

Shepard freshman Skylor Hilger added one final meet to her regular-season gymnastics schedule Jan. 22 at Glenbard West for a little extra practice.

The real benefit turned out to be additional confidence.

"I've been getting more consistent, which makes me really happy," Hilger said. "Today, I got two new season-high scores, which makes me feel really good."

Hilger finished with a flourish en route to a solid 36.55 all-around performance that accompanied junior varsity level I and II conference duals between Glenbard West and York in Glen Ellyn.

Hilger, who competed following each of Glenbard West's rotations, concluded with a personal-best 9.55 on floor exercise after a season-high 9.4 on balance beam, 8.6 on uneven parallel bars and 9.0 on vault. She just missed her highest all-around total of 36.60 from her first meet Dec. 14.

Hilger feels as though she is peaking as she prepares for her first IHSA postseason, beginning with the Hinsdale Central Regional at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 31.

"I've been having little problems here and there, changing things up, but I'm finally getting the hang of it," Hilger said. "Today was a lot about seeing what I'm nervous for, seeing those things, practicing them more in the gym so I'm not as nervous at meets so I can expect to go harder and stick them more."

Based on how she's performed so far, Hilger has an excellent chance to advance to the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 5 in

all-around and all four events. Hilger is trying to become the first Shepard gymnast to qualify for the Illinois High School Association state meet.

Top-five regional finishers in all-around and each event automatically advance for sectionals. Gymnasts also can advance at-large if they are among the 12 highest remaining scores among the four feed-in regionals. The final regional that feeds into the Hinsdale Central Sectional is Saturday afternoon at Oswego.

Hilger will compete alongside Hinsdale Central, No. 2 seed in the sectional behind state-title contender Lyons Township, No. 7 Hinsdale South, No. 10 Waubonsie Valley/Metea Valley co-op at No. 15 Riverside-Brookfield. Hilger competes with most of Hinsdale South's varsity lineup during the club season for Action Gymnastics.

"I was happy with how she did (at Glenbard West)," said Erica Wolf, Hilger's coach and co-owner of Action Gymnastics. "She was a lot more happy with her performance and that's what makes me feel good because I know that's the type of kid she is and she deserves to feel like that after a meet.

"Coming in and hitting all of her goals today, like holding her feet up on the bail and hitting her beam routine and then floor the way she wanted, does a lot for her confidence. I think she'll use that to her advantage in the state series."

Hilger's fifth and final regular-season meet was supposed to be at the Lincoln-Way Junior Varsity Invitational Jan. 19, but Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes invited Hilger to compete at one of his team's duals when they met for the first time during the Oswego Invitational Dec. 28.

Glenbard West athletes cheered Hilger on during her performances, including many varsity gymnasts who met her at Oswego and were helping at the meet.

"It was very nice. It makes me feel confident out there. The last one up, it makes me feel really happy that everyone's cheering for me," Hilger said.

"They love her. They keep joking they're going to adopt her (to compete for them)," Wolf said. "They're really supportive."

Wolf also has received support from coaches such as Fuentes and have helped her tweak Hilger's routines to get the highest possible start values and scores. Routine requirements and the scoring system between high school and club gymnastics often differ.

Even after meet, a review of the judge's scoring sheet resulted in an additional .2 for Hilger's scores on uneven bars and beam.

The beam score only added to Hilger's elation over her best performance so far on the apparatus representing Shepard.

"As soon as I finished, I gleamed with happiness because all of the hard work I did in practice paid off here. It's really exciting when you hit a beam routine," Hilger said.

"It's one of the best feelings because you're on a 4-inch platform in front of everyone, nervewracking. As soon as you hit the first big flip-flop, flip-flop series, you start feeling more confident, and then there's the leap and you're like, 'I don't want to go too hard (and fall),' but I want to go hard or I won't make it."

On floor, Hilger also goes awfully hard to land her double full twist. In previous meets, she went out of bounds while landing the skill at the end of her first of three major tumbling passes.

Hilger and Wolf have moved the double full to the end of her second pass. Hilger landed it perfectly at Glenbard West.

"I think it looks better, feels better there," Hilger said.

"I was like, 'You can blame me for (putting it in the first pass) but the next meet it's on you,' " Wolf said with a laugh. "The second pass was a lot more appropriate because the energy was a little more channeled at that point so she could not overpower it."

At Lincoln-Way, Hilger scored a 36.10 in all-around behind a season-high 9.3 on uneven bars. She also scored 9.1 on vault, 8.8 on beam and 8.9 on floor.

Because it was a JV meet, Hilger went into the competition fully understanding she was competing exhibition and not eligible for any awards.

Other honors may be coming soon.

"It didn't matter. I'm not competing for the medals," Hilger said. "I'm competing because I love competing and it's just good to see what I can do in meets. I like competing and getting the highest score I can."