

As she was on her way to the 2012 Class 3A girls cross country individual state title, Glenbard West senior Madeline Perez passed many familiar faces.

“Probably my favorite part of the race was the homestretch, just because the crowd was amazing,” Perez said. “Within that stretch, I saw Mr. Hass, Mr. Staren (head coach Paul Hass and assistant coach Mark Staren) and every single one of my family members. And there were a bunch of girls right at the bottom, right before you turn to get to the huge crowd.”

While sharing the victory in record time was great, the day became even better. The Hilltoppers finished third as a team to capture their first team trophy for a top-three finish since 1980.

“When Mr. Hass came in the (team) tent and told us we were third, that was awesome,” Perez said. “That was super exciting just because the girls worked so hard and in the end we deserved it so I was really happy that we were able to take the team trophy.”

Perez is trying to become the first multiple state champion in Class 3A girls since the sport expanded to three classes in 2008 and the first in the larger-school division since Geneva’s Rebecca Mitchell won in 1997 and 1998.

Her motivation is two-fold. Many have the Hilltoppers as the favorites to capture their first team state title.

Sixth-place state finisher Lisa Luczak and No. 4-5 state team finishers Grace Rogers and Christina Sedall also are back, as well as all-stater Lindsay Graham, a sophomore transfer from Glenbard East.

Junior Megan Ozog, a 2011 state competitor, sophomores Maddy Burt, Kate Dorsey, Caitlyn Reick and Abby Shaver also were part of the 2012 cross country postseason lineup.

In the pre-season polls, Glenbard West is ranked No. 1 by DyeStat Illinois poll with defending champion Naperville North No. 2. Their rankings are reversed by MileSplit Illinois.

The season begins with the Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Saturday at Katherine Legge Memorial Park. The Hilltoppers will see three top-10 rated teams in Palatine, Naperville Central and New Trier.

“We don’t really concern ourselves too much with that. You’re welcome to (look), as long as we’re not believing our own hype,” Hass said. “The goal is to be on the pedestal at the end of the season and that’s what we’re focused on. We’re just going to keep on doing what we always do. On the flipside, if we worried about all of the rankings (in past years), we would not have run as well as we would have. Now the shoe’s on the other foot.”

Glenbard West previously was second in 1980 and third in 1979, the first year of the girls state meet. While Naperville North easily won the 2012 title with 113 points, the Hilltoppers (138 points) were just five points behind second-place Lake Park (133) but only nine ahead of fourth-place New Trier (147), the 2011 state champs.

In May, the Hilltoppers added to the collection with their first-ever team trophy in girls track, pulling out third place (31) by one point over West Aurora and Homewood-Flossmoor.

Perez was fabulous again, winning both the 3,200 and 1,600. This season, Perez and senior Faith Bischoff are team captains.

“Now we always have (last season) to look back upon. It’s great to think about, how awesome that was, but we also know that we want to do that again,” Perez said. “There’s a bunch of media stuff out there right now. In my opinion, it’s a little bit too early to really know just because running is a sport that you just never know what’s going to happen two months from now. We try not to focus too much on that, just seeing how things go over time. Hopefully in the end, the cards will fall where they need to be.”

Top-25 finishers at state earn all-state status. In November, Perez should become the first Glenbard West girls cross country runner to earn three all-state honors. Luczak should join 2000 graduate Kyna Forkins as the only other multiple all-staters.

Perez won last year’s state title in a record 16:02 for the 3.0-mile

Detweiller Park course by 13 seconds over graduated York standout Emma Fisher (16:15), who also comfortably broke the previous record of 16:22 set in 2010 by Woodstock's Kayla Beattie in winning her second 2A state title. Perez was 15th at state in 2011 (17:15) and 29th (17:28) in 2010.

Does Perez feel different entering this season after three state titles in cross country and track?

"Not really. I still am just kind of focused on being my best in everything that I need to do for our team," Perez said. "I've set some goals for myself and always keep those in mind so hopefully in the end I can accomplish them, but I'm just going to continue to train hard and just kind of approach everything positively and make everything fun because you've got to enjoy the sport. That's kind of key in my opinion."

The official start to preseason training Aug. 14 was exciting because it really was the first time the entire team was together. Besides the usual vacations or rest to confront injuries for other runners, Perez took some time off from running this summer after competing for the first time at the New Balance Nationals Outdoor June 15-16 in Greensboro, N.C., in the 1-mile and 2-mile runs.

"Any other runner might feel pretty pressure (to repeat Madeline's 2012-13 season), but there's no pressure. We're going to do the same thing we always do. We're going to focus on ourselves and improving," Hass said. "You can't worry about what other runners are doing or what the press says about you or where they have you ranked as an individual. I think based on what I've seen of Madeline and her training, I think the results are going to speak for themselves."

Luczak is the third-highest finishing underclassman back, taking sixth (16:45) just two seconds behind Fenwick junior Olivia Ryan (5th, 16:43). Also back from the top 10 are seventh-place Jacobs junior Lauren Van Vlierbergen (16:47) and Maine South senior and three-time all-stater Emily Leonard (9th, 16:51). DeKalb senior Kelsey Schrader (10th, 16:54) is back in 2A, where she was second in 2011.

Luczak's state race was almost a microcosm of her season. Luczak was hampered by injuries, but she wouldn't let them deter her from being among the state's best.

"What she did at state last year just amazes me," Hass said. "She was limping around (beforehand). It didn't hurt her when she ran, but at that half mile she was literally 120th, 130th place. Then she was in the triangle and she was in 28th place and then she finished sixth. When she runs like that, she's awful tough."

Even after working her way up so far after placing 53rd at state in 2011 (17:59), Luczak expressed disappointment that she didn't reach the top five. In track, she qualified for state in the 1,600 and 3,200, where she finished 10th (10:51.08) to miss a top-nine, all-state medal by 2.56 seconds.

"As years go on, you become more experienced and more mature and you get stronger. I think that's kind of how I am now," Luczak said. "If I stay non-injured, I really think I can do well. My goal is top five again. I just don't want to get sixth again. My ultimate goal would be top three, but we'll see how that ends up."

To stay fit and healthy this summer, Luczak cross-trained and received orthotics, which hopefully will correct problems with her left leg. On July 4, Luczak was the female champion of Glen Ellyn's annual Freedom Four 4-mile run (24:22) and 16th overall.

After a slight shin problem, Luczak recently began building her mileage and ran well in Wednesday's team time trial on the 2.92-mile home course at Camera Park in Glendale Heights.

"She had one of the best summers of anyone on the team and she will have that success. She's getting stronger and I think she will be ready to go when it counts," Hass said.

Luczak's running adventures have included becoming friends with Graham so they were excited when the news became official in April that they would become teammates.

After being at the same 5k races during grade schools, the two

gradually became friends and then realized how close they lived apart. They attended running camp together at the University of Wisconsin.

“When I found out she’s coming, I’m like, ‘Oh my God. This is like the best news ever.’ ” Luczak said.

Graham said her family had planned to find another home in Lombard but when their house sold in a day, they were forced to shop quickly. Graham said her Glen Ellyn home in Glenbard West’s school district technically might be closer to Wheaton North.

“I was really sad to be going but there was this plus side that the (Glenbard West) team was really great so I’m looking forward to helping them as best I can,” Graham said.

“So far, I really enjoy the team here. I really liked my old team and my old coach (Joe Latala) so it was really tough, but you have to adapt to life and go with the flow, and Mr. Hass is a great coach, we’ve had great workouts and the girls are real supportive.”

The Hilltoppers found out Graham was officially coming when she texted her after rumors surfaced during the weekend of the track team’s annual home Sue Pariseau Invite in April. Because of flooding to Duchon Field, the meet was moved to Benedictine University and came off as planned.

The Hilltoppers and Graham often crossed paths literally during training runs on the Prairie Path.

“She’s been here all summer and it seems like she’s been here longer than that because she’s fit in so well,” Hass said. “It’s not easy coming from a different program of getting a new coach or new teammates. I give her all the credit in the world for how she’s adapted and kind of embraced what we do here.”

Not expecting to contend for all-state honors, Graham shaved 37 seconds off her best time and finished 20th (17:01) as the third-highest finishing freshmen just behind two others who also ran 17:01.

In track, Graham once again excelled with an all-state fifth in the 3,200 (10:42.42) behind three seniors after running a school-record 10:41.92 at sectionals.

“I didn’t think I would be all-state (in cross country), not even close. I was thinking I would be in the 30s, but I just remember I found myself more up there and I just wanted to keep myself there. It was very hard, probably the hardest race I ever ran,” Graham said.

“I surprised myself (in state cross country), but track was even better. I think my coach really got me there because I was struggling at the beginning of the season.”

Besides already having a friendship, Graham said Luczak also provided someone to train with around her pace for the summer. That especially was motivation to push Graham when she traditionally struggled at the outset of training.

“I feel like we’re going to be the best running buddies,” Luczak said. “Then Madeline, of course, is amazing, and we have such a good pack so I think we can do really well, but we’re also lucky because we have such a deep team. I feel like there are so many people that could be on the varsity, especially freshmen. We’ll see how it goes, but I’m excited.”

The progress and perseverance of freshmen played a key role in last year’s success. Rogers (59th, 17:44) and Sedall (78th, 17:55) were the Hilltoppers’ No. 4 and 5 finishers behind graduated standout Emma Reifel (51st, 17:38) and ahead of graduated teammates Cynthia Mote (105th, 18:13) and Kate Majewski (143rd, 18:33).

The Hilltoppers were making their third straight state team appearance, taking sixth in 2011 and ninth in 2010. Perez and Reifel ran with all three lineups and Luczak, Mote and Majewski both twice.

“I just loved (state cross country). I loved going down and sleeping overnight and going out to eat – and the race. I loved it all. It was really exciting. I hope to be there this year,” Rogers said.

“You can choose to feel pressure (this season), but Mr. Hass does a good job of making us not feel pressure. He just tells us to have fun

and then it'll be so much more enjoyable for us and just to get excited."

Rogers has even more reason to be excited for 2013. She spent most of last season sidelined with a back injury and not even able to work out by running. She returned with a flurry, winning her first race on the frosh-soph level in the next-to-last dual meet and claiming the sophomore-level conference race by nearly 12 seconds.

Rogers earned a spot in the sectional lineup through a time trial and was the Hilltoppers' No. 4 finisher and 20th overall. Her state time is among the 100 fastest by freshmen all-time.

In track, Rogers ran a fast-enough time in the 3,200 during the regular season to contend for a state berth (11:19.65), but the Hilltoppers could only enter two at sectionals and those spots went to Perez and Luczak.

Instead, Rogers, Sedall and Reick qualified for the state track meet in the 3,200 relay with Majewski.

"Even though I was really welcomed (as a freshman), I just feel more comfortable and more confident," Rogers said. "We know that nothing's set and promised, that anything will happen, but we're all working really hard to make sure it does happen."

"Grace and I push each other in workouts so we know what both of us can achieve," Sedall said. "I feel less pressure than last year because you felt like freshman year you had to almost show yourself, prove yourself and now everyone knows who they are and what they can do."

In her cross country debut, Sedall finished right next to Rogers at sectionals (21st) after being the No. 4 finisher at regionals (17th).

Sedall recalled state being a special day partly because it was a great way to celebrate Mote's birthday.

"All I remember is the celebration afterward," Sedall said. "Right when you cross the finish line, there's a ton of people waiting for you and everyone's cheering and hugging. You're just swarmed by all of

these people and Mr. Hass is hugging me and he was almost crying. It was like all blurry but a lot of good memories.”

During track, Sedall also ran the recognized frosh-soph outdoor school record for the 3,200 (11:45.65) because it occurred on that level, although Luczak, Rogers and Reick (11:41.19) had faster times in varsity races.

Reick also was bothered by injuries during cross country but had a relatively pain-free track season and has continued to flourish.

“I’m really proud of how she’s come along and kind of matured as an athlete dealing with injuries but also to prevent injuries from happening,” Hass said.

Ozog and senior Annika Manning bring additional experience. Ozog was the team’s No. 6 finisher at state in 2011 (126th, 18:47) and competed in last year’s state series. Ozog was the Hilltoppers’ No. 7 finisher at regionals (20th) and sectionals (46th).

This year, the Hilltoppers could receive a freshman boost from Janie Nabholz and Kathryn Kenwood. Another newcomer is junior all-state track performer Emma Gambol, who previously played volleyball. Gambol was an all-stater in May with eighth places in triple jump and with the 1,600 relay.

“She’s surviving,” Hass said of Gambol. “She’s just trying to get in shape for track. She’s trying to get mentally tougher as these long runs go.”

The West Suburban Conference Silver Division once again will be a survival test. Besides the Hilltoppers, Hinsdale Central (11th), York (14th) and Lyons Township (20th) qualified for state as teams in 2012. They and Downers Grove North all are state-ranked in the pre-season.

At the 2012 Silver Meet, Perez and Luczak were second and third to Fisher and earned all-conference honors for top-16 finishers. Besides champion Rogers, Dorsey (5th), Shaver (8th) and Burt (12th) were all-conference in the sophomore race and Manning was an all-conference seventh in the junior varsity race.

“We have a lot of girls coming back from last year, which is super exciting,” Perez said. “I’d say we’re a fairly young team so I’m really excited to see how the girls do this year and how much better they’ve already gotten from last year because I know they worked hard over the summer.

“I’m looking forward to everything. I hope it doesn’t go by too fast this year because I want to enjoy it.”

- by Bill Stone