

Sophomore Mary Nevins made quite a varsity debut for the Glenbard West girls track team when she was a freshman.

She joined the Hilltoppers' 400-, 800- and 1,600-meter relays for their first outdoor invitational at Downers Grove South.

"I wasn't that nervous for it because the girls that were on the teams were really helpful," Nevins said.

"I knew I was going to be on the varsity indoors so I just kind of was mentally preparing myself for it the whole time. I just knew I've just got to do what I can. They trusted me to do it so there must have been a reason."

Now a varsity regular, Nevins knows how great it is to compete, and succeed, as a freshman on varsity. That was among the good feelings the Hilltoppers left with after the Downers Grove North's Bruce Ritter Invite Friday. Glenbard West (81 points) was fourth in the 13-team field.

Junior Madeline Perez continued to amaze even in cold and windy conditions. Perez won the 3,200 in 10:27.30 fully-automatic time – the fastest 3,200 ever in Glenbard West history – and was second in a tremendous 1,600 finish with York senior Emma Fisher (5:02.23 to 5:02.26).

Senior Emma Reifel won the 800 (2:19.07) and the frosh-soph 1,600 relay of Nevins, freshmen Emma Winans and Sharon Murray and sophomore Emma Gambol (4:12.9) won the lone frosh-soph event offered at the invite. Gambol also was second in triple jump (34 feet-9 inches).

"We had a lot of younger kids running, and I thought they responded awfully well. There were mistakes, but they did great," Glenbard West coach Kelly Hass said.

"I thought Madeline Perez was outstanding. To do that, again, on a cold and windy night and then come back and lose (the 1,600) in a photo finish – that was incredible. I know Madeline Perez hates to lose and that's the hallmark

of any competitor, but she is losing against the best in the state and she learns from it every time.”

The Hilltoppers only finished behind DuPage Valley Conference indoor champion West Aurora (119), Prospect (105) and Palatine (90) and just ahead of West Suburban Conference Silver Division rivals Lyons Township (74) and Downers North (59).

Team points were awarded for finishes among the top eight, rather than the usual top six at invites. The same scoring format will be used at Glenbard West’s annual Sue Pariseau Invite Saturday, which has been moved to Benedictine University in Lisle because of heavy rains that flooded Duchon Field.

The Ritter Invite includes the 1,600 relay as a frosh-soph event for anyone in those grade classes. Gambol, who had three individual top-three finishes, anchored the Hilltoppers to victory by 3.03 seconds over Downers North (4:15.93), which also stacked its lineup with four varsity regulars.

“It was nice to go back to the old days (of frosh-soph), I guess,” Nevins said with a laugh. “Just going into it feeling more relaxed and not stressing so much about it, it was really fun. I had a good time.”

Perez, a varsity standout since Day One, reminisced about her freshman days as well. Back then, all of the program’s track records in distance events were held by Nell Shields, who won the 3,200 (10:33.18) and 1,600 (5:01.99) as a senior at the 1996 Class AA state meet.

By beating Shields’ previous outdoor record time of 10:32.1 manual time Friday, Perez now owns the outdoor and indoor school records for both the 3,200 and 1,600.

“I remember as a freshman looking up at (the picture of) Nell Shields and thinking, ‘That must be impossible. She did not run that fast. No one’s ever going to touch that.’ It’s exciting. I know she was such a great athlete and

I'm honored to follow in her footsteps," Perez said.

"We talked about (the record) a little bit before the meet. I always think about it, and when it comes to the actual race day, I kind of totally forget about it and then it's like after the fact, 'Oh yeah. I guess I did get it.' "

Perez beat her previous 3,200 best of 10:28.18 indoors literally running by herself. Her closest competitor was sophomore teammate Lisa Luczak, who ran a solid 11:00.77 but still was 33 seconds away.

Glenbard West distance coach and girls cross country head coach Paul Hass yelled splits every lap. In hindsight, Perez felt that her 5:06 first mile was slightly too fast.

"That's the best distance double, I think, in the state so far," Hass said.

"Who would have thought that the first meet (outdoors) that she runs (a school record) – in this weather. I thought, 'Aw. It'll be tough.' " (Hearing splits) pushes her and just the desire to do the best she can, but that's all by herself."

Perez nearly won the 1,600 as well over Fisher, whose first race was a 2:22 split on the opening leg of the Dukes' third-place 3,200 relay.

In the 1,600, they sprinted side-by-side down the entire final straightaway. It was similar to the indoor West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet March 15, where Fisher won by .47 over the third-place Perez (5:06.17 to 5:06.64) and won the 3,200 with Perez a close second (10:26.06 to 10:28.18).

"I've never had a finish like that before, but I loved it. It was super fun, very exhilarating. Congratulations to her for holding me off, but it was a fun race," Perez said.

"It's nice to have her in all for all of these races. It's fun going into races

having great competition and being able to know that you're going to be able to push each other the entire way. I think we both push each other to (personal records). It's just another race between her and me."

At the Downers South Invite, Perez led off the winning 3,200 relay and then won the 1,600. Her invite-record 4:59.95 was just shy of her school-record 4:59.04 from 2012, despite an even worse headwind than Friday.

"Still thinking about the weather (at Downers North), it was pretty crazy, but I guess looking forward now, you know that it can't get really too much worse than that," Perez said. "If you can do it in that, you can deal pretty much with anything else. It'll make all of the other ones seem a little bit easier."

Neither the 800 nor the frosh-soph 1.600 relay were anywhere as dramatic.

Reifel used a strong start to win the 800 by 2.36 seconds and run under the 2:19.74 state-qualifying standard for the first time outdoors.

Her strategy was almost the complete opposite of the Downers South Invite, where she won the 400 in 1:00.87 by going out strong and then hanging on finishing into the wind.

"Talking to Mr. Hass and Mrs. Hass, they told me to try to settle the first 200, just stay with the pack and then just kick it out the last 200 and see what I have left," Reifel said.

Her main challenge was little rest time from the 3,200 relay. She anchored the Hilltoppers from seventh to fourth (9:51.87) with a 2:19.1 split after strong legs by freshmen Grace Rogers (2:28.4), Christina Sedall (2:32.6) and Caitlyn Reick (2:31.7).

"I was a little worried (for the 800) because I could tell the meet seemed to be going fast. I realized that I probably didn't have a ton of time," Reifel said. "The only thing I think I did a little differently is I just shortened my warmup

a little bit beforehand. I was pretty warm still from my first race.”

“Emma didn’t have a lot of rest time, none of the kids did, and for her to sit back and blow the field away essentially at the 200 mark was pretty awesome,” Kelly Hass said. “Talk about perfectly executed. I thought the meet ran almost too well. It ran so fast. But it was great because it was cold.”

In the frosh-soph 1,600 relay, Downers North did lead on the final lap, but Gambol made a late burst for a 1:01.0 anchor split and the Hilltoppers won comfortably.

“That 400 felt really good. I felt I ran it really smart,” Gambol said. “I remember Mrs. Hass telling me, because the (Downers North) girl passed me, to just hang back and stay on her and then use what you have left in you.

“It was so fun. It wasn’t as stressful. I’m not going to say it was less competition, but it was just like a lower level than we’re usually competing at so it was more fun.”

Nevins and Gambol ran on the Hilltoppers’ 1,600 relay at the 2012 state meet. Even without them, the Hilltoppers put together a fifth-place 1,600 relay in the varsity race and ran a similar time (4:12.36) with Reifel, freshman Jessica Michel, junior JaSharra Clark and freshman Ellen Daniels. Reifel led off in 59.3.

“For two teams to run 4:12 in a 4-by-400, that’s amazing,” Kelly Hass said.

Nevins is encouraged by her progress especially after being injured for the cross country season. Nevins had a 1:00.4 split Friday, just .2 shy of her best last season. In her individual event, Nevins was fourth in the 400 in 1:01.02, her fastest open time.

“I really would like to break 1:00 this year because I was so close last year,”

Nevins said. "I feel like (being on varsity) is an incentive to do better and work harder in practice. It's kind of nice because you push yourself more. You feel more confident going into the blocks and more determined because you have something more to prove as an underclassman. It's good experience for the next two years, too."

Winans, Michel and Daniels have competed for the varsity outdoors after strong sophomore-level seasons indoors. Winans had a personal-best 1:01.7 split for the relay.

"It's so much fun (on varsity). It's a challenge but it's a good kind of challenge for sure," said Winans, who made her varsity debut at the Downers South Invite April 6. "I was less nervous going into this meet so I hope the level of nervousness goes down.

"Looking around before the race, seeing girls that are a lot bigger, it's definitely more intimidating, but practice is the same. I work at the same level and I just try to do my best as I would on any other level."

Murray made her varsity debut in the final indoor meet, the Top Times Indoor Classic March 23 in Bloomington, with Nevins, Gambol and Reifel in the 1,600 relay.

"It's a lot different than the frosh-soph level, more competition. It really pushes you past your limits to go above and beyond," Murray said. "Since I'm running with girls that are older and probably have a little bit more experience, I have to kind of think that I can do it. I have to go in thinking that I can beat them and not look down on myself. With my being kind of short, I've had to change my technique a little, getting my knees up more."

Clark is a varsity regular but newcomer to the 1,600 relay. She made her debut Friday and competed at 400 meters for only the second time.

Known previously only as a sprinter, Clark ran the 400 in the team's home triangular April 9 in 1:04.8. She ran a 1:03.8 split Friday.

“I was like, ‘What (I’m running a 400)?’ I don’t want to do it no more,” Clark said April 9. “It was kind of tough, I would say like the last 150 meters, because that’s when I was getting tired, but I had people cheering me on and it kept me going.”

Besides her 1,600 relay success, Gambol was second in her return to triple jump (34-9) to Palatine senior Meg Jump (35-2 1/4) and third in the 100 (13.06) and the 300 low hurdles (47.73).

Gambol had her best 300 hurdles time in just her third time competing that event and continues to close on the 46.94 state-qualifying standard.

“I was a little bit disappointed because I didn’t get my goal. I was trying to get 46, but that’s all right. I still was happy with it,” Gambol said.

“I thought she was awesome in the triple jump. She jumped well on a cold night. What does that say about her mental toughness?” Kelly Hass said.

“She’s really learning a lot about those 300s and she gets better every time. She’s gong to be facing the prospect that her times aren’t gong drop as much as she’d like them to, but I told her, ‘Later. That’s OK. There’s still work to do. You don’t want to be perfect right now.’ ”

Luczak also was a double placewinner. Besides her second-place 3,200 (11:00.77), she also ran the distance double and took seventh in the 1,600 (5:19.12), one second from fifth place.

“I’m one of the few people who’d say, ‘I love to double (in the 3,200 and 1,600).’ It’s my favorite thing in the world,” Luczak said.

“At first, I was a little disappointed because my times weren’t as good as they usually are, but I learned my lesson. In the 3,200, I’m pretty sure I went out too fast, and in the 1,600, I went out too slow, and for both I had to pay

for that at the end. It was hard but all I can say is I did my best.”

After the invite, Luczak said she planned to run the distance double again at the Pariseau Invite. Perez was unsure of her events.

“Honestly, I think I could have PRed in the 3,200 (at Downers North). I probably could have gotten under 10:38, and in the 1,600 I would say hopefully I’d get under 5:15,” Luczak said. “As time comes, I’ll learn my lesson and hopefully make up for it the next races. (The Pariseau Invite) will be a good time to redeem myself.”