

Shepard freshman Reilly Longawa has become accustomed to having her gymnastics interrupted by numerous surgeries on her left knee to correct a growth plate.

As she prepared for the Lincoln-Way East Regional Thursday, Feb. 5, Longawa was faced with a worse challenge to her training. She had not practiced the entire week following a death in the family Feb. 1.

"I haven't been in the gym for a week before this so I kind of just had to come right in and compete," Longawa said. "I'm kind of used to being out because I've been out so long with my knee so I kind of came back from that. I did it for my grandma, who passed away."

While Longawa's season came to an end, Shepard sophomore and 2013 state qualifier Skylor Hilger advanced impressively to the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 12, in all-around and all four events.

Hilger won all-around (36.25), floor exercise (9.45) and vault (9.275) and was second on uneven parallel bars (8.85) and tied for second on balance beam (8.675). She comfortably won the all-around by 1.375 points over Lincoln-Way co-op sophomore Mallory Winter (34.875).

As a freshman, Hilger qualified for state in all-around and all four events but did not compete because of illness. At last year's Hinsdale Central Regional, Hilger won two events, all-around (36.15) and vault (9.35), and was a top-three finisher on the other three events.

"I was just going in and trying to do the same thing that I did last year, which was do my best and hopefully win," Hilger said. "It builds my confidence for sectionals also. I had some troubles in warmups with being rushed and stuff, but it ended up being OK."

Top-five regional finishers automatically qualify for sectionals. Gymnasts also can advance at-large by being among the 12 highest remaining scores from the four feed-in regionals.

Coach Erica Wolf said Hilger did some more conservative routines because her primary regional goal simply was to advance to on everything and at least have the opportunity to qualify for state.

"That's all we wanted," Wolf said. "You never know. People make mistakes. Things happen. We were like, 'It doesn't matter so much how you qualify. Just get officially in the (sectional) meet and then we'll try to hit 4 for 4 there and then let the chips fall where they may.'"

The other three feed-in regionals were Tuesday at Neuqua Valley, Wednesday at Naperville North and Friday at Lyons Township. While full teams generally are placed in regionals based upon seed scores through mid-January, schools with individual competitors usually are placed at the closest site to their school's location.

Longawa said had Shepard been placed in the regionals at Neuqua Valley or Naperville North, she probably would not have competed.

"There wasn't a chance I wasn't going to compete but it turned out that (the wake and funeral were) Tuesday and Wednesday," Longawa said.

This was fourth meet this season for Longawa, each as an all-arounder, and third for Hilger. Their last regular-season meet was the York Invitational Feb. 25, Hilger's first meet this season as an all-arounder.

At regionals, Longawa had arguably her best meet of the season and came closest to qualifying for sectionals on vault. Her season-high 8.35 on vault for 14th place was .25 shy of the 8.60 at-large sectional cut.

"(Longawa) knew realistically there wasn't a great chance to make sectionals, but there was kind of maybe that outside chance," Wolf said. "At least she went in with a good mindset, knowing that if she did make it there (to sectionals) that was as far as she would get but that it wasn't likely this year."

Longawa also had a season-high 6.275 on uneven bars and her scores on beam (6.925) and floor (7.175) just missed her season highs from Jan. 13 at Glenbard West. Longawa's 28.725 all-around total also was her highest, topping her 28.15 from the York Invite.

"I went up on everything from the last meet at York and I was really happy," Longawa said. "(Regionals) didn't feel any different really. I've never been in a big competition like that. I liked it, though. It pushed me

a little more and now I know what I have to do to make it next year." Hilger can attest that her regional and competition experience from last season has helped, and this time even more than she might have imagined.

When Hilger competed at the Lincoln-Way junior varsity invite as a freshman, she discovered that the length of the vault runway was shorter than most and too short for the length of her usual approach.

"I knew that I had to make sure my run wasn't so long. That helped me a lot," Hilger said. "Actually, moving up my run made my vault better so it was all good."

Hilger landed a more conservative tuck Yurchenko vault and kept out her double back flip dismount off uneven bars, partly because of short warmup times. On floor, she has yet to add the double full twist that she used last year, but her new whip, whip full pass has the same scoring credit.

A strong opening routine on uneven bars set the tone. Hilger finished second to Downers Grove South senior Inna Dzyuma (9.125).

"Bars is my most nervewracking event. For some reason, when I compete it I just get the most nerves so knocking that out and hitting that routine just made me more confident for the whole meet," Hilger said.

After just practicing her vault the day before, Hilger fell on both tuck Yurchenkos at the York Invite. Allowed only two minutes to warm up the event Thursday, she had one timer and vault and popped one of her already ailing ankles on the landing.

In competition, Hilger also missed her first attempt but then hit the second to win the event by .025 over Lincoln-Way co-op sophomore Maggie Schultz (9.25).

Hilger hopes to perform the higher-valued pike or layout Yurchenkos at sectionals, which actually can be easier for her to land.

"In the middle of the (first) flip, I was like, 'Oh my God. I should just

lay this out,' " Hilger said. "I had too much power. The judge said if I had landed, it would have been a 9.45 (out of 9.6 start value).

"I actually opened (the second one) a little early. I had to step forward, but I wanted to make sure I landed on my feet."

Hilger won floor by .30 over Downers South sophomore Emily Tom (9.15). Hilger also would have won beam over Dzyuma (8.775) if not for a fall on a standing back flip for the second meet in a row.

"I had a good meet, other than falling on beam, which was a little disappointing. Beam was just an off night for everybody," Hilger said. "It was really exciting, especially when I hit my floor routine. That's the event I'm excited for all of the time."

At sectionals, the top five finishers automatically advance to the state preliminaries Feb. 21 at Palatine High School. Gymnasts also can advance at-large by being among the 12 highest remaining scores for sectional qualifiers from the four feed-in sectionals. The final sectional is Thursday, Feb. 13, at Niles North.

"Right now, it's not about physically if I can do it because I know I have the skills (to qualify). It's mentally and being able to hit it. Being able to make it to the next round is just about being able to hit your routines. That's what I'm working on, repetition right now."

Longawa is hoping for plenty of repetition for her skills during a healthy season for her new club, Action Gymnastics, where Hilger also trains and Wolf is co-owner and coach. Longawa plans to compete in the platinum level of USA Gymnastics' new Excel competition program.

"I really want to make it to sectionals next year so I want to get some more skills, like giants on bars, a full on floor, a flip flop on beam and a half full on the vault," Longawa said. "(High school competition is) a lot of fun, actually, a lot more than I thought. I just really like having the one teammate. We cheer each other back and forth. I'm excited to compete for Action now and to be with all of the girls who I've trained with all summer."

Like Hilger last year, Longawa slowly is gaining fame around school.

Wearing her orange warmup jacket on the days of meets has helped a bit, too.

"I had to leave school early (for Lincoln-Way East) and a bunch of people were like, 'Where are you going?' " Longawa said. "I was like, 'I have regionals,' and everyone's like, 'Oh. Good luck. I know what you're doing now.' "

-- by Bill Stone