

Glenbard West sophomore Lindsey Payne battled as hard as she ever has to catch Naperville North senior Judy Pendergast under the lights Wednesday, Oct. 7.

The course didn't help with the pursuit.

"In one of those turns when you're going into the last mile, there's a really weird curve. I kind of missed the turn for that so I kind of had to veer around an official and go back," Payne said.

"When we were turning the last time into the track to finish, I ran into the fence. It was such a sharp turn and I didn't realize that, and there were people kind of standing in my way. That was interesting. It was hard to see where you're going. I'm not going to lie. It was rough. It was crazy."

No matter the challenges, Payne still had one the nation's best 3.0-mile times to lead several strong performances by the Hilltoppers at the first New

Balance/Naperville running Company Twilight Invitational at Naperville North.

Payne's 16:29.9 finished a strong second to Pendergast's personal-best 16:15.2.

Seniors Grace Rogers (18th, 17:48.6) and Kathryn Kenwood (24th, 18:02.0) also finished among the top 25, followed by senior Abigail Shaver (18:11.5) and freshman Katie Hohe (18:12.5) in 31st and 32nd, junior Janie Nabholz (44th, 18:33.9) and sophomore Claire Kenwood (46th, 18:40.1).

Shaver, Hohe and Claire Kenwood ran personal records and Rogers posted a season best.

Even with her brief course detours, Payne just missed her 3.0-mile PR of 16:28.4, which won the Lake Park Invitational Sept. 12 and was .7 from the all-time course record.

"I always want to strive to win but I'm not disappointed in my time or my performance because I gave everything I had – and I don't think I've run that hard ever, honestly. I don't think even at state last year I ran that hard (to finish fifth)," Payne said.

"It's only October. I still have a month left before state (Nov. 7). I haven't peaked yet. I'm excited to see what else I can do. (Pendergast is) such a great competitor. I respect her so much."

As a team, the Hilltoppers finished fourth (107 points) in a powerful 10-team field that featured the top three ranked teams in Class 3A and the top-ranked 2A team, four-time defending state champion Yorkville.

Glenbard West entered the meet ranked No. 2 in 3A by DyeStatIL to defending state champion Naperville North, which won with 56 points. Yorkville (73) and No.

3 Minooka (100) were second and third with No. 6 Wheaton Warrenville South (132) fifth.

"We didn't have our best races overall collectively, but there were some good performances," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said.

"There were some good things. We've just got to trust the process and we're right there. We have a week and a half until conference and I think we'll be right where we need to be at that time and our training is going to take us there."

The new invite not only attracted an outstanding caliber of competition, but the race atmosphere was heightened. Races began at 5 p.m. with the varsity girls the fifth of six races.

The 7:30 p.m. varsity girls race was completely under the lights with an announcer and sound crew bringing them to the finish in the football stadium. Loud, energetic music accompanied the awards ceremony.

"It was really exciting," Claire Kenwood said.

"At first, there are so many people and there was so much going on with all of the advertisements – the bags and hats and shirts and overall just warming up around that with the music playing, too. The music was so much fun. And then it was night time and there were lights. It kind of took away a little bit of the nerves because it was such a new experience that you just wanted to have fun."

But there also was plenty of hype and pressure. Besides the powerful group of teams, this was the first meeting of the season between Payne and Pendergast, generally regarded as the two best runners in 3A.

Both ran great winning races in September at Peoria's Detweiller Park, the annual site of the state meet and a flat, fast 3.0-mile course where many runners get their season-best times.

With several turns – many of them tight – and poor lighting in some areas at the Naperville North course, Shaver said Hass told his runners that a great race would be within about 10 seconds of their Detweiller times.

Four varsity Hilltoppers actually beat their times from the Richard Spring Invite at Detweiller Sept. 19.

"It was just kind of a stressful race. It was some of the best teams in the state so I just felt like we were in a pack the entire time," Shaver said.

"In the start, I was a little bit farther back than I'm used to so I felt the whole time I was catching up or I needed to catch up. I think that motivated me to go a little bit faster and find a little bit more of what I had left."

Entering Wednesday, Payne had previously won all of her races, setting a course record at the Hilltoppers' home Camera Park Sept. 24 (16:38.9 for 2.88 miles) and winning the Richard Spring Invite in 16:34.0.

The previous weekend at Detweiller, Pendergast, ninth at state in 2014, won the First to the Finish Invite in a then personal-best 16:18.9 – the fastest regular-season girls time ever on the course.

"I'm not going to lie. It was really stressful. I was shaking before (Wednesday's race)," Payne said.

"I get nervous before every meet. That's just me. I just felt like I had a lot of pressure on me because my dad and my soccer team came to watch. That was cool because I miss them so much. I guess I didn't want to let anybody down but I have to realize if I'm running my best I can't let anybody down."

Payne could take pride in her time on a slower course with several turns, many of them tight, and finishing comfortably ahead of the rest of a talented field.

Payne was more than 22 seconds ahead of third-place Minooka junior Ashley Tutt (16:52.2) and fourth-place sophomore Emily Shelton (16:58.1), the other runners to break 17:00.

Tutt and Shelton were respectively sixth and 29th in state in 2014.

Pendergast took Wednesday's race out hard. At the mile, her 5:18 already held a six-second lead on Payne (5:24) and 10-second lead on Tutt (5:30).

Pendergast increased the lead to double digits during the second mile but Payne's 5:30 split with a mile to go (11:54) kept her in contention. Payne got back within single-digit seconds but by the time they entered the stadium area again, Pendergast was ahead by 13 seconds. The race ended with the athletes entering the stadium for almost one complete lap around the track followed by a sprint down the football field to the finish.

"Usually after races I feel fine. My legs were about to give out on me. I was so exhausted. I knew that I was especially tired because I started wheezing at the 2-mile mark," Payne said.

"I'm good at pushing the last mile but I think I tried to hang on with (Pendergast) for a while. I was balancing trying to run my race and not letting her get too far out of my sight. I wasn't used to pushing so hard in the middle. Therefore, I didn't feel like I had as much left at the end. I'm like, 'Aw Lindsey, you gave up at the end,' even though I know I didn't because I gave everything I had in me."

At the mile, Kathryn Kenwood (5:43) and Rogers (5:44) were 17th and 20th. The

two remained even at two miles (11:52) but then Rogers finished in 5:57 for her first sub-18:00 race this season.

"This is my best time all year so I feel confident now and I'm more excited and ready to get faster in every race the rest of the season," Rogers said.

Rogers finished with a flurry on the track reminiscent of her great anchor legs that helped the track team's 3,200-meter relay team qualify for the 3A state meet in May. The runners also ran one lap on the track shortly after the one-mile mark.

"It was weird (on the track). It was cool. The first thing I thought of was, 'My spikes are too big for this track,' " Rogers said. "Coming off it the first time, I was like, 'Come on. I still have another lap to come back here and then I can finish.' "

Rogers was 20th going behind the bleachers before turning onto the track. Her finish included passing two girls and holding them off by .4 and .8.

"That was a good feeling, looking up and seeing the clock and like, 'I can do this. I can finish under 18:00,' " Rogers said. "But I knew there were girls close behind me because I just passed them on the track so I wasn't giving up then. Breaking 18:00 wasn't going to be good enough. I didn't want anyone to pass me on that last stretch."

On Oct. 3, Hohe had the team's fifth fastest time running individually in the No. 6 flight at Wheaton North's Falcon Classic. Wednesday marked the first time she was a top-five finisher for the varsity in a regular format – with help from Shaver.

"I'd say around a mile, mile and a quarter, I'm like, 'I've got to get up there. I've got to close the gap,' " Hohe said. "It was definitely different than Wheaton North. I just probably want to move up a little bit more, help the team out with (fewer) points."

At the mile, Shaver was 38th (5:52) with Hohe (5:55) close behind in 43rd. By two miles, they were two seconds apart with Shaver leading them in 11:07.

"I kept hearing Mr. Hass would cheer for me, then cheer for her. I'm like, 'She's close. I want her to run with me,' " Shaver said. "So I stuck my hand back, whatever, and she was right with me the whole time. We just need to get with everyone else (now), get our pack together."

In their previous fastest 3.0-mile races at Peoria's Detweiller Park Sept. 19, Shaver (18:14.9) and Hohe (18:27.2) were 12.3 seconds apart.

On Wednesday, the split was just one second. Shaver was just .5 from 29th. Hohe was .3 ahead of the next finisher.

Afterwards, Hohe was considering ways in which she could have done better. She

was somewhat disappointed with her kick at Wheaton North, but to have that Wednesday she thought that she may have started out too slow. Her kick allowed her to pass two girls and finish right behind Shaver.

"She's doing amazing. It's exciting for someone as a freshman to be running so well," Shaver said. "It's awesome. I was nowhere near that as a freshman. I didn't even run varsity until the end of last year. It's incredible."

-- by Bill Stone