

Shepard sophomore Skylor Hilger is preparing for her second berth to the girls gymnastics state meet with a different approach – seclusion.

Hilger became her school's first state qualifier as a freshman, but she contracted stomach flu less than two days before the state preliminaries and was unable to compete.

"I'm making sure I wash my hands, I stay away from people that are sick," Hilger said. "My grandma's actually sick so I'm making sure I stay away from her."

Hilger will bring her healthier outlook to Palatine High School for the state preliminaries at 5 p.m. Friday after qualifying for state in all-around, vault and floor exercise at the Hinsdale Central Sectional Feb. 12.

Hilger earned two automatic berths with top-five sectional finishes as she was third on floor (season-high 9.45) and fourth in all-around (36.05). After the final sectional Feb. 13, she found out she also advanced at-large on vault as her seventh-place and season-high 9.3 beat the cut of 9.25 for the 12 highest remaining scores among the state's four sectionals.

This season, Hilger overcame breaking the ring finger on her right hand in September while diving into a base playing traveling softball. The injury especially inhibited her training on vault and the uneven parallel bars. The finger is one she slides into her hand grips.

"I didn't even know if I was going to be able to do it at all this year," Hilger said. "Being able to make it all the way to state was one of my goals and that was my main goal, to make it there. Now it's just whatever happens, happens. I made it there."

Actually competing at state is the next step. In 2013, Hilger qualified for state in all-around and all four events. Between Wednesday night and Thursday night, however, she began to feel ill.

Hilger still wanted to represent Shepard so she participated in the march-in of schools for the state preliminaries. Hilger also attended to support

her teammates from Action Gymnastics, her club team, who were competing for other schools.

Still, Hilger was in no condition to compete and still was vomiting simply as a state spectator.

"It was like the worst timing and I got (sick) at the worst possible time," Hilger said. "Mentally, I was trying not to think about it. I was trying to say I'd be fine. Then when it came to Friday morning and I was still sick, it actually clicked that I wasn't able to compete at state.

"It was really disappointing because I made it there for everything as a freshman, my first year. I was really excited, but things happen. I had three more years and I made sure I tried to make it these three years, too."

Hilger once again qualified for sectionals in all-around and all four events after a strong Lincoln-Way East Regional Feb. 6 that included first-place titles in all-around (36.25), floor (9.45) and vault (9.275).

At sectionals, Hilger struggled with landing the dismounts on her first two events, uneven bars (8.425, 9th place) and beam (8.85, 12th). She knew immediately she wasn't going to reach state on either.

Her next event was floor, usually her strongest. Coach Erica Wolf enthusiastically reminded Hilger of that.

"She's like, 'Floor is your best chance to make it and you always rock floor. You never miss floor. Just go out and do floor. If you bomb on vault, you bomb on vault. Just make sure you do good on floor,' "Hilger said.

"I've never missed floor. I've never fallen on any of my passes so I just wanted to make sure I went out there and did a good floor routine like I know I could, like I've always done."

Just to make sure, Hilger visited the on-site trainer between her beam and floor routines to get her ailing right ankle taped. For warmups, Hilger

taped the ankle on her own but removed it because that previously has affected her footing on beam.

"I had to get it taped right away and I knew she was really good at taping it because she's the trainer so it was better off that way," Hilger said.

"I have a mild sprain right now. It just bothers me, even with floor and vault. I try to do as little as possible at the same time getting enough practice that I need. It mentally affects my meet. I try not to think about it as much as I can, but it's doing OK."

Nothing was going to stop Hilger on vault. On her first of two attempts, she landed a pike Yurchenko that she couldn't even land in warmups.

The 9.3 vault also put her all-around score over the top. If Hilger had scored just 9.2 or below, she wouldn't have reached state on vault, or in all-around.

"When (floor) went really well, the momentum just took in and I had a good vault. I didn't even make any in warmups so it was like the momentum in the moment. It just all mentally clicked when I had something good happen," Hilger said.

"Once I hit that floor routine and I knew that I had made it to state, it was just one of those things where vault, go all out. I already made it there. What's to lose now?"

Hilger hadn't even competed vault this season until the York Invite Jan. 25. After she broke her finger, Hilger had to wear a splint with a cast over it. She was relegated mostly to conditioning until she received medical clearance in late November.

"I had to write with my left hand at school," Hilger said. "I've always been able to write a little bit with my left hand. My dad is left-handed. It was hard, though. I had people write for me sometimes."

In December, Hilger had her first international competition with Action in

the Bahamas. Because of her finger, she only worked beam. On Dec. 28, she made her high-school season debut when she came to support Longawa at the Oswego Invitational but then made a last-minute decision to compete on floor. Even with a conservative routine, Hilger ended up taking sixth with an 8.95.

"With gymnastics being a mental sport, knowing that I made it last year made me feel like I could make it this year. It kind of helped calm me down throughout the (sectional)," Hilger said.

At state, the all-around standings are determined Friday. Individual event qualifiers among the top 10 scores Friday advance to Saturday's event finals, which begin at 5:30 p.m. and are held one event at a time in the order of vault, uneven bars, beam and floor.

Top-five finishers Saturday earn all-state medals. Only Saturday's scores determine the final results.

Hilger shared the ninth-highest floor score among all sectional performances. She tied for 29th in all-around and tied for 30th on vault.

Last year, the lowest preliminary score to reach finals was 9.375. The only returning underclassmen from last year's floor finals that qualified this year are Lyons Township junior and defending state champion Kelsy Kurfirst (9.725) and Elk Grove senior Amelia Rafferty (9.5, 6th).

Hilger's high-school career high on floor is 9.55 from last season. She also had career highs of 9.5 on vault and 37.55 in all-around at the 2013 Hinsdale Central Regional.

"I'm already satisfied, really. If I go to the state meet and something happens where I have a terrible meet, it happens," Hilger said. "Of course, it would be great to make it to Saturday. I feel like the only way I would be able to would be for floor. I don't want to put too much pressure on myself because I have two more years."

Hilger already has received an outpouring of support. At sectionals, the

fans besides her family included Shepard freshman Reilly Longawa, who competed at regionals with Hilger, and her mother, girls and boys gymnasts from Action and her entire Windy City Ice Blue traveling softball team and coach and his wife.

Being forced to watch state last year makes Hilger all the more anxious to finally compete.

"Everybody was so hyped up at state," Hilger said. "You see the big Jumbotron (routine highlights) with everybody on it. The atmosphere just seems so good so I'm really excited for that part."

-- by Bill Stone