

When Shepard freshman Skylor Hilger made her debut as a high-school gymnast at the Lyons Township Invitational Dec. 14, she began as the first competitor on floor exercise.

When Hilger competed at the Hinsdale Central Sectional Wednesday, Feb. 6, she also started as the first competitor on floor.

But this is only the beginning.

Hilger not only became the first state qualifier in school history thanks to her sectional performances, she also advanced in all-around and the maximum four events – floor, vault, uneven parallel bars and balance beam.

The state meet is Friday and Saturday, Feb. 15-16, at Palatine High School. Individual event preliminaries begin at 5:05 p.m. Friday with event finals at 5:45 p.m. Saturday for qualifiers among the top 10 preliminary scores.

“It feels very, very good being a freshman and already making a name for myself at my high school. I’m glad to represent Shepard like that,” Hilger said.

“My big, huge goal was to make it for one event at state. Now it’s just basically enjoy, just enjoy making it. No pressure. I’m not going to put any pressure on myself. I’m just going to enjoy being able to say I’m the first one from Shepard to make it to state.”

Hilger did it impressively. Top-five sectional finishers automatically advance to state, and Hilger earned four berths that way with three season-high scores in her eighth meet overall.

Hilger was second on floor (9.45), tied for fourth in all-around (season-high 37.55) and was fifth on uneven bars (season-high 9.35).

Hilger also found out Thursday night after the state's fourth and final sectional that she had advanced at-large on vault and beam.

Gymnasts advance at-large by being among the 12 highest scores from the four sectionals, regardless of site or sectional place. Her sixth-place 9.25 on beam and season-high 9.5 on vault that tied for seventh place beat the respective at-large state cuts of 9.0 and 9.475.

"She had a good meet. We were trying to peak for this meet because her goal really was to make one event," said coach Erica Wolf, also co-owner of Action Gymnastics where Hilger competes during the club season. "Going to state on anything would have been her dream, but she'll get a little bit more than that."

The performance order could have been a deterrent. Instead, Hilger had her best overall meet to easily surpass her previous all-around best of 36.60 from the season opener. The all-around at-large state cut was 36.125.

Hilger returned to gymnastics this fall after a three-year absence. She then decided to compete on the high-school level like many of her Action teammates, some of whom attend Lyons Township and Hinsdale South and also were part of the sectional field.

Since her strong start, Hilger has worked on getting into gymnastics shape and overcoming sore ankles. She's also been practicing and adding new skills that bolster her routines and are more advantageous in the scoring system for high-school gymnastics meets.

For sectionals, Wolf constructed a training schedule with several hard workouts to keep Hilger organized and prepared. Hilger still panicked somewhat upon learning she would compete first on floor.

“She was texting me all day, saying ‘Oh my God. I’m so nervous. I can’t believe I’m first on floor,’ ” Wolf said. “I was like, ‘Oh, it’s a good thing.’ She had gone first on floor at the LT Invite (scoring a 9.3) so was like, ‘Relate it to that.’ ”

Floor mostly was agonizing beforehand because Hilger and Wolf questioned whether to include a double full twist in the second tumbling pass. A fall or landing out of bounds could have hurt her qualifying and hindered her all-around score.

After a confident warmup, they decided to keep the double full, and it went well.

“I was really, really happy that I was able to stick it and start off really strong,” Hilger said. “After that, I was just hyped up and energetic and ready to do the rest of my routines.”

Vault was perhaps the best example. Before sectionals, Hilger had never scored higher than 9.45, which would not have advanced at-large. Unlike regionals, where Hilger fell on her first vault, Hilger landed both of her pike Yurchenkos.

Hilger then exceeded her previous best of 9.3 on uneven bars to be among three Action gymnasts in the top five – LT sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst (1st, 9.7)

and Hinsdale South freshman Maddie Nowak (4th, 9.475).

Kurfirst is the defending co-state champion on the event. Kurfirst also qualified for state in all-around and all four events, and Nowak advanced in all-around and everything but beam.

Since Hinsdale South was at the sectional, Hilger was allowed to wait a few minutes to perform on uneven bars. That allowed Hinsdale South assistant coach and Action co-owner Jody Raymond, who was spotting the Hornets on vault, to then come and spot Hilger on uneven bars as he usually does.

“What you want to see is everybody hit at the end of the year and then let the chips fall where they go. To see Maddie and Skylor and Kelsy all do their best (at sectionals), it was awesome,” Raymond said. “I always tell Skylor and Maddie (this high-school season), ‘What you do in practice affects what you do in the meet. You deserve to do well because you’ve worked so hard.’ ”

Besides being the first performer on floor, Hilger also was the final one on beam. Her 9.25 was just .05 from sharing fifth place.

“Everyone from Hinsdale South that I was talking to was like, ‘Yes, I’m done,’ and I’m like, ‘I have dreaded beam – and I’m last,’ ” Hilger said. “I’ve been doing a lot of numbers on beam (in practice) so I’ve kind of felt a little confident. I was a little wobbly up there, but I stuck it.”

Based on results from all four sectionals, Hilger shared the eighth-best all-around total and was tied for seventh on floor, tied for 14th on beam, 20th on uneven bars, tied for 24th on vault. Qualifiers start from scratch at state, and preliminary scores do not carry over to the event finals.

Whether Hilger will add to this historic season at state remains to be seen. In the meantime, she has enjoyed the ride and the additional recognition she has received at the school.

Shepard athletic director Curry Gallagher and one of Hilger's teachers were among those at the sectional who saw her make school history.

"My athletic director made an announcement (at Shepard about sectionals) and everyone in the halls were like, 'Congratulations, congratulations,' not even people I know. I feel famous at the school so it's really nice to have all of that support," Hilger said.

"(Going into sectionals), I just pretty much told myself I made it here and anything I did, I'll be proud of myself. If anything happens (and I reached state), I'm going to be proud of myself either way."