

When sophomore Lauren Haney and her Hinsdale South girls gymnastics teammates faced rival Downers Grove South in their dual meet Jan. 17, the pressure of a West Suburban Conference Gold Division title was on the line.

Haney's rare landing of her double back flip dismount off the uneven parallel bars was one of the keys to the Hornets' 133.80 to 133.20 victory that ultimately set the stage for a second straight outright Gold title.

"(From that point) it was like I knew I could do it so it just mattered that I did it in the right places now," Haney said.

At the Hinsdale Central Regional Jan. 31, Haney delivered again. It was just part of a great overall night for her that helped her be among four Hornets who advanced as individuals for the Hinsdale Central Sectional Wednesday, Feb. 6.

Freshman Maddie Nowak, who won the uneven parallel bars (9.45), Haney and juniors Jessica Hawken and Taylor Daley, the team's four all-arounders, earned sectional berths. Junior Shur Batmunkh (beam) and Jorie Smith (vault) and freshman Erica Meyer (uneven bars) each competed on one event.

The Hornets weren't as fortunate as a team. Their second-place 132.35 at regionals to Hinsdale Central's 138.65 fell shy of gaining an at-large berth to the six-team sectional field.

As other teams' scores turned out, the Hornets needed at least 135.20 points to advance. They accomplished that twice, including a season-best 136.425 in their last meet Jan. 26 that secured the Gold Meet and overall title.

“You’ve got it some days and some days you don’t. What’s hard is we needed my four all-arounders to hit, just like we did (at the Gold Meet) or it wasn’t going to happen and obviously we didn’t hit (as much),” Hinsdale South coach Jennifer Fichter said. “It is what it is and we’ll be back next year and we’re going to get it done. We’re going to make it to sectionals next year.”

Individuals qualify for sectionals either automatically with top-five sectional finishes or at-large by being among the top 12 scores from among the four feed-in regionals.

Nowak easily won the uneven bars by .6 over Waubonsie Valley/Metea Valley co-op senior Jess Malon (8.85), a 2012 state qualifier on the event. Nowak also was third in all-around (36.10), fourth on floor exercise (8.95) and tied for fourth on vault (9.2) and advanced at-large on beam (8.5).

The Hornets’ other berths came at-large. Haney qualified in all-around (33.025), beam (8.35) and uneven bars (8.125), Hawken advanced on vault (8.7), and Daley’s season-best 7.975 on uneven bars advanced as the final at-large score for the event.

Hawken (31.35) and Daley (31.25) came close to the 31.575 at-large cut in all-around. Hawken (7.95) also just missed advancing on uneven bars. Daley (8.5) was .15 from the cut on vault with Smith adding a season-high 8.475.

With the same advancement format, Nowak is in contention for becoming the Hornets’ first state qualifier since Becca McLaughlin in 2007.

“I think I can make state – if I clean up my routines,” Nowak said. “Definitely

I felt a lot more pressure (at regionals), but I tried to take the pressure off myself by focusing on the team more than myself.”

Haney and Hawken are making their second sectional trips, and Nowak and Daley their first.

Last year, Haney qualified for sectionals only on uneven bars. She ended up as the 13th at-large candidate in all-around (32.875), missing that cut by just .05.

“That was one of my goals this year because last year I was in 13<sup>th</sup> place. I really wanted to get it this year,” Haney said. “I wasn’t too disappointed (last year) because I kind of knew. I wasn’t expecting much because it was freshman year. I realized how good everybody was. I was just happy to be qualifying on one thing.”

Haney’s highest scores all have come after winter break. She had season highs in all-around (33.65) and uneven bars (8.8) in the final regular-season dual Jan. 23 at Addison Trail. Her 32.90 at the Gold Meet included an 8.5 vault and 8.45 on uneven bars.

“I told her in warmups (Thursday), ‘All of a sudden, you look stronger.’ I know her goal was to make sectionals,” Fichter said.

“She’s so hard on herself. I’m just trying to get her to be positive and smile and have fun. Once she hit that double (against Downers South), that helped. That definitely gave her some confidence and she’s landed it ever since. She’s one of those kids that just works hard.”

Haney agreed that the addition of Nowak, besides boosting the Hornets’

score into the low-to-mid 130s, has encouraged her to improve.

"I get really frustrated sometimes because, obviously, working with Maddie and Jess, I want to be as good as them. That wants to make you that much better," Haney said.

Experience also has helped. Since this year's all-around cut was 31.575, Haney had some margin for error but she didn't know at the time. Instead of throwing all of her skills for beam, Haney used a bit more conservative set and she never fell.

"I watered down my beam routine, just to get a safe score. I think it was a good choice," Haney said.

Nowak had a rough beam set, but it was about the only problem she had the entire meet. She lost her footing and fell after her tuck 3/4 turn, hitting the side of her body against the beam coming down.

"She just second-guessed herself a little bit, that's all, but she got up and finished strong, which is not easy to do after you wipe out like that," Fichter said.

Even with the fall, Nowak just missed winning the all-around. Her 36.10 was just behind Shepard freshman Skylor Hilger (36.15) and Hinsdale Central senior Erin Morgan (36.125), a 2012 all-stater on beam who counted two falls. Nowak and Hilger are club teammates for Action Gymnastics, which trains out of Hinsdale South. Action co-owner Jody Raymond is an assistant coach for the Hornets.

"Maddie had a great meet," Fichter said. "I expect nothing less from her. She's awesome, she's dynamite and she did it again today."

The Hinsdale Central fieldhouse has been kind to Nowak this season. She had one of her best meets at the Red Devil Invitational Dec. 8 with a 36.65 all-around with a first-place 9.35 on vault and second-place 9.55 on uneven bars, still her highest score on the event this season.

At the Hinsdale Central Freshman Thanksgiving Invitational Nov. 24, Nowak won all-around with a 36.45 and all four events.

"I just like the positive environment. I have all of my friends from Central (here)," Nowak said. "(The regional) went well. I was glad with the first three events, but I would say I'm a little disappointed with the fourth (beam), but pretty solid I thought."

Nowak is considering adding a blind change to her uneven bars. She tested it during the Addison Trail dual and made it, but then ran into trouble and required extra swings, resulting in deductions of more than half a point.

Whatever happens for Nowak and the Hornets at sectionals, they've set a solid foundation for an even better 2014.

"I think we did pretty well as a group (this season)," Haney said. "I think it just motivates us for next year because we'll set our expectations higher. Maybe we'll try to start out with a 135."