



Julia Sakach (left), Madeline Perez, Emma Reifel

Even the few disappointments of a great Glenbard West girls indoor track season resulted in some smiles.

After the Hilltoppers completed action at the annual Top Times Indoor Classic March 23 in Bloomington, they were stunned to receive the first-place trophy for Class 3A girls in the newly added team competition. Days later, they found out that not all of the events were scored and they actually finished second to Lake Park by one point.

“The girls and I had a laugh about that,” Glenbard West coach Kelly Hass said.

The Hilltoppers should be more elated by the end of the outdoor season at the 3A state meet. Seven athletes return, including three all-staters, from last year's lineup that tied for 30th at state as a team (10 points).

Senior Emma Reifel and junior Madeline Perez already have multiple all-state medals for top-nine finishes and are on pace for even bigger things after setting school and meet records during the indoor season.

On Nov. 3, Perez led an exciting third-place 3A finish for the girls cross country team by becoming the first Glenbard West athlete ever to win the individual state title -- and doing so in record time (16:02 for 3.0 miles).

With sophomore all-stater Julia Sakach, senior Cynthia Mote and sophomores Emma Gambol, Lisa Luczak and Mary Nevins also returning from the state lineup, as well as a strong corps of younger runners, the Hilltoppers have plenty of lineup and relay options.

The Hilltoppers' senior team captains are Reifel, Mote, Leah Landry and Grace Walker.

"What we're good at, we're very good at," Hass said. "Our only goal is to focus on ourselves. We want to be aware of what everyone else is doing, but we have enough talent where our focus should be on ourselves.

"Honestly, I wish we could say that we know exactly where we're going (lineup-wise), but we have no plan. We have a lot of things up in the air and that's not a bad thing. It's going to make things awfully fun for us."

At the indoor West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet March 15 at York, the Hilltoppers finished second on varsity (76 points) and fourth on the sophomore level (60.5). Lyons Township swept both levels for the second

year in a row.

Using six athletes at the Indoor Classic, the Hilltoppers won three events, set two school records and just missed a third.

Athletes qualify for the state meet either automatically with a top-two finish at sectionals or by achieving state-qualifying standards at the sectional, regardless of place.

At the 2012 state meet, the 3,200-meter relay with Reifel, Perez and Sakach ran the second-fastest time ever at the state finals (school-record 9:00.72 fully-automatic time) but had to settle for second to Wheaton Warrenville South's winning state-finals record 8:59.03.

The Hilltoppers also finished second to the Tigers at the Lake Park Sectional (9:06.25 to 9:13.67). The Tigers also had three underclassmen on their state championship relay.

"Quite honestly, we went into it thinking if we could maybe get a 9:03 (at state), that would be awesome," Reifel said. "Obviously, you finish second, we were disappointed. You have that little bit that tears your heart a little bit because you've been working for it, but I think a few weeks later you look at it and you're like, 'What we did was really incredible,' and props to Wheaton South because they also ran so well."

With five all-state honors, Reifel, who has committed to compete at Wisconsin, has a chance to catch the program's all-time mark of seven set by 2011 graduate Kathryn Pickett. As a sophomore, Reifel ran with Perez on the sixth-place 3,200 relay (9:22.73) and also was on the seventh-place 800 relay (1:42.90) and ninth-place 1,600 relay (3:57.78) after a school-record 3:53.49

to win sectionals. Reifel also has competed at the state cross country meet with the team the past three seasons.

Last season, Reifel also made the 800 state finals for the first time and finished 12th (2:18.21) after a lifetime-best 2:13.63 in the prelims that just missed the school record of 2:13.57 set by Jenny Korrison in 2000. Reifel broke her indoor school record in each of her final two meets, concluding with a 2:14.85 to win the Indoor Classic.

Current Rockton Hononegah senior Courtney Clayton won last year's state title in 2:08.48, followed by four seniors.

"I just missed (the school record) last year so I'm going after it this year," Reifel said. "We'll take it week by week but I'm hoping to try to get down to a 2:11, 2:10 by the end of the year."

Perez already has three all-state honors, as well as two in cross country. She made her first individual state final last season and was an all-state eighth in the 1,600 (4:59.47), just shy of her outdoor school-record 4:59.04 that she set in winning the Silver Meet. Oswego East graduate Ariel Michalek won the 1,600 state title in 4:53.37.

At the Indoor Classic, Perez won the 1,600 in a meet-record 4:53.60 that also shattered Glenbard West's all-time record of 4:57.7 manual time set indoors by Nell Shields in 1996, the year she swept the 3,200 and 1,600 at the then-Class AA state meet.

"I'm happy with how I ended indoors and it's a good feeling right now going into outdoors, ready to go," Perez said. "I haven't really thought about (my state events) yet. I guess we'll just have to see where everything falls into

place, what races I end up running. Once we start figuring it out from there, we'll set some goals. It'll be hard but fun at the same time, trying to figure everything out."

Could Perez attempt the same distance double as Shields? In her first outdoor race Saturday at the Downers Grove South Invite, Perez won the 1,600 in a meet-record 4:59.95 despite battling a stiff wind on the final straightaway after helping the 3,200 relay prevail in 10:26.64.

At the indoor Silver Meet, Perez ran the fastest 3,200 in school history (10:28.18), breaking Shields' 10:34.2 indoor school record and 10:32.1 manual outdoor school record from 1996. Still, Perez finished second in the race to York senior Emma Fisher (10:26.06), who also won the 1,600 by .47 over the third-place Perez (5:06.17 to 5:06.64).

"There are some question marks (with Perez and others' events). The state's so talented, too, the 3,200, the 1,600, the 800, the jumps," said Glenbard West assistant coach and girls cross country head coach Paul Hass.

"Madeline Perez is really elite, but so is Emma Fisher, so is (New Trier senior twins Jessica and Courtney Ackerman)."

Sakach was injured the entire cross country season after suffering a torn hip labrum in July. Sakach also rehabbed throughout the indoor season, but she has run 800 meters in each of the Hilltoppers' first two weekday meets outdoors.

"Even if she comes back, the pressure can't be on her. She has to come back on her own terms," Kelly Hass said.

Even with a hamstring issue, Luczak earned her first all-state honors in cross

country by taking sixth after just missing the honors at her first state track meet. Luczak was 10th in the 3,200 (10:55.62) behind three seniors, only .84 from ninth place, and 15th in the 1,600 (5:05.24), missing those 12-runner finals by 4.33 seconds.

Luczak battled an Achilles injury and pneumonia during the indoor season but upon her return, she put on a strong finish to win the 3,200 in a lifetime-best 10:37.04. On Saturday, her second-place 5:12.03 in the 1,600 already is under the state-qualifying standard of 5:15.24.

“I’m so excited (for this season). I just want to go to state and do my best, break my time from last year and honestly have the best season of my life,” Luczak said.



Emma Reifel, Emma Gambol, Mary Nevins, Julia Sakach, Cynthia Mote

The 1,600 relay with sophomore Emma Gambol and Mary Nevins and senior Cynthia Mote was 27th (4:08.23) after Reifel and Sakach helped the relay qualify at sectionals with a second-place 3:59.12.

At the Indoor Classic, the lineup of Nevins, Gambol, freshman Sharon Murray and Reifel ran 4:03.94, just .04 shy of the indoor school record, with Reifel contributing a sub-58-second anchor. The relay was Murray's varsity debut.

This past indoor season, Gambol also competed in triple jump consistently for the first time and achieved the school's all-time record distance at 36 feet even. The program never has had an all-state triple jumper.

"It's good to know in the back of my head that I've done it before, and that I can do it again kind of thing. The 36-0, I can improve that," Gambol said.

Gambol also regularly ran the 300, which only is competed indoors, and set an indoor school record in winning the Silver Meet in 41.35. On Saturday, Gambol attempted the 300 low hurdles in a meet for the first time and won in 50.86, already close to the 46.94 state cut.

At last year's sectional, Gambol was fourth in the 200 (26.01), .07 from the state cut.

"I really want to want to make it to state in my own event. That's one of my goals this year," Gambol said. "I'd be happy (with another relay) for this year as well, but I think it would be a really good goal to set."

Nevins emerged as a key contributor in multiple events throughout the indoor season after a frustrating cross country season.

“It felt nice to come back again, for sure. I feel like this (indoor season) has just been kind of a big deal because I was out for cross country season because of an injury,” Nevins said. “It’s just been so nice to start running again and being consistent with meets and everything, it just feels so good.”

Mote also is hoping to reach state in the 300 hurdles.

“It’s a goal. Whether I do it or not, I don’t know, but hopefully I’ll have all of college to do it as well,” Mote said. “The 300 hurdles is my favorite event personally, but I really do like the 4-by-400.”

Mote typifies the spirit of all three athletes’ versatility and ability to contribute in a wide range of events, sometimes as a moment’s notice.

At last year’s Silver Meet, Mote was a late substitute in the 400. At state, she has even less time to prepare as a last-minute addition to the 1,600 relay. Walker and junior Rachel Farley also were alternates for the relay.

“I’m sitting in the heat, drinking a lemonade, like, ‘Oh yeah, I don’t have to do anything,’ and I get a phone call from (assistant coach Eric Lindberg saying), ‘You’re running in 30 minutes,’ ” Mote said. “(I thought), ‘OK. I’m going to go get changed.’ It was a little scary. I was able to get over, get changed and sat down for like five minutes and then we started warming up.

“It was a lot of fun. I’m hoping to get everything back together, and I want to get back (to state) this year. That’s my goal.”

Several other Hilltoppers could be seeing their first state competition this season.

Other candidates for the 3,200 relay include freshmen Caitlyn Reick, Grace Rogers and Christina Sedall, sophomore Megan Ozog and senior Kate Majewski. The 3,200 relay's fastest time indoors was 9:46.8 with Reick, Reifel, Sedall and Rogers.

Rogers, Sedall and Majewski also were part of the seven-runner state cross country lineup with Majewski making her second state appearance. Ozog, who ran at state cross country in 2011, Reick and freshmen Maddy Burt and Abby Shaver were team alternates.

In the 3,200, Rogers' third-place 11:32.49 at the indoor Silver Meet puts her in range of the 11:22.04 state-qualifying standard. She won the varsity 3,200 at the Downers South Invite in 11:36.15.

Freshmen sprinters Jessica Michel and Emma Winans made their varsity debuts at the Downers South Invite. Sophomore Madeleine Winter was a state alternate for the 3,200 relay last year but has focused on high jump this season.

"We've got some great young kids running awfully well," Kelly Hass said. "Who knows (what we'll do)? We're in the position of just trying to figure it all out as we go. It's actually kind of fun. I prefer this. It's a different kind of pressure. It's fun, though, to just throw kids in different things and see what happens."

-- by Bill Stone