

RECAPS

IHSA Championships

Bill Stone
Nov 8, 2011

Hinsdale Central junior Jill Hardies had a challenging act to follow Saturday.

Hardies not only wanted to improve upon last year's second-place performance at the Class 3A girls cross country state meet at Peoria's Detweiller Park. She also was trying to do so after battling injuries most of the season.

Hardies responded with the second-best state showing in program history.

She placed fifth (16:59) on the 3.0-mile course and joined 2009 graduate Elaine Kuckertz as the only Red Devils to achieve a program-best three all-state honors for top-25 state finishes.

"I wanted to get top five. That was the goal going into the race. I always want to do better than that, but realistically, that was a good goal," Hardies said.

"I knew going into it that winning was a stretch. It's disappointing getting fifth, considering I got second last year, but in the big scheme of things, considering I was injured and how hard of a season I had, top five wasn't that bad. I had the goal in the back of my mind to win, but with being injured that was probably unrealistic."

Naperville Central senior Amanda Fox (16:24) dominated the race, winning in a 3A-record time by 13 seconds over Oswego East senior Ariel Michalek (16:37), the 2010 state champion in a then-record 16:34 with Hardies just two seconds behind.

Lake Park junior Kaylee Flanagan (16:43) and New Trier junior Courtney Ackerman (16:50) were third and fourth. Maine South sophomore Emily Leonard (17:00) was sixth.

"I think overall we were both really happy with the race. We came into the race with the goal of being in the top five with the knowledge there were probably six or seven girls who could have, or should have, gone in thinking they could win it. That's the mindset Jill went in with," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"She went out and ran aggressively, which is one of the things that makes her such a great competitor, and both held on and came back well in the final mile to get fifth, which was a solid race all the way around."

This was the first time since 2001 that the Red Devils didn't qualify for state as a team. Hinsdale Central juniors Katie Gelman, Victoria Peterson and Allison Shaner made the trip with Hardies and McCabe and kept split times. Several other teammates and parents drove to Detweiller to watch the race.

Not even considering competing alone and Hardies' missed and altered training schedule, rising to the occasion on the day isn't easy.

Hardies joined several elite groups with Saturday's finish. Over 33 girls state meets in IHSA history, Hardies now is among approximately just 20 runners to earn more than one top-five state finish in either the one-class, Class AA or current Class 3A races.

In Red Devils' history, Hardies ties the all-state performances of Kuckertz, who was sixth in 2008 and 2007 and ninth in 2006. Hardies finished 17th in 2009.

"I didn't realize that. That's really cool. Hopefully, I can get three more (all-state medals) for track and cross country," Hardies said.

"She's consistently excellent. When you look over the past five seasons of cross country and track, nobody's got a better body of work than she does, and that'll continue," McCabe added. "We talk a lot about the importance of body of work and consistency and that goes hand in hand with athletic integrity. You're not always going to get a (personal record), but you'll always be in the hunt."

Hardies tried her best to contend for the title Saturday. Flanagan usually likes to go out hard and Hardies stayed with her and Fox, going through the first mile at 5:16.

By the two-mile mark, Fox was clearly in command. Hardies was seventh with Leonard beside her and a pack of three runners six seconds back.

"I didn't run my smartest race. I went out too fast. I think I could have run a faster (overall) time," Hardies said. "I was up with the leaders the first mile before they passed me, but I always do that normally. It was disappointing that I ran 25 seconds slower than last year, but I have to keep it in perspective."

Hardies' competitive edge, though, still shone through. Coming down the final straightaway, Hardies passed New Trier junior Jessica Ackerman (11th, 17:11) and outkicked Glenbard East senior Lindsey Rakosnik (7th, 17:04), the 3A state champion in the 800-meter run at the state track meet in May. Surging, sixth-place Leonard was one second behind Hardies.

"If Jill's side by side at the end of an honestly paced race, she'll kick with anyone," McCabe said.

Fox finished second only once this season, in the No. 1 flight of Wheaton North's Falcon Classic to Flanagan, who had been undefeated before finishing second to Ackerman at the Niles West Sectional. With Hardies battling the hilly terrain of Dellwood Park at the Lockport Sectional, an extra stress to her shin splints, she finished second to Michalek by 19 seconds.

"Amanda is the best runner in the state by far. That was unquestionable," Hardies said. "I had to run out of my mind (to win). I can't do the imagining, but I could have probably fought for second if I hadn't been hurt. The four girls who beat me are really good runners and had really good seasons and, fortunately, no injuries for the most part."

In 2010, Hardies bounced back from a stress fracture diagnosed during the summer that kept her out of

competing until 10 days before she won the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet.

The comeback was harder this season. She usually competed at less than 100 percent, and, more importantly, was trying to overcome her normal training workload she had to curb or alter while trying to recover. She also didn't have much of a base training carryover from track since she had to rest a foot injury just to be able to qualify for state in the 3,200-meter run. She ended up having to drop out of that race at state finals after her all-state third in 2009 helped the Red Devils win their first state championship in that sport.

"I think (the layoffs) affected my racing," Hardies said. "Last season I had a stress fracture, but I was only out five weeks. This past year, I have been out more weeks than that. Not necessarily consecutively, but with chunks of injuries."

For the first time, she competed at the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Sept. 3, but she dropped out with pain at the one-mile mark after running stride for stride with Fox.

Hardies didn't race again until the Sept. 15 triangular at York with Lyons Township. She finished eight seconds behind York junior Emma Fisher (16:05 to 16:13 for 2.85 miles), but both shattered Kuckertz's course record of 16:29.4 from 2007.

"After that York dual meet, I thought I was just going to have a terrible season and not even be top-15 at state," Hardies said.

When they met again at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 15 at LT, Fisher won in a course-record time (17:07.0 for 3.0 miles) with Hardies second (17:22.9). At state, Fisher was 12th (17:12) with the fastest state-meet time in York history since the race was lengthened from 2.5 to 3.0 miles in 2002.

Before track, Hardies will compete in at least two more cross country races at the Nike Cross Nationals Midwest Regional Sunday in Terre Haute, Ind., and the Foot Locker Cross Country Championships Midwest Regional Nov. 26 in Kenosha, Wis.

"I'm proud of how every week I improved, especially compared to (the Silver Meet), when I think I did really bad," Hardies said. "I really just use this as motivation for track season. I've learned to mentally stay strong. I've grown a lot more, both physically. It feels different for me to run because I'm taller and my stride got kind of messed up. Track's my favorite anyway so hopefully I'll use the disappointment from this season to kick some butt."

Fox's triumph Saturday is an excellent example of perseverance paying off. She finished seventh at state as a sophomore in 2009 (17:27) and, just six seconds slower in 2010, dropped to 34th (17:33) in the fastest overall girls state race in IHSA history. In May, Fox she earned her first all-state track medal with ninth in the 3,200.

Courtney Ackerman, the only three-time all-stater in New Trier girls cross country history, missed the 2011 track postseason and state meet because of a rare leg injury referred to a stress reaction. Twin sister Jessica was second in the 3,200 after Courtney was second in 2010.

During the summer of 2010, Hardies and Fox were roommates at the University of Wisconsin Cross Country Camp of Champions.

"I like looking at (Fox) as motivation. She didn't have her best junior cross country season like obviously I didn't," Hardies said. "Actually, we're really good friends. I'm really happy for her. I hope something like that will happen for me."

"Nobody was going to beat Amanda (on Saturday). She's a testament to long-term persistence and working at it. Ours is a sport that rewards consistency over time," McCabe said.

"There wasn't anybody (at state) who knows Amanda and wasn't happy for her. She's a great person as well as a great runner, and at the end of the day, that's the goal. We talk about one of our goals as being one of the teams that when our team wins, others are happy for you, too, because you win in the right way."

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