

After capturing Class 3A state championships in both of her races, Glenbard West junior Madeline Perez probably figured that her girls track state meet finals experience Saturday couldn't get much better.

As she awaited her teammates' race in the 1,600-meter relay with Glenbard West head coach Kelly Hass to conclude the meet, the impressive feat that Perez accomplished had become part of an unexpected one.

"Mrs. Hass was like, 'You know, if we really have a good race, we could be top five (as a team). That would be awesome.'" Perez said. "(Afterwards, 2012 graduate) Maddie Nagle and (senior) Leah Landry came running into the fieldhouse and they're like, 'We think you just got third,' and I was like, 'What?'"

"I sprinted out onto the field, and sure enough – (we were third, by) one point. It was just awesome."

The Hilltoppers earned their first team trophy in program history for a top-three finish at the state finals at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston. Their 31 points from five all-state performances edged fourth-place West Aurora and Homewood-Flossmoor (30 points) and sixth-place Belleville West (29). Lincoln-Way East (79 points) won its first state title and team trophy over defending champion Edwardsville (68.5).

Hass was about to collect the team tent just outside O'Brien Stadium when she heard the news.

"We beat out two other teams by a point. It was our turn (I guess)," Hass said Hass.

“A couple of people said to us coming in, ‘Hey, you guys could win a trophy.’ Really, I didn’t think we could. I thought we could be top five. I felt very comfortable saying that, but go figure. I can’t wait to go home and take a look at what else happened for that to fall in line. It just goes to show how spread out the talent is in the state.”

Perez led the way by winning the 3,200 (10:22.29 fully-automatic time) and the 1,600 (4:52.24) despite fairly hot conditions.

Senior Emma Reifel was third in the 800 (2:12.19), and sophomore Emma Gambol was eighth in triple jump (37 feet-0 1/2 inch) -- both all-time school records. The 1,600 relay of Reifel, sophomore Mary Nevins, junior JaSharra Clark and Gambol was eighth (3:58.47). Top-nine finishers earn all-state honors and team points.

With the meet completed, the 1,600 relay was by the awards tent celebrating a job well done, needing to break 4:00 for the first time all season in Friday’s preliminaries just to reach the finals and doing so with a season-best 3:55.65.

At first, a few Hilltoppers came down from the grandstands to congratulate the relay. They just kept coming once the trophy rumor was confirmed.

“We’re all just like, ‘What? Is this real?’ ” Reifel said. “It was just so exciting and I think what makes it so cool is just nobody expected it, the fact that it just kind of came from really hard work. I was saying to Madeline I don’t think it’s too often that you win a trophy off a lot of distance events so I thought that was pretty cool.”

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 Hilltoppers' previous best finish was sixth in 2011, also with 31 points but five shy of third. They had seven all-state efforts among eight girls from Kathryn Pickett in long jump and both hurdles events and all four relays. Reifel and Perez were on the 3,200 relay, and Reifel also was part of the 800 and 1,600 relays.

"It was just an awesome day. I'll never forget it," Perez said. "I'm just so happy because all of these girls worked so hard all year, and even the alternates who just made the weekend so less stressful because they did basically everything for us, and the coaches. Really everyone deserves it. I'm so happy we could bring this home for our school. It was a pretty exciting day."

Had there been a tie for third Saturday, the teams involved would have all received trophies. And this one is staying.

When the Hilltoppers competed at the annual Top Times Indoor Classic March 23 in Bloomington to conclude their indoor season, new organizers added unpublicized team awards.

The Hilltoppers were stunned when they received the first-place 3A girls plaque. Days later, Hass was contacted that Glenbard West actually finished second, one point behind Lake Park.

“I’m like, ‘No. They miscounted again,’ But they had not,” Hass said, laughing. “It just goes to show you, you never know. We were conservators. We cleaned up every point. We nickled and dimed. That’s what you teach your kids. Every point matters, but we weren’t down here looking for points. We were looking for great performances and that’s really what we got.

“Madeline Perez – you don’t get any better than that, but apparently we do because now we’ve got Madeline Perez and a team trophy.”

On Nov. 3, Perez became the program’s first girls cross country state champion. On Saturday, she became the first girl to sweep the distance double (3,200/1,600) in the largest school division since York senior Maria Cicero in 2001 for then-Class AA.

Another to perform the feat was 1996 Glenbard West graduate Nell Shields, whose remaining indoor or outdoor records at the distances have been broken by Perez this season.

“It’s pretty indescribable,” Perez said. “You’re floating pretty high for sure, but I’m just really happy with everything and how it all turned out and it was just awesome.”

Perez’s victories were complete contrasts. In her first time running the 3,200 at state, Perez's 10:22.29 won by 11.74 seconds over Lake Park senior Kaylee Flanagan (10:34.03), last year’s state champion in 10:30.47.

Perez won the 1,600 (4:52.24) by just 1.74 seconds over New Trier senior Courtney Ackerman (4:53.98) after an all-out sprint between the two down the final straightaway.

The 1,600 victory became even sweeter because state champions earn 10 team points and second place eight points. Each lower place receives one fewer point all the way to one point for ninth.

West Aurora junior Emma Spagnola won long jump by two inches but was second in the 100 high hurdles and 300 low hurdles by .04 and .22, respectively.

“Everything counts. You really have to think about that when you’re running,” Nevins said. “That one girl you pass could be it, and that was the case for us.”

In triple jump, Gambol would not have placed, or even reached the 12-person finals, without the 37-0 1/2 on her third and final attempt in prelims – then a lifetime-best by more than a foot beyond her previous all-time school best 36-0 indoors.

The 1,600 relay moved up from the 14th seed based on sectional times to reach its nine-team final. On Saturday, the Hilltoppers clinched third place as a team outright when Gambol held off ninth-place Springfield by .68.

“(The trophy) feels really good. It’s awesome to be a part of it,” Gambol said. “I’m really proud of the whole team and everyone’s performances and the fact that I got to be a part of it.”

With seven career all-state medals, Reifel is second in Glenbard West history to Pickett’s eight, seven of hers in individual events.

As a sophomore, Reifel was part of three of the Hilltoppers’ four all-state

relays in one state meet – the only time in school history that has been accomplished. Last year, she and Perez helped the Hilltoppers run the second-fastest 3,200 relay in state finals history (all-time school record 9:00.72). Unfortunately, Wheaton Warrenville South ran the state-meet record in the race (8:59.03) and beat the Hilltoppers for the title. By the 800 finals, Reifel was mentally and physically drained and ended up 12th (2:18.21) after a then personal-best 2:13.63 in the prelims.

“Last year, obviously, the 4-by-800 was a bummer to take second. We were happy with our time, but it was still hard. And then to go out in the 800, and I was last in that, the whole kind of thing was like, ‘Ugh,’ and I kind of felt heavy leaving,” Reifel said.

“Just to end on such a good note this year, honestly, I couldn’t be happier. I’m so lucky for all of these teammates and I’m on cloud nine right now.”

At the 3A girls cross country state meet Nov. 3, Perez won the race to become the program’s first individual state champion. Luczak also was an all-state sixth, and the Hilltoppers finished third as a team (138 points), just five points behind second-place Lake Park, for the program’s first trophy since 1981 and only third overall.

Paul Hass, Kelly’s husband, is the head coach for girls cross country and also coaches the distance runners during the track season.

“The big joke all year, I kept telling the girls, was, ‘Hey, he thinks he’s got one up on me.’ Absolutely not, so what are you going to do about it?” Kelly Hass said.

Reifel, Rogers, Sedall and Majewski also were part of the seven-runner state

cross country lineup. Reick and Shaver were among the five alternates. The Hilltoppers were making their third straight state team appearance, each one with Perez and Reifel, after taking sixth the previous season.

“For cross country, we knew we had a shot of getting a trophy. We were obviously happy with third, but it was also a little bittersweet because we (barely) missed second,” Reifel said. “For this just to be kind of out of the blue, I think it makes it so exciting, and it’s a great end to my senior year. I couldn’t ask for anything better.”

Upon the Hilltoppers’ arrival in Charleston Thursday, Reifel said Shaver immediately sensed a more relaxed feeling than the cross country state meet. Reifel said she felt two reasons were that state track was over two days and there were several races as opposed to the preparation and expectations encompassed by a single 3.0-mile race.

The other main difference, Reifel now recalled with a big smile, was the Hilltoppers’ team mentality and goals entering state track. As it turned out, this effort yielded the same tremendous results.

“I said, ‘I think the biggest thing is we’re not really going after a team goal. We’re just going in with each individual is going to do her best,’ ” Reifel said. “Nobody expected this (team trophy). Just the fact that everybody ran their hearts out together, we pulled it off. That was so exciting.”

**-- by Bill Stone**