

Glenbard West senior Madeline O'Brien's hopes of being a distance runner in college were ended by a series of foot injuries.

That hasn't stopped her from finding new ways to still compete and contribute and remain an important part of the Hilltoppers' girls track team.

"I'm still sad about (the injuries), but at the same time I've gotten so many new opportunities so it's good," O'Brien said.

"There were times when I was (considering quitting). I didn't do cross country this past season because I was so frustrated with my foot and everything. I love seeing my teammates run and I'm always so proud of them, but it was hard because I wanted to be out there, too. I'm really glad I stuck with track because I love the team. I love the cross country team, too, but the team aspect of track is so much fun."

O'Brien was among several Hilltoppers who took advantage of great weather in the outdoor track season opener, a non-scored junior varsity meet against Lyons Township Wednesday, April 9.

O'Brien was among 10 events in which the Hilltoppers had the top performance.

Freshman Sophie Cvengros won the 100-meter dash (13.7 manual time) and 400 (1:07.1), and freshman Anna Gambol won shot put (31 feet-9 inches) and discus (91-4).

Other first-place finishers were senior Erin Spiech (300 low hurdles in 55.6), juniors Emma Gambol (100 high hurdles in 17.5) and Megan Ozog (3,200 in 12:32.1), the 3,200 relay of freshman Alexa Fausey, junior Julia Kochert, sophomore Charlotte Graham and junior Jessica Hajny (11:50.5) and the 1,600 relay of Emma Gambol, junior Jessica Johanson and seniors Meg Maloney and Rachel Farley (4:35.7).

O'Brien won pole vault (6-0) in competition only among teammates Allie Roule and Faith Bischoff, winning a tiebreaker with Roule with fewer

misses at 6-0. Ozog and the 3,200 relay also were first in events that LT did not enter.

Pole vault is O'Brien's new event after she served as a team manager following the second surgery on her right foot during the winter of her junior season.

"(Last track season) was still fun but I was kind of sick of just timing people, doing splits. I wanted to do something and I think this was a good thing to do. I love pole vault," O'Brien said. "I'd love to pole vault at conference. I don't really have many expectations, but I just want to have fun and enjoy my team."

Just about any performance felt great Wednesday. After a miserably cold and snow-intensive winter, there was actual spring-like weather, including an appearance by the sun and only a slight breeze off Lake Ellyn.

"Outdoor season is my favorite because indoors you're kind of all cooped up," Maloney said. "(It's great) when you finally get outdoor with the fresh air and everything. We're so lucky because we're right by the lake and it's so nice to finally be outside and run. We had a really lucky day, too. It was so beautiful out."

Maloney enjoyed a nice finish to her meet as part of the 1,600 relay, which edged LT (4:35.7) by .6.

This is Maloney's second track season. Coming around the final curve, she and her relay teammates were urged on by a long line of screaming teammates.

"Everyone is so supportive so it made it really easy to run and really fun. I love the 4-by-400 and we won, so it's even better," Maloney said.

"I feel like whenever you come to track practice, you're always happy and you're always supported and really loved. If I'm having a bad day, when I come here I can always get cheered up by my fellow team members. Even though I joined late, I heard that the track team was amazing and all. The

support that I needed was here.”

O’Brien has received and provided that kind of support through a challenging high-school running career. As a freshman, she competed at the 2011 state cross country meet and was the Hilltoppers’ No. 7 finisher (135th). It was the first state team appearance since 1997 by the Hilltoppers, who have returned every year since and on Nov. 9 captured their first state championship in the sport.

Then as a sophomore, O’Brien was hampered by extreme foot pain. She underwent her first bunion surgery, but it was unsuccessful. After another season of pain, she underwent more intensive bunion surgery with a different doctor as a junior, which affected her track season as well. She does recall running one 400 in a low-key weekday track meet.

“I didn’t really have a cross country season since then, which was a bummer,” O’Brien said. “There was always my freshman year. Cross country was my life -- cross country and track and running and I had wanted to run in college so badly. After all of my foot stuff, I realized that wasn’t going to be a thing.”

O’Brien has kept a good attitude and remained determined. Still, it’s basically her first name that has earned her the nickname Mad Dog.

“I have a Mad Dog personality, like I’m crazy, but I’m a happy person. I should be Happy Dog,” O’Brien said. “That really started junior year but it stuck. Actually I don’t even know who did (start it). My cousins used to call me that, my math teacher and then everyone so it stuck.”

Besides pole vault Wednesday, O’Brien actually did compete on the track, a late entry in one of the 200-meter heats despite not running for about a month.

“It was so funny. That was really fun,” O’Brien said. “It was just nice being back out there. I’m glad I did it. It was completely last minute. I’d glad that (head coach Kelly Hass) said that I could, that she even offered for me to do it.

"Considering how out of shape I am, probably (I am surprised) because that was hard. If I was in shape, still in distance shape, I miss the 800 a lot, but that (200) was a lot of fun. I'm glad I did it."

Spiech, the Hilltoppers' veteran hurdler, has regained an interest in competing in the 300 hurdles after focusing on the 100 hurdles in 2013.

Spiech had the best time Wednesday by .2. Emma Gambol was a state qualifier in the event last year, but she only competed in the 100 hurdles.

"It felt good. It's my first time doing it in like a year and a half. I only did it once last year so it felt good to run it again. It's a hard race, but it was fun," Spiech said.

"Mrs. Hass and I both want me to drop time this year so I think it'll end up happening. I mainly didn't want to run them as much (last year) and then I realized I missed them so Mrs. Hass and I decided we were going to do them again. It's been an all right transition."

Senior thrower Ashley Schleck also is trying to finish on a high note. Prior to her final home meet of 2013, Schleck was warming up when she threw the shot more than 30 feet – a career best.

Wednesday was a step forward with a season-best 27-0 on her last throw for sixth place. Her season best in 2013 during competition was 28-3.

"I'm hoping to end the season at a 30 because that's how I ended it last year," Schleck said. "It's just kind of mental thing for me. I'm having a mental block. I can do it. I have the physical capabilities of doing it.

"Yeah, it did surprise me (when I threw 30 feet). I didn't even know I had the capabilities of doing something like that. I'm aiming for it (again). That's my goal."

This season, Schleck is the veteran of the throwers. Senior Dee Dee Burns, a varsity regular who was second in shot by tying her lifetime best (30-7)

and third in discus (83-8), only joined track last year. Bischoff, the other senior, is new to the events.

"I try to help (the younger throwers) with their technique most of the time because you can always improve that. Like (throws coach Nick Posegay) says, most of it is technique and strength a little bit," Schleck said.

"I'm working on height mostly and just visualizing. Visualizing is a big part of it. I was really good at that last year, which is probably why I threw better. This year, I just have to focus on that. You can never have too much of that."

Among second-place finishers, sophomore Jenna Kelly broke 6:00 in the 1,600 for the first time (5:58.2) after just missing in her final indoor race (6:01.1).

Sophomore Christina Sedall was second in the 800 (2:42.7) in her first race since the conference cross country meet. She has been recovering from a stress fracture in her hip.

Junior Shontana Hudson, a transfer this season from Wheaton Warrenville South, was second in long jump (13-6). Junior Rachel Aubrey was second in triple jump with an encouraging yet slightly agonizing 29-7.

Aubrey continues to hover around 30 feet, but she hasn't reached it yet. She was coming off a career-best 29-8 1/4 at the indoor conference meet March 14. Aubrey's 2013 season ended with a 29-7 for seventh on frosh-soph at the outdoor conference meet.

"Thirty (feet) and up is my goal," Aubrey said. "It's really frustrating because I keep jumping 29s. (Kelly Hass) is getting frustrated, too, so when I jump 30 I'm going to be really excited."

Aubrey has been a triple jumper since her days at Hadley Junior High. Her older sister, Erin, also was a triple jumper and strong runner for the Hilltoppers before graduating in 2010.

As a sophomore, Rachel Aubrey enjoyed a major breakthrough at practice when she “randomly” jumped 28 feet after usually being in the 24s and 25s.

“It’s been really consistent (since then),” Aubrey said.

“I have to work on my first hop. (Hass) says my second two (phases) and my jump in are just beautiful, but my first one’s bad, which is weird. You’re first one usually is really good and your second two are like ehh. But it’s opposite for me. If I get my first one, that’ll be just very good for me.”

-- by Bill Stone