

After qualifying for the girls track state meet in the distance double the past two seasons, Glenbard West junior Lisa Luczak's main competitor Thursday, May 15, was the clock.

Competing in the 1,600-meter run at the Class 3A Wheaton Warrenville South Sectional, Luczak was determined to advance on time despite an injury-filled season, but she wouldn't have to fight alone.

Sophomore and good friend Lindsay Graham and Glenbard West coaches and teammates were positioned around the track to provide time splits and encouragement.

"I was like, 'I don't know if I'm going to qualify,' " Luczak said. "All of my teammates knew that I was injured so I hadn't run the mile that much and they knew that I was really, really nervous."

While top-two sectional finishers automatically advance to state, entries that achieve state-qualifying standards at the sectional also qualify.

Luczak finished third, but her 5:13.10 fully automatic time beat the 5:14.24 state-qualifying standard. She is among the Hilltoppers' six entries for the 3A state meet Friday and Saturday, May 23-24, at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston.

"This, by far, is probably one of my top three favorite races ever. I don't care about time, just the feeling and accomplishment that went along with it," Luczak said. "Just the support system was absolutely incredible. It just makes you so thankful to have such a great team."

Graham won the 3,200 in a lifetime-best 10:36.83. Junior Mary Nevins won the 400 (59.53) and led off the winning 1,600 relay with sophomores Ellen Daniels and Emma Winans and senior JaSharra Clark (season-best 4:04.93).

Senior Madeline Perez, the defending state champion in the 3,200 and 1,600, advanced in both races with second-place finishes in 10:45.74 and 5:11.70 respectively. It was just her second outdoor meet of the season and her first time running the 3,200 since March 8 indoors.

With Luczak and Perez both battling in the 1,600 with little regular-season competition, Glenbard West assistant coaches Paul Hass and Mark Staron were busier than ever. Sophomores Grace Rogers and Caitlyn Reick were among other teammates keeping them going, and trying to help Luczak beat the state cut.

"It was great team support. And it makes such a big difference," Paul Hass. "I don't think you see that with all teams and it was great to see that with the distance girls, supporting their teammates and maybe it makes a second and a half difference (for Luczak). I'm sure it helps."

At the state meet, top-nine finishers in the finals earn all-state medals and team points. Graham and Perez posted the No. 1 and 2 fastest sectional times in 3A for the 3,200. Nevins was 17th in the 400, the 1,600 relay was 20th, and Perez and Luczak were 21st and 29th among 1,600 qualifiers.

"The past couple of years, I have learned not to go in with a whole lot of expectations. That's not for me to do. That's for the kids to do," Glenbard West head coach Kelly Hass said.

"Most of the kids that are running are true students of the sport. They know their competition. They know what they're supposed to do. It's really nice to sit back and just trust that the greatest effort they could put forth on that day is going to be there. I'm excited to see what they can do, but there's no pressure whatsoever."

Last year, the Hilltoppers earned their first top-three state team trophy by taking third (31 points) behind Perez's championships in 10:22.29 and 4:52.21 and three more all-state performances.

Nevins and Clark were part of last year's all-state, eighth-place 1,600 relay (3:58.47) with current junior Emma Gambol and graduated Emma Reifel, who also was third in the 800. Gambol was eighth in triple jump with an all-time school-record 37 feet-1/2 inch. Graham was an all-state fifth in the 3,200 (10:42.42) but competed last year for Glenbard East before transferring to Glenbard West this school year.

"I'm ready to go and get my team back to Charleston," Perez said. "I haven't really thought about (goals) yet. Obviously, I'm going in to defend two titles from last year and really the main goal is just to do my best and see where I come out."

Luczak qualified with Perez last year in the 3,200 and 1,600 and also advanced in both races in 2012 while Perez was part of the second-place 3,200 relay and eighth in the 1,600 (4:59.47).

In 2013, Luczak was 10th in the 3,200 (10:51.08), which is only run in two heats Saturday, and reached the finals of the 1,600 and was 12th (5:14.50) following a 5:09.64 in the preliminaries.

Daniels and Winans have never competed at state. The four 1,600 relay alternates, sophomores Jessica Michel, Sharon Murray and Nicole Rogus, and freshman Sophie Cvengros, also have never competed at state.

Another thing will be different at state. The Hilltoppers have new uniforms that they unveiled at the sectional. Hass stunned the team at practice Monday when senior co-captain Erin Spiech entered modeling the new uniform.

"The week before, Mrs. Hass was telling us, 'Oh, you have a surprise next week,' and we're like, 'Oh, probably a workout of something,'" Daniels said. "I think they're really nice. I think that the material is nice. The other ones we had, they felt kind of worn out."

Before the sectional, Luczak only had run 5:29.64 in her last outdoor 1,600 April 22 but she had run 5:16.45 March 14 indoors. She only ran the 3,200 at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet May 8 and was second (11:17.02).

"She always amazes me. I've gotten to the point where I never count her out, even though things look like they aren't going her way," Paul Hass said. "I really was impressed with her attitude going into it, just being so confident and positive and said, 'I'm going to do it. I know what I need to

do.' "

So many factors seemed to be against Luczak. First of all, this year's state-qualifying standard was dropped by an entire second from 5:15.24 to 5:14.24.

"I remember it was 5:15 from last year and then Mr. Hass said 5:14 so I looked it up (Wednesday) and I was like, 'Hey there, they changed the time on me. That isn't nice,' " Luczak said. "It's like state's getting faster so you've got to keep up."

Surprisingly cold weather conditions Thursday also could have deterred Luczak, especially since she knew she probably would have to advance on time, not place.

"Mainly, I just kept thinking about it like, 'This is my chance to go to state.' I can do this,' " Luczak said. "And I kept on thinking about so many girls would be dying to have the opportunity to run the mile and I'm lucky enough to have it so I need to prove that I deserve it. And for me, proving that means I need to qualify for state."

On the track, Prospect senior Christina Santiago (5:10.82) and Perez provided great competition. At the 800 mark, Perez (2:24.4) held the lead before Santiago passed her on the backstretch of the third lap.

Luczak hit the halfway point at 2:26.3 after an 80.2-second second lap. She became slightly worried when her third lap was 80.3 seconds – slower than her pre-meet state-qualifying pace – but she finished in 76.9 seconds and actually finished just 2.28 seconds from Santiago and 1.60 seconds from Perez. Santiago also advanced earlier in the 3,200 with a third-place 11:00.61 well under the 11:16.04 cut.

"That helped so much with (teammates) yelling splits. It really gave me an idea of how close am I? Will I make it?" Luczak said.

"I knew that (Santiago and Perez) would be tried coming off the 3,200. I was a little bit closer to them than I expected I would be, but having them

there was really nice. I knew pacing wise, they're going to (easily beat 5:14.24) so stick with them and I'm going to qualify too."

The reason Luczak may have hit the mark may have been the first 200 meters of the race. A habitual slow starter, Luczak tailed the frontrunners from the beginning.

"She went out there and was in fifth place at the 200. I've never seen Lisa in fifth place after 200 in any race, but she was there," Paul Hass said.

Off the track, Graham provided vocal and tactical support with splits and encouragement. The good friends also often warm up and cool down together.

With Graham earlier winning the 3,200 by nearly nine seconds – and breaking 10:40 for the first time – there was plenty to celebrate.

"(Luczak qualifying) was like the best thing ever. You could tell that she put it all out there, and I was happy to be cheering for her," Graham said. "I just talked to her (beforehand) and I didn't want her to get nervous or anything. Nerves don't help no matter what. We told a couple of jokes, kept things light-hearted and during the race I yelled her splits at her and screamed."

"A lot of times we'll just talk about whatever, anything going on, and it's just kind of relaxing. It takes your mind off the race," Luczak said. "It makes you not stressed at all, just happy and ready. It's so nice having a friend to be able to warm up, cool down and does track and everything. I'm pretty lucky."

Graham felt fortunate that her tactically smart race not only resulted in a season-best time. She also surpassed her previous personal best and a Glenbard East all-time record 10:41.92 that came at the 2013 York Sectional to finish fourth in an extremely talented field.

"I think Lindsay ran the best race of her career, in my opinion," Paul Hass said. She looked really smooth and very efficient and just really executed the race strategy perfectly."

Sometimes hampered by going out too fast, Graham actually was last in the entire heat over the first 100 meters but hit the 200 in 36 seconds and completed the lap in 77.3 seconds.

Graham soon was out front as usual. After a 5:18.1 first 1,600 meters, Graham opened a gap at the outset of the fifth lap and built it with a consistent pace. She finished in 77.7 seconds, second only to her first lap, while her other laps were between 81 and 79 seconds.

"I think I went out perfectly. I just wanted to keep hitting 80 (seconds per lap) or under," Graham said.

"I'm really happy. It's a really good 3,200 for me. On my warmups, my legs felt really good so I was just like, 'All right, that's a good sign.' I love when my legs feel good. When my legs feel bad, I'm like, 'Aw crap,' but I felt really good during the race. I just try and tell myself they feel good no matter what."

At state last year, Graham was the highest finishing non-senior to Perez in the 3,200. According to DyeStat Illinois, the only faster 3,200 than Graham this outdoor season was at sectionals Friday, May 16, by Byron senior Kelsey Hildreth (10:32.02), who competes in Class 1A. Santiago ran 10:39.19 May 2.

"I'm just happy to set a PR. No matter what the ranking are or anything. All I can do is my best at the state meet. That's all I can do," Graham said.

"I feel like I'm as ready as I can be. I've been doing everything right and all of the work is done basically. I'm just going to ride it out. The most important thing is to just run my own race. You can't do anything better than your plan. You can't really base it off other people, in my opinion."

Perez also had a strong 3,200 under somewhat unusual circumstances. Because she had not run the event outdoors, Perez was seeded with no time and placed in the slower heat, which was run earlier in the meet just before the 200 preliminaries.

While strange to see one of the state's all-time best distance runners in the slow-seeded heat, there was logic behind how it happened.

The earlier heat gave Perez roughly an addition hour and 15 minutes to cool down and prepare for the 1,600. The last time Perez did the distance double indoors at the Proviso West Invite March 8, the lower leg pain that has sidelined her surfaced. Perez reported no problems after this double.

"We weren't sure how her body was going to respond so the goal was to give her as much rest (between races). And the fact that she hasn't run two miles outdoors," Paul Hass said. "If anyone was affected, it was probably Madeline running in the slow heat. There was no discussion whatsoever of getting a competitive advantage. It was 100 percent due to Madeline's health.

"It's probably not up to her standards, but I'm very, very happy and pleased how she ran considering it's her first 3,200 back and she's getting back in race shape."

Left to basically compete on her own in the heat, Perez quickly distanced herself from the field with a blistering 74.4-second opening lap.

Perez covered the first 1,600 meters in 5:13.3 and finished with 81-to-84 second lap splits over the final four laps. Paul Hass noted the Perez probably covered additional distance because of numerous shifts to Lane 2 to lap so many runners.

"I've run solo races before and really any other girl who went into any sectional with no time would have been placed in that heat so I was where I belonged," Perez said. "I was prepared for it and I knew that I was just going to have to pace myself and it was fine."

In her outdoor track debut at the Silver Meet, Perez anchored the second-place 3,200 relay and was third in the 1,600 (5:04.19). With qualifying in the 1,600 not really in doubt, Perez was able to test her tactics and abilities Thursday, especially coming off the 3,200.

"She lost a little bit that second half (of the 1,600), but that's feeling that 3,200 and just getting her legs back under her," Paul Hass said. "We were where we needed to be or close to it. Maybe a little slow for her goal time, but she gets to run that fresh on Friday (in the state prelims) and we'll see what happens."

Perez set the all-time school records for the 3,200 (10:21.19) and 1,600 (4:52.21) in 2013 but this has been a tough outdoor season with her health after also sitting out most of the cross country season to recover from a calf injury. After winning the 2012 3A cross country title in record time, Perez still finished third after making her season debut three weeks earlier at the Silver Meet.

"Both (senior) seasons, unfortunately, kind of have the same pattern and trend, but I'm looking at it glass half full. I'm just excited to be going back down there in both events and give it my all," Perez said.

"Looking back at everything, this is my second week at full mileage so, all things considered, I was happy with my double (at sectionals). Is it where I wanted to be? No, but when I look at everything, I'm happy with it. I think the main goal was just to go out there and see what I had."

A third-time state competitor Nevins also spent most of the outdoor and indoor seasons to recover from a pulled quadricep muscle.

Nevins was rewarded with a breakthrough at the Silver Meet by winning the 400 in a personal-best 58.79. Her sectional time earned a victory by 1.13 seconds over Willowbrook's Taylor Burton and marks Nevins' first state berth in any event other than the 1,600 relay.

"When I was cooling down, I was just smiling the whole time. I was really happy," Nevins said. "When I finally made it through for the 400, it was sort of like a relief. It was like, 'Oh my gosh, finally.' It's just nice to have some individual recognition for a change just because it's always been the 4 by 400. It's really exciting to have this new goal, I guess, to look out for. I'm totally thrilled."



"I thought Mary Nevins was spectacular," Kelly Hass said. "It's really fun to see her run the race because she is perfectly comfortable letting people blow by her that first 100 meters. She knows the strength of her race is the last 150 so she is perfectly content to let people get really tired and be that strong runner at the end."

Things finally clicked for the 1,600 relay as well. Besides usually lacking Nevins, other strange circumstances prevented the Hilltoppers from ever completely forming their strongest lineup at the time.

At the Silver Meet, they ran an encouraging third-place 4:07.73 with Nevins, Graham, Winans and Clark, which earned the sectional's No. 5 seed. Still, it was Graham's third event of the meet and Clark's fourth race, counting prelims.

"We tried five times to put together our best 4-by-400 and all year long bad things happened," Kelly Hass said. "(The Silver Meet) was a pretty solid glimpse of what we could have. I wasn't asking for a win (at sectionals) so for what they were able to accomplish, it was pretty cool."

Sectionals marked the 1,600 relay's first major victory this season. Although shy of the 4:04.24 state cut, they won by 1.26 seconds over York (4:06.19), which has consistently beaten them head-to-head.

"It's just a totally different vibe because last year it was almost certain we were going to qualify because we had won other 4-by-400s throughout the course of the season," Nevins said. "This year, it was like, 'It's getting stressful. We're not sure (we can qualify), but we're going to do our best,' so it was awesome.

"I was screaming my head off (watching the race). It was so cool. Everyone just ran so well. I was so impressed."

The Hilltoppers have traditionally been strong in the 1,600 relay. They entered Thursday as an underdog to advance but encouraged by a more rested lineup coming off strong splits on varsity and frosh-soph at the Silver

Meet.

Winans said she opted not to hear beforehand how many teams were seeded ahead of the Hilltoppers.

"Just because you're seeded a certain place or just because you're guessed to race a certain time doesn't necessarily mean you're going to run that. I just like to go into it thinking that my best is all that I can do and my best is going to get us where we want to go and that's what I did," Winans said.

"Going into the meet, we were right on the bubble for time and qualifying. It was just so exciting to know we beat York and we are going to state. That's pretty cool. I'm super duper excited."

This 1,600 relay at state will be different for Nevins because she has competed the past two years with Reifel, now at Wisconsin. Winans and Daniels bring the perspective of being alternates for the relay in 2013.

"Being an alternate last year, I remember just thinking, 'Oh, I want to run so bad next year.' This is such a fun, cool experience to have and it happened. I'm super excited," Daniels said.

"(Competing at state) was just kind of like a carrot and I was a rabbit," Winans said. "I know what it's like there (at state). I know that I have what it takes to get there and to be successful. If there was ever a day where (I thought), 'I'm so tired. I don't want to do this workout,' (I thought), 'State, state, state. You can do it. I know I can.' "

Last season, Clark was a key piece to the relay after being converted from exclusively a sprinter to a 400 contributor as well. The progress of younger 400 runners, especially in the absence of Nevins, made a huge difference this season.

Winans became a varsity regular early on, yet she probably has made her biggest strides in her mental approach and preparation. More racing experience in the face of better competition has helped her calm pre-race

jitters and keep her performances and results in perspective.

"It's something I realized this year, that's it's OK to be nervous. It's actually important because that means you value something and you want to do your best, but you should never be in a position where you're so nervous that you can't do your best," Winans said.

"This year, going into all of my races, I'm like, 'If I do my best, I can't fail.' For me, failure is consciously not doing my best and this year I can honestly say that every race I did, I tried my best. Times change, the weather changes, who I compete against changes so that changes things. Something that was hard for me to grasp last year was if I wasn't first place, I'd be like, 'I didn't do well.' You just have to look at the grand scheme of things and look at your effort individually."

Daniels got off to a late indoor start after playing basketball and saw occasional varsity track action. At the Silver Meet, she competed on the frosh-soph level and had her best 400 day ever, taking second in the 400 (1:02.86) and then contributing a team-best 1:03.4 split on the second leg of the second-place 1,600 relay.

"I think I got a lot of confidence with that (400 double). I was like, 'If I can do both of those, then I can definitely run just one 400 at sectionals,' " Daniels said.

"I'm just proud of myself because I feel like last year I just didn't get up to the spot that I wanted to be and this year I think that I just worked hard at all of the practices and I just made sure that I was doing everything right. I'm just glad that it worked out and I achieved my goal."

The underclassmen handled their roles well in the race. They received a good warmup earlier in the 400 relay with freshman Sophie Cvengros and Clark, finishing sixth (52.52).

Thanks to Nevins opening the 1,600 relay in 1:03.1, Daniels received the baton among the leaders.

"I was kind of nervous thinking, 'Mary's going to be up at the top. I'm going to have to race all of these girls that are so good,' " Daniels said. "I knew I needed to get out faster because usually I'm scared if I get out too fast I'll be tired at the end, but Mrs. Hass was telling me right before the race, 'Just make sure you get out hard because you know you're going to have something at the end.' Then at the end I just gave it all I had."

Daniels' 1:01 not only kept the Hilltoppers in contention but put Winans up front to battle York. Winans followed in 1:01.3 to keep the lead for Clark, who finished in 1:00.3.

"I was like, 'This is great. This is right where I need to be,' " Winans said.

"I haven't really been getting out in the beginning of the race as hard as I could. I was like, 'You know what? These girls are going pretty fast. I think I can keep up with them.' It was really good to have them to pace myself and on the back straightaway, kind of (it was) see ya. I think we handed off (with Clark) right where we were supposed to. I was like, 'She's got it.' "

Other Glenbard West entries did not qualify for state but gave great efforts.

Gambol came close to returning to state in triple jump but ended up fourth (34-7), seven inches from second place and shy of the 35-8 qualifying standard. Her 13.52 in the 100 prelims was 10th, missing the nine-sprinter finals by .11.

"I was really upset. It was really not a good experience," Gambol said. "I don't really think there was anything I could do to change what happened, just keep a positive attitude, don't give up hope, I guess, and stuff like that."

Gambol's best triple jump distance this season was 35-6 3/4 April 2 and March 14 indoors. At state last year, Gambol achieved the longest jump in school history (37-0 1/2) on her final attempt in prelims and ended up an all-state eighth. She advanced to state with a 35-9 1/2 at sectionals and had a then all-time school record 36-0 indoors.

She also reached state last year with the all-state 1,600 relay and in the 300 low hurdles, her final event Thursday (13th, 53.06). Gambol had a rough finish to her four events at Glenbard West's Sue Pariseau Invite April 24 after coming back from illness.

"It could have still run me down. I haven't really been getting a lot of sleep. I've kind of been stressed out. It could have been that. I was really nervous, maybe not enough adrenaline, too many nerves," Gambol said.

"I hadn't hit qualifying marks this whole year. Last year I hit a 36-0 indoors. I feel like I kind of came back after a little dip in the middle of the season. It was all right. I guess I can learn from it, do better next year."

The 3,200 relay of junior Julia Sakach and sophomores Katie Bassett, Kathryn Kenwood and Grace Rogers also took fourth (season-best 9:46.45), 4.11 seconds from second place. Only first-place Wheaton Warrenville South (9:37.50) ran under the 9:38.24 state cut.

Sakach was part of the second-place all-state 3,200 relay in 2012. Rogers was part of last year's state-qualifying 3,200 relay, which advanced at sectionals with a slower 9:52.93 but which took second place. Bassett and Kenwood are first-year track runners.

On the anchor leg, Rogers got the baton roughly 10 seconds behind second-place Prospect (9:42.86) but closed the gap by more than five seconds with a team-best 2:24.8 split and nearly caught third-place Conant (9:44.13). Sakach opened in 2:25.1, followed by Bassett (2:27.7) and Kenwood (2:29.0).

"I felt like I learned the past few weeks I can't doubt my finish because I know I have a fine kick. I kept that in my mind the whole time and I think that helped me do better," said Rogers, an all-stater in cross country. "State's so fun. I love it, cross country and track, so it'll fuel me to do better this summer. I want to get in a lot of miles, get ready for cross country season to do better than I did last year."

Senior Grace Lupo gave herself a chance to qualify in high jump. She

cleared a career-best 5-1 for the first time on her third and final attempt. She then missed three chances at 5-3, the state-qualifying standard.

"I feel like my last attempt at 5-3 was my best of them all because I was just kind of like, 'I have nothing to lose now. It's my last one, my last attempt ever, so why not just go for it, do whatever it takes?' " Lupo said. "I almost had it, but my leg, my foot (hit the bar). I'm happy that I got the chance to do that and I got a PR, a career best. It was nice for that. I guess I was asking for a little more than I should have, but I'm happy."

Lupo previously cleared 5-0 for the only time March 14 indoors but had cleared 4-11 twice outdoors, including at the Silver Meet.

On Thursday, Lupo ended up in eighth place behind four jumpers who cleared at least 5-3 and fourth among the jumpers whose best was 5-1.

Lupo's 5-1 clearing was a dramatic one. She grazed the bar and quickly excited the jumping mat in case the bar decided to fall.

"It was kind of panicking when I could feel my leg hit it kind of, and I just thought, 'I better get off this mat before anything happens,' " Lupo said. "I was lucky because my jumps were all more towards the left side of the mat so I was able to just get myself off right away."

Lupo has competed in high jump for four years along with senior Madelyn O'Gorman. The Hilltoppers' other sectional entry, O'Gorman missed the opening height of 4-9, which she cleared for the first time this season at the Silver Meet.

Now good friends through track, Lupo and O'Gorman will both be attending the University of Illinois, but will not be roommates.

"Now I'm just realizing how much (track) means to me and how this team is, literally, just a family," Lupo said. "No other sports are like this. I know that because I talk to my friends who are in other sports and they're like, 'You seem closer with your track friends than us,' and they're some of my

best friends.

“(O’Gorman and I) weren’t really friends before (track) so this is kind of the way we came together. We’re known as never apart from each other on this team. Whenever we’re in the same place we are in the same place. It was nice to build that relationship and next year we’re going to be together so it’ll be a lot of fun.”

Murray ran a personal-best 1:03.72 in the 400 for seventh, .22 from a top-six finish. The 800 relay (Michel, Rogus, junior Morgan McEnroe, sophomore Isabella Salafatinos in 1:51.67) was eighth.

McEnroe, usually a 400 runner, made her sectional debut with the 800 relay. McEnroe also will be joining the team on the trip to Charleston.

“(Sectionals) was definitely a little bit nervewracking, a little bit more pressure than I’ve ever experienced,” McEnroe said. “But at the same time, it was a lot of fun just to be out there and compete with the rest of the athletes, just kind of see where the chips fell.

“(For next season) I’d really like to keep working as hard and just kind of fight through the pain that’s maybe there every once in a while, if it’s not too bad, and hopefully just get back to where I ended this season.”

Freshman Anna Gambol, the Silver champion in discus, reached the finals and took ninth (100-1), losing out on a tiebreaker for eighth.

In the 800, sophomore Abby Shaver ran a lifetime-best 2:31.41 in the second of three heats and placed ninth. Shaver’s previous open best was 2:35.30 April 26. Senior Annika Manning, also in the second heat, placed 12th (2:33.37).

Spiech was 11th in the 300 hurdles (52.77). Other personal bests included Michel (100 in 13.84) and sophomore Emily Asselmeier (200 in 28.93) in her first outdoor track season. Both sprinters finished 17th.

-- by Bill Stone