

Sophomore Andrea Ori has emerged as a solid vaulter for the Palatine girls gymnastics team this season with her tuck Tsukahara.

When she was unable to land either of her attempts for the first time at the Palatine Regional Wednesday, there was only one way for her to respond on her other two events.

“I said to my coach (Terry Theobald) before I got off vault, ‘I’ve got this,’ “ Ori said. “I just wanted to go out there and stick it and pick up the team and go from there.”

Little did Ori realize the importance of her strong performances on balance beam and floor exercise. They helped the Pirates win the regional title by just .05 over Barrington (139.825 to 139.775) to automatically qualify for the Fremd Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Monday.

Senior Nicole Kuksuk shared the regional title on balance beam (9.45), and seniors Abby Alden and Megan Hedstrom and sophomore Claudia Przystal also had top-five finishes. They and Ori all earned individual sectional berths.

The Pirates’ second straight regional title and ninth in the past 10 seasons came by the smallest margin of victory that Theobald could recall.

“That close gets worrisome, but it was really exciting to win. Now we’ve got to look forward to sectionals,” Ori said. “I don’t think (any of us knew). We try to focus on our routines and not worry about the score until the end. If we worry about the score, then it plays with our heads a little bit too much. You don’t worry about the routine and you fall more.”

The Pirates counted one fall on each event. After vault and uneven parallel bars, they trailed Barrington by .275 (69.45 to 69.175), but they passed the Broncos with a meet-best 35.575 on beam, .6 better than Barrington, and 35.075 and floor.

“Beam is what made the difference,” Theobald said. “All week we’ve been

talking landings, landings, landings. Every tenth is going to count. 'It's going to come down, I'm telling you, to a tenth.' I've said that all week. And then it did."

The Pirates continued the momentum from the Mid-Suburban League Meet Jan. 25 at Palatine, where they scored a season-high 143.075 to finish third among the 12 schools from both divisions.

Palatine and Barrington are the No. 4 and 5 seeds in the sectional, and Barrington's score still was high enough to advance as to the six-team sectional field at-large.

While the Pirates could follow how they were doing Wednesday, as usual the coaches kept the other running team scores to themselves.

"We don't talk about scores. I don't want them to know. (We tell them), 'Just go and do what you're supposed to do and then the score takes care of itself,' " Theobald said.

"That's all for us (coaches) to be worrying. They've got enough to be worried about. We teach that from the ground up with the little kids through the park district (program in Palatine). We don't talk about a score. We talk about performance, to do a good performance."

The Pirates had plenty of good performances. Individuals qualify for sectional either automatically with top-five regional finishes or at-large by being among the 12 highest remaining scores from the four feed-in regionals.

Ten of the Pirates' 15 entries advanced with top-five finishes. Besides Kuksuk's beam title, Alden was second in all-around (36.325), vault (season-high 9.325), uneven bars (9.325) and beam (9.125), Przystal was fourth in all-around (34.875) and uneven bars (8.6), fifth on vault (8.85) and tied for fifth on floor (8.6) and Hedstrom was fifth on uneven bars (8.575).

There were five more entries that advanced at-large -- Kuksuk (8.875), Przystal (8.825) and Ori (8.725) on floor, Ori (8.4) on beam and Hedstrom (8.675) on vault. The unofficial at-large sectional cuts were 30.875 all-around, 8.625 vault, 8.325 uneven bars, 8.325 beam and 8.725 floor.

“We really built ourselves up on Friday. We thought we did really well and we carried it to today, used our momentum,” Hedstrom said. “We know we have the potential to do it so when we pull together as a team we can do whatever we want.”

What was perhaps more important was several gymnasts, such as Ori, responded to disappointments from one event on the next. The Pirates started on uneven bars and vault, followed by beam and floor.

Ori, who had a team-high and personal-best 9.45 vault at the MSL Meet, still scored an 8.275 to tie for 14th.

“That’s the first time (Ori has) missed a vault, the first time. (We told her), ‘Big deal. It’s over,’ ” Theobald said. “She came back (on beam and floor). That’s exactly what you’ve got to do. You learn from stuff like that. You learn from mistakes. That’s the bottom line.”

Ori had a strong second half. Her 8.4 on beam and 8.725 on floor came within range of her season-high scores of 8.725 and 9.1. She cited several reasons she was able to bounce back so well.

“It’s a group effort. I have to do it for myself because ultimately I’m the one doing the routine, but my coaches do help calm me down if I’m disappointed or something,” Ori said.

“(As a team) we just try to pick each other up if we’re not feeling good. You kind of get disappointed in yourself and you want to bring them up from where they are and get excited to compete again. If they nail it, then you’re excited for them and cheer them on. Cheering helps a lot in routines.”

Kuksuk has spent this season cheering more than usual because her competition has been limited by elbow and shoulder injuries.

She was limited to two routines Wednesday, and that was with just returning to floor Monday. She competed on floor for the first time since Jan. 12, albeit with watered down tumbling.

“It usually goes that way, where the coaches are like, ‘No, you shouldn’t do it,’ and I was like, ‘Yeah, I really want to.’ I just decided to try it,” Kuksuk said. “I really like doing floor, competing it, the adrenaline. I get most of my bonus in my dance so I’m like, ‘Well, at least I’ll throw some tumbling in there.’ ”

Kuksuk shared the beam title with Barrington freshman Abby Hanslov, who won all-around (37.85) and the other three events outright.

“I just enjoy doing beam. I’m normally really nervous on beam, but today it was fun,” Kuksuk said. “It wasn’t my best routine, but I think it was good enough for today. I didn’t connect my jump-jump that I normally do.”

Alden had another consistent all-around effort, other than a fall on her first tumbling pass for floor. She also overcame striking her foot on the uneven bars at practice Monday.

“It’s fine. You’ve just got to get (your disappointment) out of way and then I’ll be ready for sectionals,” Alden said. “I know it was a really close score, but it feels amazing to win so we can all go, for sure, as a team.”

Despite not advancing as an individual, sophomore Morgan Anderson had one of the most important scores of the meet. After falling during her routine on uneven bars, Anderson started out the Pirates’ beam set with a 10th-place 8.1 and no falls, .15 from her season best.

“I was just excited that I made it. So much practicing, doing well in practice and then trusting myself is the main thing,” Anderson said. “It kind of helps

when you don't count sometimes, just leave everything out there. People are behind you to support you, and if you fall then it's OK. But it's also good to go and compete in the actual top four."

Anderson and sophomore Cindy Feliciano, who started the Pirates' set on uneven bars with a season-high 7.425, were the only ones without previous regional experience.

"(It was) no different, maybe just smaller, more homey," Anderson said. "No more pressure, no less. It's still a meet. (Being at home) helped a little bit. It's a little distracting but it also gives you that extra oomph."

At sectionals, the Pirates will be an underdog in a field with No. 1-seed and state-title contender Prairie Ridge co-op (147.175 regional score), No. 2 Fremd (143.525), No. 3 Prospect (139.85), No. 5 Barrington and Conant (139.00).

"We're going against the No. 1 and No. 3 teams in the state," Theobald said. "I think we can go 142.00 because you know the scores are going to be tough. We've been around that the last couple of times so we'll see what happens. We've been on that equipment (for club gymnastics practices) so it's kind of our equipment, too."

Individuals qualify for state either automatically with a top-five sectional finish or by being among the 12 highest remaining scores from the four sectionals.

Fremd is the first sectional. The final sectional is Thursday at Stevenson.

"If we get our high score and really accomplish the best we can do and everybody hits, then it'll be worth it, whether we win or not," Hedstrom said.

Kuksuk is going for her fourth trip to state and Alden her second. Kuksuk, a vault and floor qualifier in 2012, may only compete on beam at sectionals,

but Theobald said she still may add vault to help the team score. Regardless of her vault score, she would not be able to qualify for state in that event.

“I’ll try and see how it goes. If worse comes to worse, I’ll stick to beam because that’s my favorite,” Kuksuk said.

Alden made her first state trip last year on beam. She’s a contender in all four of her entries. Her 8.65 floor score Wednesday missed the at-large cut by just .075.

“I am hoping to make it to state, fingers crossed,” Alden said.

At the MSL Meet, Kuksuk was third on beam (season-high 9.55), .05 behind champion Sydney Plichta of Fremd (9.6).

Alden had arguably her best overall meet of the season, taking fifth in all-around (37.025) and beam (9.3), seventh on floor (9.2), 10th on uneven bars (9.2) and 12th on vault (season-high 9.325).

Przystal was eighth in all-around (36.60), tied for 10th on floor (9.05) and was 12th on uneven bars (season-high 9.05). Ori was eighth on vault (9.45) and 18th on floor (8.9), and Hedstrom was 15th in all-around (33.75) with a season-high 8.8 on uneven bars. Anderson had season highs on uneven bars (8.6) and floor (8.15).

The Pirates had season-high team scores on vault (36.675) and uneven bars (36.60). The MSL West Division final standings are based solely on dual results with Palatine tying with Conant for fourth with a 2-3 record. Fremd won the title with a 5-0 mark.