

RECAPS

STORY: Red Devils sixth on varsity, frosh-soph levels at Hornet-Red Devil Invite

After sitting out all of last cross country season with hip surgery, Hinsdale Central senior Veronica Peterson was excited about competing in the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational.

"I was really nervous going into the start because I haven't raced cross country in a whole two years," Peterson said. "I got into it right away and I remembered how to race."

What was even better was Peterson shared the experience with her teammates, even more so than she might have imagined.

When Peterson finished in a career-best time at Katherine Legge Memorial Park, senior teammate Becky Ventura was just in front of her as the Red Devils' No. 3 and 4 team finishers.

They helped the unranked Red Devils finish sixth (165 points) in a field that included four of the top-seven teams in the Illinois Prep Harrier Class 3A pre-season rankings, including the No. 1 and 2 teams -- defending state champion New Trier and state runner-up Wheaton Warrenville South.

"I've never raced with a teammate by my side the whole time and it was really fun," Peterson said. "We practice, we train together, we run all of our practices together so it felt like it wasn't as nervewracking because we were running together like we normally do."

Senior Jill Hardies was fifth (17:59.28) in the first time the three-time all-stater has completed the race at the invite.

Junior Becca Marcotte (20th, 19:01.13), Ventura (30th, 19:29.92) and Peterson (31st, 19:35.23) also earned individual medals for top-40 finishes, followed by seniors Zoe Larson (93rd, 21:29.16) and Grace Cook (151st, 22:31.27). Ventura was the varsity's Runner of the Meet.

The Red Devils only finished behind No. 5 Glenbard West (51), New Trier (55), No. 7 Palatine (60), Wheaton Warrenville South (139) and unranked Naperville Central (147) and ahead of seventh-place Minooka (201). Glenbard West and Palatine were sixth and 10th at state in 2011.

Besides Hardies, there also were five other runners who earned 2011 all-state honors by finishing among the top 25 at the state meet. Glenbard West junior Madeline Perez, 15th at state last year, won the race in a course-record 16:59.40.

Throw in freshman Emma Sullivan's team-best performance from the sophomore race (8th, 20:07.17), and the Red Devils could have finished fourth on the varsity.

"I've never walked out of a meet in sixth place and been so happy because I knew going in that all of the pieces of the puzzle weren't there (on varsity)," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

“This will be the best, most competitive girls meet in the state outside of the state meet, team and individually. You had four of the top seven (ranked) teams and I think it’s actually better than that because Palatine was ranked seventh. When we put everything together, we’re going to be a real good team this year.”

This was a quite different scenario from 2011, when most of the Red Devils competed in the open race. The only two entries in the varsity race were Hardies and Ventura, who finished in 35th in 20:19.06. Hardies dropped out of the race after being in contention for the lead at the one-mile mark with graduated eventual winner and 3A state champion Amanda Fox of Naperville Central.

“It’s definitely encouraging that we had a full (varsity) team running,” Peterson said. “It’s really encouraging to see all of us running so much faster times than we ever have before. It just shows how much the hard work of the summer has paid off. It’s a really good starting point to have for all of us to know that we can push ourselves a lot more and get faster.”

Hardies was hoping for a stronger start after taking time off during the summer to completely heal a foot injury that also resulted in her focusing on the shorter 1,600 in track rather than the 3,200.

While Perez had a great race, breaking Fox’s record time from last year (17:05.88), Hardies feels she could have challenged for second if she had run different tactically. Hard training the past couple of weeks also took its toll as the race progressed.

“I’m very, very disappointed. I went out really fast and I kind of forgot how to run cross country meets,” Hardies said. “I’ve got so accustomed to running the (1,600) in track that I just did not run it very smartly. I went out way too fast. There’s a lot of girls who now are in very good shape and I’m not there yet, but I think I will be when I get onto a flat course, which I’m good at.”

Several other top-10 state contenders were in the field. Perez was followed by New Trier senior Courtney Ackerman (17:13.48), Glenbard West sophomore Lisa Luczak (17:20.00), New Trier sophomore Mimi Smith (17:36.27) with Palatine senior Tess Wasowicz sixth (18:16.94). At the 2011 state meet, Ackerman was fourth, one of only two underclassmen to finish ahead of Hardies, Smith was 10th and Luczak was 53rd as the Hilltoppers’ No. 2 finisher.

On Saturday, Hardies was a clear second to Perez after one mile (5:21 to 5:28) and fourth after two (11:44), just slightly ahead of Smith.

“Right now (Perez is) in the best shape in the state. There’s no way I could have ran a minute faster (to win). I think I could have gotten second if I hadn’t gone out fast in the first mile,” Hardies said. “Everybody who I figured could beat me did. I just have a lot of work to do and I need to use this as motivation to do better in future races.”

“The way Madeline Perez ran, going out with Madeline was too fast. If Jill had gone out with the main pack, she probably would have been second or certainly in the top three,” McCabe said. “Jill isn’t happy with her finish, but our plan was to run a patient race and not to jump into the lead right away. She didn’t do that so she did a good job following that.”

Hardies sat out most of last cross country season, completing just one race prior to the week before the conference meet. Yet Hardies again rose to the occasion and finished fifth at state. If there's work to be done this season, she's at a much higher fitness level to achieve it.

She and the Red Devils will get to test themselves on the state course Sept. 8 in the Peoria Woodruff Invite at Detweiller Park.

"I'm obviously excited about being healthy, finally in the beginning of the season. Even though I'm not where I'd like to be, at least I'm running for the first time," Hardies said. "I got to finish that race so I was excited to just really do that, be able to say my senior year I finally ran (the Hornet-Red Devil). And I'm very proud of my team, too. They did really well."

Marcotte also is at a much better starting point after just one race in 2011 before the final three in the postseason because of a hamstring injury. She also was in rehab throughout the track season.

"I miss racing a lot. I missed it last spring a lot so I'm happy that I'm back," Marcotte said.

With a somewhat conservative approach, Marcotte was 17th at the first mile and moved up from 23rd the final mile, edging out Minooka's Kaitlin Frei by .03.

"Not as well as I thought (I could do), but this was my first race back. My injury was fine so I was really happy about that," Marcotte said. "I wanted to run as fast as I could but at the same time I didn't want to push it. I don't think I was in the right mindset. I don't think I was focused enough. I could have taken advantage of the downhills. It's just a starting point for everybody."

"Today was getting her feet wet. I'm glad she had a chance to do that before (Peoria Woodruff)," McCabe said.

"I thought if (Ventura and Peterson) could be top 30 that would be an optimal race for them and they were just outstanding. Zoe Larson and Grace Cook filled in admirably as they were needed today. Typically, they're going to be our top (junior varsity) runners, but who knows."

Even with her solid 2011 varsity season, Ventura beat her KLM best by a minute Saturday. Working together, Ventura and Peterson were 36th and 37th at one mile and 31st and 33rd at two. The next two finishers were within a second of Peterson.

"When we were coming up on people, we'd be like, 'Go now,' and then we'd pass them and then push ourselves up the hill and going down to pass people," Peterson said.

"We always run the same times at practice so we knew that we'd be coming in together and we knew that we were really good at pushing each other. We're like, 'Well, if we can push each other during practice, we can push each other during a race.'"

SOPHOMORE RACE

Instead of being too nervous for her first high-school race, Hinsdale Central freshman Emma Sullivan

overcame several challenges to accomplish her goals at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite.

The biggest one came with a boost during the race from coach Mark McCabe.

“(McCabe) was saying, ‘You’re at 13th, you have three more to get to the top 10.’ I just had an energy rush, and I started passing people,” Sullivan said.

By the time the 3.0-mile race had ended, Sullivan had achieved more than that. She finished an impressive eighth in 20:07.17 as the team’s top finisher.

“My goals were just to get in the top 20 or top 10, mostly top 10. I’m happy with what I did,” Sullivan said. “I feel like I did well, better than I usually do. I gave it my all and I did the best that I could.”

Sophomore Sara Folliard also had a strong season debut by taking 16th (20:31.31) to also earn a medal for a top-40 finish. The Red Devils’ other finishers were sophomores Tillie Kummerer (42nd, 21:47.02), Molly Leahy (44th, 21:52.37) and Anya Patel (59th, 22:10.19).

As a team, the Red Devils finished sixth (163 points). New Trier beat Minooka 58-66 for the team title.

Sullivan and Folliard were the team’s Runners of the Meet.

“Emma just ran outstanding, her first high-school race. She’ll run with the varsity next week (at Peoria Woodruff),” McCabe said.

“We had a number of outstanding races. Molly and Anya are just coming back from little tweaks. Tillie had a solid first race. Sara had an outstanding race. That’s the best race of her life.”

Sullivan started running competitively in sixth grade at Westview Hills Middle School in Clarendon Hills and was a two-time Class AA competitor at the Illinois Elementary School Association state meet. She was 92nd in 2010 and 68th last year (12:44 for 2.0 miles).

Even with the longer distance Saturday, Sullivan said she pretty much had the same emotions as her middle-school races.

“I felt like I had more endurance, I could finish stronger and do more damage,” Sullivan said. “For my first race, I was really nervous. Once the gun went off and I was in it, I wasn’t as nervous and I just got in it and started running.”

Sullivan was among the top 15 at the one-mile mark but suffered a temporary setback soon after. Sophomore teammate Susan Spencer, who was running alongside and near Sullivan, dropped out of the race.

“I looked back and didn’t see her. I just saw other colors and had no idea where she was,” Sullivan said. “I was kind of worrying about her, but I was like, ‘I just have to focus on my race. I have to finish and then I can see what’s up.’ ”

Folliard showed substantial improvement from last year's Hornet-Red Devil, when she finished 23rd in the roughly two-mile open race. Her two-mile split Saturday (13:39) was roughly 40 seconds ahead of her finishing time last year.

"I think I did pretty well. I got a (personal record) and it was a hard course," Folliard said. "I was tired. Then I saw my time and I was like, 'Oh. OK, good. It was worth it.'

"We thought coming in, top 15 to 20 would be outstanding (for Folliard)," McCabe said. "We've been talking about Sara stepping up to a whole new level and she is."

Since last season, Folliard has a freshman track season under her belt, running the 800, 1,600 and 3,200. She also feels a stronger distance base now that she is training with the varsity.

"Before I didn't really do as many long runs, but now we do them every week so that helps," Folliard said. "I've improved. And I'm faster now. Hopefully I can just keep improving because now that I've seen what I can do, hopefully I can do better."

OPEN RACE

Heading into the girls open race, the sixth and final race at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, the question continued to grow.

When would it finally start raining – and how hard?

"We'd been talking about it all week with the (effects from) Hurricane Isaac down south. We knew it was coming," junior Amanda Koronkiewicz said. "A lot of people thought it was going to be later in the afternoon but then when we got here this morning, it was so gloomy."

As it turned out, the rain never dampened the competitors. The girls open race time was bumped up a bit, and it was completed with just a mere drizzle. Heavy rains finally didn't arrive until the awards ceremony.

In her first cross country competition, freshman Brigid Mulligan was 16th (13:32.70) and Koronkiewicz was 18th (13:36.10).

Other medalists were freshman Emma Stapleton (21st, 13:57.83), seniors Julia Tabaczyk (25th, 14:09.20) and Meg Knister (31st, 14:20.17), freshman Madeline Sullivan (32nd, 14:20.74), sophomores Rachael McCann (34th, 14:21.93) and Jillian DeBoer (35th, 14:22.40) and junior Cristina Tye (40th, 14:28.60). Sophomore Maddy Melin (41st, 14:30.21), junior Sara Ramasastry (43rd, 14:35.41) and sophomore Victoria Burke (44th, 14:39.24) also placed among the top 45.

Mulligan and Ramasastry were named the team's Runners of the Meet.

"With drizzle and stuff, you can't really feel it when you're running. I honestly didn't really notice it," Koronkiewicz said. "It was actually kind of refreshing while you're running to have the nice little cool rain, but you've just got to not let it deter you, just push through, because there's so many other things that can go wrong."

Tabaczyk, Knister and Tye also were medalists in last year's open race with Tye again finishing 40th. Ramasastry made one of the biggest improvements from the 2011 results, climbing from 75th in 15:32.74. DeBoer moved up from 142nd in 16:47.55.

Koronkiewicz especially was excited to compete because she spent the 2011 Hornet-Red Devil Invite cheering from the sidelines. She was out with shin and hip problems until the third race of the season.

"I remember last year starting the season being like, 'I wish I could run.' It's good to be back racing and everything," Koronkiewicz said. "This season, my goal is) just focusing on times and trying to drop those and just making sure everything stays healthy because I've been so used to not finishing seasons because of my injuries – knowing where my limits are but not setting any limitations as well."

Saturday also marked the first time Koronkiewicz competed in a two-mile race in either cross country or track.

"I was telling Meg Knister, because we warmed up and cooled down together, it's always been three miles and in track I've done the 800 and one-mile," Koronkiewicz said. "It was different. I was kind of used to having that extra mile to push in, but I just told myself it was probably like a benefit not to do it."

-- By Bill Stone