

Shepard junior and two-time state qualifier Skylor Hilger is a veteran of high school gymnastics, but she came to the Wheaton Warrenville South Regional Tuesday, Feb. 3, with plenty of question marks.

This not only was her first high school meet of the season. Even though Hilger had just returned to training full time, the open gym schedules, combined with the recent snowstorm, had resulted in her not being able to practice over the previous three days.

"I came into this kind of nervous in the first place, kind of frazzled. I've been having trouble with my ankle, too," Hilger said.

"I've done so many meets that it was kind of easier for me -- definitely mentally. Physically it was hard, but I came in knowing what to expect. I wasn't there physically, endurance wise or ankle wise, but because I've had so much experience, it did help me definitely."

Hilger admitted it may not have been pretty, but she did enough to advance in all-around and all four events to the Glenbard North Sectional at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 10.

Hilger advanced automatically in three events with top-five regional finishes. She was second in all-around (35.325), floor exercise (9.075) and balance beam (8.825) to gymnasts from Wheaton Warrenville co-op, the regional team champion.

After the final feed-in regional Thursday, she found out that she also advanced at-large on uneven parallel bars (8.825) and vault (8.6) despite punishing falls on both of her attempts. Her 8.6 shared the last advancing at-large score with two others.

Hilger took second in all-around to Wheaton Warrenville co-op senior Lenna Klein (35.90) despite counting two falls on vault and beam.

"I'm disappointed with how I did overall, but it could have been worse," Hilger said. "I watered down a lot so I could make it to sectionals. We figured I could squeak by even with my smaller skills because we didn't want to throw my skills,

especially without having practiced. It would probably be messy and sloppy and we wanted to go more conservative.”

Hilger now has a chance to return to the state meet Feb. 20-21 at Palatine High School.

Individual sectional qualifiers advance to state either automatically with top-five finishes or by being among the 12 best remaining scores from among the four sectionals.

Last year, Hilger reached the state event finals on floor and finished sixth (9.45), just .025 from a top-five, all-state medal. She also qualified in all-around and vault. As a freshman, Hilger qualified for state in all-around and all four events but couldn't compete after coming down with the flu just before the state preliminaries.

“Overall we just kind of came (to regionals) to try and qualify for sectionals so it buys us another week to go in and practice,” coach Erica Wolf said, Hilger's coach. Wolf also coaches Hilger during the club season at Action Gymnastics, which Wolf co-owns with Jody Raymond.

At sectionals, the top-five finishers automatically advance to the state meet. Those among the 12 best remaining scores among the four sectionals also advance at at-large qualifiers. The final sectional is Thursday, Feb. 12, at Lake Park.

“I'd take anything,” Hilger said. “My favorite's floor and say I was only to make floor to state, I'd have a whole week to try and upgrade.”

Hilger once again shined on floor Tuesday and only finished behind Wheaton Warrenville co-op senior Katie McDonald (9.15). They were the only gymnasts to score 9s on the event.

The routine still was a tough one. At regionals, all gymnasts compete first on vault and uneven bars before moving to floor and beam. Hilger had just crashed both of her pike Yurchenko vaults, badly stinging and twisting her ankles that have had a

history of hindering her.

"I was kind of nervous because of my ankle, and the whip pass is easy to roll my ankle. But mentally it's my favorite event and I usually score highest on it so I was kind of like more excited to get a solid score," Hilger said. "Going into the meet I feel like that was the most consistent event I had."

On beam, even with a fall on her flip-flop layout, Hilger was second to Klein (9.075). Playing it safe especially after her vaulting troubles, Hilger removed her standing back flip out from the routine.

"The second (vault) hurt worse," Hilger said. "The first one hurt really bad and then there was kind of adrenaline, which kept me going. Then the second one was just like two in a row and it just killed my ankle."

Just attempting the beam flight series after years on and off with the skill is a personal triumph for Hilger. She received credit for completing the series because the fall came after landing both feet.

"That (flip-flop layout) was a big goal for her. She probably could have stayed on, but I could see she was off just enough," Wolf said.

Hilger was sixth on uneven bars and seventh on vault, .125 and .175 from top-five finishes, respectively. For those events, she was spotted by former Hinsdale South girls gymnastics head coach Jarrod Amolsch.

Wolf and Raymond currently are Hinsdale South assistant coaches and the Hornets were competing Tuesday as well, but at the Lincoln-Way East Regional, which feeds into the Hinsdale Central Regional. Raymond also handles spotting events for the Hornets.

"It was nice of (Amolsch) to come in and spot for vault and bars because we got double scheduled for regionals," Wolf said. "We didn't expect that to happen, but when the individuals were realigned, we thought there was a good chance."

There's a good chance that Hilger will be adding more skills to her sectional routines with hopes to qualifying for state.

If she can qualify, it'll be the end of a tough road for Hilger, Her early season training was inconsistent because of her responsibilities with softball, especially after she made a verbal commitment to play for DePaul University.

"I was coming in during the summer. It got harder to go to the gym with all of the (softball) responsibilities I had to fill but then pretty much this month I started going full on again. I didn't want to do any meet before because I didn't feel like I would be ready," Hilger said.

"On my own, I do conditioning, but it's different when you're on bars. You forget how hard endurance wise (gymnastics) is. Even at our last practice Friday I couldn't keep my feet up on a bail so we came in here even worrying about that. (But) I feel I'm getting back into it. Bars sets are getting easier. For my floor routine, I wasn't as much out of breath."

-- by Bill Stone