

The Glenbard West girls indoor track team already had won three events at the Illinois Prep Top Times Classic Saturday, set two school records and nearly a third in the 1,600-meter relay.

Just when it looked like things couldn't get any better, they did.

This year's invite under new directors added team scoring. After a brief moment of confusion, the Hilltoppers were summoned to receive the Class 3A girls first-place trophy.

"I can't stop smiling. It's so great. I'm so happy for everyone," sophomore Mary Nevins said. "It's just insane, so unexpected. It was a great way to start spring break. It's such a great moment."

The Hilltoppers definitely ended their indoor season on a high note with several memorable performances on the beautiful 200-meter track of Illinois Wesleyan University's Shirk Center. The Top Times Meet invites entries based on top performances during the indoor season.

Junior Madeline Perez won the 1,600 in a meet-record 4:53.60 fully-automatic time – the fastest 1,600 ever run in school history.

Senior Emma Reifel won the 800 in 2:14.85 to once again break her indoor school record.

Sophomore Lisa Luczak was a surprise winner in the 3,200 in a lifetime-best 10:37.04 after trailing until the final lap and not even being certain she was going to compete until late in the week.

The 1,600 relay Nevins, sophomore Emma Gambol, freshman Sharon Murray and Reifel finished fourth in a season-best 4:03.94 that was just .04

from the indoor school record from 2011, when Reifel was part of the relay as a sophomore. Gambol was 11th in triple jump (34-5) and freshman Grace Rogers was 13th in the 3,200 (11:53.93).

“(The 1,600) just overall was a fun race and even more fun with how great everyone else ran, too. It was so exciting to see, especially when we heard them call us over for the team trophy,” Perez said. “We never even talked about it, and I guess just everything fell into place. I guess it’s kind of nice we didn’t think about it because it wasn’t on our minds. It just kind of happened naturally.”

In past years, the Top Times Classic had honored an Athlete of the Meet for each girls and boys class. Glenbard West head coach Kelly Hass was among most not aware of the change to include team standings this year.

“I can’t believe we won the team title, honestly,” Hass said. “I’m like, ‘You called me over here, and I’m a little nervous because I’ve been called to (starter’s) tents before after the (1,600 relay).’ They asked, ‘Why are you over here?’ and then another guy comes and said, ‘Oh, you won the team title.’ I’m like, ‘No, we did not.’ Sprint teams are supposed to do that. We’re distance heavy, but we did it. I’ll take it.”

Perez was among the Hilltoppers who took advantage of having a great race. With the 1,600 her only race, Perez shattered the indoor school record and program-best time of 4:57.7 (manual time) set by Nell Shields in 1996, the year she went on to sweep the 3,200 and 1,600 state titles that May as a senior. Last May, Perez set the outdoor school record of 4:59.04.

“If anything, I was thinking, ‘Come on, you’ve got to get a PR (personal record). It’s about time to do something,’ ” Perez said. “I wasn’t so much

focused on the records. I try not to think about those too much because I know if I run well enough they should fall into place. My focus is just running my best. Kind of racing myself was the key to today and I think it worked out well.”

With no events before her 800, Reifel had a sub-2:15 in mind. By nearly a second, she broke her 2:15.73 indoor record that won the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Indoor Meet March 15 to join Shields as the only Hilltoppers to win that event indoors on the varsity level. Reifel’s all-time best is 2:13.63 from the 2012 3A state prelims.

“It was my goal so I was definitely happy about it,” Reifel said. “I knew it was going to be hard but I really tried to break it down in my head if I ran so-and-so time for each split, then I thought definitely it was a possibility. I just went out there and just gave it all I had. I didn’t have anything before so that definitely was helpful.”

Luczak sat out the Silver Meet to rest an Achilles injury but actually looked stronger as the 3,200 progressed. Lake Park senior Kaylee Flanagan, the 2012 3A state champion in 10:30.47, went out hard and looked to have the race locked up, but Luczak persevered and was just under four seconds behind with 400 meters left.

Luczak took over the lead at the start of the final lap and never looked back.

“I wasn’t really expecting anything and then to get first, I was like, ‘Wow, kind of shocking,’ ” Luczak said. “After not competing for so long and not being able to compete in conference, I was just getting really down and really sad. I love competing. That’s what I train for so to be able to use this opportunity, I was like, ‘Oh yes, I’m going to run. I can do it.’ ”

Reifel was the Hilltoppers' only champion at the Silver Meet. Perez was the state's top runner-up as ran an indoor school-record 10:28.18 in the 3,200 but took second to York's Emma Fisher (10:26.06) and third in a tight 1,600 (5:06.64) to Fisher (5:06.17) and Hinsdale Central senior Jill Hardies (5:06.35) by less than half a second. Fisher and Hardies did not compete Saturday.

"It was hard to get second in the 3,200, hard to get third in that 1,600, and to have the opportunity to come back and do that today was pretty awesome for (Perez). She deserves it," Hass said.

"In the mile, are you kidding me, a 4:53? That's just ridiculous. Every time that we think she's getting to that high point, she drops another bomb on us. That was just fun to watch, just drop her competition like that and win it outright."

Perez ran an indoor school-record 4:59.29, the last time she ran the 1,600 fresh March 8 at the York Invite. This time she broke Shields' all-time school record and the Top Times Invite record of 4:54.0 in manual time set in 1998 by St. Charles junior Tera Moody, now an elite marathon runner.

Perez took the lead Saturday by the first 100 meters but ran a steadier pace this time. She ran the first 400 meters in 1:11, the first 800 in 2:25 and averaged 36 to 38 seconds over her final four laps to win by 5.86 seconds over Yorkville's Skyler Bollinger (4:59.44) who posted the fastest reported time for a freshman this indoor season. Flanagan (5:03.94) was third in an impressive double comeback.

"My start was a little bit smarter. I didn't kill myself, which I was happy about. I had more juice in the end, which was good," Perez said. "I felt really

good going into the race, just stayed relaxed and in the end everything turned out well. I knew what I needed to do and just was able to execute real well. In the end, I'm happy. I'm already looking forward to outdoors but pretty happy."

Reifel also won her race convincingly, by 4.66 seconds over Downers Grove North junior Stephanie Urbancik (open 800 lifetime-best 2:19.51), who also was second to Reifel at the Silver Meet. Especially with Urbancik and Downers North junior Meghan Bonfield (4th, open 800 lifetime-best 2:20.69) among the top competition, Reifel once again knew she would have to take the race out fast to establish herself among the frontrunners.

"It did go out really fast. I kind of wanted to hang back a little bit because at conference I made the mistake of going out way too fast," Reifel said. "I tried to hang back a little bit and be more relaxed my first 200 (32 seconds) and then I just really worked on, especially my third 200, keeping my (pace) strong. I tried to surge at the 400-meter mark and pick it up so I could maintain more of a steady pace."

"She just keeps dropping time. At some point, you're supposed to flatten out, aren't you?" said Hass, laughing. "She's just phenomenal."

Luczak already felt like a champion just being able to compete in the 3,200. She opened the season Feb. 9 with a lifetime-best 10:46.4 but then was sidelined by a cold and pneumonia. She returned March 2 at the Proviso West Invite with her only double in the 3,200 (11:24.0) and 1,600 (5:25.8) but then began experiencing problems with her Achilles tendon. She was scratched from 1,600 at the York Invite and sat out the Silver Meet.

"I was debating whether or not to run this meet. I ran (Friday) and I was like, 'OK. It feels pretty good. I think I can run today,' " Luczak said. "I decided

that I'd also see with the warmup, and I was like, 'I can run this,' and I did and it turned out well."

"I was so happy that (10:46.4) race and I'm like, 'There's no way I can top that today.' And then when I did, I was shocked."

While Flanagan was running away with the race, Luczak was firmly in second and looking solid, a 5:14 for her first mile. As she continued to run steady, Luczak slowly closed the gap. She ran the final lap in 36 seconds.

"Towards the end, towards the last lap, I was like, 'Wait, I could actually win this,' " Luczak said. "Once I passed her, I was like, 'OK, I'm not going back. I need to keep this. I need to stay where I am. There's no way I'm going to lose this now. I've worked too hard.' "

"I'm so happy for her with all of the time off she's had," Hass said. "She's so dedicated and just wanted to run so bad. We've tethered her for a long time now and so it was great for her to be able to do that."

In Luczak's eyes, the thrill of victory wasn't even the best part.

"I would have been so happy that I just ran it," Luczak said. "My goal was under 11:20, but what I told all of my friends is my main goal is to actually finish. If I finish the race, I'll be happy. I did and it's not hurting so I'm very happy about that. That was like the biggest reward out of everything."

The Hilltoppers had another surprise waiting in the 1,600 relay. They dropped a whopping 6.0 seconds from their season-best time with the only change the addition of Murray, who was making her varsity debut.

“I think we were all capable of the times that we ran so I was just happy with it. It was still unexpected, but I felt we could do it,” Gambol said.

All four runners had personal-best splits – Nevins (1:01.9), Gambol (1:00.1), Murray (1:03.8) and Reifel (57.7), who received the baton in fourth. The Hilltoppers were just .39 behind third-place Hinsdale South (4:03.55). St. Charles East grabbed the lead early and won in 3:57.75.

“I was quite excited because my goal for the season was to try to get 57s so I was happy to get it indoors,” Reifel said. “I always think it’s easier to get a good time when you’re running for the team because you’re really going after it and it’s not just for you. It’s for three other girls.”

The improvement showed. At the Silver Meet, the Hilltoppers (4:12.16) finished second to Downers North (indoor school-record 4:06.29). With the same lineup Saturday, the Trojans ran just slightly slower and finished seventh (4:06.97).

“The (1,600 relay) exceeded every expectation I ever had. We were hoping maybe for a high 4:04,” Hass said. “We thought Emma was rested, relatively speaking, and Emma Gambol from what we ask them to do week to week to week. They were great. For Sharon Murray, this was a bold statement for her, really, really big.”

Nevins and Gambol ran with the relay at state last year after Reifel helped the Hilltoppers qualify at sectionals. Murray found out she was joining the lineup at school Tuesday morning.

“(I was) sitting at my locker and Miss Hass comes by and says, ‘Hey, are you going anywhere Saturday (for break)?’ I said, ‘I’m staying home,’ ” Murray

said. "(Hass) said, 'You're coming with us 4-by-400.' I was like, 'Ahh,' shocked that whole day. I texted my mom, 'How did this happen?' "

For her first varsity race, Murray cut her fourth-place 1:05.25 from the sophomore 400 at the Silver Meet by roughly one and a half seconds. Murray competed in track for Glenside Junior High in sixth and eighth grade but missed her seventh-grade season because of a broken arm.

"I was kind of scared because I'm a freshman and this is varsity level and I didn't know how I was going to do and I ended up PRing," Murray said. "It was great. It was just mind blowing. I felt that adrenaline. It was a lot of pressure, but I think it went well.

"I'm just with no words. It's crazy. I've improved so much (this season)."

Nevins also concluded her strong indoor season with a great finish. With the 1,600 relay their only event, Nevins and Murray had to sit around and wait most of the day, but they ran simulated 200-meter dashes before the competition.

"It was just nice to get running," Nevins said. "It would have been nice to have something else to keep you moving and not get too tired. I was just lying here and sleeping, but it was still OK."

Indoor track also is about learning, and Gambol and Rogers gained that from their individual events.

In her first season as a triple jumper, Gambol already has a personal best of 36-0, the first jumper in Glenbard West history to reach that distance since the event was added to the girls state finals in 1996.

Gambol struggled to find her timing and mark Saturday until the last two of her six attempts.

“I just think the experience is really valuable, not to freak out too much or anything,” Gambol said. “I just wasn’t feeling it. I was kind of tired and I just needed to get a little bit pumped up, really get a rhythm down because I was getting kind of slow and high. It was a new atmosphere so it was kind of weird for me because I’ve never really been here so I just kind of had to adjust.”

Rogers was coming off a personal-best 11:32.49 for third on varsity at the Silver Meet but she was close to her previous best of 11:46.5 from Feb. 23. Rogers spent most of the race at the back of the 12-runner pack and still had to race by herself after passing Minooka’s Morgan Crouch (12:11.61) soon after a 5:42 halfway split.

“It wasn’t my best race, but I got to experience coming here. I think I just wasn’t in the zone,” Rogers said. “Previously, I’ve run in a pack and it just helps me. It encourages me to stay at the pace I’m at, but it’s so hard when you know what pace you should be going when you’re not really by a bunch of people. I haven’t really thought about (my goal outdoors), but I just know I want to do better.”