

The long-awaited return of senior and defending Class 3A state champion Madeline Perez inspired the Glenbard West girls cross country lineup Saturday, Oct. 19, at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet at Proviso West.

While Perez might not have had the individual finish she wanted, the Hilltoppers' historic performance gave her reason to smile as well.

"Everyone ran so great today," Perez said of her teammates. "I'm just proud of everyone. It was a really good day for Glenbard West."

After missing the entire season so far to recover from a calf injury, Perez finished second for the second year in a row. Her return also led a tremendous team effort that clinched another outright Silver championship for the second year in a row.

Perez (17:43.0 for 3.04 miles) finished second to Hinsdale Central freshman Alexa Haff (17:27.8) after being second in 2012 to York graduate Emma Fisher. Five other Hilltoppers earned individual all-conference honors and also finished among the top 10 as they won the team title with a program-record 23 points – also among the greatest Silver Meet performances ever.

"It's good to just be back. It was killing me not to race because that's my favorite part about cross country and track," Perez said. "My main goal was just to run my best so that the team could bring the conference title back to Glenbard West. We did that so that made the day pretty awesome."

Sophomore Lindsay Graham (3rd, 18:00.2), junior Lisa Luczak (5th, 18:07.2), sophomore Grace Rogers (6th, 18:37.8), freshman Janie Nabholz (7th, 18:46.2) and sophomore Kathryn Kenwood (10th, 18:48.7) also were all-conference with top-16 finishes. Junior Megan Ozog (20th, 19:21.4) just missed, coming 9.3 seconds from 16th.

Perez, Luczak and Ozog were the only returnees from last year's varsity Silver lineup. Graham and Ozog also returned to the lineup after sitting out the Hilltoppers' final Silver dual Oct. 10.

"We did awesome today. We did, just sayin'. I'm really proud of everyone" Rogers said. "It's awesome to have Madeline back. I love it. It feels more official now. It's like we're all where we should be."

Glenbard West extended its program-best streak of overall conference titles to three in a row, the last two outright. Even without Perez, the Hilltoppers again were 6-0 in Silver duals and won the Silver Meet after sharing the 2011 title with York, winning the Silver Meet after the Dukes won the dual. The Hilltoppers' only other previous conference titles were in 1979 and 1990.

The Hilltoppers also equaled the program-best of six all-conference runners in one race, achieved only once before in 1979, and that team only had four top-10 finishers.

Looking through past results, Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said this was the lowest score for a Silver champion since York's 19 points in 2000. That team didn't put six among the top 10, either.

"It's got to be up there as one of the lowest scores in a long time. It was very impressive the way the kids ran and six in the top 10 is an amazing feat. I don't know if I saw that coming myself," Hass said. "I'm very pleased with the results. And talking with the girls, they all think they can improve from this point forward. I know some of the girls were not very pleased (with their races) so obviously there's still some work to do."

Perez led by half a stride as she and Haff passed the one-mile mark in 5:32. Haff had a body-length lead after two miles in 11:31.

Running into a stiff wind coming out of the forest area, it really wasn't until the final stretch that Haff pulled away with a vicious kick that she often hasn't needed in previous victories.

"Alexa ran an awesome race so kudos to her," Perez said. "It's my first race back so it's a starting point. My goal was to have our team win conference and that happened. This is just a starting point and I'll hopefully get better each week from here, but I'm just going to take it one week at a time."

During the regular season, Haff won five of her six races this season. She was second in the other Sept. 14 by just 1.7 seconds to Buffalo Grove sophomore Kaitlyn Ko (17:00.96 to 17:02.66) at Peoria's Detweiller Park, site of the state meet Nov. 9, when Ko snuck past her in the final 30 meters.

"I can't speak for Madeline, but I think she's understandably disappointed in being a senior and (not winning), but at the same time I'm very proud of her. The last 1,000 meters of the race, she's right there. That bodes well for her conditioning at this point," Hass said.

"It was a great race, no matter how you slice it. (Haff is) an extremely talented runner physically and mentally so hats off to her for what she did. She's one of the maybe top two or three runners in the state. There's nothing to be ashamed of but (Perez) has high expectations of herself so we'll see what happens the next two, three weeks."

Perez hadn't competed in cross country or track since June 15-16 in the 1-mile and 2-mile track races at the New Balance Nationals Outdoor in Greensboro, N.C. The injury lingered longer than Perez initially thought, and she couldn't run for six weeks. Her primary conditioning consisted of pool workouts.

"I've never had something to an extent like this so that was kind of the first time that I had to buckle down like that," Perez said.

"Going into the race (Saturday), I didn't really know what to expect with this being the first race back after missing a good chunk of the season. I just wanted to have a steady race. That was kind of my goal, just strong miles throughout. I have some work to do, but that's OK. We've still got time."

Perez was reminded that at the 2012 Silver Meet, she was second to Fisher by 9.1 seconds. Three weeks later at the state meet, Perez won in a Detweiller Park-record time of 16:02, 13 seconds ahead of the second-place Fisher, who also broke the previous course record.

"All positive thoughts from here on out -- that's how I just kind of like to live my life anyway, just completely positive," Perez said. "We've won the past three years so that's been the highlights of my conference races, winning as a team."

Perez and Luczak both earned all-conference honors for the third time and Graham the second. In her freshman Silver Meet, Perez was tripped during the race and ended up 26th.

In 2012, Graham was fifth at conference, but that was for Glenbard East at the DuPage Valley Conference Meet before she moved to Glen Ellyn earlier this year.

Graham nearly didn't compete Saturday but she's rested a sore knee that especially hurt her during her last race at the Wheaton North's Falcon Classic Oct. 5. She still took fourth in the No. 1 flight race.

"My knee is definitely a little bit sore, but as long as I can run on it, that's the most I can ask for at this point," Graham said. "I think the only place to go is up, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. I think I'll improve. I didn't lose a terrible amount of ground (sitting out). I sure did lose a little bit but not a terrible amount and I think I'll be able to make it up."

During the regular season, Graham was the Hilltoppers' highest finisher to Haff twice. Graham was third overall at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, 5.18 seconds behind Haff, and second by five seconds in the dual.

On Saturday, Graham (5:38) was six seconds behind Haff and Perez at the mile and trailed by about 11 seconds at two miles. Graham held onto third comfortably, 7.0 seconds in front of fourth-place Lyons Township senior Lexy Rudofski (18:07.2).

"I feel like at the beginning I should have sprinted a little bit faster because there was already so much distance between me and the front. It might have helped a little bit, but I did the best I could, considering everything."

"I thought she ran very well. It's just a matter of managing her knee and how it responds," Hass said. "She's really committed herself to finishing out the season for herself and the team. She's earned everything."

Luczak knew after the race that she should have gone out faster because she certainly had more to give at the end. Luczak was eighth at the mile but in only 5:48, nine seconds behind the fifth-place Rudofski.

While moving up to sixth by two miles, Luczak still was 11 seconds behind the fifth-place Rudofski. Despite a 6:19 finish, only four seconds slower than Perez's, Luczak only passed Oak Park-River Forest senior Erin Schrobilgen (9th, 18:48.2) in the final 1.04.

"Then by the end, I was just trying to go as fast I could to catch up. I just didn't have enough time to (catch more runners). It's just one of those races where it's like learn for next race," Luczak said.

"She loves to chase, but you've got to be in the game if you want to chase," Hass added. "She had to put herself in the race the first half mile instead of coming back from far and making the task almost insurmountable."

Luczak was third in the Silver Meet last year and sixth in 2011. This time, she's had to overcome injuries that affected her summer and early-season training.

"Even though I felt like I started out fast, I realized I didn't. I learned my lesson and hopefully next time I do better," Luczak said. "Health wise, it's amazing. I feel great. My Achilles isn't hurting anymore and nothing's hurting. My race strategy just has to come into place."

Rogers was the key to the rest of the top-10 finishes. The veteran calmly led a pack with Nabholz and Kenwood, a first-year runner as a sophomore, which was 15-16-17 after one mile in 5:56 and gradually progressed to 9-12-13 by two miles.

"It's always nervewracking in the beginning how some people from other teams go out faster," Rogers said. "I've just learned throughout the season how fast to go and I'm use to kind of being stuck in a pack so I wasn't too worried."

"The key was I tried to stay with Kathryn and Grace the whole time," Nabholz said. "We stayed in a pack pretty much throughout the whole race so that really helped me find my pace and finish with a good time."

Last year, the Silver Meet was just two weeks after Rogers made her season debut after recovering from a back injury. She was entered in the frosh-soph race and won.

"That was awesome, but I think I'd rather be where I am now, be on the varsity and get whatever place I get than winning frosh-soph. I like being where I am," Rogers said.

"Grace was really a key for us. When she runs like that, she's a big value for us not only by herself but also the tone and pace she sets for Janie and Kathryn," Hass added.

The frosh-soph level was the start of this season for Nabholz and Kenwood. In that race at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, Nabholz was fourth and Kenwood was 15th as the Hilltoppers' top two finishers.

"When the season first started, I wasn't up there, and now that I'm up in the top five, it's pretty surreal. I didn't know I could have it in me," Nabholz said. "I was really surprised that I got all-conference. I wasn't feeling so good this week because I had a cold so coming back from that is really good."

"When I first started frosh-soph, I got 15th and I was like, 'OK, I'll move up. Top 10,' and then (being on varsity), yeah, it was surprising," Kenwood said. "It's really exciting. It's a lot of fun, joining the team and getting better."

The Hilltoppers' fun should continue at the 3A Fenwick Regional at 1:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 26, Schiller Woods. They should easily advance to the Lake Park Sectional Saturday, Nov. 2, with a top-six finish, if not win the regional. The only other state-ranked team in the nine-team field is Oak Park-River Forest, which was fifth (107 points) at the Silver Meet.

The Hilltoppers' postseason lineup is the seven varsity runners at the Silver Meet plus senior Annika Manning and sophomores Nicole Berneche, Kate Dorsey, Caitlyn Reick and Abby Shaver.

Glenbard West has only won two regional/district titles in program history and not one since 1983. Last year, the Hilltoppers were second at regionals 43-47 to Lake Park, which finished second at state with the Hilltoppers taking third.

"It was just amazing (Saturday) to finally feel like our team is back together," Luczak said. "Everyone's running again and everyone's doing so well and we're all so close since we really see the younger classmen step up, especially Janie. She did great. It's the first time I really felt like we had our full team there. It kind of gave us a feel for how state will be, too."

-- by Bill Stone