

RECAPS

STORY: Red Devils take 11th at state; Hardies all-state for fourth time

Becky Ventura experienced about every emotion at her last cross country meet for Hinsdale Central.

She and fellow senior Katie Gelman were competing at the Class 3A state finals Saturday, Nov. 3, for the first time.

"I was talking with Katie and we're like, 'I can't believe we're here.' It's so cool," Ventura said. "Being my last high school race, I made sure I left on a high note and left the season feeling positive. I think just also to be at the state meet (inspired me)."

As Ventura left Peoria's Detweiller Park, there was a bit of sadness everything was over but there was a great feeling of accomplishment. She was among six Red Devils who ran personal records as they finished a strong 11th in their team return to state after a one-year absence.

"I thought we all ended with a punch and all happy with how we performed. The competition was definitely very tough, but I think one of our goals for state was for all seven of us to have a solid race. We definitely left the course feeling that way," Ventura said.

"It wasn't perfect, but I don't think you ever have a perfect race. I left feeling content so I was happy with my race. Actually, after the race, I was really sad because I was thinking, 'Aw, it's over.' I was happy but also sad because that was my last cross country race at Central. It was a little bittersweet at the end. But racewise, it was one of my better races."

Senior Jill Hardies became the first four-time all-stater in program history as she finished eighth (16:49) on the 3.0-mile course. Junior Becca Marcotte was 83rd (17:57), followed by sophomore Sophie May (98th, 18:06), freshman Emma Sullivan (101st, 18:07), sophomore Sarah Brennan (122nd, 18:22), Ventura (151st, 18:40) and Gelman (165th, 18:50). Seniors Veronica Peterson and Allison Shaner and sophomores Sara Folliard, Molly Leahy and Susan Spencer also were part of the postseason roster.

Making their 10th state appearance over the past 11 seasons, the Red Devils (304 points) were 28 points behind 10th-place Maine South (276) in the 25-team field to equal their 2009 team finish.

The Red Devils were the highest finishing team among the five qualifiers from the Marist Sectional Oct. 27, where they were third, and the second-highest finisher team among four West Suburban Conference Silver Division state teams. Glenbard West (3rd, 138) earned its first state trophy since 1980 behind champion Naperville North (113) and Lake Park (133). York (315) and Lyons Township (491) were 14th and 20th.

"We went in with the hope that top 10 would be our ultimate push and we were 11th so we were right there. Unfortunately, we had a couple of people that were not quite 100 percent back from illness. But everyone ran extremely well and we finished the season off strongly," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"Our goal this year was to re-establish the Hinsdale Central girls tradition and I think we did a good job of

doing that. I think everybody left the school on Saturday night feeling good about what they accomplished this year, and what the future holds. With four of our top five (at state) coming back, and the younger kids moving up and some potential additions, we're really looking forward to the years ahead."

The seniors have left quite a legacy with their performances, and perhaps even more their leadership, after the Red Devils did not qualify for state last year after being decimated by injuries.

Hardies had her third straight top-10 state finish not only in the fastest state field ever but while continuing to battle painful injuries in her left foot the past few weeks.

"I thought that was absolutely the best possible race she could run on that day," McCabe said. "She's been dealing with the stress reaction in the foot and some tendinitis. It's definitely impacted her training over the past few weeks. But she's a warrior. She guts it out and competes and does the best she can do.

"We thought going in, based on what's happened the last few weeks and the strength of the field, if she'd be in the top 10 it would be a very successful day."

Optimal weather conditions for most runners -- cloudy, cool, little-to-no wind -- combined forces with outstanding competition for blazing results.

Glenbard West junior Madeline Perez won in an all-time girls course record of 16:02 with second-place York senior Emma Fisher (16:15) also breaking the previous mark of 16:21. New Trier senior Courtney Ackerman (16:27) and Lake Park senior Kaylee Flanagan (16:39) were third and fourth after being fourth and third, respectively, in the 2011 race behind two seniors. Three sophomores were fifth through seventh, Fenwick's Olivia Ryan (16:43), Glenbard West's Lisa Luczak (16:45) and Jacobs' Lauren Van Vlierberge (16:47).

The previous state finals record was 16:22 by Woodstock's Kayla Beattie in the 2010 2A final. The former Class 3A state finals record was 16:24 by 2011 champion Amanda Fox of Naperville Central.

As an individual entry at the 2011 state meet, Hardies was fifth (16:59), 10 seconds slower than her race Saturday, after another season training around injuries. Hardies was second in 2010 (16:34) by two seconds to then-senior Ariel Michalek of Oswego East and 17th in 2009 (17:51).

Hardies now is among just 29 runners to earn four all-state honors in the largest enrollment class races since the girls cross country state meet began in 1979. 2009 Hinsdale Central graduate Elaine Kuckertz was all-state from 2006-08, finishing as high as sixth in 2007 and 2008.

"(Hardies is) a gutsy performer and at the end of the season, in the meets that count the most, she's always there," McCabe said.

"She shouldn't be anything but proud about what she did (Saturday). She's one in a handful of four-time all-staters. I think there's about 25 of them and if you look in terms of their performances (combined), she's probably one of the top dozen. Her body of work is as good as any senior distance runner in the state of Illinois and after track she'll further bolster that resume."

On Sept. 8 at Detweiller, Hardies (17:15) was second to Ackerman (16:45) at the First to the Finish Invite. On Sept. 15, Flanagan ran the then all-time best 16:21 the following week with Perez (16:29) and Fisher (16:58) second and third.

When the Red Devils finished fourth at that meet, the Red Devils were excited that the results validated that they should be able to return to state as a team. But they weren't satisfied.

They ran significantly faster Saturday. The other four Red Devils from that varsity lineup (Marcotte, Sullivan, Ventura and May) beat their Sept. 8 performances by at least 26 seconds with May dropping an incredible 1:33. The invite was her first race in nearly a year since being sidelined by injuries midway through her freshman year.

May would have run even faster Saturday, but she again was dealing with stomach pains and was knocked down during a pin turn early in the first mile.

"I was probably on the ground five seconds because girls were running over me, tripping. I was trying to get up as fast as I could but probably by the time I got up, 20 girls passed me because they were going by so fast," May said.

"Just getting to run in the meet was amazing, just being able to be a part of that. The atmosphere's really high and it put the pressure on you in ways that are good and bad. In the end, it balanced itself out, I realized I had a new PR and I'm realizing where I'm at and where I could be. Coming up through this whole season has made state what it is."

It was a long road back for Marcotte back to the state meet, but the path ahead seems to be getting smoother. The only other runner with previous state experience besides Hardies, Marcotte beat her 2010 state time by 13 seconds, when she also was the No. 2 team finisher (87th, 18:10) for the 19th-place Red Devils.

"I didn't really have any expectations going in freshman year and this year I put a lot of pressure on myself to do well. That was the big difference," Marcotte said. "I wanted to be in the top 40. The times were really fast. The conditions were really ideal."

Marcotte competed toward the end of last season but she was still ailing from a pre-season hamstring injury. She never competed during track to hasten her recovery.

After being relatively injury-free this year, Marcotte could not shake an illness the past few weeks.

"I couldn't train as hard as I should have," Marcotte said. "I thought I got a decent time. (But) I'm not satisfied with it."

Brennan and Gelman did not compete at the First to the Finish Invite. Brennan actually sat out most of the season recovering from her quadricep injury, not competing until the Silver Meet Oct. 13. Gelman conquered electrolyte issues that contributed to her being unable to finish races last year, including the sectionals. Still, Gelman sat the early part of the season to get healthy before making her season debut in the next race Sept. 13.

Once May rejoined the lineup, she tried her best to remain healthy to run and train consistently.

“I definitely have learned a lot about myself and my body and what works best for me training wise, pushing myself and not overdoing it,” May said. “Now I know what I can handle and what I cannot, and doing the little things makes a big difference, like rolling out (my legs) after practice and stretching out. It’s a confidence booster that makes it more exciting and the more excited you get, the more motivated you are to do well and get points for the team and want to do well for the team.”

Sullivan gained a tremendous amount of confidence from her first season of high-school cross country. She had big-meet experience from two Illinois Elementary School Association cross country state meets in Normal with Westview Hills Middle School, but Sullivan outdid those performances Saturday. Last year, she was 68th (12:44 for 2.0 miles) in the sixth-through-eighth graders race in the AA division for higher-enrollment schools.

Sullivan was 15th among freshman finishers Saturday and named the team’s Athlete of the Meet.

“I feel like I did accomplish something (Saturday), and I did improve from the beginning of the year and from last year, too,” Sullivan said.

“I was a little nervous, but I was mostly excited because I was just happy to be down there with my team. I was just trying to do the best for my team. I was trying to stay with Sophie, too. It felt kind of different because there were way more schools than in middle school, but the crowd felt the same because it was a big meet for both of them.”

Sullivan made her varsity debut at Detweiller in September, taking 56th in 19:06 just in front of Ventura. Sullivan was motivated by her older teammates at state. Sullivan also received advice beforehand from Hardies and Marcotte, especially to get out fast and not get boxed in early.

“I just wanted to do especially well for (the seniors) because it’s their last race ever in high school,” Sullivan said. “My expectations at the beginning of the year? I didn’t really have any. I just wanted to do the best that I could. My goal going into the summer was to be on varsity and I did accomplish that so I’m really happy about that and I think I did well.”

The seniors provided a positive influence throughout the program. This year’s senior captains were Gelman, Peterson, Shaner and Ventura.

Peterson missed the 2011 season recovering from surgery but worked her way back to compete this season and was the first alternate throughout the postseason. Shaner, the “team mom,” also was injured most of last season and has worked her way back. Shaner competed occasionally as she prepares for a strong track season.

“None of the success would be possible without our four senior captains, who have just been the glue to this team,” McCabe said. “I told them in all of my years of coaching, they did as good a job of captains as any group I’ve had and they’ve just been tremendous.”

“(The seniors) contributed so much. They were the captains and were always making sure we were doing

what we were supposed to do," May said. "They'd tell us to calm down when we were going over the line and if we were going overboard, getting too excited or too loud. They designed the shirts, planned a lot of things for us and helped us make the season a lot more successful. Their work made it a great season for us."

A four-year team member, Ventura made great strides last year when she was among the few varsity runners to be hampered by injuries. She often was among incomplete lineups at varsity races, including the only varsity runner for last year's regular-season varsity invite at Detweiller.

"I learned a lot from running by myself. You need a lot of mental strength," Ventura said in September. "You have like two sides in your head the entire race. The one's saying, 'You're tired. Why are you doing this to yourself?' and the other one is, 'Go for the gold.' You learn what spots you really need to push through and I guess the experience has really helped me out this season and also the training this summer. Working hard, I can see the benefits."

The seniors' emphasis for this state trip was team bonding. Ventura and Hardies reminisced about being teammates back at Hinsdale Middle School.

"Sometimes we'd ditch practice to go running. We were supposed to stay within the school boundaries, and often we'd just leave," Ventura said. "We were talking about this like, 'Wow, this I our last cross country race (together).' We've definitely grown up a lot. It's cool to see us improve over all of these years."

State was a great reward after handling other responsibilities as well. Besides school, Ventura was among four drum majors for the school's marching band and would often perform Friday nights and quickly go home to get ready for invites the following morning.

"I've learned a lot through cross country. It hasn't just been a sport for me. It's been motivation. It's kind of been an outlet for a lot of things. It's something completely different from school," Ventura said. "Often times, I'm stressed out. Going to practice makes me feel more at ease, relieves some anxiety or stress."

"Cross country has meant a lot to me. I've made a lot of good friends through it and it's made me become a good leader and grow as a person. It's influenced everything in my life."