

Palatine senior Abby Alden experienced a bit of deja vu before her second straight appearance at the girls gymnastics state meet at Palatine High School Friday.

After being the first competitor on balance beam in 2012, Alden was the second of 67 competitors on beam for these preliminaries.

“It was a flashback from last year, going first on beam again, but I don’t mind it at all. I like getting it done with and out of the way,” Alden said.

Otherwise, this was a much different state experience for Alden. It not only was her last, but it also showed the progress she’s made as a gymnast and leader for the Pirates.

Alden qualified for state as an all-arounder and on beam and uneven parallel bars after having only that one early beam routine as a junior. Palatine sophomore Claudia Przystal joined Alden on beam as the third competitor in her first state berth.

“Just making it to state this year in all-around (was my highlight),” Alden said. “I think I peaked at the right time for once. I think being a senior and just knowing what everything is about for the high-school season (helped me), and knowing how hard you have to work to get to state.”

Alden remained a model of consistency one last time. Her beam routine scored an 8.975 and finished 19th, .225 shy of a top-10 finish needed to advance to Saturday’s event finals. She finished 24th in all-around (35.95) and tied for 24th on uneven bars (9.0). Przystal was 31st on beam (7.95).

“This year she competed (all-around) every meet,” Palatine coach Terry

Theobald said. "Abby's been here before. Abby did what she was supposed to do, nothing out of the ordinary. She didn't have a team behind her, and that makes a difference. The warmup is different. You have less time (as an individual competitor). We try to block together with other kids so they get more time, but even with three kids, six minutes goes fast."

With the meet at Palatine, Alden did have many of her teammates in the competition area helping with the running of the meet. Alden also supported her friends from Fremd, which finished third as a team (146.05) behind Lyons Township (149.625) and Prairie Ridge co-op (149.30).

Alden has been a mainstay of the Palatine Park District gymnastics program for about as long as Theobald could remember. While getting to compete for one last time at her school, the end of her Palatine gymnastics career still wasn't easy. Alden will attend Grand Valley State University.

"A little bit (emotional tonight). It's a little hard," Alden said. "This is everything I've been hoping for my senior year. I'm just so happy how it turned out. It's definitely been a climb, but it's been worth every minute of it and I wouldn't take anything back."

In her other state events, Alden scored 8.875 on floor and 9.1 on vault. With her rotation, Alden was able to start and end with the events on which she qualified. She ended as the 61st of 67 entries on uneven bars.

"I had a lot of fun tonight. I don't regret anything," Alden said. "I had to just take it and go with each event. Just all around I'm happy with each event. Nothing was bad for me. I think everything was pretty much hit and pretty much good."

This season, Alden scored as high as at least 9.3 in all four events with a

season-high all-around total of 37.20 at the Palatine Invitational Dec. 19. She scored as high as 9.5 on beam three times this season.

Her dependability as a competitor was equaled by her leadership as a senior for a relatively young lineup. That especially held true as fellow senior co-captain and three-time state qualifier Nicole Kuksuk was rarely able to compete as an all-rounder as she fought back from elbow and shoulder injuries to compete more than was ever hoped or imagined. Kuksuk just missed returning to state as an individual qualifier on beam.

“(Alden) stepped up and people look up to her in the gym. She’s definitely a leader,” Theobald said. “The younger kids learned something from her (approach). We coach team. We don’t coach individuals. We’re all in this together.”

Theobald said there still is a possibility that Alden and Kuksuk could compete for Team Illinois at the National high School Gymnastics Meet in May.

“(Alden) came in strong and led the team like a good captain would and always brought us up if we were down,” sophomore Andrea Ori said. “She helped us with the meets and everything and kind of led by example. In practice, she works really hard on skills and if she messes up, she keeps drilling to make sure she has them to be consistent in the meets. To finish (event) with her being so consistent really helped the team.”

Even without Kuksuk at full strength, the Pirates scored a season-high 143.075 at the Mid-Suburban League Meet and won the Palatine Regional (139.825) by .025 over Barrington. The Pirates then scored 139.475 at the Fremd Sectional.

Another big reason for the Pirates' progress was the progress of Przystal, who emerged as a strong all-rounder in her second varsity season. Przystal, who suffered a fall on beam at state, qualified with a 9.025 at sectionals that beat the 9.0 at-large cut.

"(State) was a good experience. It felt really fun," Przystal said. "I think (competing third) got me more out of the fear since I got it over with first. I got to watch other girls, which was more fun. I am very proud of myself. I hope that next year I do better."

"To be on the floor (competing) is different so it's good for Claudia to see what it's about," Theobald said. "There's no comparison year to year. Last year, she was a scary kid to watch. She's performing now. She's starting to step up and she's learning new stuff already. We've already changed a whole bunch of stuff on bars."

Besides Alden and Kuksuk, the Pirates only graduate Megan Hedstrom from their sectional lineup. Hedstrom has received an NCAA Division I scholarship to play softball for the University of North Dakota.

Other underclassmen in the sectional lineup besides Przystal and Ori were sophomores Morgan Anderson and Cindy Feliciano. Ori and Anderson each competed three events and Feliciano was a specialist on uneven bars.

"Next year, hopefully, we'll get a team here (to state). We'll see what happens," Theobald said.

"I know we're all going to work really hard over the offseason together," Ori said. "I know a lot of us are going to work out together here and hopefully

come back really strong with lots of new skills.”