

The last time Shepard sophomore Skylor Hilger competed as an all-rounder at a gymnastics meet, she achieved history by becoming the school's first qualifier for the IHSA state meet.

When Hilger joined Shepard freshman Reilly Longawa at the York Invitational Saturday, Jan. 25, Hilger wasn't sure she was going to compete all four events.

Hilger's recovery from a broken finger has limited training on vault and uneven parallel bars, and she wasn't landing her tuck Yurchenko vault during warmups.

"I actually tried to do that at practice yesterday and I couldn't. But then I wanted to get an all-around score, even if it was bad," Hilger said. "I just decided to go for it. It was last minute."

While vault might have a ways to go, Hilger began to show her flare with four top-10 finishes at the 10-team invitational.

Hilger finished sixth in the all-around (35.125), just .075 from the top five.

Hilger was third on floor exercise (9.3), seventh on the uneven parallel bars (8.875) and tied for 10th on balance beam (8.75). She also scored 8.2 on vault.

Longawa had season-high totals for all-around (28.15), vault (8.3) and uneven bars (6.2) and also scored 7.1 on floor and 6.55 on beam. She had her highest event finish on vault, tying for 35th.

The invite turned out to be the last meet for the Astros before the state series begins for them at the Lincoln-Way East Regional

at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 6.

They and Fenwick sophomore Claire Long were supposed to return to Elmhurst Jan. 25 to join the Glenbard West-York dual, but school was closed that day because of dangerously cold temperatures and not rescheduled.

Longawa has competed as an all-arounder two previous times this season. She nearly scratched from floor Saturday, which turned out to be their first event, but Longawa gave it a try as the invite's first performer.

"I have really bad shins right now, but (coach Erica Wolf) was like, 'Just do it. It doesn't really matter right now,' " Longawa said. "I thought it was fun. It was just easier, I guess, than I thought. The adrenaline got me going and then I didn't even think that it hurt."

As a freshman, Hilger's historic performance at the Hinsdale Central Sectional earned state berths in all-around and all four events.

That turned out to be her last all-around performance until Saturday. She was unable to compete at the state meet because of a bad case of stomach flu and any club meets with Action Gymnastics before this season were hampered after she broke a finger on her right hand playing softball.

"It was my first time in a long time (for all-around), almost a year, so it felt really good. I wasn't doing it for the scores. I was just doing it for the exposure before regionals," Hilger said.

"We were kind of worried about vault and bars just because she

hasn't gotten to train them or do that much on them, but we decided, whatever the decision, that we weren't going to look at scores, just look at the process," Wolf said. "I think she's still holding back a little bit with the finger but we're getting better, just being aggressive with it, so we have to get over that and then once we do, we'll be good."

Longawa's meet also was about progress. She beat previous bests of 28.00 in all-around and 8.2 on vault from her last meet Jan. 13 at Glenbard West and 5.35 on uneven bars from her high-school debut at the Oswego Invitational Dec. 28.

"I just wanted to hit all of my routines and I did that," Longawa said. "I feel like I did better than I have before, especially with bars. My scores went up and I added a new skill in there, too."

Because of her finger and illness, Hilger previously competed just one routine previously this season – an 8.95 on floor at the Oswego Invite.

Hilger was even sharper Saturday as the invite's second floor performer. Even with one more conservative tumbling pass minus her double full twist, Hilger's 9.3 only was beaten by Naperville North's Michaela Robert (9.475) and Glenbard West's Amber Broucek (9.45).

"It's one of those events where I can just go to make it a solid score," Hilger said.

"Actually, (my healing finger) isn't botherine me on bars. It bothers me on vault sometimes, but for bars it's actually doing really well. It was just the fact that I hadn't done (vault)."

Hilger's final event on beam also was encouraging. Although she counted one fall, an automatic .5 deduction, for her standing back flip, Hilger added a flip flop, flip flop, full dismount that she learned the previous week – and she landed it cleanly.

Hilger was .25 from fifth place and .5 from tying Robert for second. Naperville North's Anneli Kawaoka won with a 9.5.

"I still felt like it was solid. Even though I fell on my tuck, I'm still glad that I was able to do the part that I was focused on," Hilger said.

The other two events were more about regaining the competitive feel for them.

On uneven bars, Hilger did a conservative routine that did not include her new dismount yet was .1 from the top five. As for vault, Hilger could not land either attempt, but barely landed short as she works toward including more difficult ones from last season.

"At least it's good that I know I can just throw it if I have to. (In warmups), I fell on my face so I wasn't expecting it. I was just trying to get to my feet, but I know it happens," Hilger said.

Uneven bars and vault turned out to be breakthroughs for Longawa. She added an uprise, free hip combination to her uneven bars routine. She landed her half-half vault as usual, but this time she moved in the direction that she was supposed to twist.

Longawa also again stayed on beam, even while adding a back walkover for the first time.

"I was really nervous about (my uprise, free hip), but then I hit all of them in warmups and I hit them all at the gym the other day," Longawa said. "This was the first meet where I twisted (vault) the right way."

"Consistency has really been our goal," Wolf said. "Vault went well. She twisted the correct way. That was good for her. And then on bars, (the uprise, free hip) was a big deal for her because she was a little nervous about it. She dealt with that really well."

At regionals, the top five regional finishers in all-around and the four events automatically advance to sectionals as ranked qualifiers. Individuals also can advance to sectionals at-large in an event by being among the 12 highest remaining scores for non-ranked qualifiers.

Hilger needs to qualify for sectionals in all five events for any chance to reach state on them again. Besides having uninterrupted practice for more than a week, Hilger also hopes to take advantage of her postseason experience from 2013.

"I'll definitely do repetitions in the gym (at practice). We also do pressure sets," Hilger said. "It's warm up on bars, warm up on beam and then warm up on this and then go back and compete and have everyone watch. It's only two minutes for warmups. Last year (for the state series), I only had two minutes per warmup."

-- by Bill Stone