

After the Glenbard West girls gymnastics team came painfully close to qualifying for state as a team last season, senior Abbie Garchitorena and her teammates did the only thing they could.

About a week after the state meet, they began their quest to become even better.

“We’ve just been working really hard, getting ready for the meets. We’ve been preparing for a while now. We’re working really hard, a lot of hours and just supporting one another,” Garchitorena said.

“We knew we were right there (at sectionals). We tried our best and we’re still happy with the results, even though (we didn’t qualify). Going to state (as a team) especially is really good because you get to enjoy it altogether.”

The Hilltoppers enjoyed plenty of success last season. They won their first outright conference championship in program history by going undefeated in the West Suburban Conference Silver Division, as well as their fifth straight regional title.

At the Glenbard North Sectional, their 144.875 points tied for second with DeKalb/Sycamore co-op behind Glenbard North’s 146.35. After competing at state the previous two seasons, the Hilltoppers ended up just shy of the 145.375 cutoff score for the fourth and final at-large state team berth to the eight-team field.

Garchitorena and junior Maggie Phillips and sophomore Mackenzie O’Keefe, two of the team’s 2012 individual state qualifiers, are the lone returnees from that sectional lineup. However, the addition of freshmen Amber Broucek, Mia Connolly and Sarah DeStefano has the Hilltoppers thinking

they can contend again.

“I think we can be better (than last season). I really think we can,” Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said. “Mackenzie will be a huge part of that. That will be a big score for us and the rest of them will be solid,” Glenbard West coach Carlos Fuentes said.

“They’ve put in so much work, even before the season even started. They’ve been doing open gyms, summer camps. They have already put in a lot of hours in the gym. Some of their (new) routines are tougher (with more difficulty) than the routines we lost.”

Even after being injured the first half of the season, O’Keefe qualified for state last year in all-around (24th, 35.975), the uneven parallel bars (tied for 14th, 9.2) and balance beam (31st, 8.3) and was an individual sectional qualifier on vault and floor.

Phillips was 33rd on the uneven bars (7.875) at state as an individual qualifier and competed on the event for the team in 2011. Garchitorenna also competed for the team at state in 2011 on vault, beam and floor exercise and was a state alternate for the 2010 team.

Under Fuentes, the Hilltoppers have made all three state team appearances and won all six of their regional titles and both sectional titles. Now gone is the nucleus of the group that won regional and sectional titles en route to state berths in 2010 (5th, 145.65) and 2011 (7th, 144.65).

This lineup has a drastically new look after the graduation of varsity regulars Nicole Pagor and Shauna Gialluisi and Missy Guzman, who reached state last year in all-around, balance beam and floor exercise. That followed the loss

of another talented class in 2011 with Shannon Dietz, Megan Brennan and Becky Mladucky, who tied for second at state on the uneven parallel bars as a senior.

“It’s such a new team. It’s just a new energy. It’s a whole new chapter now, a whole new group of kids,” Fuentes said. “It’s fun as a coach in terms of I’m doing a lot more teaching in terms of some of the little things, like, ‘This is how we warm up’ (to prepare our new gymnasts for meets physically and mentally).

“Everyone will say, ‘This is the year (Glenbard West will) have to take a step back and have to rebuild,’ because everybody has to rebuild eventually. This just won’t be the year. It’s not arrogance or anything else. It’s just hard work. These girls just put in the hours.”

O’Keefe came on strong as a freshman despite breaking a metatarsal in her foot just before the start of the season. She won beam at the Silver Meet (9.325) and uneven bars at the Glenbard West Regional (9.35).

On uneven bars at state, O’Keefe missed the event finals for those among the top 10 preliminary scores by just .1 and finished behind seven seniors.

“I was really nervous at first (at state) and I had a really good day. I was all pumped. It went down to a fall on beam, but all of the others were so fun,” O’Keefe said.

“State was fun, probably a highlight the entire day. Even though it was just me, Maggie and Missy competing, everybody (from the team) was in the stands and we got to see them before we went. They made signs and it was just so exciting.”

A physically and mentally stronger O'Keefe should be even better this year. Fuentes is hopeful she can challenge the 38.00 all-around barrier that only four gymnasts reached at state, three of them seniors.

Besides leading what will be one the state's toughest uneven bars lineups, O'Keefe is throwing a layout Yurchenko vault with a start value of 10.0. On beam, her final series and dismount is the same as Carmel senior Lauren Feely, the two-time defending state champion in the event.

"We could really have that top all-rounder to hang our hat on that we haven't had for a few years now," Fuentes said. "We really only saw maybe 50 percent of her (last season because of her injury). She's extremely talented and extremely driven. It's hard to find that combination in a gymnast. She really could score at or above a 9.5 on every event."

"I've progressed a lot because I'm a lot stronger. It'll be exciting what the scores are because it's kind of up in the air," O'Keefe said. "Definitely my form and everything have improved."

Garchitorenna is among only a handful of seniors in the program and the only one who will compete on varsity. Last year, she competed regularly on three events and was a sometimes unsung but consistent contributor, including a regional title on vault (9.375). She's already working a tougher vault this season with a 10.0 start value, basically a Tsuk with a half twist.

Garchitorenna also plans to contribute even more as a regular all-rounder and as a leader for a younger varsity lineup.

"It's great to have the other seniors and they're great support. And

everybody else, the rest of the team, is really there for supporting and helping,” Garchitorena said.

“It’s fine being the only senior (on varsity). It’s made me work harder, too. I’m there for the underclassmen, supporting them, because I know when I was a freshman, I was really nervous. I like being there for the underclassmen.”

Phillips will be trying for her third state appearance. Mostly a bars specialist last season, she also should be a regular in the beam lineup.

“I just need to relax and do my routines (this season) because I know how to do them,” Phillips said. “We’re all really good individually and I think we can really pull together as a team. Our events are looking really good. We’re really pulling our routines together.”

DeStefano and Broucek, projected as all-arounders, have known each other since kindergarten at Churchill Elementary School. They and Connolly all attended Hadley Junior High.

DeStefano and Broucek both trained at Palmer’s Gymnastics in Bloomingdale, where Broucek was a Level 7 and DeStefano reached Level 6 before competing two years in the Amateur Athletic Union optional division. Connolly was a Level 7 gymnast at Legacy Elite in Carol Stream.

Since she is the cousin of Pagor, DeStefano especially is familiar with the Hilltoppers’ gymnastics tradition.

“(Our athletes) know they’re inheriting this program, this legacy and they want to continue it,” Fuentes said. “They respect everything that’s been

done before them, but they don't want to be the team that takes a step back. They want to represent Glenbard West well and take us into the future for the next few years."

In the Silver, the Hilltoppers again will have to contend with Lyons Township and Hinsdale Central.

LT actually scored lower than Glenbard West at sectionals (144.05) but qualified for state automatically by winning the Hinsdale Central Sectional. The Lions were sixth at state with a season-high 144.475 behind now-sophomore Kelsy Kurfirst, the uneven bars co-state champion. Hinsdale Central returns its entire lineup from last year's team that scored as high as 139.95.

This year, the Hilltoppers will play host to the second of the state's four sectionals Feb. 5. The 2010 state-qualifying team advanced by winning sectionals at home at Biester Gym.

"I think our bars look great right now, our beam looks great. I think floor and vault just takes a while. Once that comes together, I think we'll be a very well-balanced team," Fuentes said.

"We're motivated by our setbacks more than we are by our success. We've been a great program for 10 years now. We have banners (in our practice gym) for each time we qualified to state, we have sectional championships, but that's not what motivates us. It's missing it (by .5) last year. That's what motivates us."

Glenbard West gymnastics at a glance

COACH: Carlos Fuentes (12th season)

2011-12 RESULTS: Season high 147.30 points (Jan 3); won West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet (144.85) and overall title outright; won Glenbard West Regional (145.20); tied for second at Glenbard North Sectional (144.875)

RETURNING 2012 STATE QUALIFIERS: Sophomore Mackenzie O'Keefe (all-around, uneven parallel bars, balance beam); and junior Maggie Phillips (uneven bars)

OTHER KEY RETURNEE: Senior Abbie Garchitorena

KEY NEWCOMERS: Freshmen Amber Broucek, Mia Connolly and Sarah DeStefano