

Senior Grace Walker has been an emotional leader for the Glenbard West girls track program without even competing.

The past three seasons, Walker leads the entire team after meets in singing the school fight song as a group, oftentimes after most opponents are long gone.

“I think it’s a good thing in that it includes everyone on the team, not just the people who are competing that day. This way, everyone feels included,” junior Grace Lupo said. “Everyone has their own separate events. The way that (Glenbard West head coach Kelly Hass) says we’re going to do this, I think it helps in bringing the team atmosphere together.

“In competition, she’s very serious and she’s very focused, which you would expect from everyone, but then she kind of switches modes (for the fight song), where she can bring out everyone’s happy side. I think that’s a great aspect that she has, where she can help even the more shy people come out and sing the song and kind of laugh at her because she’s having fun out there.”

There was an important feature to one of Walker’s final performances with the Hilltoppers April 26 after Wheaton Warrenville South’s Tiger Invitational. She also was able to compete after being hampered by hip and knee injuries.

In her first action since the outdoor opener April 6, Walker cleared a season-best 5 feet-1 inch in high jump to tie for second place behind Wheaton South junior Erin Zappia (5-3).

“It felt really good. Being out for a few weeks and just watching and coaching my teammates a little bit, I was just so excited to get back out there and just do what I can,” Walker said. “My season is kind of winding down, my time here at West at the track team. I just really want to leave off on a good note and just give it my all every time that I’m out there and not take it for granted at all.”

Junior Madeline Perez set an all-time school record in winning the 3,200-meter run in 10:21.19 fully-automatic time to also crush the invite and Grange Field track records.

Perez later joined the 1,600 relay with sophomore Mary Nevins, junior JaSharra Clark and senior Emma Reifel to take second (4:06.26) to Wheaton South's meet-record 4:03.48.

The Hilltoppers (61 points) finished third in the 19-team invite behind the host Tigers (130.5) and Saint Ignatius (63) and just ahead of fourth-place Oswego (57.5).

Top-nine finishers earned team points, three places more than at most invites. Teams also were allowed three individual entries per event instead of the usual two.

This also was the Hilltoppers' final major meet before the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet May 3 at Lyons Township's south campus in Western Springs.

With Walker deciding to sit out the home quadrangular April 30 with Downers Grove North, Hinsdale South and Willowbrook, she could have as few as two high-school meets left.

"It's just so surreal for me, being on this team for four years and then realizing that I only have a few more opportunities to compete," Walker said. "These are the last few times I get to jump for my team and so that's just super motivation, just to be out there for the team and just give it my best. It's just a limited time I can be out there so I want to take it all and just shoot for the stars, I guess, let all of my practice and training just really shine."

Perez significantly improved upon her previous 10:27.30 all-time 3,200 record from April 12 to win by more than 26 seconds over Glenbard East

freshman Lindsay Graham (10:47.71) in a talented field in which the top five finishers all ran under the 11:22.04 state-qualifying standard.

Perez also broke the invite record of 11:42.74 from 1983 by DeKalb's Amy Townsend, who was second at state that year. Also falling was the Grange Field record of 10:48.64 in 2000 by York junior Maria Cicero, the Class AA state runner-up in the 3,200 and 1,600 that year and state champion in both in 2001.

"Astounding. She did the whole thing again by herself. And she ran the last lap pretty much all out in Lane 2 because she was lapping girls," Glenbard West coach Kelly Hass said. "I think people should be legitimately afraid to run against Madeline Perez. The thing about Madeline is she's so respectful of her competition, she's not going to take anything for granted. She is a heck of a competitor."

But Perez as a 400 runner? When sophomore Julia Sakach was having hip pains after earlier competing with the 3,200 relay, Perez, originally slated for one race, agreed to join the 1,600 relay about 45 minutes before the race.

Perez then delivered a 1:02.9 split to join Reifel (59.1), Nevins (1:01.0) and Clark (1:02.1), a sprinter who continues to make progress.

"It's crazy. Our big joke is (Perez is) trying to make the 4-by-400 now. You can't have it, Madeline, but she is amazing," Kelly Hass said.

Sophomore Emma Gambol also had a big meet. She was third in the 200 (25.92), .40 from first place, fourth in the 300 hurdles (48.45) and sixth in triple jump (32-10).

Gambol's fourth event was one she hardly competes but may focus on in the future, the 100 high hurdles. She ended up 18th (17.54 seconds).

"I did (the 100 hurdles) in seventh grade a lot and eighth grade a couple of times (at Hadley Junior High), but not at West," Gambol said. "I thought it

went pretty well. I felt like my steps could have been better because I four-stepped and I was supposed to three-step.

“I hope to do them next year and really work on them more. I really want it to be one of my good events.”

Gambol, who hadn't run in the 200 for a while, only had previously broken 26.0 once at the 2012 sectionals, when she nearly qualified for state. Gambol actually ran a lifetime-best 25.85 in the prelims.

“I was really, really happy, especially doing it twice (under 26.0),” Gambol said.

In the 300 hurdles, Gambol continues to close on the 46.94 state-qualifying standard. She finished just .28 behind third-place Oak Park-River Forest junior Amari Wilkerson (48.17).

“I'm not down in the 46s like I would like, but that was still a good race. I had some good competition, and I got to see (Wilkerson) so that was helpful,” Gambol said.

Reifel, known more for her 800 talents, was third in a rare time running the 1,600 (5:05.41). Lisa Luczak was fifth (5:09.18), just .80 behind Wheaton South senior McKenna Kiple (5:08.38), followed by four other runners who were under 5:12.

Reifel, going for her third straight state trip in track, also has competed with the cross country team at state the past three seasons. Those races usually are 3.0 miles.

“I ran the 3,200 a few weeks ago and I was just laughing going into it like ‘Oh, a 3,200,’ ” Reifel said. “Then I was like, ‘This is less than I run in cross country,’ so just going into track sometimes you forget a little bit.”

Reifel, who ran 5:12.74 during weekday action April 16, was hoping to run at

least under 5:10 in the 1,600, well under the state-qualifying standard of 5:15.24. York senior Emma Fisher won the race in 5:02.75.

“I definitely wanted to try to get in the 1,600 in a big invite this year, just kind of see how I could do, and I was lucky enough to be able to get to run it fresh,” Reifel said.

“(Distance coach Paul Hass) just told me to kind of follow and kick and obviously don’t go out with Fisher because I didn’t want to go out too fast. She obviously is a strong runner, and she has a great kick, too.”

Second-place Oswego senior Kelsey Hjorth (5:04.43) was of special interest. Like Reifel, Hjorth will be running at the University of Wisconsin.

“We were talking a little bit at the end of the meet. That was the first time we really met,” Reifel said.

By contrast, freshman Christina Sedall, who has enjoyed most of her success in long-distance action, was sixth in the 800 (2:29.31). Freshman Caitlyn Reick was ninth in the 3,200 (11:41.19).

The 400 relay of Clark, freshmen Emma Winans and Jessica Michel and Nevins was ninth (52.57) and the 3,200 relay of freshman Grace Rogers, sophomore Julia Sakach, senior Kate Majewski and Luczak tied for ninth with Wheaton North (9:56.98).

Reick, often a member of the 3,200 relay, showed major progress in running the 3,200. Her time April 9 was 12:11.34.

“I feel like I just need to build up my stamina again for that race and kind of learn to run it a little more,” Reick said.

“I was hard to figure out my pace in the beginning because I was like, ‘Oh gosh, six more laps,’ but it wasn’t too bad. It’s a mile less than cross country (races) so that was kind of like, ‘Yeah, I’m almost done.’ I just told myself I

wanted to (get a personal record). I didn't really know what a goal time for me would be because I hadn't really trained for it."

The Hilltoppers enjoyed more success Tuesday in the seniors' final home meet.

Majewski went out in winning fashion as she won the 1,600 in a season-best 5:36.3 with Sedall second in 5:44.0.

"I was running with Christina and really glad that we were able to have such a fun race. I have to say the 1,600 is one of my favorite races and it was really exciting for our last home meet," Majewski said.

"When I was running, (Paul Hass) was going, '600 meters to go. This is it. This is your last time running on this track.' It really hit me and I really tried to give it everything I had left in me. It was sad, but we still have a lot to go so it's good."

In a highly competitive 400, Reifel edged Downers North junior Stephanie Urbancik, a 2012 state qualifier in the event, 59.1 to 1:00.9. Reifel then came back and won the 200 in 27.0.

In pole vault, senior Grace Farley equaled her season best and team best of 6-6 to win. With Walker helping at high jump, Lupo cleared a season-best 4-10 to finish second after she and junior Madelyn O'Gorman both cleared 4-9 at Wheaton South.

"I'm a little bit far away from the bar when I take off, but other than that, I feel good. I tried to remember how I jumped (at Wheaton South) to try and get back into that today," Lupo said.

O'Gorman is on the verge of her career best of 4-10. On April 12, she achieved her lifetime best in long jump by hitting 15-0 at Downers North's Ritter Invite.

“I was really close to have a PR (at Wheaton South). Today, I didn’t feel as good, but I’m feeling a lot better than I was. I just need to make sure to keep popping my hips,” O’Gorman said.

“I was a little surprised (about the 15-0). I was really happy. It made me feel like the hard work was paying off,” O’Gorman said.

On the sophomore level, freshman Ellen Daniels won the 100 (13.4) and 200 (18.7), and freshman Katie Goleash improved her personal best to 83-10 to win discus.

Who will take over for Walker next year to lead in the school fight song? Walker stepped into the role admirably as a sophomore to succeed older sister Carly, who handled the role before graduating in 2010 and heading off to the University of Illinois.

“At first, everybody (left from other teams) just kind of stares at us like we’re crazy. We’re kind of just like, ‘Yeah, we’re doing it. You wish your school was us,’ “ freshman Abby Shaver said. “I think we all just know that it’s a tradition and we just think it’s fun to keep on doing.”

The stares come mostly from Walker’s energetic and somewhat unique performance at the front of the group. She said that she may have stolen some moves from Carly, but she also has developed her own style, most notably while toting batons in one or both hands.

“It’s the dancing, the dancing with the baton. I like that,” Shaver said.

Occasionally, Walker will have teammates accompanying her on the sidelines. One of Walker’s favorite memories was having Reifel off to the side with a huge bag of ice covering her leg and flashing a team plaque.

“Sometimes she uses pom poms and stuff, but I think it’s better when she uses the baton because that way it’s incorporating track into everything. And also her dancing brings a lot to it,” Lupo said.

The tradition also includes signing meets as the buses arrive back at school. Since the girls cross country program, in which Paul Hass is head coach, also believe in the tradition, incoming freshmen discover quickly the need to learn the words to the school song.

Lupo, who played volleyball as a freshman, didn't learn the school song until track season. Shaver is among several track members who also compete in cross country.

"It's kind of been an expectation (to know the song). It's catchy. It's pretty easy to remember," Shaver said. "(Walker) doing it sets an example for the freshmen and sophomores like that, 'Hey, we can still do that even after they're gone.' We can carry on the tradition."

Last season, Lupo filled in for Walker when she wasn't able to attend one of the junior varsity meets, apparently because her first name also is Grace. Lupo said she wouldn't mind leading her teammates in the fight song next year, even if it was in a duo or supporting role.

"I couldn't quite do it the way she does it because she gets really crazy and she's used to it. I was kind of timid about it," Lupo said.

"I think it would be a lot of fun. I don't really know if I really have the personality that she brings out in that, but I would love to (try). I think it would be so much fun."