

After first joining the Glenbard West girls track team in 2013, senior Dee Dee Burns is feeling the benefits and challenges this season.

"I think it's a little easier (for me) because we're doing a lot more stuff that helps with throwing. Now we're lifting, whereas last year I couldn't lift more than 15 pounds. Now I lift a lot more," Burns said.

"I think it's harder (also) because now I'm pushing myself harder. When we do hills (in practice), I know I'm ready to die, but it feels good after we're done because I know of the improvement."

On Saturday, April 12, Burns enjoyed her best day as a thrower as she had career bests of 32 feet-5 inches in shot put and 92-11 in discus.

She wasn't alone. Several Hilltoppers rose to the occasion and it helped them win Downers Grove South's Mustang Invitational for the first time since 2011. The Hilltoppers (115.5 points) won by 8.5 points over Lyons Township (107), the defending outdoor West Suburban Conference Silver Division champions who won the indoor Silver title March 21.

Junior Emma Gambol won her two 2013 individual state-qualifying events – the 300-meter low hurdles (49.18 fully automatic time) and the triple jump (35-6 3/4).

Sophomore Grace Rogers defended her invite title in the 3,200 (11:33.47), and the Hilltoppers defended other titles with new faces. Sophomore Lindsay Graham won the 1,600 (5:04.22) and he 3,200 relay of sophomore Kathryn Kenwood, Graham, junior Colleen Luczak and senior Annika Manning prevailed in 10:05.80.

The 1,600 relay of sophomores Nicole Rogus, Emma Winans and Sharon Murray and senior JaSharra Clark gave an inspired effort to finish second (4:14.48), and Burns earned second in discus.

"I think it was a bit of a surprise (we won as a team), but we're all ecstatic about it. It was awesome when we figured it out," junior Morgan McEnroe said. "I think all of us just really knew that we had to come

together as a team and I think that was really cool that we all figured it out at one time and really put it together really nicely."

Senior Madeline Perez, the defending state champion in the 3,200 and 1,600, and juniors Lisa Luczak and Mary Nevins were among key Hilltoppers from the 2013 invite lineup that did not compete Saturday.

Even with their efforts, along with graduated all-stater Emma Reifel, the Hilltoppers were second to Glenbard North 145.666 to 100 points. The Panthers (102) were third Saturday.

"That's a little momentum we needed (going forward)," Glenbard West head coach Kelly Hass said. "We have over 40 points in the field events (41.5). It's been years since that has happened. And from what I saw on the track, every kid stepped up. I'm so excited for them. They ran great. They all just ran so well. They stepped up today."

With a brutal wind greeting runners on the homestretch, competing was the name of the game rather than times. Manning had to take the wind head on during the 3,200 relay when she found herself in a pretty unfamiliar anchor position and with the Hilltoppers comfortably ahead.

"This (final) straightaway, whew, it's windy. It's pretty tough," Manning said. "(Anchoring) was kind of fun, I've got to say. It was difficult at point since I wasn't running with anyone, but it was good."

Burns' big day provided another part of the success. Besides taking second in discus to Glenbard North senior Tasia Collins (100-4), Burns was third in shot (32-5). Freshman Anna Gambol also came through, taking third in discus (89-8) and fourth in discus (31-2 1/4).

The wind proved to be only an annoyance for Burns.

"It was just bothering my hair," Burns said. "I liked that Anna and I both placed so we earned some points for the team."

Burns easily beat a similar breakthrough performance in the outdoor

opener Wednesday, April 9, at Duchon Field. Burns threw a career-best 83-8 in discus and equaled her best of 30-7 in shot. Her best discus throw last season was 73-7.

On Saturday, varsity discus went first. Burns reached 92-11 on just her second throw of prelims and had several other throws in the 80s but scratched her third and final try in finals.

"I thought they were going to say 88 (feet) or something and then when they said 92, I was like, 'OK,' " Burns said. "(In shot) it was just wow, 32, so I was pretty happy that."

Burns threw her 32-5 on her first attempt in shot while most of her other throws were in the 28s. She would have had to exceed the 37-8 state-qualifying standard to catch champion Collins' 38-5 1/4.

"(The 32-5) was like, 'Um. OK,' When I threw it, I just felt like my arm drop. It was like my arm told me, 'I'm done,' " Burns said.

Burns said she's been working on where she stands in the throwing ring, even after Wednesday's great performance. Burns has been using the South African drill, which encourages throwers to visualize a linear progression from the back of the ring before releasing.

"I had to get it down and correct," Burns said. "I just imagined (the line) was there and I just stepped and turned. I have to remember to switch my feet. It's hard to remember, but if I do, it's going to be a good throw. Switching feet gives you that extra push."

Burns is still pushing for more success. She wasn't able to come out for track as a freshman to focus on academics and nearly did as a sophomore but then changed her mind. Classmates and throwers Ashley Schleck and Diamond Rainey finally persuaded Burns in 2013.

"I knew I was going to do it and then (they) kept hounding me to join so I was like, 'OK, OK, OK,' " Burns said. "(Saturday) was pretty good. I still want to get up there, hopefully get ready for state."

Gambol made the most of another busy four-event meet but yet a change of pace since she was in four individual events and no relays.

In her final event, Gambol came from behind late in the 300 hurdles to win by just .04 over Downers South sophomore Shaliyah Dixon-Tucker (49.22) and triple jump by four inches over LT junior Emma Haugen (35-2 3/4), a fellow state qualifier who was hampered late indoors by an ankle injury.

In her other events, Gambol was third in long jump (15-11), 1 1/2 inches from fourth, and fifth in the 100 hurdles (18.39). Both are relatively new events for Gambol, who at last year's invite won the 100 and was second in the 200.

"Place-wise, (the 300 hurdles) went very well. I won so that's good. Time-wise, for being my first race of outdoor, there's a lot of improvement that needs to happen," Gambol said. "I'm happy with the result because (Dixon-Tucker) was really talented, a good athlete. She was beating me and I just beat her in the finish. She was really pushing me to do better.

"It wasn't my best (triple) jumping day, despite winning. I only took four jumps and all six in the long because I didn't want to get tired out. It was a good warmup. It was a good way to score (team) points."

Gambol began regularly competing in the long jump during indoors and achieved 16-3 1/2 at indoor conference. The 100 hurdles used to be somewhat of a mental block for Gambol after she ran the race at conference during seventh grade and fell over a hurdle.

The incident seemed to create a mental block for Gambol that resulting in tripping every time she competed as an eighth grader. Gambol then stayed away from the 100 hurdles as a freshman after tripping during 55 hurdles races indoors. Last year, she returned to the 55 hurdles and then tried the 100 hurdles once at the Wheaton Warrenville South Invite.

"It was the first race in high school where I was really serious, I guess

(about the 100 hurdles. Still) it was just for fun. Then this year is when I'm actually getting more serious about it," Gambol said.

Gambol still had some issues with the 100 hurdles Saturday. During prelims, she tripped over the second hurdle but managed to not only keep her balance but also not cross into any competitors' lanes and get disqualified. Gambol pulled out third in her heat to advance to the finals.

"Psychologically, I'm really more prepared this year and I feel I'm ready to conquer the high hurdles because the height difference bothers me for some reason," Gambol said.

"Honestly, the most important thing with hurdles is your form and the repetition of form. It doesn't really change in either of the (100 or 300) races. The 100 hurdles, I always have to work on getting my trail leg around and that helps with that. It's sped up from the 300s. They complement each other with working on the form."

Graham and Rogers masterfully handled the brutal wind with different strategies.

Graham took control of her 1,600 during the second lap to dictate a strong field with Hinsdale Central sophomore Annie Zaher (lifetime-best 5:07.86) and Downers South junior Amanda Thate (5:08.66), who easily topped the 5:14.24 state-qualifying standard.

Graham edged her season-best of 5:06.94 from March 1 indoors but was ultimately trying to break 5:00. Perez set the invite record last year with 4:59.95.

"Hopefully I can run even faster when there's no wind," Graham said. "I definitely wasn't as tired as I was that meet where I ran the 5:06. That meet, I really died. This time, I was tired but I wasn't on my deathbed."

At the 2013 state meet, Zaher was 17th in the 1,600 at state last year as the top-finishing sophomore, and Thate competed with the 3,200 relay. At the indoor West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet March 21 at

Proviso West, Graham won the 3,200 and Zaher won the 1,600 in 5:16.01.

"I kind of stupidly looked around over turns (for Zaher and Thate) and they were pretty close," Graham said.

"(Distance coach Paul Hass) and I were debating if I wanted to go for a really good time or I wanted to run more tactically and go for the win. I stayed behind the first lap, which I thought would be a good idea, but I was hoping to be a little faster than I ended up getting."

Rogers spent most of her 3,200 one-half stride behind Downers South senior Haley Albers (11:38.22), a 2013 state qualifier in the event. Rogers powered past Albers with 250 meters left and won by 4.75 seconds.

"I wasn't planning on going that early but (Albers) was kind of being aggressive, pushing me to the outside lane so I was like, 'Ahh, get out of here,' and just finished," Rogers said.

"(Paul Hass) told us to kind of tuck in behind anyone we were running with. I think it helped me drafting behind (Albers) the whole time. She was running a pretty good pace. I thought it was a perfect pace for me. I was pushing me, but I was still able to stay with her."

At the invite as a freshman, Rogers won the 3,200 in similar fashion in 11:36.15 with Albers second in 11:46.75. Rogers remembered that day being windy as well, but also cold and rainy.

"I remember doing the same thing, running behind two girls the whole time. One of them blocked the wind and then I went the last 400," Rogers said.

The Hilltoppers won the 3,200 relay last year with Perez, Luczak, Reifel and graduated Kate Majewski. On Saturday, track newcomer Kenwood opened with a 2:29.1 and the Hilltoppers were a close third to Lyons Township and Geneva.

Graham came out surging, taking the lead by the 500-meter mark and

putting the Hilltoppers ahead to stay with a 2:22.2 split. Luczak (2:41.6) and Manning (2:23.7) held the advantage for a 9.62-second victory over LT.

"I was really happy with that. When Colleen got the baton, I was so proud of her. She did her best to keep the lead and so did Annika," Graham said. "I was cooling down when I found out we won (as a team) and I was really happy. I'm excited that once everybody is back at full strength that we'll be even stronger as a team."

Clark has a busy day sprinting. Besides anchoring the 1,600 relay with a team-best 1:01.7 split, Clark was part of the third-place 800 relay with sophomores Jessica Michel, Sharon Murray and Ellen Daniels (1:50.56) and anchored the fifth-place 400 relay with sophomore Emma Winans, Daniels and Murray (52.42).

Clark also pulled out third in the 100 (13.98), just .26 behind first-place LT junior Mayra Baeza. Michel was third in the 200 (28.55), and Winans was fourth in the 400 (1:03.09).

"I didn't think I'd do that well (in the 100) but I finally had the greatest start of my life," said Clark, a 2013 state competitor with the 1,600 relay. "I feel like I'm stronger competitively. I just want to do (state) again so I just push for it. I just hope that we just push for it and every meet can be like this."

Daniels was supposed to run two 400s for the sophomore team, but she was moved to the varsity for two relays. She came out late for the indoor season after playing basketball and is working her way back from an ankle injury.

"It feels fine now so I think I'm back and ready. It's better competition (on varsity), but they were good races so I'm happy with it," Daniels said.

"It's been going good (this season). Actually, I was surprised how fast I got back into it. I was scared that I was going to be behind everyone but I'm really happy with how well I've been doing, especially with my 400s. Last

year, I ended off on the same note I'm starting this year so it's good."

Senior Grace Lupo tied for fourth in high jump (4-10). Junior Rachel Aubrey was seventh in triple jump and did so with a career-best 31-8 1/4 – her first time beyond 30 feet. Two other jumps also were beyond 30 feet.

"(Kelly Hass) was actually measuring so she saw (my first 30 footer) before me and I screamed out loud and hugged her and I was really excited. It's a very exciting moment," Aubrey said.

"It's good that it's consistent so I hope I'll be getting better than 31. My legs are sore today, too, so hopefully when they're not sore I will jump better. Miss Hass is very proud of me so that makes me even happier."

Sophomore level

Like a few other Glenbard West girls indoor track athletes, sophomore Isabella Salafatinos had the tough decision to continue with the team outdoors or return to soccer for the spring season.

The calendar made the decision for her.

"I didn't really decide what I was going to do until the day of soccer tryouts," Salafatinos said. "I didn't really have a choice because I forgot there were soccer tryouts so I was like, 'I guess this is what I'm supposed to do.' I'm very happy that I stuck with track."

Now that she is fully committed to track, Salafatinos is running even better. In her first outdoor meet for the Hilltoppers Saturday, April 12, Salafatinos won both the 100 (13.76 fully automatic time) and 200 (29.53) at Downers Grove South's Mustang Invitational.

Sophomore Abby Shaver also won the 3,200 (12:40.76). The Hilltoppers still finished fifth (67.25 points) among eight teams despite promoting numerous underclassmen to help the varsity pull out that level's title with 115.5 points.

Sophomore Kelsey Lentz made her first 100 hurdles finals and took second (18.97). Freshman Melina Thurmond was second in shot put (28 feet-8 inches).

Sprinting into a stiff wind, Salafatinos won the 100 by .13 and the 200 by an impressive .59 after running even faster in the prelims in both races (13.59 and 29.53). She was the second seed in the 200 to second-place LT sophomore Maggie Caplice (30.12).

"I was definitely feeling (the wind) at the end (of the 200) but in the end there was really nothing I could do about it so you had to run through it," Salafatinos said.

"I was really tired all day. Half of me wasn't really sure I wanted to make it to finals but I decided that I was just going to run as well as I could. I wasn't sure how well I was going to do because I've been recovering from multiple injuries, but in the end it just all worked out."

Shaver's strategy also worked to perfection. She spent most of the race just behind race leader Hannah Dutler of Lyons Township, a 2013 state track qualifier in the event.

With just 150 meters left, Shaver initiated a vicious kick into the wind that pulled out the race with 2.94 seconds to spare. Sophomore Nicole Berneche was fifth (13:10.53).

"People said that (I won decisively) and I thought (Dutler) was behind me the whole time. I guess that helped make me to go faster," Shaver said.

"It was so fun. It was great. I knew since it was windy, I should stay behind them for the most part so they could take the wind from me and then at the end I was just like, 'All right, I guess I could try faster,' and I was just giving it what I had left."

In shot, Thurmond missed her lifetime best by only seven inches but needed to throw 33-10 1/2 to catch Hinsdale Central freshman Ugochi

Ihemeson, who remains undefeated in shot and discus on the frosh-soph level.

Lentz continues to go faster and gain confidence as a hurdler. In prelims, she was third in the first of two heats in 19.83 and reached her first finals in the event with the sixth-fastest time.

Lentz shaved .85 off her time in the final and only was beaten by Downers South sophomore Lauren Wong (17.58). Lentz was .24 ahead of third place.

"I think that one and indoor conference were my best races," Lentz said. "I recently started four-stepping in between the hurdles. I used to take five steps and it's a lot faster and easier for me to do better."

At the indoor West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet March 21 at Proviso West, Lentz took a big step by reaching her first finals in the 55 hurdles, placing fifth. She competed in hurdles as freshman but was a beginner and just working on five-stepping consistently.

Lentz's fluid and focused race in the finals shows she's ready to take the next step. She also anchored the sixth-place 800 relay with sophomores Claire Ficarella, Grace Keane and Leah Backart (2:05.63).

"I just look at the hurdles. I definitely don't pay attention to what's on the side of me when I race," Lentz said. "You have to be very ambidextrous to switch steps and I've gotten my rhythm down by now so it's pretty fluid."

The 3,200 relay of sophomores Katie Bassett, Abby Moody, Christina Sedall and Kate Dorsey was third (10:25.60) with Bassett running a team-best 2:32.3 split. In their later open events, Dorsey was third in the 1,600 (5:40.41) and Bassett was fifth in the 800 (2:34.49).

The 3,200 relay was only the second race this season for Sedall, who made her season debut in the junior varsity meet three days earlier by taking second in the 800 (2:42.7).

Sedall competed for the 2012 state cross country team and at the 2013

state track meet with the 3,200 relay. Sedall just missed making the 2013 state champions team's postseason squad after her performance at the conference meet. She hadn't competed since then because she was running with right hip pain that was eventually diagnosed as stress fractures.

"It's just great to be besides these girls again. I'm not obviously at my best but I'm totally fine just working my way back," Sedall said. "It's all right because the recovery has been great and I'm back now so that's what matters. Really the main goal is junior year of cross country because that's what I really want to be back for since I'm more passionate for cross country. I'm getting there, I think."

After her strong freshman year, Sedall had high aspirations that she nearly partially achieved despite being injured. Although not part of the state team, she was among the Hilltoppers' most vocal cheerleaders along the courses and armed with some of the most creative motivational posters.

She remained patient during her recovery, focused on a safe and conservative comeback. Working with a quality, running-based specialist for her physical therapy certainly helped.

About a month ago, Sedall began by running one mile and has gradually increased from there. She feels her training has become fairly substantial for nearly two weeks.

"Right now I'm just focusing on staying healthy," Sedall said. "It was definitely hard this cross country season, not performing how I wanted to because freshman year I had run at state. Over the summer, I had the goal of getting all-state and obviously I didn't even get to go to state. It was very hard to see some of my friends succeeding and me just having to watch, but at the same time, while it was hard, I was totally excited for them. If I wasn't out there, I'd want them to be."

With sophomore Ellen Daniels made a late move from the sophomore 1,600 relay to two varsity relays, the sophomores had to scramble as well. Sedall and Shaver were employed to join the 1,600 relay.

Asselmeier, Sedall, Shaver and Bassett finished fourth (4:40.29) with Asselmeier (1:09.2), Shaver (1:09.6) and Sedall (1:09.7) each breaking 70 seconds.

"I was so tired. After the 3,200, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I can't do this,' " Shaver said. "But it was really fun. It's one of my favorite races just to do for fun."

It's the kind of competitive spirit that Salafatinos said she is discovering in herself now that she has committed to the outdoor season and hip and tendinitis problems seem to be behind her.

"I feel like I've definitely improved physically because I've learned to work very hard in track. They push you a lot and I feel like mentally I've also improved because last year I was just not trying that hard because it was just for soccer (conditioning)," Salafatinos said.

"This year, I'm doing it more for the team so I feel like I'm putting more effort into it, being a better teammate. Now I'm trying to win and I'm not just running."

-- by Bill Stone