

After not competing since Sept. 13, senior Lisa Luczak especially was determined to join her Glenbard West girls cross country teammates for her final West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Saturday, Oct. 18, at Proviso West.

Luczak, recovering from injured Achilles tendons, tried to help the process by taking two cortisone shots in both ankles Tuesday, Oct. 14.

The initial results weren't optimistic.

"I knew the week before I told myself no matter how much I was hurting, I was going to run no matter what," Luczak said. "(Recovering from the shots) on Wednesday, I couldn't walk and I was like, 'Shoot. What am I going to do?' By Thursday, I was able to walk and feeling fine. By Friday, I could run a little bit but I was still hurting."

By Saturday, Luczak and the Hilltoppers were back to their old selves.

Luczak finished fourth and the Hilltoppers comfortably won the meet with 20 points to earn a share of their fourth consecutive overall title.

Junior Lindsay Graham comfortably won the wet and muddy 3.04-mile race in 17:50.18 to become only Glenbard West's third different individual varsity champion in conference history.

Freshman Lindsey Payne took second (18:19.74) with Luczak (4th, 18:46.39) with juniors Grace Rogers (6th, 18:53.21) and Kathryn Kenwood (7th, 19:05.56) and sophomore Janie Nabholz (8th, 19:10.68) also finishing in the top 10. Junior Abby Shaver finished 12th (19:32.54), giving all seven varsity runners top-16 all-conference honors at a conference meet for the first time in program history.

"Honestly, I'm just go grateful and thankful to have had such a great team and great teammates who help each other and support each other to achieve something that great," Luczak said. "There's also luck (involved), but a lot of hard work. It's great to be a part of it. It's great to graduate with something so accomplished -- our team won it four years in a row. That's pretty amazing."

The Hilltoppers now set their sights on the 3A Lake Park Regional at 1 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 25, at the east campus in Roselle. Before Saturday, that was the last course on which Luczak had competed in helping the Hilltoppers win the Harvey Braus Lancer Invitational. Last year marked the team's first regional title since 1983.

The overall conference title is a combination of results from the Silver Meet and the regular-season Silver dual meets. Because the Hilltoppers lost their dual with No. 2-ranked Hinsdale Central on its Katherine Legge Memorial home course 25-30 Oct. 9, they had to win Saturday to guarantee at least a share of the overall title.

"I was so happy (to win), but more so I was excited when I turned around and I saw (my teammates finishing), like Lisa. I didn't know she was going to do that well," Graham said. "She hasn't been running for such a long time. To come back like that was so cool."

Because York's home course of East End Park in Elmhurst had too much water, the meet was moved on Thursday to Proviso West, also site of the 2013 Silver Meet. Glenbard West runners initially were happy to return to Proviso West since they competed there Oct. 2 and it brought back memories of last year's strong conference performance.

Saturday's course conditions, however, had its share of muddy and wet areas exacerbated by intermittent rains during the eight girls and boys races, eliminating any chances of personal-record times or even decent ones.

"That was like a minute and a half slower than normal, but we were just happy we gave a good effort and the (team) places were there," Graham said. "I did not enjoy that. I'm always tired and in pain during a race, but that was just especially sucky to be honest. It was so windy and muddy."

Several Glenbard West runners also had leaving the meet as early as possible on their minds to get ready for the homecoming dance that evening. Colleen Luczak, Lisa's twin sister who competed in the junior varsity race, was named homecoming queen Friday.

"I couldn't be more happy with how they ran," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said. "They had all of the excuses here with homecoming and Colleen being homecoming queen at the pep rally (Friday). They had a lot of distractions last night so it was a matter of how they were going to stay focused. They had the fun last night but just came in ran just incredibly today so I'm very, very happy.

"To see Lindsey Payne get second in the conference as a freshman is great -- and Lindsay Graham a conference championship. It was just good all-around."

Everyone agreed that Lisa Luczak's return to the lineup was a huge emotional lift. Without her since the Lake Park Invite, the Hilltoppers have only lost that one dual, but she made a great team even stronger.

Hinsdale Central sophomore Alexa Haff, the defending Silver Meet champion and second at state last year, did not compete Saturday to protect a minor injury. In the 2013 race, Haff won over Madeline Perez, who like Luczak made a triumphant return at the meet but actually hadn't competed the entire season because of a lower leg injury.

On Saturday, even if Haff had managed to defend her individual title and the rest of the results remained the same, Glenbard West would have beaten Hinsdale Central 25-33.

"We still did well without her, but we know we need her. Having her in the meet was awesome. We did better and it felt like more of a team," Rogers said. "I remember last year we ran for our first time with Madeleine there (at the Silver Meet) and ran so well and it felt so good. That's how it felt (Saturday)."

"All week we didn't know if (Luczak) would run and then she probably knew she would run," Kenwood added. "It was great. We were all really excited for her. It was awesome having her there and she did so well. We were all so proud of her."

Although her mind was set on competing, Lisa Luczak still underwent a medical checkup Friday just to make sure. Although her injury has made good progress, her doctor suggested not running at the Silver Meet.

"I was like, 'This is my senior year,' and they understood. They knew how important it was. I was happy to take that risk because I was happy to be running. Even though I was hurting the whole time, I'm like, 'This is worth it because it's my last conference race. This is my last chance to do it.' "

Luczak and the Hilltoppers added to their conference history -- and even created a new chapter. Before this current streak, Glenbard West had just two conference team titles in 1990 (outright) and 1979 (shared), the third year of conference competition.

Graham joins Kyna Forkins (1997 and 1999) and Farah Jadran (2002) as the only other varsity champions in school history. 2014 graduate Madeline Perez, the 2012 Class 3A individual state champion, finished second the past two years. Graham competed in cross country and track for Glenbard East before transferring to Glenbard West last season.

"I haven't had one (conference title) for cross country," Graham said. "I have one for track, which I got my freshman year indoor and outdoor, but then I didn't get one last year so now I have a cross country one. I'm excited about that."

With her remarkable comeback, Luczak became just the third Glenbard West runner to earn varsity top-16, all-conference honors all four years -- joining Forkins (1997-2000) and Suzy Treis (1978-81). Luczak is only the 33rd runner among all schools to achieve that honor in the 38-season history of the meet.

Luczak previously finished fifth last year, third as a sophomore and sixth as a freshman. Treis also had four top-six finishes, placing as high as fourth twice, while Forkins had two titles with a third and a ninth.

"I knew I had been all-conference the other three years and it would be great to get the fourth. I knew I was injured and did not know if I was going to do it," Luczak said. "Mr. Hass told me (I was the third in Glenbard West history) and I was completely shocked. To get that honor, I was so happy because it's not so common. It was just so exciting and knowing that I did it, it was a nice accomplishment and that the team also won. It was just a good day overall."

In fact, all seven Hilltoppers earned all-conference honors in a varsity conference meet for the first time in program history. Six of the seven Hilltoppers had achieved that honor in two previous seasons – 1979 and last year with Perez (2nd), Graham (3rd), Luczak (5th), Rogers (6th), Nabholz (7th) and Kenwood (10th).

"Going into it, I didn't know that had never happened," said Shaver, who has worked her way into a varsity spot the past two meets. "During the race at two miles, they were calling out places and said that I was top 16 and I was like, 'Oh that's really cool. Maybe I can get all-conference.' It was even cooler that it happened to be the first time that's ever happened. That was insane, so many first things (for our team). Lots of cool things happened."

Luczak's extraordinary comeback and race, however, was nothing new. In May, she came back from injury again to qualify for state in the 1,600-meter run the hard way. She was third in the race but her 5:13.10 beat the state-qualifying time of 5:14.24.

"The less she runs, the better she runs. It's crazy. She's always a good running no matter what," Graham said.

"That's just an intangible when you finally can say your team is here, we're one solid team and Lisa's back," Hass said. "It's just a psychological boost to the girls on the team, kind of like last year when Madeline came back here, and hopefully we can keep her running the rest of the season."

At the Glenbard West-Hinsdale Central dual, Graham not only finished 27 seconds ahead of Haff but her winning 16:35 for 3.0 miles broke the previous KLM course record by 17 seconds. Haff set the previous mark Sept. 6 when she (16:52.79) and Graham (17:03.48) finished 1-2 at the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational at KLM.

Graham had no knowledge that Haff wasn't competing Saturday until the race started. Graham led by four seconds after one mile (5:40) and built it to 19 seconds after two miles (11:35).

"A half mile into the race, I didn't know that she wouldn't be there, but then I

realized I was alone and I'm like, 'Something's up,' " Graham said. "I was looking at Mr. Hass and I was like, 'What am I doing? Where is she?' I thought maybe I went out too fast or something but then I just realized she wasn't there."

Just as exciting was Payne pulling out second over Hinsdale Central junior Annie Zaher (3rd, 18:35.22), the defending 3A state track champion in the 1,600.

At the Hornet-Red Devil, Payne was third overall, but at the Hinsdale Central dual, Payne was fifth behind three Red Devils. That included fellow freshman Reilly Revord (4th in dual), who was ninth Saturday (19:11.32).

At two miles Saturday, Payne was third and a stride behind Zaher in 11:54.

"I really wanted to beat (Revord) and I said, 'No. I have to go after their No. 2 runner (Zaher),' and I'm like, 'Oh my gosh by 20 seconds,' " Payne said. "I know personally I had butterflies the night before and all morning. I just went after them.

"I thought that I was going to be lucky if I got fourth. I just thought that (Zaher) was going to beat me for sure. My goal was just to beat Reilly. I was literally on (Zaher's) back, not trying to trip over her practically. At first, I was really nervous the pace was going to be too fast. I would just die at the end. Actually I surprised myself. I felt like I could go a little faster, which gave me a leg up. At the 2-mile mark, I decided to make my move. I said in my head, 'Just go for it.' I just passed her and pulled away at the end so that was good."

Payne almost pulled away too well. She began to struggle down the finish, especially with the longer course than usual.

"(Second place) was surreal. It was awesome. I really gave everything I had. I was super dizzy, but it paid off," Payne said. "Before the race I was praying and reading the Bible and visually thinking about it and it really helped. I couldn't have done that by myself. I give it all to God. It was a really cool thing to happen. I can't wait to see what happens at state and stuff."

With two freshman placing ahead of her, Rogers equaled her 2013 Silver Meet finish. Rogers finished just .36 behind fifth-place Hinsdale Central freshman Grace

McCabe (5th, 18:52.85), oldest daughter of Hinsdale Central head coach Mark McCabe. Rogers was seventh at the dual, one second behind McCabe.

"I was really happy with how I did (Saturday). I didn't beat the girl at the dual meet, by a really small amount again, but I'm happy with my place and how I ran," said Rogers, an all-state 21st in 2013.

"I've definitely improved I think. I'm not in the same place as last year. Hopefully I'm in a better spot. It has gotten more competitive (in the Silver). I feel really excited for what's to come, especially after having this good meet."

Nabholz and Kenwood, a second-year cross country runner, also returned to the top 10. At two miles, Kenwood and Rogers were side by side in seventh and eighth (12:23), just behind McCabe with Nabholz just a second behind in ninth.

"I felt like I did pretty well. It was really hard in the mud and it slowed down the times pretty well," Nabholz said. "Your feet were just getting stuck. You just kind of ran through it."

Nabholz never remembered any cross country race as sloppy. A girls soccer player for the Hilltoppers last spring, Nabholz said her experience with rough conditions in that sport didn't really give her an advantage in Saturday's race.

"I feel like that's different because you're not constantly running the whole time (in soccer matches). It's more stopping and starting and you can slide and stuff (on the field)," Nabholz said.

Nabholz and Kenwood agreed they were much less nervous for Saturday's Silver Meet than in 2013. While she also could not keep up with Rogers in the final mile-plus, Kenwood was excited to have improved upon her eighth-place finish at the Hinsdale Central dual.

"I did better. I didn't quite stay with Grace, but I was happy with what I did," Kenwood said.

"I like this course. It's fun being here again and to win again it's awesome. The last conference meet, I was more nervous going into it and I felt just less prepared last

time. (This win) means a little bit more, watching our team, some of the struggles, like Lisa (being injured) and then the Hinsdale race. We all came together and won it so it was awesome."

Shaver was the only non-senior addition to this year's varsity Silver lineup. She improved from taking second in last year's frosh-soph race in 19:53.5, about 21 seconds slower than she ran Saturday.

"It was a little nerveracking to be honest. I have run a few varsity races before this but I was unsure whether I would be able to perform at my best, but I just gave it my all and it worked out," Shaver said.

"Not (very good) time wise, but effort and place wise I think it was good. (All-conference) means a lot to me, especially as a junior. I've been working hard both years before this just to get to where I am."

The Hilltoppers had won their last two Silver titles outright after a dramatic 2011 Silver Meet. They won that meet on a sixth-runner tiebreaker with York (51 points each) to earn an overall title share with the Dukes after losing their dual, the program's last dual loss until this season.

"Freshman year (was the most memorable title) because we won off our sixth runner. That's hard to beat," Luczak said. "This one probably ties that. It's the most meaningful because it's my senior year. It's my last race and to know I'll not be a part of it next year is so sad."

Graham, Luczak, Kenwood and Shaver were the only varsity Hilltoppers remaining for the awards ceremony. Teammates from the sophomore and junior varsity levels, mostly underclassmen, took the places of other award recipients.

"It was hilarious to have the younger girls go up for them," Luczak said. "They called (senior junior varsity runner) Hannah Arduino and Rebekah Crail went. Then they gave her the wrong ribbon and (for the exchange) we're like, 'OK. Who's Hannah?' "



Luczak left shortly after receiving her fourth all-conference medal, but only to see Colleen dressed up before she attended the dance. Lisa was instead the Hass' baby sitter Saturday night and did not attend the dance to protect her injury from the temptation to dance, especially as a senior.

"It was so exciting (for Colleen). I'm like, 'Oh my gosh. I'm related to royalty,' " Lisa Luczak said. "If I did (go) I would have been in a lot of pain and I wouldn't have been able to enjoy the dance for what it's meant to be. The seniors go crazy. For me, it's kind of hard not to dance."

Payne attended her first homecoming dance and managed to find a second wind and enjoy herself.

"I was exhausted, but I still found a way to dance so it was fun," Payne said. "I just didn't have a lot of time to get ready. It was so weird going from super muddy to cleaning up."

-- by Bill Stone