

Shepard freshman Skylor Hilger rapidly is learning the way high school gymnastics meets are conducted.

"At practice, I warm up (events) for two minutes so I get used to doing it at meets so it's easier for me," Hilger said.

One aspect remains constant. Gymnasts who perform well usually get higher scores and reap the rewards.

Hilger did just that at the Hinsdale Central Regional Thursday, Jan. 31. She won all-around (36.15) and vault (9.35) and was second on balance beam (8.95) and third on floor exercise (9.05) and the uneven parallel bars (8.8).

"I was very surprised, but excited. I'm very, very happy right now," Hilger said. "I did not think I would get first in all-around at regionals, especially freshman year. It makes me really excited. There's three years still ahead so hopefully it'll get better and better."

Things could get better pretty soon. Hilger advanced to the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 6 in all-around and all four events and she has showed she is capable of becoming her school's first gymnast to qualify for the state meet.

"(My goal is) just hit it for sectionals and I should be able to make it," Hilger said. "My goal is at least one event. If not, I've got three more years."

Hilger can advance to state automatically with any top-five sectional finish. If she doesn't place among the top five, she still could qualify at-large if her score is among the 12 remaining highest scores from the four sectionals. The at-large cuts will be determined after the final sectional Thursday at

Stevenson.

The state meet is Feb. 15-16 at Palatine High School.

"I think for sure (she can qualify for state)," coach Erica Wolf said. "I think she's happy with how she performed (at regionals). She's happy so that's the most important thing. She didn't know what to expect coming into regionals because club (gymnastics) regionals is very different. It's after state, and this is leading up to state for high school so I was trying to tell her how it works."

Hinsdale Central generally is regarded as the weakest of the four sectionals, although top-seeded Lyons Township is expected to contend for its first state team championship.

Hilger, however, also has scored higher on all four events than she did at regionals. She also played it safe on some routines, making sure she advanced to sectionals with a slightly slower score rather than by possibly eliminated by a routine disaster.

She and Wolf also took the nerves of her first high-school postseason action into account.

"(I was) a little shaky. It's an accomplished feeling (to advance), which is good," Hilger said. "It's not my totally best meet, but not my worst meet. It's good that I didn't have a bad meet. I was really trying not to."

Hilger seemed to get stronger as the meet progressed and did just enough to pull out the all-around title. Her 36.15 edged Hinsdale Central senior Erin Morgan (36.125), a 2012 all-state performer on beam who won floor (9.5),

and Hinsdale South freshman Maddie Nowak (36.10), Hilger's club teammate from Action Gymnastics who won uneven bars (9.45).

Starting on uneven bars, Hilger suffered a form break but quickly recovered and landed her double back dismount beautifully.

For vault, Hilger nearly landed her pike Yurchenko on her first attempt, but she had too much power and rolled forward. She nailed the second chance and took the title by .05 over Morgan's handspring front.

"The first vault, I was like, 'Dang it (I fell).' The second one I was really like, 'You've got to do this now. No matter what, just pike it in and go for it,' " Hilger said. "It's really pressure when you miss your first one. You depend on the second one no matter what."

Hilger continued her streak of staying on beam, but she felt a little sloppy and finished second to Waubonsie Valley/Metea Valley senior Jessica Malon (9.275), a 2012 state qualifier. Hilger had a slight bobble after the completion of her flip-flop, flip-flop flight series on beam, but she also landed her back tuck flip and dismount without problems.

"I've been doing a lot of back tucks (in practice)," Hilger said. "I was a little sloppy because I was a little nervous. When I come to the meets sometime, I get a little sloppy so I've just got to work on that."

As the last competitor on floor, Hilger received the third 9.0 on the event to finish behind Morgan and Malon (9.2). Hilger has her highest event score so far on floor (9.55 Jan. 22), but she removed her double full twist from the end of her second pass, concluding with just a single full instead.

Hilger still could have pulled off second with the routine. She said her leg

buckled during her leap series, and the form error cost her .2.

"It stinks when you get .2 off for a leap. Things you don't worry about are what cost you," Hilger said. "I'm definitely putting (the double full) in for sectionals."

Despite competing alone all season, Hilger has received waves of support from other teams and gymnasts. At sectionals, Hilger will see many of her Action teammates as well as many friends she has made along the way. During regionals, Hilger became friends with Riverside-Brookfield senior Becca Smith, also a first-year high-school gymnast who will be her team's lone representative at sectionals.

"Sectionals will be nice because there are a lot of girls from her club there, from LT and Hinsdale South," said Wolf, co-owner of Action Gymnastics. "Everyone's been so supportive. It's just going to be a nice environment for her. Sectionals is kind of nice because not everyone makes it (as an entire team). She'll kind of blend in more with the one or two kids that might make it (for some teams). I think she's pumped. This (performance at regionals) will give her confidence."