

Glenbard West senior Madeline Perez, the defending Class 3A girls track state champion in the 3,200 and 1,600-meter runs, returned to the state meet already with a triumphant feeling.

Perez had qualified for state in both events after recovering from a lower-leg injury that kept her from competition for more than two months. She was healthy and conditioned enough to contend for the titles.

"It definitely was motivation. I guess after my injury came along, it was more just focusing on can I get myself back rather than trying to think about what happened in the past," Perez said. "I think that's one of the things I've taken away from being injured a little this year. You can't dwell on the past if you're trying to move forward in the future."

Perez managed to make one last mark in state history. She repeated as the state champion in the 3,200 in 10:34.60 fully automatic time and then finished an all-state eighth in the 1,600 in 5:02.19 at the state finals Saturday, May 24, at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston.

Sophomore Lindsay Graham added to the success by taking second in the 3,200 (10:40.73) after finishing fifth in the event as a freshman while competing for Glenbard East.

"Something about this (3,200) race was just really special. It meant a lot to win it," Perez said. "I was hoping in my mind that I would be able to defend my title and I just felt really good. It was just really nice that it all came together in the end. It's still sinking in."

"For outdoor conference (May 8) being my first race since March (8 indoors), I didn't really know what to expect coming in, but I did know I wanted to go after it and do everything I could to try and win. It means a lot that I was able to do it, especially for all of the people who have shown me so much support, not only this year but all four years."

The three all-state performances for top-nine finishes gave the Hilltoppers 20 team points to finish 12th.

The 1,600 relay of junior Mary Nevins, sophomores Ellen Daniels and Emma Winans and senior JaSharra Clark nearly made the finals. In the state preliminaries, Friday, May 23, the Hilltoppers ran 3:58.16 – a season best by 6.77 seconds – and ended up 10th, .33 from the last advancing team.

Nevins was 19th in the 400 (59.08) in her first individual state race and junior Lisa Luczak was 30th in the 1,600 (5:13.10). Both were making their third state trips.

Perez is the first back-to-back state champion in the 3,200 in the largest class since Palatine's Amy Laskowske won her first two of three Class AA titles in the event in 2003-04. A 1-2 finish in the 3,200 by runners from the same school has not happened in recent memory, if ever.

"It was a good day. (Perez) was so excited about it and so focused on going out on a high note, which was not easy after all she has been through," Glenbard West distance coach Paul Hass said.

"Madeline was ultra confident. She could not wait for it to happen. She had a big smile on her face. She loves to compete. I think she loves the big stage because she has worked so hard. Madeline Perez loves competition where others get nervous. You saw that in the mile, too. She tried but she was tired. She took control of that race, too. She had a race strategy in plan and I tip my hat off to her for going out on her terms. It was a really great end to a really great career."

At state in 2013, Perez won the 3,200 in 10:22.29 by 11.74 seconds over Lake Park graduate Kaylee Flanagan and the 1,600 in 4:52.24 by over 1.74 seconds over New Trier graduate Courtney Ackerman. Perez just missed again breaking her 1,600 school record of 4:52.21 from the state prelims. She ran an all-time school-record 10:21.19 for the 3,200 at Wheaton Warrenville South's Tiger Invitational.

In the fall as a junior, Perez captured the girls cross country state title as a junior with the fastest girls time ever at Peoria's Detweiller Park (16:02 for 3.0 miles). The 2013 Hilltoppers won their first girls cross country team state title Nov. 9 with Perez finishing third after not competing until the

Silver Meet after recovering from a calf injury.

"Rewriting the record books for Glenbard West and the state as well, for Madeline Perez to have three distance titles to go along with a cross country title puts her in the upper echelon as one of the greats in the state for distance running. She has to be in the conversation for what she accomplished in her career at Glenbard West and the state of Illinois," Hass said.

"Lindsay is part of that legacy as well and great things are ahead for her as well as part of that 1-2 finish for Glenbard West. It's certainly one of the greatest highlights in distance running for our school. If it's happened before (1-2 from same school), it hasn't happened in a while."

Graham showed her competitiveness to earn her fourth all-state honor for track or cross country. Graham's ability to hold onto second – and run her second fastest 3,200 ever -- with far from feeling 100 percent was another glimpse at her further potential next season.

Perez took the lead from the start, but Graham remained close behind for most of the race. By the end, Graham had to hold onto to second by .33 over charging New Trier junior Mimi Smith (10:41.17), the 2013 state cross country champion.

"Eventually that's what it came down to. I didn't want to give up (second place). My legs, they hurt. I did my best," Graham said. "Sometimes it just comes down to what kind of day you're having. I felt randomly good (at sectionals) and then today, I just didn't. That's OK. That's life. I got second. I'm glad I improved my (2013 state) time and place. (Perez) did great. Definitely (she was focused)."

The 3,200 is only run in two sections at the state meet Saturday. Those among the top half of fastest sectional times run in the second section, which is held after the 400 relay.

Perez set the tone for the race early with splits between 1:18 and 1:20 for a 5:17.0 first mile with Graham right behind. The Hilltoppers remained together for two more laps (1:20 and 1:21) before Perez began pulling away during the seventh lap. Her 1:20 split opened a two-second lead on Graham. Perez then closed in 1:15.8.

"I wanted to take it out. I like kind of getting into my position early and kind of be dictating it a bit, but I knew that I wanted to take it out and it felt really comfortable so I just went with it and pushing each lap," Perez said.

Since winning the 3,200 and 1,600 March 8 at the Proviso West Invite indoors, Perez didn't return to action until the 3,200 relay and 1,600 at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet.

Her return to the 3,200 didn't come until the Wheaton Warrenville South Sectional, came in the slower-seeded heat of the 3,200 with no seed time. Even without any competition pace-wise, her 10:45.74 was second overall to Graham (10:36.83), who won the faster-seeded heat. They were the two fastest 3,200 sectional times in the state.

"I definitely had confidence. Between (my sectional) race and my workouts from the past couple of weeks, I could tell it was all finally starting to come together, and I've only been up to full mileage for only three weeks now," Perez said.

"It was kind of, whether I wanted it or not, state was here and I had to be ready for it. Based on how everything was going in my workouts, I was waiting for it to translate to my race so I'm happy that it finally happened."

Perez's enthusiasm to return to the 3,200 and perhaps test her abilities might have got the best of her at sectionals. She took the first 400 out in a snappy 1:14 and was unable to finish strong.

With Saturday's first lap four seconds slower, Perez had a much more steady race throughout with consistent splits -- and she still had enough left for a powerful kick. Her final 400 was nearly eight seconds faster than her last lap at sectionals.

"One of Madeline's strengths is her kick and she kind of took that away from herself when she went out so fast (at sectionals). The goal was to be a little more relaxed so she'd have a little more at the end," Hass said.

"She was able to run even splits and finish on a strong note. For her to go out and do it, all of the credit goes to Madeline for just a beautiful race plan. I couldn't have drawn it up any better than what she did. She went out and Lindsay was right there with her."

Graham said her legs didn't feel as good Saturday as they did at sectionals, when she ran her lifetime best and first sub-10:40. Graham still beat her 2013 state time of 10:42.42 and her previous career-best 10:41.92 at the 2013 sectionals.

"I didn't feel that great, but I did my best. (My legs) felt really bad. I knew it was going to be rough," Graham said. "I just wanted to run the best that I could. If it went out fast, I wanted to be smart. If it went out slow, I didn't want to wait. I just went out and tried to be consistent."

"I'm very proud of what Lindsay did. I thought she ran a great race, second in state," Hass said. "She went out at a smart pace, moved well. If she can run that great with her legs not feeling well, that talks about what character you have. Smith was up to her usual kick like when she won cross country and was coming on like gangbusters and Lindsay found another gear. I couldn't be more proud of her finishing so strongly."

Perez gained an additional lift from Friday's preliminaries. In her only race, Perez won her heat of the 1,600 with a come-from-behind victory over Hinsdale Central sophomore Annie Zaher (4:58.31 to 4:58.50). They were the second and third fastest preliminary times to McHenry junior Lauren Opatrny (4:58.05).

"I felt really good and I just wanted to see what I had," Perez said. "The kick at the end reminded me of kind of how it shaped out last year against Courtney Ackerman. It kind of reminded me of what that felt like and I could finish strong."

It nearly happened in Saturday's final. Perez was among the 1,600 leaders as the bell rung to signify one lap left but Zaher immediately passed her as well as a couple of others and she soon drifted back.

Finishing in 1:05.8, Perez still pulled out eighth in the 12-person race, less than one second from fourth place.

"It's definitely bittersweet. That 1,600, I gave it my all. I would have liked for it to turn out better, but in hindsight I just couldn't run any faster with how I felt," Perez said. "I can't believe it's over. Last year was just completely different circumstances coming into the race and the races. It definitely felt like a completely different year so looking back I know I'll look back on these two years as completely different, each one with its own special memory."

Zaher captured Hinsdale Central's first 1,600 state title in 5:00.08. Palatine sophomore Kelly O'Brien (5:00.50) and Fremd junior Ayako Higuchi (5:00.98) also broke 5:01. Opatrny was sixth (5:01.85), and Naperville North's Maria McDaniel, the only other senior in the field, was 11th (5:03.48).

Zaher had the benefit of running the 1,600 fresh Saturday. Besides Perez, Streamwood junior Gabby Juarez (9th, 5:02.94) and Smith (12th, 5:11.06) were coming off the 3,200 earlier. O'Brien, Higuchi and St. Charles East junior Toree Scull (4th, 5:01.26) also were part of their team's 3,200 relay finalists. St. Charles East won the 3,200 relay with Palatine third and Fremd ninth.

"It was extremely competitive and extremely close," Hass said. "Annie Zaher was fresh and that was a big difference in her win and you've got to give her credit because she did a strategy to go after the people that were tired. For Madeline to get in there and be in the conversation with one lap to go, she found something to beat four more runners to finish all-state."

Even with her struggles, Graham felt significantly better than her cross country state meet. Battling tendinitis in both knees the final month of the

season, a race she considered "the worst race ever" still earned 17th place as one of four all-state performances by the Hilltoppers.

Surviving the end of the cross country season motivated Graham to remain injury-free throughout track. While contributing at meets for the Hilltoppers in everything from the 800 and 1,600 to the 1,600 relay, Graham focused on state in the 3,200 as she did last season.

"I wish I would have done better today (at state), but it's nice to be able to run at all," Graham said. "It's most important to stay not injured. I'm going to take it easy for a while before I start running in the summer, but I can wake up and smile tomorrow."

The 1,600 relay lineup also had reason to smile after nearly pulling off a shocker and reaching the state finals. The Hilltoppers had run a then season-best 4:04.93 to win sectionals, but that still was the state's 20th fastest sectional performance.

The Hilltoppers' 3:58.16 Friday was a drop of 5.77 seconds. The last team to qualify for finals, East St. Louis Senior (3:57.83), was in the same heat as the Hilltoppers.

"Oh man, I was totally in shock. I looked at our time and I was like, 'We just dropped six seconds,' and that was insane. We were so close, too, to finals, so it was awesome," Nevins said. "I really had no idea what to expect going into it, but it was really fun so that's all that matters. It was just a really fun day."

Last year, Clark was a surprise addition to the 1,600 relay after Glenbard West head coach Kelly Hass put her in 400s midway through the outdoor season.

In her final race Friday, Clark anchored in a career-best 57.8. Nevins and Daniels both had 57.8 splits, and Winans ran 1:00.6.

"I was so nervous. I always get nervous before a 400," Clark said. "I was shocked. I didn't believe it, especially my time for the 400. I PRed, my last

race. Probably (it happened) because it's a big competition, I wanted to make finals. (My teammates) motivated me."

In 2013, the relay was an all-state eighth in **3:58.47 after a season-best 3:55.65 in prelims**. That relay also included current junior Emma Gambol and graduated standout Emma Reifel, who earlier was third in the 800.

Daniels and Winans were among the relay's four alternates. This year's official alternates were sophomores Jessica Michel, Sharon Murray and Nicole Rogus and freshman Sophie Cvengros.

Daniels and Winans both contributed lifetime-best splits Friday.

"It was very exhilarating to know that anything can happen (at state) and some great things have happened on that track. It was just cool to be a part of it. It's just a springy (track), nice facility," Winans said.

"It was really fun, just had a really good energy about it. Just knowing that you're going up against the best girls in the state is just really fun," Daniels said. "We still have all of us (except Clark) and there are a lot of people that run the 400. We had a lot of really good athletes that probably could have run with us. I think next year we're going to have a really good shot of going back again."

The season turned out to be a breakthrough for Nevins. After being a part of the 1,600 relay at state the previous two years, she added her first individual event at state after winning the 400 at the Silver Meet (lifetime-best 58.79) and sectionals (59.53). She entered state seeded 17th.

"Yeah, (state) was a little scary just because everyone ran so well," Nevins said. "State for the 400 is totally different than any other 400 race that I ran this year because everyone's running 55s and I'm like, 'Not there,' which is OK. It's cool to see everyone else."

Nevins hopes that she can combine her experience with a healthier year for an even better 2015. Her career-best performances came even though she sat out part of indoor season and most of the outdoor season recovering

from a pulled quadriceps muscle.

"This season was more like an eye opener to see what I can actually do," Nevins said. "I didn't have a whole season to train, obviously, so I think next year I have to be more conscious of what I do in terms of training, just so I won't hurt myself. I don't want to go through all of that again, miss a good chunk of the season. I must be more careful, and hopefully that'll open more doors for other things."

After one of the most inspirational performances at sectionals, Luczak delivered quite an effort at state under different circumstances.

Luczak became sick during the weekend and battled illness throughout the week heading into state. Once she received medical clearance that she was not contagious, Luczak went down with the team Thursday and remained determined to compete no matter how awful she felt Friday.

"I didn't really feel that great but just being able to go to state is really amazing. It's always fun with the team and the atmosphere at state track. And since everyone did so well, it made the experience that much more fun," Luczak said.

"I felt bad before so I knew it was going to be a pretty hard race. I've had races where I've had a cold, but nothing like this. This is probably the worse. When you're physically injured with a muscle strain on bone, it's not that bad. You're so excited, the pain kind of goes away. When you're sick, it doesn't really so it's a lot harder."

At sectionals, Luczak's 5:13.10 for the 1,600 beat the lowered 5:14.25 state-qualifying standard. Besides battling illness, Luczak's time Friday was even more impressive considering her second-fastest time for the season was 5:16.45 indoors back on March 14.

"With all that to run a 5:18 is pretty amazing. She put herself in it with two laps to go and just didn't have enough," Paul Hass said. "I'm really proud of her gutsy performance."

Luczak still accomplished her goal. She finished ninth out of 11 competitors in the second of three heats.

"For as sick as I was, a goal was not to get last and I didn't get last so I was happy about that," Luczak said. "I don't know what my time was and I don't even care. I don't want to look at splits."

As Perez prepares for her next running chapter at Georgetown University, she leaves quite a legacy. She helped the Hilltoppers earn their first state championship in cross country as well as a third-place finish in 2012 and their first state trophy for girls track by taking third in 2013.

Perez earned seven all-state medals in track, sharing the most in program history with 2011 graduate Kathryn Pickett. Besides two medals in the distance double the past two seasons, she was eighth in the 1,600 in 2012 and part of the second-place 3,200 relay and sixth-place 3,200 relay in 2012 and 2011, respectively.

In cross country, she is the only Glenbard West runner with at least three all-state medals. She also was 15th at state as a sophomore.

"Probably cross country junior year would be my greatest memory but I don't know. They've all been pretty special," Perez said. "I've never felt that way in a race before. And then to bring a third-place trophy on that same day, Detweiller Park is so historic and to be able to put my name on it was pretty special. And against a very, very respectable field."

This year led to many more victories, personal ones rather than necessarily versus the watch. Accomplishing so much this season, even with two major injuries, made Perez that much more appreciative of an incredible junior season.

"Last year (in track) was pretty special. It'll be pretty hard to replace a year like that. This was a special year, too. It didn't turn out the way last year turned out, but overall (today), I just felt really in the zone and good," Perez said.

"I was talking about being in the (starting) tent before the race and I was thinking back to freshman year, like our 4-by-800 and each year along the way, how it's progressed. It's been a pretty fun time and I'm pretty grateful for all of the opportunities that I've had and all of the successes. I'm just really looking forward to what's ahead."

-- by Bill Stone