

While freshman Skylor Hilger is hoping to make a name for herself in her first high-school gymnastics season, she already has walking down the halls of Shepard High School.

“When I wear the sweatshirts around school, they’re like, ‘We have a gymnastics team?’ ” Hilger said.

Yes, the Astros really do. It’s Hilger.

After a three-year absence from the sport, Hilger has resumed gymnastics and will represent Shepard in the state series as an individual entry. Before then, she will compete as an all-arounder in five regular-season invitationals, beginning with the Lyons Township Invitational Friday and the Homewood-Flossmoor Invitational Saturday.

“I’m excited, very excited, a little nervous. I’m just going to go and have fun, try my best,” Hilger said.

“I kept watching (gymnastics) and thinking about it. I never really got back into it. I was really excited (to start again), and I’m really pumped to be back in because I love doing it. It’s really fun for me. It feels like I have to do it. It almost feels like it’s a part of me actually.”

Hilger’s coach is Erica Wolf, a coach and co-owner at Action Gymnastics, which trains out of Hinsdale South High School. Hilger first competed for Action as an 8-year-old and rejoined the club this season. In November, she competed with Action at a club meet prior to the high-school season to qualify for the USA Gymnastics Level 9 state meet in March.

Hilger already has the equipment to prove it. With the help of coach Erica

Wolf and parents Deanna and Jerry, Hilger has not only her competition leotard but Shepard gymnastics warmups, T-shirts, sweatshirts and gym bag that incorporate the school colors of orange and brown.

The leotard includes a large S on the front.

“Her idea was having the S. That was kind of nice because her name starts with an S and so does the Shepard so it’s kind of a double meaning,” Wolf said.

Hilger began gymnastics when she was 8, spurred on by watching the Olympics and familiarity with the sport through her aunt and mother, a former high-school gymnast. Hilger started at Action and proved to be quite a competitor, so outstanding that Wolf and Action coach and co-owner Jody Raymond encouraged her to attend the pre-elite program at nearby Illinois Gymnastics Institute in Westmont. IGI’s alumni include 1992 U.S. Olympian Betty Okino and numerous International Elite and Level 10 gymnasts.

As part of the TOPs (Talent Opportunity Program) for gymnasts 7 to 10, Hilger trained full-time and was home schooled. She nearly was the top 30 youth gymnasts invited to the national team training center in Texas. By age 11, Hilger was not interested in making the time commitment anymore and quit.

“It started getting really intense and it just wasn’t meant for me. It kind of became a chore for me. It got to the point where I just didn’t want to do it anymore,” Hilger said.

Last year as an eighth grader, Hilger became intrigued when Shepard senior Arielle Pilcher competed individually in the Illinois High School Association

state series as an individual. Hilger's older sister and Pilcher were cheerleading teammates, and Pilcher had talked about her days as a Level 8 gymnast.

Pilcher competed at the Hinsdale Central Regional and advanced to the Hinsdale Central Sectional in all-around, vault, the uneven parallel bars and floor exercise.

"It made me think, 'It would be really cool to get back into it and do high-school gymnastics,' " Hilger said. "I really wanted to try out so I asked Erica and she said she would be my coach."

Since IHSA gymnastics began in 1977, Shepard has never had a team. If Hilger were able to qualify for the state meet, she is believed to be the first in Shepard history.

"I'd really like to qualify for state and making state finals would be awesome," Hilger said. "(My goal is) just try my best, but to make it to state would be awesome, especially freshman year."

In the three years since last competing, Hilger has obviously grown. Although she plays traveling softball as a shortstop for the Ice, she needed to regain upper-body strength.

Wolf added Hilger also has had to adjust to equipment because the uneven bars settings and height of the beam are different from the international standards under which she previously trained.

"Now I'm almost where I used to be strength wise. I'm glad because it makes skills easier when you've got the strength to do them, but it's hard to get back into it," Hilger said.

“Being older, it’s easier to try and skills and make yourself do them. You’re not as nervous, for me at least. You’re able to go for things more.”

In hoping to help the transition, Wolf entered Hilger in five regular-season meets. IHSA assistant executive director and girls gymnastics Tracie Henry confirmed that Hilger does not have to compete in any regular-season meets to be eligible for regionals. The only requirements for individuals are that their schools enter them with the proper paperwork and view the online rules meeting and that the coach or school representative complies with IHSA by-law 2.070 regarding the qualifications of coaches.

Hilger also will compete at the Oswego Invitational Dec. 28, the Neuqua Valley Invitational Jan. 12 and Lincoln-Way Junior Varsity Invitational Jan. 19.

For the postseason, Hilger will compete in regionals the week of Jan. 28 at a site to be announced in early January. Should she advance, Hilger would compete at the Hinsdale Central Feb. 6 with a chance to qualify for the state meet Feb. 15-16 at Palatine High School.

“I wanted her to feel like she had as close to a normal high-school season as possible,” Wolf said. “(I wanted for her) a high school experience, not just, ‘Let’s try and get some medals at state,’ and to get some school spirit throughout the season and good practice meets.”

This weekend, Hilger is in for an experience. Throughout her gymnastics, Hilger said she always has favored uneven bars and floor, where one of her passes includes a double twisting front flip.

At Lyons Township, she will be the invite’s first competitor on floor.

“This (level) is a good place for her,” Wolf said. “I think she’ll be really motivated after having gone through her first high-school meet. It’ll give her a ton of confidence.”

Hilger will feel far from alone. LT sophomores Kelsy Kurfirst, the defending co-state champion on uneven bars, and Olivia McGann were Action teammates with Hilger in the fall and should compete for the Lions’ varsity at the invite. At the H-F Invite, Hinsdale South also is entered and the Hornets’ lineup should include Action teammates Maddie Nowak, Jessica Hawken, Taylor Daley and Lauren Haney.

Hilger’s school friends and Ice teammates also have expressed interest in her schedule.

“They’re going to try and make a wave,” Hilger said. “All of my friends are very excited. My softball team wants to go on Saturday.”

“She’ll probably have half of the stands supporting her. She has a lot of family,” Wolf said. “Just being with some of her (Action) teammates, they’ll support her nicely.”

Wolf and the Ice softball coaches have cooperated on practice schedules so Hilger can continue with both sports. Hilger plans to try out for Shepard’s softball team in the spring.

In the meantime, she’s becoming accustomed to her school colors. Wolf and Hilger worked together on a leotard that may have incorporated orange and brown (along with white) but that she was excited to wear.

“I never thought I would order brown rhinestones, but I definitely did,” Wolf said with a laugh.

For individual competitors, there is no requirement that they compete in leotards with their school colors. Many wear leotards from their club team or ones that they consider their favorite or lucky.

Hilger hopes to share any success with her high school.

“The people at school are like, ‘Why didn’t you use black (in your leotard)? Why did you use brown?’” Hilger said. “They’re my school colors so I kind of wanted to use those instead of black. It ended up looking really good so I’m happy with it.”