

Glenbard West sophomore Mackenzie O'Keefe remembered being injured for last year's girls gymnastics season opener with a broken metatarsal in her right foot.

"This meet, the next meet and a couple of meets after that, I was a score flasher," O'Keefe said. "I was so jealous of everybody getting to compete. This year, it's so nice for everybody just to be competing. No one's injured so that's really great."

O'Keefe was slated as an all-rounder for the annual four-team opener Tuesday in Glen Ellyn, but she nearly didn't make it through the meet.

On her first event, vault, she injured her right ankle on the springboard while attempting a layout Yurchenko. After trying to walk off the pain, O'Keefe was asked by coach Carlos Fuentes if she wanted to sit out the other three events.

"I said, 'No,' and then he said, 'OK, just play it by event. If it hurts after the next event, stop.' But I hate quitting in the middle of meets so I just kept on going," O'Keefe said.

By the time she finished, O'Keefe broke 37.00 in all-around for the first time and won all four events in helping the Hilltoppers score 140.45 points to defeat Lake Park (133.60), Addison Trail (117.20) and Willowbrook (116.50).

O'Keefe's 37.15 total consisted of a 9.5 on balance beam, 9.4 on vault, 9.2 on floor exercise and 9.05 on the uneven parallel bars. Freshman Sarah DeStefano (34.51) and senior Abbie Garchitorea (33.95) were second and third in all-around and added top-two event finishes.

A state qualifier as a freshman in all-around, uneven bars and beam, O'Keefe

scored as high as 36.95 in all-around last season to finish third at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet.

“(Breaking 37.00) boosts me up a lot. I was so excited when (Fuentes) said, ‘Congratulations on your first 37.00.’ I was like, ‘Oh wow,’ ” O’Keefe said.

“I think (the injury) helped me a lot because I wasn’t really focused on gymnastics. I was just focused on not hurting myself anymore. It was like the pressure was kind of off almost. I wasn’t really nervous and I usually get really nervous before beam, shaking kind of, but I wasn’t. I just wanted to get through it and be done with it.”

This is one of the Hilltoppers’ highest season-opening scores since earning their first state trip as a team in 1995. Last year, the team opened with a 136.75, although graduated all-around standout Missy Guzman also was out for the meet besides O’Keefe.

On Tuesday, the Hilltoppers were an impressive 35.90 on beam, 35.45 on vault, 34.65 on uneven bars and 34.45 on floor. With junior Maggie Phillips and freshmen Amber Broucek and Mia Connolly also part of the lineup, freshmen accounted for 11 of the Hilltoppers’ 20 routines.

“(Breaking 140 is) a great accomplishment, especially with so many young new faces. It’s a great start to the year, tons of room to grow,” Fuentes said. “With all of the first-meet jitters that you would expect from just any competitor, but from freshmen, I thought they did a fabulous job to start off the year.”

Garchitorenna finished second on beam (9.35) and vault (9.1), DeStefano was second on floor (8.75) and fourth on uneven bars (8.6) and Broucek was

third on beam (8.85), uneven bars (8.8) and floor (8.7). Connolly contributed a counting team score on vault (8.35).

All three freshmen came into the meet with extensive experience in club gymnastics.

“I think we (as a team) did amazing for our first meet. We worked so hard to get prepared,” Broucek said.

“It was definitely a lot different than (club meet) competition. I’m used to competing for an individual, but now it’s actually for your team and I think it’s less stressful. You have more people supporting you altogether.”

Broucek overcame a rough start. On vault, she tried her recently learned tuck Tsukahara, but didn’t land either try.

“I just blocked it out and just said, ‘Whatever. Vault’s done.’ I have to worry about concentrating on all of the others, just block it out,” Broucek said. “I was really nervous, but I think I did pretty well for the first meet.”

While Fuentes said his gymnasts usually add skills to their routines gradually and more as they progress, Broucek has shown such a strong learning curve that she took on and executed several new tricks Tuesday.

“Almost every single skill in every one of her routines was new. For the fact that she did as well was amazing, to see that she could have that much success and really keep her cool,” Fuentes said.

Garchitorenna’s beam routine was perhaps the highlight of the meet. O’Keefe said she received an emotional lift to finish off the event after Garchitorenna

overcame her nerves and delivered a solid routine. Even before her injury, O'Keefe planned not to use her complete difficulty on beam, removing an additional jump from her dismount.

"Abbie and Mackenzie have tremendous start value. They are 10.0-type beam routines," Fuentes said. "(Garchitorea has) had the highest start value on beam for us for years and now she's just putting it together. As a sophomore, she did a back tuck, back tuck connected for state prelims. She's always been fantastic on beam and now it's just getting her nerves under control. (This season, it's) just being a senior, and being more comfortable with being out there and competing."

During her second vault, O'Keefe said, 'Oh my gosh,' while in the air during her layout before landing and immediately falling to the mat. After the meet, she visited the school trainer and had the ankle taped and iced.

On Wednesday morning, O'Keefe was back in the practice gym preparing to train, albeit a bit more conservatively. Fuentes said she probably will be day to day.

"I almost forgot to salute because I just wanted to roll off, but then I stood up and then it just hurt really bad," O'Keefe said. "It's fine when I walk, but when I turn it the littlest bit, it hurts really bad and it hurts to jump, but I can still walk."