

Glenbard West junior Kathryn Kenwood experienced uncharacteristic breathing problems during the Class 3A Lake Park Regional Saturday, Oct. 25.

Kenwood not only persevered the final two miles of the cross country race, but she even finished seventh overall as the Hilltoppers' No. 4 finisher.

"I really don't know what it was. I think it was the (warmer) weather," Kenwood said. "I was (a top-five team) runner. I just knew that I needed to get up there and my goal was to be top 10."

Junior Lindsay Graham easily won her first regional title but wanted to run faster.

Freshman Lindsey Payne was second and completely exhausted afterward.

Junior Grace Rogers had a great third mile, and junior Abby Shaver a memorable finish. Sophomore Janie Nabholz didn't look like a runner having to tend to shin splints afterwards.

The defending 3A state champions and No. 1-ranked Hilltoppers were prohibitive favorites to win -- and they did so comfortably for their second straight regional title -- but they're not taking any race for granted. They placed their entire top five among the top 10 and their 24 points won by 46 points over second-place York (70).

Graham covered the 3.0 miles in 16:43.90 with Payne second (17:23.20). Rogers (4th, 18:04.46) also earned a top-five medal, Kenwood (18:33.41) and Nabholz (10th, 18:45.91) also placed in the top 10 with Shaver 11th (18:51.56), and senior Megan Ozog was 21st (19:22.66).

"(Glenbard West coach Paul Hass) talked to us a lot about how this is a workout and it is really important to do well every week and how to just give it your all," Rogers said.

"There are no off days. Every day is all you've got. We just went into this and tried hard. We weren't going easy or anything. This is it."

Before last season, the Hilltoppers hadn't won a regional since 1983. Now they're trying to add to two straight sectional titles – the only ones in program history -- at the Niles West Sectional at 1 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 1.

A top-five finish only is needed to advance to the Nov. 8 state meet at Peoria's Detweiller Park. Top-five ranked New Trier, third at state in 2013, is expected to be the biggest sectional competition.

"It's always nice to win a regional," Hass said. "We don't take that lightly, but we have some work to do. Our split (among our top five) was 2:02 and that's a little too big for what we want to be.

"Hopefully we get more on the same page (at sectionals) and I think we will. It was a tough week of training and they had some tired legs and that's to be expected. We've been working hard and now the next two weeks we hope to get even stronger and fresher legs."

Senior Lisa Luczak, a two-time all-stater and member of the last three state qualifying teams, is expecting to rejoin the lineup after sitting out Saturday to rest her Achilles tendon injuries. Luczak competed at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 18, her first meet since the last time the Hilltoppers were at Lake Park for the Harvey Braus Lancer Invitational Sept. 13.

The Hilltoppers also are familiar with the Lake Park east campus course for the postseason. It was the sight of the 2013 sectional and 2012 regional. The course ends with runners entering the track stadium for roughly the final 275 meters.

"I just like that it's a good spectator course. It stays close together," Graham said.

Last month, the Hilltoppers and Graham won the Lancer Invite for the second year in a row. On Saturday, Graham ran about six seconds faster than her 16:49.5 after taking the lead earlier than usual by the first turn of the course 50 seconds into the race.

Graham was well ahead by the mile (5:20) and was 10:56 at two miles.

"I thought my time was going to be faster (than 16:43.90), though, so I'm pretty disappointed. I did do better than at the invite, but I just thought I had improved more than six seconds," Graham said.

"I started too fast, but I stayed strong mentally so that's good. I don't think the heat affected me at all. I just felt tired. I think I was pretty motivated. It's just when I got out there I didn't feel as good as I wanted to. About coming up to the mile, I was like, 'This is going to be rough.' "

Payne knew she would have a rough time battling with Fenwick senior Olivia Ryan, but the freshman was up to the challenge.

Payne also finished second to Graham at the Silver Meet, but Ryan is a three-time all-stater who was third at the 2013 Fenwick Regional behind graduated standout Madeline Perez and Luczak.

"Last week, getting second was cool because Hinsdale (Central) is always our biggest rival. That was a really big accomplishment for me personally, but this week was also cool because I wasn't really sure I was going to be able to beat (Ryan)," Payne said.

"(Ryan) was the one person they wanted me to keep up with, they wanted me to beat. I was worried because they were telling me in the beginning that she had a really strong kick. That's why I was just freaking out the whole time. That's why I kept looking back the whole time to see if she was coming."

It never happened. Ryan finished a solid third, but 29.79 seconds behind Payne. However, Payne said she never took her advantage for granted.

"It was a really rough race. It was a great race, but I've never been so tired before. At the end, I was on all fours. I was really dizzy," said Payne, whose third mile was 6:03.

"I think I just pushed myself extra hard today. I just give it everything I have, everything I possibly have every race. I know the track's so fast. That's the part I was the most worried about. I just had to make sure I was really far ahead. I tend to not have the strongest kick because I just kind of give everything I have the whole race."

Rogers, known for her strong finishes, didn't need too much of a kick because of her work through a sub-6:00 (5:58) third mile, only five seconds slower than her first mile.

It's the second straight race that Rogers has matched her finish from the previous year, even though she feels significantly stronger. Rogers was an all-state 21st in 2013.

In the first part of the race, Rogers was the frontrunner of the pack with Kenwood and Nabholz that was battling for fourth with Fenwick freshman Anna Mannion and York junior Elizabeth Hagstrom. They tried to challenge Rogers, but she ended up 10.66 seconds ahead of the fifth-place Mannion (18:15.12) and well ahead of the sixth-place Hagstrom (18:26.30).

"I don't remember (the third mile) necessarily but as soon as I was at the finish, Mr. Hass was like, 'Grace, your race was awesome,' so I'm happy to hear that," Rogers said. "I wasn't super thrilled with my time or anything, but where I ended up I felt like I did great."

Last year, Nabholz (6th) and Kenwood (9th) also were top-10 regional finishers in their first high school cross country seasons.

With temperatures back in the 70s and the girls race starting at 1 p.m. Saturday, Kenwood said the heat after several colder days probably was the main contributor to her breathing problems.

"I don't really know what's going on, but I still tried my best," Kenwood said. "I also think I went out a little too fast. That definitely made it even worse. I was trying to keep up with Grace – but she's fast."

Kenwood and Nabholz were together at the mile Saturday (5:54), just behind Rogers, but the two became separated by a few seconds during the second mile. Kenwood finished in 6:19.

"After the first mile, Janie was ahead of me and I was just like, 'I can't breathe,' " Kenwood said. "Then after the hill, though, it was downhill and I was like, 'OK, this will help.' And then I just kind of realized I had to pick it up, so I did. I wasn't dying."

Experience also probably helped Kenwood to continue running well, as well as Nabholz. In 2013, Nabholz was the lone freshman among the Hilltoppers' state lineup of 12 competitors and alternates.

"Definitely I have to be more focused, now that I'm not a freshman anymore and I'm not like the baby of the crew anymore," Nabholz said. "It's probably a little easier now that I know the drill and how everything goes."

Nabholz's third mile (6:28) was her slowest. She said she didn't feel any shin or knee pain while competing, but she did soon afterwards.

"They were kind of hurting when I finished the race so I'm icing. I don't really feel it during the race. I do at practice, but I don't know if it's the adrenaline (at meets). I don't really feel it," Nabholz said. "I think I also might have started out a little too fast so hopefully next week, I'm going to stay back a little in the beginning."

Shaver had the most dramatic finish. Coming into the final straightaway, she still was about 15 meters behind Oak Park-River Forest sophomore Carolyn Galo and appeared destined for 12th place.

By the middle of the straightaway Shaver was right behind Galo. Shaver then made a surge just before the finish, edging Galo (18:51.60) before she could respond by just .04.

"I don't know how far in front of me she was, but I just set my sights on her. My goal was just to get either really close to her or pass her by the finish," Shaver said.

"I personally like (finishing) on the track because we know exactly where 300 (meters) to go is so you know where to kick it in and you can see the people spread out so you have the goal of who you want to beat and how many you want to get. I think it helps."

Shaver joined the varsity lineup for the Silver Meet and finished 12th, helping the Hilltoppers have seven, top-16 all-conference runners for the first time in one race.

In Luczak's place, Ozog rejoined the lineup after winning the junior varsity race at the Silver Meet and helping Glenbard West earn a share of that level's conference title for the first time since 1979.

"I'd say I was less nervous today because I was used to it from (the Silver Meet) and I had confidence that I could do well," Shaver said. "My time was better, and my placement was better. I think it was harder for me. I don't know why. I just felt like I was really tired through the whole thing but I did better so that was good."

Luczak had competed at the last three regionals. While her presence and fourth-place finish was an important factor in the Silver Meet victory, Luczak is seeking her third straight top-10 finish at state.

"We'd love to have her at sectionals and, like last week, I think it just gives us a mental boost for our team as well. She's invaluable to what we do this year," Hass said.

"We'll take it day by day. The biggest meet we need her is state. It can change. We'll do what's in her best interests to run at state and help the team."

Graham understands the pain of injury and not competing. Late last season, she began experiencing pain in both knees and sat out the regional. She returned for

the Lake Park Sectional (4th, 17:19) and then finished an all-state 17th at state. Competing for Glenbard East as a freshman, Graham was an all-state 20th after being at the Lake Park Regional (7th, 17:48.5).

“Definitely. You never want to take (competing) for granted,” Graham said. “That was one of my better injury races (last year at Lake Park). This is kind of the first race where I felt cruddy (at this course). I liked it beforehand because I always felt good here.”

Rogers was injured most of her freshman season but returned in time for the Silver Meet and postseason. Her freshman year at the Lake Park Regional, she was an alternate. Shortly after the boys regional race, Rogers and the other alternates competed in a time trial and Rogers’ time was good enough to earn her a spot on the sectional, and eventually, state lineups.

Glenbard West’s healthy alternates ran the time trial as usual Saturday, finishing in the order of juniors Caitlyn Reick, Christina Sedall and Nicole Berneche and freshman Claire Kenwood.

“I remember (in 2012) really wanting it really bad and knowing I could do it and make the state team,” Rogers said. “Today, I really felt for the alternates when they were running, cheering for them a lot, because I’ve been in that position.”

-- by Bill Stone