just as a team we rocked it," Smith said.

"I think it certainly was our best meet overall," Hultmark added. "I think the judging was just different, just lower scores overall."

At Neuqua Valley, Batmunkh had a career-high 8.35 on beam – her first 8 on the event this season -- to tie for 18th. It led a season-best 28.85 team score on the event, followed by Budaitis (season-high 7.8, tied for 22nd), Smith (6.7) and Hultmark (6.0).

”That (8.35 on beam) was really exciting. Everything was just spot on. I didn’t wobble or anything,” Batmunkh said. “I think it helped that beam was last so then I just kind of loosened up throughout the meet and then by the end I’m just like, ‘OK. I’m just going to go out there and do it.’ I was supposed to do my tuck full, but I kind of just skipped that and went to my dismount. I was like, ‘Ah, I don’t really need it.’ ”

Smith tied for 25th on vault (8.3), and had a team-high 8.0 on floor. Bucke had a team-best 5.0 on uneven bars and a season-high 7.45 on floor.

”(My floor routine) was so on. I just didn’t feel so pressured and I just went out there and had fun and did do my best,” Bucke said. “Everyone did very well (at that invite).”

The season-high score against Leyden included current season-high team scores on floor (30.30) and uneven bars (21.20) and then season-best 27.80 on beam.

Smith won floor (season-high 8.4) and vault (8.4) and Batmunkh won beam (7.75). Budaitis was second on beam (7.25) and tied for second on vault (8.2) en route to a season-high 28.95 all-around total for second to Leyden’s Siahn Correa (30.50). Bucke was third on uneven bars with a season-best 5.9 and went 24.50 in the all-around.

Hultmark also enjoyed arguably her best overall meet. She had a career-high 26.10 all-around mark with season highs on beam (6.9), floor (6.6) and uneven bars (5.1) and hitting a season-high 7.5 vault for the third time.

”Yeah, that was a good meet. I think I stuck my beam routine and everything was good and powerful,” Hultmark said. “A lot of it just depends on who’s judging. (Thursday) I felt like I did the same routine, or close, and the scores kind of fluctuate.”

”(Hultmark) is one of the hardest workers you’ll ever meet,” Fichter said. “You tell her to correct something, she makes the change and she thanks me

at the same time. The improvement in her scores is legit because that's what she does in practice. She works hard every day."

At Morton, the Hornets were able to celebrate their progress along with their first victory of the season.

Smith and Batmunkh won vault (8.5) and beam (7.45), respectively. Smith also had a career-high 27.35 all-around total with help from a season-best 7.15 on beam. Bucke added a season-high 7.55 vault after scoring 7.4 three times previously.

"It was pretty wonderful (to win). All season's been rough since we lost a lot of girls (from last year)," Bucke said. "We've been trying really hard and then finally we beat somebody. It was great."

The way that the Morton team also approaches gymnastics was perhaps even more memorable than the victory itself.

"They had such good sportsmanship. It was amazing," Batmunkh said. "We were on floor and they were cheering our names. I'm like, 'Where did that come from?' I turned around and it was them. I think that kind of elevated us to where we are now because the atmosphere at these meets are so much better than they were at the beginning of the season. Morton kind of helped boost that energy."

"We didn't even know we won at first because I think they misread the scores, but I was still thinking, 'This was a really fun meet,' just because of the atmosphere. Those (Morton) girls were really nice," Hultmark said. "Then as a bonus they re-read the scores and we also happened to win, but it would have been awesome either way."

Having Budaitis compete would have been the final piece to Thursday's festivities. Her mother did attend the meet and receive flowers during the opening ceremonies. In the Hornets' weekly awards among its gymnast, Budaitis was selected as the best representative of hard work.

The absence allowed Lofgren to compete with the varsity for just the second time this season. She made her varsity debut at the Homewood-Flossmoor Invite Dec. 16 with a routine on uneven bars, essentially filling the spot before Batmunkh was ready to perform a routine.

Lofgren usually competes for the junior varsity I level as an all-rounder, the same role she performed Thursday.

"(The H-F Invite) was kind of a long, drawn out day and I just did bars, but it was fun," Lofgren said. "I was kind of nervous (Thursday) because Fichter wanted me to do really well but at the same time she wanted me to have lots of fun. She knew it was Senior Night so she just wanted me to do my best and just try my hardest. I was like, 'OK, just relax, have fun,' so it was all good and I was happy with my performance."

As the lone senior not full-time with the varsity, Lofgren has been the key link with the JV I and II levels. She was voted as the team's representative for helpful and encouraging.

"I think we (seniors) kind of helped to show them that doing your best and trying but also having fun makes the season better and helps them improve," Lofgren said. "This is (Hultmark and my) second year doing it and a lot of them know that and they think, 'Oh you're good and stuff.' I'm just thinking, 'You can do it, too.' It's not just us, and in a lot of them I see more potential than I could see in myself ever."

Bucke is one shining example that will continue the seniors' example. She has been the only non-senior regular in the varsity lineup after taking a big step from competing on the junior varsity II level as a freshman.

"I feel like (the seniors have) pushed my limits," Bucke said. "Going into practice last year, it was like, 'Oh I'm JV II, whatever.' Now I'm with the seniors on varsity and they're just like, 'You've got to try your best and you can do it.' You just try your best and get up to their level, too."

The last time for the varsity and JV I teams to compete together will be at the West Suburban Conference Gold Division Meet at 6 p.m. Friday, Jan. 31, at Leyden's west campus.

Fichter agrees that this is one of her favorite seasons as a coach and that includes being an assistant coach when Fremd won a state championship. This year's season has had many triumphs in another fashion with a group that has shown up faithfully for practice and reaped the rewards beyond their routine scores.

"Gymnastics in high school is more to come out, not necessarily with your one goal as being to win, but more to just be with your friends and have fun, work hard and just do your best and try to improve and keep working at your goals and hopefully win," Hultmark said.

"Sometimes I feel like high school sports can get too focused on just winning and it kind of ruins the experience of friends. I think that this year was better in that way. We definitely were still competitive (in our approach) but it wasn't our only goal going out there."

-- by Bill Stone