

Glenbard West freshman Lindsey Payne received quite an introduction to high school girls cross country Saturday, Sept. 6.

The Hilltoppers are coming off their first team state championship and returning six of their seven runners, yet Payne still has earned a spot in the varsity lineup.

Payne's debut came in the Hornet-Red Devil Invitational against one of the strongest regular-season fields in the state. Including the Hilltoppers' returning all-state trio of senior Lisa Luczak and juniors Lindsay Graham and Grace Rogers, the race had four of the top-nine finishers at the 2013 state meet, including New Trier senior Mimi Smith, the defending state champion.

"It's really cool to be able to just know that I'm part of such a great team now and get to contribute in meets," Payne said.

"I just was going in, trying to do my best, help my team out as much as possible. It was just kind of new territory. I wasn't sure what to expect so just trying to keep up with some of the leaders was my goal."

Payne and the Hilltoppers couldn't have been much more impressive. Payne finished third overall and the Hilltoppers put their top-five finishers in the top 15 to roll to the invite title with just 36 points.

Graham (17:03.48 for 3.0 miles) finished second to Hinsdale Central sophomore and defending invite champ Alexa Haff (16:52.79) in an early meeting of two of the state's projected individual state title contenders.

Payne was a solid third (17:23.13) while Luczak was fifth (17:31.86), just behind Palatine junior Kelly O'Brien (17:28.20). Junior Kathryn Kenwood (18:00.73) and sophomore Janie Nabholz (18:11.38) were 11th and 15th. Rogers (25th, 18:34.37), senior Megan Ozog (38th, 19:03.91) and juniors Kate Dorsey (43rd, 19:08.73), Abby Shaver (46th, 19:14.61) and Caitlyn Reick (52nd, 19:37.31) also broke 20:00.

"I'm very happy with the overall effort, no question about it. Now we've just got to work to keep getting better, stay healthy, of course. But it was a nice birthday

present for me,” Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said.

“That effort was really all that we were looking for. It’s a starting off point for the team. Last year, I think from this meet we kept on getting better and better and hopefully we can do the same this year. It’s a long road ahead of us, but it’s a nice starting point for sure.”

The invite featured eight teams ranked among the top 25 pre-season by DyeStat Illinois and MileSplit Illinois with six of them receiving at least one top-10 ranking.

Glenbard West, ranked No. 1 in both polls, won by 32 points ahead of second-place Hinsdale Central (68), followed by Palatine (103), Minooka (124), Naperville Central (125) and New Trier (130) and Wheaton Warrenville South (168). New Trier and Palatine were third and fourth at state last year and Minooka was sixth.

At last year’s invite, Graham and Luczak finished among the top four, but the Hilltoppers finished third at the invite as they competed without graduated Madeline Perez, the 2012 individual state champion.

The 2012 Hilltoppers won the invite and finished third at state.

“Of course, as a team our goal is always to do our best and we’re not looking to get first. Our goal is to do our best,” Luczak said.

“Honestly, everyone did insanely well. After this performance, we want to just keep it up, keep the momentum going, not get ahead of ourselves because we know we have a lot of work to do and all of the teams are going to still keep on improving. Starting out better than we did last year just raises our confidence and makes us really think if we could do better than last year, that would be absolutely amazing.”

Payne is learning that mindset quickly. The Hadley Junior High graduate said she was hoping to finish among the top 15 Saturday, maybe the top 10. She ended up finishing among the top three by holding off O’Brien, sixth at state last year.

“I was really nervous this morning. Once we started racing, I kind of just forgot about everything and ran,” Payne said. “I did surprise myself. I did not think I was

going to be in the top five for sure. Individually, it's great to perform well but the team effort, it felt good to know that I ran for my team, not only myself, so that was cool."

In the team simulation run on its home Camera Park course Sept. 3, Graham ran the No. 3 fastest time ever on the course (17:14) with Luczak (17:37) second and Payne (18:02) third with the No. 5 all-time performance by any frosh-soph runner. Perez owns the top two fastest times (16:53 and 16:56) and also ran 17:14.

While Payne was battling a cold the previous week, Luczak had her race affected Saturday recovering from a cold.

"To see Lindsey Payne have a coming out party, she ran incredibly. To be third in this meet, the caliber of athletes that she was able to finish ahead of was really something," Hass said.

"Lisa was sick and I told (Payne) there's two rules to be a varsity runner as a freshman. No. 1 is you have to be talented enough and she certainly is and No. 2 is you can't be afraid to pass a teammate. You've got to be able to do what you can do. She did what she needed to do for the team."

Graham turned in another phenomenal performance to contend for the individual victory. She was stride for stride with Haff throughout most of the race before Haff pulled away in the final stretch.

Graham easily beat her pre-race goal of breaking 17:20.

"I felt good the first two miles and then I kind of faltered the last half mile," Graham said. "(Haff) helped me stay fast so I could achieve my time goal. It was rough (near the end), but I saw the clock and I knew I was going to get a good time. That's good. I'm happy about that."

While last year's invite conditions were much worse, the third-place Graham beat her 2013 time of 17:35.06 by 31.58 seconds. Haff won last year in 17:29.88, 37.09 seconds slower than Saturday.

In that race, Graham was edged for second at the end by Smith (17:34.10), who ended up eighth Saturday (17:36.46).

"The exact same. It played out the exact same (for me as last year's race)," Graham said. "(My feeling was) kind of the same because you never know how it's going to go since it's the first meet. I think it helps me see that I'm in pretty good shape."

Graham appeared in good shape for at least a top-10 state finish in 2013 but she had to battle injured knees throughout the postseason. She still finished 17th at state. A healthy Graham then took second to Perez in the 3,200-meter run at the state track meet in May (10:40.73). Haff was sixth in the 3,200 (10:50.36).

"I know she's disappointed (today), but I thought she just ran lights out," Hass said. "Take your hats off to Alexa Haff. She ran great, but Lindsay ran great, too. She was stride for stride with her most of the race. We couldn't have done what we wanted to do today without Lindsay. What she did was truly incredible. She went after it and I'm proud of her for that."

Even with her illness, Luczak had her third straight top-six finish at the invite. She was third as a sophomore and fourth last year (18:00.19).

"Honestly, I can't even remember last year's race. It was so long ago," Luczak said. "I did the best I could have done and I'm just happy with how my race went. I went out at a good pace and I didn't die so that's always good, but especially I'm happy because I'm not injured anymore. I'm just happy overall with how I did, especially facing that (cold)."

Kenwood, Nabholz and Ozog also return from the state lineup. At the 2013 invite, Kenwood and Nabholz both were competing for the Hilltoppers for the first time on the frosh-soph level. They were the team's top two finishers with Nabholz fourth and Kenwood 15th.

"I thought Kathryn Kenwood led our pack incredibly. She had a great kick," Hass said.

"I was definitely more nervous last year. I was more excited this year to see how we'd do the first meet," said Kenwood, a first-year runner as a sophomore.

"We all ran really well. I have more experience now so I was not as nervous as last year and I kind of knew more what I was doing. That was the big difference. I don't know what my (personal record) was, but it was close to it."

Nabholz has a better summer base since she didn't have to contend with a stress fracture as she had entering freshmen year. However, she's only about two weeks after having her training hindered for a couple of weeks by an iliotibial band (IT) issue.

"I feel like I had a pretty good race for the first race. I did pretty well for that (time recovering)," Nabholz said. "I feel like I have more confidence in myself and I know what to expect more than last year. I feel like I know what's going to happen. I have more knowledge running."

Because the invite allowed unlimited entries, the Hilltoppers were able to display their depth. While placing six runners among the top 25 and nine among the top 50, Hass is hoping to see the pack among the team's top finishers tighten.

Payne is more than happy to do her part with the veteran runners, who have been strong role models in her early progress.

"They definitely had great support (Saturday). They're such great mentors to me," Payne said. "I always listen to their advice. They always help me so much and make me feel like a part of the team. They're just great motivators to try and keep up with."

-- by Bill Stone