

Despite proving all season that she belonged at the state meet, Hinsdale South freshman Maddie Nowak still had to qualify at the Hinsdale Central Sectional Wednesday, Feb. 6.

If that wasn't tough enough, Nowak had to compete first on balance beam, the often nerveracking event that recently has been giving her the most trouble.

"(I tried to have) just a positive mindset always. I knew that I'd hit this routine before. I knew the pressure was on, but I just tried to stay calm," Nowak said.

"I just thought, 'Have a hit routine and it'll set the tone for the rest of the meet.' "

Nowak did just that. In fact, she did so well that she qualified for the state meet in all-around and three events either automatically with top-five sectional finishes or at-large by being among the 12 highest remaining performances from the four sectionals.

Nowak was third on floor exercise (9.425), fourth on uneven parallel bars (9.475) and tied for fifth on vault (9.525) and her sixth-place 37.225 all-around total, .325 from fifth, easily advanced at-large by beating the 36.125 cut by more than a point.

"It feels so good (to qualify) and I know in a few days I'm going to be nervous about actually going to state, but just the feeling of qualifying is just so great," Nowak said. "I know I'm going to be working hard and putting in a lot more hours (of practice) to do my best."

Nowak is the Hornets' first state qualifier senior Paulina Rante and junior Alyssa Fatigati qualified on uneven bars in 2010 and the first all-around state qualifier since senior Becca McLaughlin in 2007.

Hinsdale South juniors Jessica Hawken and Taylor Daley and sophomore Lauren Haney also competed at sectionals as individual qualifiers but did not advance.

The state meet is at Palatine High School Friday and Saturday, Feb. 15-16. Friday's competition beginning at 5:05 p.m. is for the eight teams and individually for the all-around finals and event preliminaries. Event finals are at 5:45 p.m. Saturday for qualifiers among the top 10 preliminary scores.

Nowak also is the first state qualifier under Hinsdale South third-year head coach Jennifer Fichter.

"Maddie did awesome. I'm so proud of her," Fichter said. "She got the job done. She was in such a positive mindset, and she did the best she could. We're going to go get them at Palatine. I couldn't be more excited for her.

"Obviously, she didn't let (beam) get to her. Her confidence has been a little shaken because she had a couple of bad falls in previous meets on her leap series. It kind of shook her a little bit. We've been working on her confidence, and it'll be there (at state)."

Ironically, Nowak probably has beam to thank for all of her success. While Nowak's 10th-place 8.8 on was shy of the 9.0 at-large state cut to advance on the event, that performance led to her advancing on everything else.

"I thought if I could conquer beam, which is my hardest, then I could all of

the other events, which I wasn't nervous about today," Nowak said. "I knew it would not make state individually, but it was a good, solid score for my all-around at least."

Nowak has scored as high as 9.45 on beam this season Jan. 9, but it's truly been a season of ups and downs on the event. She stayed on beam at the West Suburban Conference Gold Division Meet and shared the event title with Hawken at 8.425. At regionals, Nowak took another hard spill but still scored an 8.5.

At sectionals, Haney and Nowak immediately followed a great beam set by Lyons Township, in which the Lions went 5 for 5 with four of them earning individual state berths.

"I've never seen (Nowak) more nervous, and I was nervous because she had to start on beam," said Hinsdale South assistant coach Jody Raymond, who also coaches Nowak during club season at Action Gymnastics.

"She worked really hard on it in the last couple of days in particular over and over on the beam to get consistent. All of that pressure, it was loud and I could just see it in her face. She was really nervous, but it's what you do in practice. She focused on being tight and going hard, and that's what helped her get through the routine. Once you get through the hard events, everything else gets easier after that."

The Hornets competed in the same order as sectional team champion and state-title contender Lyons Township (149.25). Competing second on floor, Nowak was just .1 from tying for first with LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst (9.525), the defending co-state champion on uneven bars.

Nowak was just .025 shy of her season-best scores from regionals on floor and vault. For her two vaults, Nowak said she was “a little frazzled” landing her tuck Yurchenko but followed with an even better and higher-value pike Yurchenko.

Nowak was just .075 shy of her season best on uneven bars. Three Action gymnasts – Kurfirst (1st, 9.7), Nowak and Shepard freshman Skylor Hilger (5th, 9.35) – were among the top five on uneven bars and reaped many of the top-five medals. Kurfirst and Hilger advanced in all-around and all four events.

“What you want to see is everybody hit at the end of the year and then let the chips fall where they go. To see Maddie and Skylor and Kelsy all do their best (at sectionals), it was awesome,” Raymond said.

Nowak has some great family ties to the sport. Her older cousins Katie and Mary Burke were standout gymnasts for perennial powerhouse Fremd High School. They combined for 17 individual state titles with the younger Mary winning all-around and all four event championships as a senior in 2008. Katie graduated in 2004.

Nowak’s older sisters Maggie and Mary often attend meets and provide support and advice. Mary was at sectionals, but Maggie, a former all-conference softball player for the Hornets, was back at school.

“I had a rough two practices before with beam. (Maggie said), ‘The practice before, even the week before, doesn’t have any significance in what your routine will be at the meet,’ so I just tried to brush it off,” Nowak said.

Nowak might perform even better at state. She still made add some skills to

her uneven bars routine, which would give her the possibility of a higher score, and upgrade on of her vaults to a layout Yurchenko.

Qualifiers start from scratch for the state prelims and event finals. Based on all sectional results, Nowak was 10th on floor and tied for 12th on uneven bars and tied for 18th on vault.

“I’m just going to take it one step at a time. I’m going to have a good time, have fun, not really focus on the pressure,” Nowak said. “I’m glad to be adding new stuff to my routines. I’m really excited to work on that and just be with my Action teammates.”

In her third trip to sectionals, Hawken was 27th on vault (8.875). Haney expanded upon her 2012 sectional berth on uneven bars by advancing in all-around (29th, 32.075), besides tying for 28th on uneven bars (8.25) and taking 30th on beam (7.325).

In her first sectional appearance, Daley was 32nd on uneven bars with a season-high 8.025. She qualified with a then season-best 7.975 at regionals, which was the at-large cutoff.

“I was so shocked (to qualify), but it was fun. I think of that as my worst event, but hey, I was fine with it,” Daley said. “I think I definitely want to work harder and improve on many skills. This season was really fun and I think we went out with a good ending.”

The Hornets captured their second straight outright Gold title. At regionals, their 132.35 was the eighth-highest score among feed-in teams to the Hinsdale Central Sectional, 2.85 points from the sixth and final advancing spot as a team.

With no Hornets graduating from this year's varsity lineup, a sectional team berth is among the bigger list of goals for 2014.

"I'm so happy we got to bring four kids (to sectionals)," Fichter said. "We will be here next year as a team. We've already talked about it. There's no question."