

There may have been reasons for the Glenbard West girls cross country team to panic Saturday, Sept. 20, but for once junior Grace Rogers was breathing easier.

One of three returning all-staters from the 2013 Class 3A state championship team, Rogers has been battling a sinus infection since early August.

"It hasn't been too bad lately, but it hasn't gone away so I went to a specialist," Rogers said. "I've been on new medicine for just a week."

Just like last year, Rogers and the Hilltoppers once again tasted sweet success at Peoria's Detweiller Park, the annual site of the state meet. They won the 3A varsity race at Peoria Notre Dame's Richard Spring Invitational despite competing without two of their top three runners and having their pre-meet routine affected because of late-arriving bus.

Top-ranked Glenbard West remained undefeated by putting its first four finishers among the top 14 to hold off No. 4 Palatine by 10 points, 70 to 80.

Junior two-time all-stater Lindsay Graham finished second (16:51.1 for 3.0 miles). Rogers (9th, 17:48.0) cracked the top 10, and junior Kathryn Kenwood (17:59.3) and sophomore Janie Nabholz (18:03.7) 12th and 14th.

"I think it's really impressive the team still could win, which was awesome," Rogers said. "I guess we realized we've got to step it up and make sure we'd do it for the team because we were down a few runners."

Senior Megan Ozog (18:28.4) was 33rd as the team's No. 5 finisher, followed by juniors Kate Dorsey (44th, 18:38.8), Abby Shaver (52nd, 18:43.3), Caitlyn Reick (108th, 19:24.6), Christina Sedall (152nd, 19:56.) and Nicole Berneche (174th, 20:07.8).

The 3A race featured 57 teams, seven that were rated among the top 25 by DyeStat Illinois, and others from out of state. Downers Grove North (168), St. Charles East (197) and Schaumburg (223) – all ranked among the top-20 -- were third through fifth.

"(Our girls) really stepped up well. They could have had all of the excuses in the world with the bus situation and getting out of our prep that we usually have and kind of rushing around," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said.

"Palatine is an outstanding team, a top-five (state) team for sure. For us to have two kids out and have some of these others step up to beat them by 10 points, I was hoping to get maybe in the 80s and see what happened, but they actually exceeded my expectations."

Teams were allowed as many as 10 entries in the varsity race. The Hilltoppers' top-seven finishers all earned medals for being among the top 60, and they probably would have had more with a complete lineup.

Senior and two-time all-stater Lisa Luczak remained sidelined by an Achilles tendon injury that also kept her out of Thursday's home conference triangular with York and Oak Park-River Forest at Camera Park. Freshman Lindsey Payne missed her second Saturday invitational to play with her club soccer team, but she said this will be the last time the sports will conflict this season.

"It was really fun to win today because we definitely had a lot of tough competition," Ozog said. "It was interesting to see that we could still beat Palatine and all of the other teams without two of our best runners. It was nice to see that our team doesn't rely on a few amount of girls. We have a ton of great talent that can back us up."

Graham nearly won the race even though she was affected from her impressive victory two days earlier at Camera Park. Her 16:42 over the 2.92 miles broke the 16:53 course record time previously held by 2012 individual state champion Madeline Perez.

On Saturday, Graham finished second at the invite for the second straight year, this time 21 seconds behind Peoria Notre Dame junior Maryjeanne Gilbert (16:30.2), fourth at the 2013 invite in 17:18 and second at the 2013 Class 2A state meet (17:04) as the highest finishing non-senior.

"I'm not really happy about my time today, but I felt really tired," Graham said. "I felt horrible. The first mile, I was OK but halfway through I was like, 'This is going to be really rough.' Maryjeanne was phenomenal. Even if I was feeling good, I probably would have been able to keep up but I'm just happy no one passed me.

"I just know mentally that was actually very, very hard the last mile. Any time you

have a race like that it just helps your mental toughness, I guess. It was nice to know that I didn't give up."

Rogers was rewarded for her perseverance through her ailment. This was her highest finish in three invites this season and first time among the top 10.

At one mile, Rogers was in a pack with Nabholz and Kenwood in 24th through 26th in 5:46. By the two-mile mark, Rogers and Nabholz were ninth and 10th in 11:52 with Kenwood 15th in 11:56.

"This is the first race where I ran a lot better," Rogers said. "I was really happy with how I did and just different parts of the race brought back state and remembering how it imitated certain parts. It motivates me for later on. We're going to be there in six weeks and I want to be better by the time state comes."

So does Graham. She was second at last year's invite, she finished second to Pleasant Valley (Iowa) junior McKenzie Yanek (17:02 to 16:48) and went on to finish 17th at state despite battling tendinitis in her knees.

Graham was 26 seconds ahead of the rest of Saturday's field, led by third-place St. Charles East freshman Audrey Ernst (17:17.5). Yanek was fourth (17:20.5).

Ernst led at one mile in 5:25 with Graham one second behind her in second. Gilbert, fifth at that point in 5:30, followed with another 5:30 second mile to lead Graham by one second with a mile left (11:00 to 11:01). Ernst was a distant third in 11:18.

"I don't think I started too fast or anything. From my aerobic standpoint, just my legs were really tired. I'm glad I was still under 17:00. Honestly, I know (Gilbert) was phenomenal but she surprised everyone today. I don't think anyone thought she would be able to pull off that time. I knew she would do awesome. I tried to make my move in the triangle and I heard her right next to me and I was like, 'Oh my gosh.' She was going so fast."

Kenwood, Nabholz and Ozog also are back from the state championship lineup. They all improved upon their 2013 invite performances, when the Hilltoppers (159 points) were third to Palatine (94) and New Trier (140), which took fourth and third at state, respectively. Perez sat out the invite recovering from injury.

Kenwood made the biggest leap from the 2013 invite, improving upon a team-best eighth place in the frosh-soph race in 18:52.

"Over the summer, I trained a lot and it feels good to get 12th," Kenwood said. "It definitely felt more crowded than last time (at this invite) and the start was a lot faster, but I liked it more because it was my first time running course last year. I feel like I knew the turns. I knew where I was going this time, so that was good."

In 2013, Ozog (47th, 18:25) and Nabholz (81st, 18:44) were the team's No. 4 and 5 invite finishers for the varsity. Ozog went into Saturday knowing she very well could be the Hilltoppers' No. 5 finisher.

Ozog actually finished higher than at least the No. 3 runner of every team except Palatine, whose top-five finishers were 6-11-13-24-26 and its sixth in 27th.

Ozog was 44th at the mile (5:51), just behind Dorsey (37th, 5:45), but had moved up to 32nd by the two-mile mark.

"I definitely felt some pressure, knowing that my place was going to count as a (team) point probably," Ozog said. "That definitely kind of got me going towards the end. It definitely helped knowing that I had to step up today."

"We couldn't have done it without Megan Ozog today. She really brought it for us," Hass added. "Obviously Lindsay Graham was outstanding, not only her place but her time. And then to see Grace Rogers finally get over this cold, now you're starting to see what Grace can do. That was just outstanding for Kathryn to be 12th and Janie 14th. The pack was there and that's what we're looking for."

Shaver, a standout for last year's frosh-soph team, also earned a varsity medal with 7.1 seconds to spare from 60th place. Just 2.1 seconds from the top 50, Shaver was 46 seconds faster than the 2013 invite, when she 28th in the frosh-soph race (19:30) as the Hilltoppers' No. 3 finisher.

"I heard some people calling out like 50th place with more than a mile to go, though I had no idea when I finished where I'd be," Shaver said. "This is the first year that I've been racing varsity more consistently. The competition is just so much more intense so to be up there made me really happy."

Luczak said she was disappointed not to compete but is keeping her eye on the big picture, especially the state meet at Detweiller Nov. 8. Luczak visited a doctor Friday and was told she had recovered enough to compete if necessary but would be taking a risk.

"It was killing me. I knew I could have run but inside I kept thinking, 'OK, I'm a senior. I need to be smart. I have a lot more ahead of me than this race,'" Luczak said.

"It was extremely hard because you can't get better than Peoria, but I'd rather run at state than run it now. It's always hard not running, but it was nice to see how well the team did and it was nice to see girls from a different view because a lot of times you can't watch other races while you're warming up. It's nice to get a different perspective once in a while."

The invite is a way for the runners to gain familiarity for the course by the time the state meet rolls around. Unlike their routine for state and other meets, however, the late bus put the Hilltoppers at Detweiller about 45 minutes beyond what they had planned. The team had to scramble, especially the frosh-soph team, which had the invite's first race at 9 a.m.

"I'm sure the varsity didn't feel as relaxed as they wanted to be. We got here, got some work done setting up (the team camp) and next thing you know, you've got to warm up," Hass said.

"It was kind of go, go, go. It was that way since we got on the bus. That's kind of hectic and it can take you out of your game, but I give all of the girls credit for overcoming it and making their own circumstances. As opposed to the circumstances defining them, they defined the circumstances and I'm proud of them for that."

Nevertheless, Detweiller is becoming a comfortable course for team veterans such as Rogers, who debuted on the course at the 2012 state meet and helped the Hilltoppers finish third.

In a way, the Hilltoppers' performance Saturday was a replay of the 2013 state meet on a minor scale – the elation of winning and the satisfaction of a strong

team effort regardless of the odds.

“After the race, I was talking with Abby and Kathryn. (We were saying), 'Didn't we run there for the Notre Dame Invite and then for state?' ” Rogers said. “As Mr. Hass said before, it's starting to feel like a home course because we've run there so many times. I feel like I know it very well, like Camera. It makes it that much more enjoyable to run.”

-- by Bill Stone