

Last girls cross country season, Glenbard West junior Lisa Luczak used to enjoy finding her friend Lindsay Graham from Glenbard East and talking about their races and catching up.

It's a daily routine this season. Graham, a sophomore, has transferred to Glenbard West.

"After meets and stuff, we'd always talk and now it's like she's on my team so it's the exact same," Luczak said.

There still was plenty to talk about after Graham and Luczak finished third and fourth in Saturday's season opener at the Hornet-Red Devil Invitational at Katherine Legge Memorial Park. The Hilltoppers finished a close second to Palatine as a team 59-61.

"It was different (competing here for Glenbard West)," Graham said. "There's really not much to say. I didn't feel that much out of sorts because the girls have been all so nice so I feel like part of the team."

Graham finished third (17:35.06) and Luczak (18:00.19) only finished behind Hinsdale Central freshman Alexa Haff (17:29.88) and New Trier junior Mimi Smith (17:34.10) on a new 3.0-mile KLM course in a talented field in which three 2012 all-staters competed.

Sophomore Grace Rogers (16th, 18:40.07) and junior Megan Ozog (18th, 18:40.88) also earned awards for top-25 finishes, followed by Christina Sedall (29th, 19:13.91), Abby Shaver (44th, 19:53.21) and Hannah Arduino (83rd, 21:08.57). Teams were allowed unlimited entries, rather than only seven like most varsity invites.

The Hilltoppers were third in Class 3A last year, but senior Madeline Perez, the defending state champion, did not compete as she works her way back from a different training schedule during the offseason.

Glenbard West was rated No. 1 or 2 in every pre-season poll along with defending state champion with Palatine No. 3. Naperville Central

(86) and New Trier (90) were among three other top-10 rated pre-season teams in the field.

"When you have such a great runner as Madeline, of course, you don't put a lot of pressure on her, but she is a good aspect of the team so without her it's a bit more pressure and it's hard," Luczak said.

"It's just great to have (Graham) on the team. It's so exciting to see her now as part of our team and her first official meet. It almost feels like she's been here the whole time, even though she hasn't."

Had Perez raced and won the invite, the Hilltoppers would have scored 40 points. Palatine's top-six finishers were 5-9-10-15-20-21. It's no wonder they Pirates, as well as the Hilltoppers, have been ranked nationally as well.

"They really competed well. A nationally-ranked team like Palatine at full strength on varsity and we're within two points of them, I couldn't be more pleased with the effort the kids put forth and I think we'll continue to get better. I know they will, too," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said.

"Obviously, you'd rather win than lose by two, but I'm still pretty happy because I think the effort was there and the performances were what you would hope. Some were a little disappointed and we'll see what happens in the future."

Perez is working her way back from a tremendous junior season that not only saw her win the cross country state title in record time at Detweiller Park but also sweep the 3,200-meter run and 1,600 at the state track meet in May. After then competing at the New Balance Track Nationals in mid-June for the first time and then took three weeks off from training.

As a junior, Perez missed one dual meet as she recovered from a mid-season illness that nearly endangered her postseason success. With Tuesday's dual with Glenbard South canceled because of hot

weather, the Hilltoppers next compete at the Lake Park Invitational Saturday. They return to Detweiller for the Richard Spring Invitational Sept. 14.

"Right now, I just need to kind of get a little bit of base under my belt. Trust me, as soon as I can race I'll be out there," Perez said. "This is one of my favorite meets of the year so it's a little disappointing, but it is exciting to watch the girls and be able to cheer them on."

Luczak was sixth at state last year and the top returning finisher from last year's invite (3rd) who competed Saturday, but she was not at 100 percent. Graham was 10th for the final individual medal of 2012 and took 20th at state last year. Smith was fourth at the invite and 12th for her second all-state honors.

"I'm really happy with Lisa because she's been sidelined for a little bit with the (new) orthotic issue. And Lindsay competed right off. Right from the beginning, she was battling," Hass said. "That's all you can ask of the kids."

Graham also would not have competed Saturday had her family not moved from Lombard to Glen Ellyn. As it turned out this year, Glenbard East competed instead at the Fenton Earlybird Invite Saturday.

"I like it here (at KLM). It's a good course, very cross country- esque with the creek and trees and hills," Graham said.

Graham raced for the victory. She went out with the leaders from the outset and was battling Haff for the lead throughout most of the final mile. Smith caught Graham down the final straightaway, which now is an uphill climb.

"It was kind of disappointing, but I tried," Graham said. "With 500 meters left, I tried to get rid of (Haff), but she's great. I couldn't counteract it. She had a good finish. I'm happy with the time I got. If I just keep improving on that, I'll be happy."

In the team time trial on their home Camera Park course three days earlier, Graham ran 17:42, the No. 9 fastest recorded time by a Glenbard West runner on the course. Graham said she still wanted to run at least 10 seconds faster.

She achieved her goal time Saturday of finishing in under 18:00 by a significant amount.

"I've never run with (Perez) before. Last year, and pretty much all of the time, she's just way ahead. It gave me a chance to be the front of the race (Saturday) for most of it, until the end," Graham said. "She'll help us with getting less (team) points. And the same for Lisa when she's feeling a little bit better."

Saturday was a textbook race from Luczak. Luczak was fighting off shin tendonitis and a cold, yet she still just missed equaling her 2012 invite finish in 17:20.00.

Once again, Luczak found herself way back before gradually moving up. By the halfway point, she had maneuvered into eighth place.

"At the beginning, I was like, 'Ah, I lost it. I'm just not in a good position. I'm not running at a good pace.' Then I just got done picking people off and running and building up," Luczak said.

"I was really happy with what I did. I didn't feel so great, but I was happy with how I did. I knew I wouldn't be able to run my ultimate best so it was time for (other runners) to step up and I think they did."

Rogers and Sedall return from the 2012 state lineup, and Ozog ran with the team as a freshman. Ozog came out strong Saturday, putting herself among the top 15 in the first half mile.

Ozog entered the race enthusiastically after a strong summer of training and running 18:51 at the time trial.

"I really liked just getting out again and competing and having the cross country season start up so I was ready to compete," Ozog said. "I'd say for myself I think I can get better from here. It was a great start because an 18:40 was a hard time for me to get last year and just knowing that I could do it from the start is hopeful for me."

"Since she was a freshman, she's never backed away from tough competition," Hass said. "She (went out hard) last year but she would always kind of fade in the last mile. That's one thing we've really worked on. I'm so proud of her because she was right where she needed to be with 300 to go. She was a huge leader for our team."

In the 3.0-mile frosh-soph race, freshman Janie Nabholz helped the Hilltoppers to a third-place team finish by taking fourth in 18:54.62, a time that would have contended for 21st in the varsity race.

"I wanted to get under 19:00. It was a good race," Nabholz said. "(This race gives me) probably just some experience so I can do really well in the next couple of races and help out my team."

Sophomores Kathryn Kenwood (15th, 19:46.51) and Kate Dorsey (20th, 20:05.13) also earned top-25 awards, followed by Nicole Berneche (38th, 21:07.70), Nicole Rogus (48th, 21:25.86), Meredith Miscinski (61st, 21:57.35) and Sarah Cholewinski (77th, 22:35.65).

The Hilltoppers (118) finished behind Wheaton Warrenville South (28) and New Trier (43).

Determination carried Nabholz during the third mile when she again began experiencing shin pain. While Wheaton Warrenville South's Sara Atkins won the race in 18:31.06, Nabholz held off the Tigers' No. 2 finisher Emma Schroer (18:54.76) by .14.

"(The pain) kind of just came out of nowhere in the past week," Nabholz said. "I kind of just told myself just to get through it and push through it and I did so that was good."

Nabholz ran for St. James Middle School from fifth through eighth grade, winning the conference meet last year.

"(This invite) was very different. In middle school, there weren't as many girls. Here it was just harder competition, lots more girls, lots more schools, but it was really fun."

By contrast, Kenwood was a sophomore competing in her first cross country race of any kind. Kenwood is a life-long soccer player who played for the Hilltoppers last spring on the freshman and sophomore levels.

"It was my first race so it was exciting," Kenwood said. "I was a little nervous, though, but I felt good when I was running. I'm a little tired (afterwards)."

Kenwood said she was persuaded to join cross country by fellow sophomores Sedall and Caitlyn Reick, a 2012 state alternate who did not compete Saturday. Kenwood said she received plenty of advice from them and other teammates before tackling the KLM course, generally regarded as one of the more challenging ones in the area.

"Everyone was really supportive and just kept telling me to run because you can't do anything else, so I was like, 'OK, and I did. It was fun, though," Kenwood said. "I hope to learn how to do certain things better, like going uphill, going downhill."

Four Hilltoppers competed in the 1.93-mile open race. Senior co-captain Faith Bischoff was 29th (13:44.44), 4.16 seconds from a top-25 award.