

Just when the cross country course at Proviso West should have been its toughest, Glenbard West senior Grace Rogers was at her best.

At the Class 3A York Regional Saturday, Oct. 24 – and on a longer 3.04-mile course -- Rogers already was in position for an individual medal with a top-five finish. That's before her kick.

Rogers finished with a flurry and passed two runners to place third behind sophomore teammate and race champion Lindsey Payne.

They helped the Hilltoppers capture their third straight regional team championship 33-41 over Wheaton Warrenville South and advance to the Lake Park Sectional at 1 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, at the east campus in Medinah.

"I don't know. It just feels like I was finishing harder," said Rogers, still unable to completely grasp her late burst.

"It's been hard for me to do this season, finish hard, but I'm working on it. I've had some pretty memorable kicks from track, other meets. This year, it was good for me."

Payne (17:43.03) won the race by 50.35 seconds over WW South junior Sara Atkins (18:33.38). Rogers (18:44.00) earned third by 1.50 seconds over WW South junior Allison McGrath (18:46.50).

Freshman Katie Hohe (7th, 19:12.21) and senior Kathryn Kenwood (10th, 19:40.36) also were among the top 10, followed by junior Janie Nabholz (12th, 19:45.47), senior Abigail Shaver (19th, 19:56.90) and sophomore Claire Kenwood (29th, 20:14.26).

In one of the state's toughest regionals, the Hilltoppers, No. 2 in the final DyeStatIL 3A rankings Oct. 20, held off No. 11 Wheaton Warrenville South, whose top-five finishers were 2-4-6-14-15. No. 23 York was third with 93 points.

The Tigers were second to No. 1 Naperville North at the DuPage Valley Conference Meet Oct. 16, also at Lake Park.

"Wheaton South is a very good team and for us to not have our team firing on all cylinders we were still able to do something very great, which was win a regional championship against some very good competition," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said.

"I think we had some great performances. Grace Rogers ran incredible. Lindsey Payne was her usual, incredible self. I know some of our girls were probably a little disappointed in how they ran. They still finished hard, they still ran well, still able to win regionals."

The Hilltoppers also will be favored to win their fourth straight sectional title at Lake Park, where they won the Lancers' Harvey Braus Invite Sept. 12. They only need a top-five sectional finish to return to the 3A state meet for the sixth straight year.

Rogers is known for her kicks, but that's usually during the track season with a baton in her hand. In May, her anchor lap at the Glenbard North Sectional helped the Hilltoppers' 3,200 relay with Shaver and Kathryn Kenwood qualify for the 3A state meet.

"She's always got her kick. It's famous," said Kenwood, laughing.

"Some people ran amazing. Some people didn't run their best. We're going to work on packing back up, but we're all still happy and proud that we won regionals. It's a hard regional, so even not running our best (we won)."

Put Payne in the amazing category. She again seized the lead from the outset – and she sure felt it.

Saturday's tough conditions included soft ground from earlier rain and winds that Hass estimated at 20-plus miles per hour.

"This was probably one of my hardest races that I've ever run. I'm not going to lie. The wind was very, very strenuous," Payne said.

"There was a quarter-mile stretch that was really difficult, but I'm just proud of myself and my team for not quitting because it took everything in us to not give up and we didn't. The best part for me today was turning around and seeing my teammates finish hard. I just knew that all of my work and their work was just worth it."

At the mile, Payne (5:29) had a significant lead on Atkins (5:43), who was in second running alongside York senior Elizabeth Hagstrom (5th, 18:57.26). By 2.0 miles, Payne (11:20) opened the gap on Atkins to 35 seconds.

Payne previously said she had an extremely tough race at the Twilight Invitational Oct. 7 at Naperville North, when she was a solid second to Naperville North senior Judy Pendergast.

"That was one more tiring just because of the pace. I would almost say I felt more tired today to be honest because the wind was extremely hard to run in. It was very, very cruel," Payne said. "My legs were burning. The wind was so hard."

The team race was just as hard. After one mile, WW South actually led the Hilltoppers 37-50 with its No. 5 finisher 10 places after of the Hilltoppers.

By the second-mile mark, the Hilltoppers were in front 35-44. Nabholz (12:41) made a significant move from 27th into 13th, six places ahead of the Tigers' No. 5 runner, with a 6:32 second mile. Rogers (12:14) and Hohe (12:18) moved up one place each into fifth and seventh.

"(Collectively) they were behind and they just moved and raced, because it's a longer course and pretty much used it to their advantage so that was nice to see," Hass said.

Rogers still had to overcome a 10-second deficit on McGrath after two miles. Somehow, Rogers did.

"I saw it from a distance. She was amazing. She just moved and moved," Hass said.

"Oh my gosh. I'm so proud of her," Payne added. "Third in regionals. She did so well. I know she felt good about her race and we're all so proud of her. She definitely surprised us (with that kick) and stepped up today."

Hohe continues to step up as a freshman. She finished seventh after finishing seventh in the Silver Meet.

On Saturday, Hohe was 7.17 seconds behind WW South senior Mary Erdman (6th, 19:05.04) and 22.90 seconds ahead of Wheaton North sophomore Rose Quinn (8th, 19:35.11).

"At conference, I was running more in a pack and this time it was a little bit more spread out so definitely a little bit more challenging running by myself. And the distance was a little bit longer," Hohe said. "I'm still really happy with both races and I definitely feel like I can improve and run fast at the Lake Park course next week, too."

Besides WW South and York, other ranked sectional teams are No. 12 New Trier and No. 19 Maine South.

One big factor in the Hilltoppers' favor will be teammate support. Several runners not among the team's 12-runner state lineup were along the course cheering on the runners.

It certainly made a difference in the Hilltoppers' performance – and Rogers' race – at regionals.

"We were talking before the meet, just run for each other and when it gets hard just think about everyone else on the team," Rogers said. "Just thinking about the other girls on the team, and the girls that aren't running here today (helped)."

"I'm just really proud of myself for not giving up and all of my teammates from

our whole team came,” Payne said “They really helped me. Their cheering really pushed me and supported me.”