

Even before the start of her distance races, Glenbard West sophomore Lindsay Graham is a model of consistency.

Since her debut with the Hilltoppers in the fall for their state championship cross country team, Graham has maintained a new look as exact as possible.

"You always see me in pigtails. It's like my little signature hairstyle," Graham said.

Once the competition begins, Graham's consistency as a runner puts her among the state's best.

On Saturday, March 29, her focused and disciplined effort earned an impressive 23.48-second victory in 10:44.98 fully automatic time in the girls Class 3A 3,200-meter run at the annual Illinois Top Times Invitational at Illinois Wesleyan University's Shirk Center in Bloomington.

Graham achieved an indoor lifetime-best despite her closest competition being the Downers Grove South trio of junior Amanda Thate (11:08.46), senior Haley Albers (11:09.92) and junior Abby Kargol (11:12.09).

Glenbard West junior Emma Gambol finished seventh in the girls 3A triple jump (34 feet-10 1/2 inches).

"Most races I'm not up there (by that much). This is the first time it's been like that," Graham said. "I want to be a little faster."

Top Times entries earned invitations to compete based on regular-season indoor performances. Glenbard West senior Madeline Perez, the defending state champion in the 3,200 and 1,600, and junior Lisa Luczak both declined competing to rest injuries.

Graham was coming off a 10:45.37 to win the 3,200 at the indoor West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet March 21 at Proviso West, but Oak Park-River Forest freshman Emily Blankmeier was just 2.53 seconds behind in that race.

"Last week was the hardest victory I've worked for, at conference. That was super tough, but I was glad I was able to push myself without someone being there (Saturday)," Graham said.

This was the second straight Top Times appearance for both Hilltoppers, who then earned their first all-state track medals in May.

Graham, then competing for Glenbard East, was fifth in the 3,200 at Top Times (Glenbard East indoor school-record 10:56.65) and went on to take fifth at state (10:42.42) behind Perez and three seniors. Gambol was 11th in triple jump (34-5) at Top Times and went on to take eighth at state with the longest triple jump in Glenbard West history (37-0 1/2).

"It's hard to remember (Graham) is only a sophomore when she does something like that. (Distance coach Paul Hass and I were impressed) what she did by herself," Glenbard West head coach Kelly Hass said. "I thought (Gambol) did better than she did last year. I think she also does better when she has her whole team around her, and I respect that."

In Saturday's 3,200, Graham was in charge by the second of the 16 laps. Still, she covered most of the 200-meter laps in almost 40 seconds precisely until finishing her final lap in 39. Her eight 400 splits all were between 1:18.97 – her final two laps – and 1:21.42 on laps 13 and 14.

"I just remember I was trying to speed up every lap, but I was staying the same (pace) so I just had to keep going," Graham said.

Gambol would have needed to jump one foot longer just to move up to sixth. Five jumpers exceeded 36 feet and two 37 feet with St. Charles East junior Allison Chemlik the champion at 37-5 1/4. Chemlik was sixth at state last year (37-0 3/4), 1/4 of an inch ahead of Gambol.

Most major triple jump events allow three attempts in the preliminaries and three additional attempts for those who reach the finals. All 12 entries Saturday could take six attempts.

Gambol achieved her 34-10 1/2 on her third attempt after a 34-6 on her second. She had three other jumps between 33-10 3/4 and 33/3 1/2.

"(My jumps) were pretty consistent but they were consistently not my best," Gambol said. "The competition was really good. There were a lot of talented girls. They did great and it was a tough meet. It just wasn't my day I guess."

Graham had to contend with being the No. 1 seed with her time from the Silver Meet. According to DyeStat Illinois, the only faster time this indoor season was 10:34.48 by Perez at the Proviso West Invite March 8. Perez, who has not competed since that meet, won the Top Times 1,600 in 2013, has not competed since the invite.

Luczak was entered as the No. 2 seed for Saturday's 3,200 at 11:11.33 but scratched late in the week. Luczak won last year's Top Times 3,200 in 10:37.04 with a dramatic comeback over the second half of the race over Lake Park graduate Kaylee Flanagan (10:44.53), who was second to Perez at the state finals in May.

"I kind of wanted to carry on the tradition of West winning (the race). I don't like being the No. 1 seed. But it went well," Graham said. "(Luczak) made the right choice. I'm glad she's not running today because I wouldn't want her to get hurt."

Graham competed with sore knees the final weeks of the cross country season but still finished an all-state 17th after being an all-state 20th as a freshman. That was a team-best 34th for Downers South at state while Albers and Kargol were 12th and 17th in the 3,200 at state. Three more runners in Saturday's 12-runner field were 2013 state qualifiers in the 3,200.

Now back to full-time training, Graham challenged her all-time 3,200 best of 10:41.92 from the 2013 York Sectional, Glenbard East's all-time school record.

"On some levels, she's still learning how to run the 3,200, but it didn't

look like it (Saturday)," Kelly Hass said. "She looked like she pretty much had it under her control. She's a machine. She just goes, but she's also got a little more speed than people give her credit for."

Graham would have been either closer or set a new personal record if not for eluding the pack earlier than the second turn of the second lap or a brief disturbance halfway through the 14th lap. As she a runner on the third turn who was on the inside of Lane 2, the runner suddenly shifted inside. It nearly forced Graham onto the infield, which would have resulted in a disqualification.

"On my first lap, I was too slow and I think I should have gone out faster. I ran on the outside a little too much and I got tripped," Graham said.

"She had the first lane completely open so I'm not just going to go out to Lane 3. I'm going to go through and she just cut right over and almost knocked me into the inside so that slowed me down. I wouldn't have touched her."

Gambol also was trying everything possible to perform her best. This was only her third straight week of competition in the event after an ankle injury, and her indoor school record of 36-0 set last year only would have placed sixth.

As the competition continued Saturday, Gambol increased her stretching and strides along the track. She even put her long hair into a bun for her fifth jump and then put it back down for her last.

"I was trying to change my mindset because I was starting to think negatively in the middle. I just tried to work on getting in the zone more," Gambol said. "I wasn't feeling very fast and Miss Hass was saying I wasn't going very fast. I was trying to get my speed up so I could be more aggressive in my jumps."

"I liked that a lot about what she did," added Kelly Hass, who oversees the triple and long jumpers. "She could have been very disappointed after her first one or two jumps but she wasn't. She kept going back and giving

it another go. That's a sign of her maturity level, and I'm pleased with that."

Glenbard West juniors Morgan McEnroe and Jessica Wulffen and sophomore Grace Rogers also made the trip to Bloomington to assist their teammates. Rogers, another of the Hilltoppers' all-staters in cross country (21st place), warmed up and cooled down with Graham.

Wulffen handled the task of fixing Graham's hair, which usually is done by sophomore Abby Shaver.

"They look awesome," Graham said of her pigtails. "They're a different type of braid. I just want the braid into the pigtail. Everyone on the team knows them by now."

The new style evolved out of an unfortunate haircutting disaster shortly after the state track meet. Graham, who prefers her hair long, had lost six inches before the scissors could be stopped.

"It was a stubborn hair lady. I was thinking, 'Cut the ends off,' and she was like, 'All of this is dead,' and she just snipped away," Graham said. "Everything looks better with long hair. That's just me. I went to (running) camp over the summer and some girl did pigtails and I was like, 'Oh, those look cute,' so I started doing them for races."

Where Graham and the braids will appear at state remains to be seen. With Luczak also placing 10th in the 3,200 in 10:51.08, the Hilltoppers have three of the top five non-senior finishers from last year's 3A state field. Luczak also is a two-time state qualifier in the 1,600, placing 12th in last year's final.

Teams are allowed only two entries per individual event for the postseason.

"Madeline deserves a shot at both (the 3,200 and 1,600 at state) – if that's what she wants to do," Hass said. "People talk about it and that it's a good problem to have. It'll sort itself out. Everybody will have an

opportunity to do what they do best and the decision will be made from there. We haven't made a conscious decision about what we'll do ahead of time."

On the trip back to Glen Ellyn, Graham capped her indoor season by being allowed to select the team's dinner destination.

Graham chose Wild Berries Restaurant in Bloomington, where she dined for the first time after the 2013 Top Times Invite with her family. She again ordered the pancakes and enjoyed them with a half-knife scoop of cinnamon butter.

"(My indoor season) was super good, consistent. I stayed healthy, perfect," Graham said. "I wish this race went a little faster, but it's OK."

-- by Bill Stone