

Freshman Reilly Longawa felt like a rookie and veteran during her first high-school meet at Oswego's Tumble for the Troops Invitational Saturday, Dec. 28.

Longawa is competing as an individual competitor representing Shepard High School along with sophomore Skylor Hilger, the school's first qualifier for the state meet.

"It's different because at my old gym, I was the oldest and all of the other girls were like 9," Longawa said. "I didn't really have anybody that was close to my age to talk to and now that I'm with Skylor (Hilger), I do."

Longawa and Hilger had plenty to discuss before, during and after their first high-school meet this season. Longawa competed as an all-rounder and Hilger joined her on floor exercise, their final event, in a last-minute decision after warming up on the event.

Even with a conservative routine, Hilger finished sixth (8.95) and missed tying two other gymnasts for fourth by .075.

"I just did it. I just figured it was really good practice, especially since (Longawa was) ending on it," Hilger said. "My mom's going to be mad at me because I told her I wasn't competing so she didn't come."

Longawa and Hilger also are teammates in club for Action Gymnastics after Longawa previously competed with the Alsip Park District in the USA Gymnastics new Excel Division at the Silver and Bronze levels for 14-year-olds. They are being coached by Action coach and co-owner Erica Wolf and training out of Hinsdale South High School in Darien.

While Hilger is able to see many of her club teammates at meets, she said she also is enjoying having an actual teammate as well. Longawa said she became motivated to represent Shepard after seeing Hilger perform in a meet at Glenbard West last season.

"(Longawa) was kind of inspired to be a part of this and see what it's all about. And, of course, Skylor was really welcoming," Wolf said. "I'm still

getting to know (Longawa) as a competitor and gymnast and Skylor has been able to help a lot with that and kind of take a little bit of initiative as a teammate, which is really nice to see."

Longawa was the invite's first competitor on vault. She had her highest score on the event (7.9, 49th) and her highest finish on the uneven parallel bars (5.35, 47th). She also scored 7.0 on floor (50th) and 5.275 on balance beam (48th).

"(This competition was) different and nervewracking, but it was good practice to do it for me," Longawa said. "(My club meets were) actually a little more stressful because I knew all of the girls, but they were also easier because there weren't a lot of girls in my age group.

"Vault and floor were pretty good, and beam was all right. On bars, I connected (my skills) and did my routine. That's all I wanted to do. It wasn't really different from (my club meets) because I'm used to the warm up all (events), compete all."

The invite marked the first time Longawa performed her new floor routine with new choreography.

"I've never done it full out with the music," Longawa said. "It was clean. I'm glad I remembered it. When I came in today, that was the event I was most confident for so I wanted it last."

Last season, Hilger qualified for the state meet in all-around and all four events but she couldn't compete in the state preliminaries after contracting a bad stomach flu days before.

The Oswego Invite was her third meet as a freshman. Hilger finished third on floor (9.25), fourth on vault (9.3) and fifth in all-around (35.50) but this season she is returning from a broken finger in her right hand that she suffered while playing traveling softball.

"I've been able to do those passes for a long time so it was kind of an easy routine for me. I'm just glad it was solid, that's all. That's all I was aiming

for, a clean, solid routine," Hilger said. "I didn't think I was going to make my Rudi, which I was surprised about."

"We weren't going for score. We were going for experience and trying to pace ourselves for (later on), clean and safe," Wolf said. "As long as Skylor was safe on floor, I was like, 'I don't care what you do. Play it safe and water it down and don't do anything crazy because we're not trying to peak now.'"

Longawa and Hilger said they didn't really know each other until Longawa began training at Action during the summer. Already, they are bringing out the best in each other.

"(Hilger) helps a lot," Longawa said. "I probably couldn't have been able to throw my back walkovers on the beam if she wasn't there. She's the one who had me throw them in the first place at the gym."

"I knew she just had to do them so she'll get more comfortable with them mentally," Hilger said. "When I was training for sectionals and state, (Wolf) had me do 10 routines a day. Every time you do them, especially beam, it's like with repetition you get better."

Hilger said she probably would not have competed at all Saturday if not for Longawa. Their next chance probably won't come until a dual meet during the first full week of January.

"It's really nice because I have someone to talk to when I'm waiting there and it's also nice to have someone to cheer on. It's more comforting, I guess," Hilger said.

"I wasn't going to do (floor Saturday) and she's like, 'Just do it. If you fall, you fall. It's not a big deal. You're just doing it for fun.' She really encouraged me. She was like, 'You're going to hit it. You always hit it.' She made me feel comfortable."

-- by Bill Stone