

After battling strep throat and sore ankles since her last gymnastics meet, Shepard freshman Skylor Hilger nearly sat out Oswego's Panther Invitational Dec. 28.

"I was kind of worried about it, but I thought a meet's a meet. I might as well get the opportunity and the practice that I need for the state series and getting used to still competing high school," Hilger said.

"I didn't know if I was going to be sick still. I didn't know about my ankles. I didn't know if I was going to have enough time to prepare."

Despite having just two days of practice since her previous meet Dec. 15, Hilger still earned three top-five awards. She was third on floor exercise (9.25), fourth on vault (9.3) and fifth in all-around (35.50) as well as 11th on the uneven parallel bars (8.55) and 18th on balance beam (8.4).

"I thought she might sit this one out because she had been sick," coach Erica Wolf said. "(I said), 'I'll be there if you need me.' It's good that she came, though. I think overall it's going to make her more confident. It beats sitting at home, wondering what would have happened. She might have had a couple of mistakes on bars and beam, but if anything, that'll just motivate her to pick that up and do better next time."

Hilger said she began feeling ill Dec. 20, her second day of final exams at Shepard. The illness lasted through Christmas.

Hilger's concerns about competing at the invite were curbed somewhat when she practiced the day before and her pre-invite warmups went well. Both of her ankles were heavily taped.

“I figured trying is better than not doing it at all. I didn’t have my best meet. But I’m just glad I came out here and tried,” Hilger said. “Even with the tape on it, (my ankles) hurt. I’ve always had problems with that (right) ankle my whole gymnastics career. I’m just going to try and strengthen it after every practice, do like half an hour of ankle strengthening and make sure I ice it.”

Hilger did catch a break at the invite. Her first two events were the hardest on her ankles, floor and vault. They turned out to be her strongest performances.

Because of Hilger’s illness and injury, a somewhat more conservative floor routine went smoothly. She then landed her first vault, a pike Yurchenko.

“She has good presentation (on floor) and she’s sharp. I think that routine, when she gets a few more skills in it, will score really nicely,” Wolf said.

Uneven bars was the event on which she has been able to practice least. Her invite routine was hampered by a fall on her pirouette midway through the routine. On beam, she fell on her standing back flip for the second meet in a row.

Even with those two falls, each an automatic .5 deduction, she finished just 1.225 points behind all-around champion Mackenzie O’Keefe of Glenbard West (36.775) and only .925 behind runner-up Abby Madden of St. Edward (36.425). O’Keefe also counted two falls, and Madden one on beam.

“On bars, I tried. I just fell apart. I guess it shows that you do need practice,” Hilger said. “I don’t know what happened there (on my standing back). My feet were on, and my foot just slipped off. I have no idea, but hopefully that doesn’t happen anymore because I thought I was on. I was surprised that I

slipped.”

Hilger currently is scheduled not to compete again until the Neuqua Valley Invite Dec. 12. She has received invitations from schools to compete at their dual meets, but she hasn’t accepted any to date.

Hilger gained further insight about competing by herself since she was grouped at the invite in a rotation with Madden and the Batavia and Geneva teams.

Madden competes with Batavia throughout the regular season because her coach (Doug Bucholz) also is the Bulldogs’ assistant coach, but otherwise she is a solo performer. Madden and her sister, Jordyn, who graduated, competed together last season and both qualified for the state meet.

“I thought that was really nice that they happened to be in the same rotation,” Wolf said. “They were all supportive, really nice.”