

Glenbard West junior Madeline Perez and senior Emma Reifel have become quite a roommate combination when it comes to state meets this season.

They were together in November when Perez became the Hilltoppers' first girls cross country individual state champion and the team finished third for their first trophy since 1981.

When they were reunited for the Class 3A girls track state meet Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, the stakes became higher. Reifel not only was looking for a great way to finish her career, but she also was needed to give Perez the special big-meet braids that her mother usually does prior to Saturday's event finals.

"I'm not going to lie. I felt like when I was doing it, I made sure to do it slowly and I wanted to do it nice and tight because her mom always braids it tight so all of the wispies are back," Reifel said. "I wanted to make sure it was done right. But it was OK. Her hair was easy to work with."

It turned out to be the look of a champion.

Perez won both the 3,200 and 1,600-meter runs to lead a great day by the Hilltoppers that culminated with a third-place team finish for the first trophy in program history.

"You know, I don't really know yet (how this feels). The same thing with (winning) cross country. It'll take a couple of days and then maybe it'll all sink in, but I'm just pretty happy right now," Perez said.

"(Reifel) was my roommate for cross country and now roommates in track and it was just the best. I knew she could do (the braids). She's done it for a

billion girls forever now, it seems like, so I think she was fine with it. We were really relaxed. It was so nice having her. I'm going to miss her so much."

Perez won the 3,200 (10:22.29 fully-automatic time) comfortably and the 1,600 (4:52.24) in a dramatic finish to become the first girls runner to win both races in the largest-school division since York senior Maria Cicero in 2001. Woodstock senior Kayla Beattie last accomplished the feat in 2011 for 2A, winning both races with all-time records for the state finals.

Reifel also was part of two all-state performances for top-nine finishes. She was third in the 800 in an all-time school-record 2:12.19 and led off the 1,600 relay with sophomore Mary Nevins, junior JaSharra Clark and sophomore Emma Gambol that was eighth in 3:58.47. Gambol also became the program's first all-stater in triple jump with an all-time school record of 37 feet-0 1/2 inch.

Sophomore Lisa Luczak also competed Saturday in the 3,200 (10th, 10:51.08) and 1,600 finals (12th, 5:14.50). Also competing in Friday's preliminaries were Gambol in the 300 low hurdles (14th, 46.20) and the 3,200 relay of senior Kate Majewski and freshmen Caitlyn Reick, Grace Rogers and Christina Sedall (22nd, 9:44.19). State alternates were freshmen Ellen Daniels, Jessica Michel and Emma Winans for the 1,600 relay and freshman Abby Shaver for the 3,200 relay.

"The team trophy's just amazing. I'm so happy to have gotten that," Perez said. "Each and every race, I'll remember something special about all of it and the dinners and the breakfasts and the resting in the dorms and the ice baths, everything, all of the girls and coaches for sure."

“Isn’t that awesome? Madeline should take a lot of credit for this (trophy) and never will,” Glenbard West coach Kelly Hass said. “The younger kids have great role models, and it showed up today. The effect from the last couple of years of kids showed today.”

The past two years, Perez has competed at state with the 3,200 relay and in the 1,600, earning a combined three all-state honors. The 3,200 only is run in two heats Saturday.

In the 3,200 state debut, Perez won by 11.74 seconds over the 2012 event champion, Lake Park senior Kaylee Flanagan (10:34.03) with York senior Emma Fisher third (10:41.42).

Perez then pulled out the 1,600 by 1.74 seconds over the 2012 state runner-up, New Trier senior Courtney Ackerman, in a battle down the final straightaway before emerging with 45 meters left.

“You know, I definitely thought about (winning both races). You can’t not think about it,” Perez said. “It just pops up in your mind, but I was trying to not think so much about places and times as much as just kind of running my best, running smart and just really taking care of my body and doing everything I could for our team. It just all came together in the end and I’ll take it every time.”

Perez just missed her all-time 3,200 school-record 10:21.19 from April 26 and the 10:17.28 large-school state-meet record set by Cicero. Beattie owns the all-time record of 9:56.96.

Even after her dominating 3,200 in the heat, Perez just missed her all-time school-record 4:52.21 that she ran in Friday’s preliminaries for the fastest

preliminary time. The all-time and large-school records are sub-4:50, including Beattie's all-time 4:43.65.

One drawback to the 3,200 victory was that like many award winners, Perez was stuck on the infield for a long time waiting to receive her championship medal. Perez could spend most of the time under a tent, but she also cooled down with Flanagan and York senior Emma Fisher and continued to stretch and roll her legs.

Perez then quickly returned to the dorm and tried to re-focus for the 1,600.

"I was really trying not to think about (already winning the 3,200) at all. I was excited but after the awards ceremony, I was like, 'OK, it's time to buckle down. You've only got two hours. You've got to rest your body,' " Perez said.

"I knew I (still) had so much more rest time than what I've had in the past and I'd be fine. After every race, you're just feeling kind of like dead, but definitely I just ate a lot, drank a lot, took a cold shower, cooled my body off and I was feeling good by the time the mile came around."

The Hilltoppers strategically placed their team camp in the fieldhouse next to a giant fan. When Reifel entered after her 800 to see how Perez was doing, there was only a moment of concern.

"I caught her and was asking how her legs were feeling. She was like, 'You know, they feel really tired, really Jell-Oee.' And then all of a sudden she was kind of getting up and she's like, 'I just got a boost of energy. I feel great all of a sudden.' And I was like, 'That's awesome. Go get it Madeline.' "

Perez needed all of the she stamina she could muster for the 1,600. In 2012, Perez was eighth in the 1,600 (4:59.47) behind three underclassmen, including Ackerman (4:54.45), who was second to graduated Ariel Michalek of Oswego East (4:53.37).

Conditions were fairly hot and Perez and only five other of the 12 finalists also had run the 3,200. Fisher (6th, 5:00.45) was the next highest finisher among those who ran the distance double. Oswego senior Kelsey Hjorth also was all-state in both races with a sixth and seventh.

Ackerman only ran the 1,600 Friday and won her heat in 4:55.94. For the finals, she earlier joined New Trier's 3,200 relay lineup for the finals and anchored the Trevians to their first state title with a personal-best 2:11 split.

"(Ackerman) was next to me every step of the way. It was nice having someone pushing me, but I just found a little extra juice at that last 100," Perez said. "The adrenaline and the crowd were just indescribable. It was just awesome. And she ran amazing, too. It was really exciting, very, very exciting."

Last year's 3,200 relay with Perez and Reifel was a bittersweet second to Wheaton Warrenville South by 1.69 seconds (8:59.03 to 9:00.72) with the two fastest times ever run at the state finals. New Trier won Saturday's 3,200 relay by 7.35 seconds by running 9:04.86.

Reifel also reached the finals for the 800, but by then she was spent and ended up 12th (2:18.21) after a then personal-best 2:13.63 to qualify.

Returning to the finals fresh Saturday, Reifel delivered the fastest 800 in school history to finally surpass the 2:13.57 set by senior Jenny Korrison

when she also finished third at state in the 2000 Class AA meet.

“I was hoping to get a little bit of a faster time, but at the end of the day, I gave it everything I had and I cannot complain about third place, especially coming off last year,” Reifel said.

“Emma ran a phenomenal 800. It was tactical and truly a great culmination of her career,” Hass said. “It was nice to see her go out with what we kind of consider her best race ever.”

Reifel’s ultimate goal was to run 2:10, which would perhaps be fast enough to capture the state title. Vanderbilt-bound Rockton Hononegah senior Courtney Clayton defended her title impressively by winning in 2:07.05, breaking the converted 2:07.54 record that stood since 1984, after winning last year in 2:08.48.

Competing in the same heat Friday, Reifel (2:14.79) had the second-fastest overall preliminary time to Clayton’s 2:10.67.

“She looked like she was jogging it. I knew she was going to go out ever harder (Saturday),” Reifel said.

Wheaton South senior McKenna Kiple (2:11.74), a member of the Tigers’ 2012 state championship 3,200 relay, passed Reifel down the straightaway to pull out second by .45.

“McKenna and I were talking after and we were saying how we were thinking (Clayton) would get out fast and just to try and hang on and kick at the end and see how close we can get,” Reifel said. “At 300 meters, she had 20 meters on us. I wasn’t overly shocked by it, but right then it kind of

became a race for second place.”

Gambol enjoyed a breakthrough as well in her first year as an individual qualifier, and in two events that she didn't focus on until this season. She's already become the first all-stater in triple jump and holder of the indoor and outdoor school records and she's becoming among the program's best 300 hurdles behind Pickett, the Hilltoppers' only all-stater in the event as well as long jump.

“I've been wanting this (in triple jump) since the beginning of the year. I was just thinking a different mindset and knowing that I can do it helps a lot,” Gambol said. “I was a little disappointed I didn't get to make it in the (300 hurdles) finals, but then again it's my first year and I'm a sophomore.”

Gambol jumped a then all-time indoor school record 36-0 indoors but went through a rough stretch outdoors, especially while she was dealing with back pain. At sectionals, she automatically advanced to state with a then outdoor-best 35-9 1/2 on her first jump in finals to surpass the 35-8 qualifying standard.

On Friday, Gambol's second attempt was a decent 35-7 3/4, but she needed more serious pop to reach the 12-person finals. As it turned out, she needed a personal best by 7 1/2 inches (36-7 1/2), but to break 37 feet?

“I really try to focus in, especially on my third jumps, and I try to think how much I really want it,” Gambol said. “To make 37 felt awesome. I didn't know I jumped that far at the time. I looked down at the mark and she's like 37-0 1/2. I'm like, 'Oh my God.' I just kind of went into shock. It was awesome, such a great feeling.”

Performances in triple jump prelims carry over to finals. Gambol was in seventh place after Friday but was passed in the finals by Cary-Grove senior Joslyn Nicholson, who went from ninth (36-9 1/4) to fourth (37-5). Nicholson was the only jumper to improve upon her distance in the finals, although Gambol nearly did with a 36-10 on her last attempt.

In the 300 hurdles, Gambol would have had to run another personal best by .45 to reach the nine-person finals. Her 46.20 was her second fastest time ever to her first-place 45.77 at sectionals.

The tradeoff was even better performances by Gambol anchoring the 1,600 relay with her first sub-1:00 split ever. The relay's performance even turned out to be a bit of a shock to Reifel, a veteran of the race who has been a part of qualifying lineups at sectionals the past three years.

In their first race together, the Hilltoppers ran a team-best 4:01.16 to win sectionals. In Friday's prelims, they dropped to 3:55.65 as all four runners contributed sub-60-second splits – Reifel (57.5), Nevins (59.6), Clark (59.9) and Gambol (58.3). Reifel (58.6), Nevins (58.9) and Gambol (59.4) also were sub-1:00 Saturday.

“If everyone ran the best they possibly could (Friday), I was picturing a 3:56 in my head so when Emma crossed and we had 3:55, I was like, ‘Gosh, where did this come from?’ ” Reifel said.

Reifel was part of the ninth-place 1,600 relay state lineup in 2001. She also helped the Hilltoppers at sectionals last year, but was replaced at state to focus on her other two events.

Nevins remained from the sectional lineup and was joined by Gambol, who

had just missed qualifying individually in the 200. The Hilltoppers were 27th in 4:08.23.

The Hilltoppers were nearly 13 seconds faster Friday to easily beat the finals cut of 3:58.62.

“It’s so cool (to be in finals). I was really hoping not to sit in the bleachers all day,” Nevins said. “It was just unreal to be running with some of the best teams in the state and really get that experience. I’m really determined to make it even further next year with the times and the place, but I thought today was just so cool. I was feeling so great.”

Clark still was feeling a little surprised. The past month has been a whirlwind as the sprinter was discovered by Hass as a 400 runner in disguise and became part of the relay mix. Entered in the 400 at sectionals, Clark was shifted to the 1,600 relay because of illness to Winans and ran yet another personal-best split, which Clark topped yet again Friday. Her 1:01.3 split Saturday was comparable what she ran at sectionals.

“It’s unbelievable. I never thought I’d be a 400 runner and then I turned out to be one,” Clark said. “I’m so excited. I can’t wait until next year for the season.”

Luczak also is excited to take the next step in 2014 for her distance double, especially after battling injuries and walking pneumonia near the end of the indoor season.

In the 3,200, she ended up 10th (10:51.08) for the second year in a row, just one place and 2.56 seconds from ninth. Luczak ran significantly faster last year’s 10:55.62, which missed ninth by only .84 but would have placed 13th

Saturday.

Luczak ran a lifetime-best 10:37.04 to win the Top Times Indoor Classic March 23.

“I just didn’t run my race (Saturday). I went out too fat and I died, but I learned my lesson,” Luczak said.

“It’s just like one, ‘Aw, once again 10th,’ so it’s hard, but hopefully next year I can get back and break that. Overall, it was kind of disappointing, but it’s one of those things where there’s always next year and for all I’ve been through this whole year, it’s not bad.”

In the 1,600, Luczak ran a lifetime-best 5:03.18 in the 1,600 to earn the 11th of 12 qualifying spots after her previous best of 5:05.24 was 15th last year, 4.27 seconds from finals. Luczak was 12th Saturday (5:14.50), 10.20 seconds from ninth.

“(Friday) was pretty. That was a PR for me, plus that was the first time I’ve ever qualified for the mile the second day,” Luczak said. “I was just thrilled with that. I couldn’t believe I even qualified.”

The 3,200 relay was thrilled it even qualified for state, but that didn’t stop them from running significantly better at state and perhaps setting the tone for a strong team performance.

The same lineup, which qualified at sectionals on place with a runner-up 9:52.93, dropped more than eight seconds to improve upon being seeded 29th of 32 qualifiers.

“We were all kind of nervous in the beginning, but then I think once we stepped out there, we just really felt like, ‘Oh, we’re so lucky to be here,’ and it was awesome. I had so much fun,” Reick said.

Besides the freshman, Majewski also was competing in her first state track meet after running twice with the cross country team. She made her opportunity count with a lifetime-best and team-best 2:23.9 split.

“For me, that was so exciting. It was a good start. We were able to get in the swing of things,” Majewski said. “I’m so proud of everyone. It was a fast track and we just took advantage of it and had a blast.

“I am so glad again, (for) the freshmen. They brought me here. They had amazing races at sectionals. It was really special because without them, who knows. I wouldn’t be in. It’s sad because this is never going to happen again, but I’m glad we had this last little bit of time together.”

Reick (2:25.4) equaled her season best. Rogers (2:25.3) and Sedall (2:29.7) once again showed progress as sporadic season-long relay members who both ran the 3,200 at the conference meet on the varsity (Rogers) and sophomore (Sedall) levels.

“That was an awesome start (by Majewski). She’s so fun and she doesn’t show us that she’s super nervous or anything,” Rogers said. “I just want to make sure I can come here again. It was a great experience and it was really fun.”

“When we finally got here and you heard the speaker yelling out ‘State championships,’ and ‘Going to finals,’ it really hits you,” Sedall said. “I feel like this year for freshmen, it was just kind of seeing what it’s like and then

try and PR. Next year, you can actually go after it, maybe try and get a better place, make it to finals definitely.”

In Friday’s preliminaries, Perez ran an all-time school record 4:52.21 as the fastest qualifier after x

The 3,200 is only run in two heats Saturday, but Perez had the fastest sectional time of 10:21.82, just shy of her all-time school-record 10:21.19 that won Wheaton Warrenville South’s Tiger Invitational April 26.

While the 3,200 relay went into the grandstands Saturday to cheer on their teammates, the competing Hilltoppers were spread out among their various events and warm-up and check-in schedules.

Reifel and her 1,600 relay teammates were preparing for their race as Perez went for her second state title in the 1,600. There is a speaker in the fieldhouse that feeds the stadium announcer’s play-by-play, but it’s not always audible.

“We could just hear, ‘Ackerman, Perez,’ and we couldn’t tell for sure who finished first in the end. When I got over to the tent to check in for the 4-by-400, I asked and sure enough, I found out it was Madeline,” Reifel said.

“I couldn’t be more happy for her. She’s the hardest worker so she deserves every bit of it.”

**-- by Bill Stone**