

After a girls gymnastics season full of close calls, Shepard sophomore Skylor Hilger finished with a great one.

Hilger not only competed at her first state meet at Palatine High School but she advanced to the event finals on floor exercise Feb. 22.

As the last competitor on the last event, Hilger placed sixth among the 11 floor finalists with a 9.45, just .025 from a top-five, all-state medal.

"So close, so close but I'm happy with it. I barely even made it to (the finals) so being able to get sixth is a really good accomplishment," Hilger said.

"(I'll remember) just the experience, I guess. Being here (in finals) was the best part. I don't know how else to describe that, especially knowing for next year what it is and seeing all of the best of the best girls in one gym is just so overwhelming but at the same time it's good to be there with them. It was just overall a great experience."

Hilger reached the floor finals by being among the top 10 scorers among state qualifiers during the Feb. 21 preliminaries with a 9.25. Hilger also qualified for state in all-around (14th, 36.45) and vault (31st, 9.3).

Hilger's state appearance especially was rewarding because last year she qualified for state in all-around and all four events – becoming the first state qualifier in Shepard history. However, Hilger contracted stomach flu just days before the meet and did not compete.

"I hit everything (in prelims). I think I had a pretty solid meet," Hilger said. "Nothing was overly great, but nothing was bad. I was proud of myself for first year state being able to hit everything."

This year, Hilger wasn't even sure she could try to return to state after she broke a finger on her left hand playing softball in September.

She first worked her way back on balance beam and floor and then added vault and uneven parallel bars. She made her season debut only

competing floor at the Oswego Invite Dec. 28 as Shepard freshman all-arounder Reilly Longawa made her high-school debut.

Now Hilger is ready to return to club action with Action Gymnastics, where Wolf is a co-owner and coach. Hilger planned to compete in a Level 9 club meet the morning after the state finals.

"I didn't have that much training time so being able to come back and hit this routine and make sixth place at state, I can't even wrap my head around the fact that that happened," Hilger said. "It pumps me up next year, knowing if I could get sixth with this routine, next year, if I hit the routine with all of the skills I'm going to add, it's going to be even better."

It nearly didn't happen. Preliminary competition order is determined by random draw based on sectional results. Hilger competed on floor in the second of the meet's four rotations and initially believed that her 9.25 wouldn't be high enough to advance. Hilger had shared the ninth-highest sectional score among state qualifiers, but that was a 9.45.

After seeing floor results on the JumboTron screen, coach Erica Wolf and Hilger knew there still was hope. Hilger saw herself in eighth place near the start of the final rotation with nine remaining individual qualifiers, but three who scored 9.4 or higher at sectionals.

Because of two key falls, only one more girl outscored Hilger. She and Elk Grove senior Amelia Rafferty advanced with the 10th and final score.

"I didn't think I was going to make (finals). I feel really bad for those two girls, but it gave me the chance," Hilger said. "I couldn't have done anything more. I felt that (prelim) routine was really strong. If I wouldn't have made it, I couldn't have done anything more so I was still really proud of myself."

For the finals, Hilger maybe could have done more skill-wise, but she chose to be safe and solid.

Hilger consistently has done a double full twist in past tumbling passes,

but she kept it out, thinking she could still contend for state and the event finals with a slightly more conservative approach. Hilger said she also kept out a double twisting front she was practicing during warmups.

Only the scores in finals determine the final results. Events are also are conducted one at a time, starting with vault, followed by uneven bars, beam and floor.

"I decided to play it safe and play it clean. It worked out really well," Hilger said. "Especially going last (on floor), it was the last routine so it was good energy. I was more relaxed than I have been at the previous meets because it's just like, 'You made it here. You should have fun because you deserve to be here.' It just made it more relaxing and fun to be here."

Lyons Township junior Kelsy Kurfirst (9.675) won the state title on floor for the second year in a row. The Lions also once again won the state team title.

Only two of the six seniors in the finals finished ahead of Hilger – LT's Katie Carling (2nd, 9.625) and Rafferty (tied for 4th, 9.475).

"We just trained to not have any regrets so I think that's exactly what we did, be safe and know you did everything you could to prepare and whatever happens, happens," Wolf said.

"We wanted her to just feel good about what she did. I think she covered it in that sense."

As usual, Hilger had plenty of support from her family with her parents, sister, aunt and uncle among those in the stands. Hilger also was grateful for the amount of support she received from other individuals and teams competing at state, even gymnasts she doesn't know particularly well.

Surprising support even came from the crowd.

"I was on the floor (about to start) and there was someone yelling at me,

'Go Skylor,' and I didn't even know who it was, some random guy," Hilger said. "I didn't even know who it was, but it made me feel good."

-- by Bill Stone