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Nauset's Stewart finally reaches top

NORTHBORO — As Nauset's Kim Stewart approached the vault and uneven bars during yesterday's girls state individual gymnastics meet, she sported a giant brace along her left elbow. Some may have believed that brace was an indicator that the senior was going to water down her performances. Stewart proved them wrong. Performing the most difficult routines of the event, Stewart rebounded from a third-place finish in 2012 and nagging injuries throughout her high school career to take the state all-around title with a score of 37.65.

"I thought I did really great," said Stewart. "I knew it was going to be close."

Stewart and her three Nauset teammates who also qualified for the all-around began on the balance beam. Stewart's routine included a back handspring backflip. She fought for her front tuck and stayed on the beam, and dismounted with a roundoff one-and-a-half twist.

Her high level continued on the floor exercise, where she went pass-for-pass with last year's all-around winner Samantha Kaplan of Sharon. Competing in adjacent flights, Stewart and Kaplan traded roundoff back handspring double pikes in warm ups, then both nailed them as the opening passes. Kaplan's routine was calm, cool and landed with precision — aspects the senior is known for.

Where Stewart made her defining mark on floor was in improved dance elements, her high roundoff back handspring double somersault, and an fourth tumbling pass of a punch front into a full.

As the event progressed, Stewart found herself in direct competition not just with Kaplan, but with Melrose's Annalisa DeBari, who came into the meet relatively under the radar. While Kaplan and Stewart dueled it out, DeBari quietly delivered the same level of difficulty as her older counterparts, but with the noted elegance that Melrose has in spades.

Stewart approached the vault knowing her Yurchenko full could be the difference maker if hit. Despite the overwhelming black brace, she approached the vault at full speed, doing a roundoff onto the springboard, a back handspring onto the vault and a twist as she descended to the mat. Hit perfectly, the vault earned not only a big reaction from the crowd, but a 9.6 from the judges.

Heading into her last event, Stewart was tied with DeBari, who delivered a stellar 9.525 routine on balance beam right before Stewart approached the uneven bars.

"I used that closeness as motivation on bars," said Stewart.

Stewart performed her routine in a business-like manner, hitting her handstands on the high bar and performing a crisp flyaway to the low bar. Her double-somersault dismount away from the bar was clean, and a 9.65 from the judges sealed the win.

DeBari finished second by a narrow .05 margin with 37.6 and Beverly's Heather Gomes (37.375) snuck by Kaplan (37.35) thanks to an afternoon without a score lower than a 9.2. Kaplan ended up fourth, but received Senior Gymnast of the Year honors from the coaches association.

State individual title in hand, Stewart turns to rallying her Nauset teammates toward next Saturday's South sectional.

"We're going to be getting ready for the South sectional and keep our performance going," she said. "We want to go even bigger."

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