

When recuperating senior Annie Zaher warmed up with the actual Hinsdale Central girls cross country varsity lineup prior to the conference meet Oct. 17, other teams and coaches began to wonder.

“(Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe) joked that we’ll fake some people out. I was like, ‘Really? People just noticed me?’ ” Zaher said.

At the Class 3A Lyons Township Regional Saturday, Oct. 24, Zaher actually did compete for the first time this season.

After waiting more than eight months to represent the Red Devils in any kind of race, Zaher finished third – and looked and felt ahead of schedule.

“It was kind of like a dream come true. Originally I didn’t know if I was going to get to run this season, but now I feel I was able to get a race earlier than I originally expected so it was awesome,” Zaher said.

“I wasn’t sure the next time I’d race but it was regionals and I still have sectionals and state so it was definitely earlier to get it than I expected.”

The addition of Zaher gave the Red Devils an emotional lift and a new feeling this season – a first-place finish against strong competition. They captured their fourth straight regional title by edging higher-ranked LT 30-36 in Western Springs.

Sophomore Reilly Revord (17:33.89) won the 3.06-mile race by 7.56 seconds over LT freshman Emily Barcelona (17:41.45).

Third-place Zaher (17:47.06) and fifth-place sophomore Grace McCabe (18:04.32) also earned regional medals for top-five finishes. All three runners shared the team’s Athlete of the Meet honors.

Senior Mackie Stevens was eighth (18:18.51) and junior Molly Caveney (19:01.46) and freshmen Kayla Byrne (19:41.77) and Taylor Waldron (19:46.40) were 13th, 15th and 16th.

“It was great to have Annie back. It just added to the team and added to the strength of us,” Revord said. “The team appreciated all of the hard work coming in and making it a good start to the three big races coming up. Everybody was really excited.”

The Red Devils, No. 16 in the final DyeStatIL 3A rankings Oct. 20, play host to the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 11 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 31, at Katherine Legge Memorial Park and should get a top-five finish to qualify for the 3A state meet Nov. 7 in Peoria.

They actually will be among the favorites to win the sectional with No. 7 Lions and No. 17 Lockport, winners of the Plainfield South Regional.

LT's top-five finishers at regionals were 2-6-7-10-11. At the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 17, the Red Devils (80) were third to LT (67) and Glenbard West (34) with a six-runner lineup. Without Zaher Saturday, the Lions would have won the regional by six points.

"We would always plug in Annie after each meet and see where we were. Now that she was in (Saturday's) race, it was nice to see the actuality," Grace McCabe said.

"I think we did the best we could without her, knowing we weren't at full strength but still trying to make up for that. Now that she's back, this definitely gives us a big lift because we know we're at full strength and can pretty much contend against anyone now."

For Mark McCabe, this regional victory brought back memories of 2005. That year, the Red Devils were fourth at state, their first top-five finish ever, but had only won the conference meet during the regular season.

"When you run a really tough schedule, that's often how it's going to play out. Plus, missing one of your top athletes magnifies that," Mark McCabe said.

"Was (Zaher) physically able to (run at conference)? Yes. But there's no sense in rushing things. We've been patient all along but it pays off. It's hard to be patient sometimes but we've said, you don't want to give up what you want most for what you want at the moment. And what we want most is to have her ready for the end of the season – and beyond."

Zaher won the 1,600-meter run at the 2014 3A girls track state meet but she missed most of this past track season with a stress reaction. Her last track race was Feb. 20 indoors at York.

On July 24, Zaher actually competed at Peoria's Detweiller Park, site of the Nov. 7 state meet, in the annual Detweiller at Dark invitational. However in August arose another feared stress reaction in the other foot.

Zaher never had an MRI but she wore a protective boot for a couple of weeks. By mid-September, things began looking up for this season as she was able to cross-train and maintain her fitness.

"Annie's such an emotional leader as well. She's been with us the whole season but this was the first time she physically towed the line with the girls," Mark McCabe said.

"She helps the team performance just to have her there, but she helps everybody else because they're jazzed just about the fact that she's back."

Zaher was going to run slightly conservative yet keep the lead pack in sight and roughly a 5:50 first mile. When she crossed the mile marker during the actual race, she was at 5:35.

"I was just like, 'Wow, a lot faster than I had planned,' " Zaher said. "I kind of freaked out but at the same time there were girls in front of me. I still felt pretty good so I just kept going with it."

Zaher eventually caught St. Ignatius' Kyleigh Spearing (4th, 17:54.27), who went out with Revord and Barcelona.

First place remained in question until Revord closed well the final 400 meters. That was not only impressive considering the wet and windy course conditions but also because Revord had been battling illness late in the week.

"Winning a regional title is definitely really cool," Revord said. "Just before the race I kind of took (illness) out of my mind. I didn't feel really well and I tried to focus on the race and focus on what needed to be done and knew what I could do. I knew I could win, even if I was not feeling 100 percent."

This was the third straight top-five finish for Revord against many top-25, all-state candidates.

"She's not only peaking when she wants to but she's incredibly consistent, which was our goal this year, to work on consistency and confidence," Mark McCabe said. "We talked about the goal of being regional champion. Now she can go into any race confident she's going to be at the front of the race."

Grace McCabe also gained some needed confidence. She was slightly off the lead pack, but she also was 7.16 seconds ahead of LT's No. 2 finisher, senior Vanessa Flaherty (18:11.48).

"I'd say it's my best race so far, even though it wasn't great," Grace McCabe said.

"I was happy with my race. It wasn't a fantastic race but I think it was my best race of the year because I just went into it more positively and also having Annie there helped, knowing it was full strength. I never really got into contact with Annie, which I should have done. That's why I wasn't extremely happy."

McCabe spent the early part of the race with Stevens and LT's trail pack. Stevens ended up .76 behind LT senior Hannah Dutler (7th, 18:17.75). Caveney, who split four LT runners, was 6.69 seconds from senior Natalie Jaramillo (11th, 18:54.77), LT's No. 5 finisher. At the Silver Meet, Caveney was roughly 21 seconds from LT's No. 5 finisher.

"Grace had her best race of the year. Grace is a gamer. She always comes on at

the end of the year," Mark McCabe said.

"Mackie had another really solid race. She's someone else who has come so far and gained consistency at such a higher level. Molly is just ready to bust out and is showing it in practice. I think the next two weeks is really going to be great. We have five girls showing great consistency, which is what you need to see to have a really good team."

The other two spots are to be determined. At regionals, Byrne and Waldron made their postseason debuts. At sectionals, freshmen Bella Pisani and Caitlin Chval are expected to compete.

"Four of (the freshmen) have continued on," Mark McCabe said. "It was good experience for those two to run in a varsity postseason meet."

In the frosh-soph race at the Silver Meet, Byrne (13th), Waldron (14th) and Pisani (15th) earned top-16, all-conference honors. Chval (17th) missed 16th by 4.3 seconds.

Like most of the season, Byrne and Waldron worked off of each other Saturday. By the end of the race, they had a 25-second gap in front of and behind them.

"We ran side by side for the majority of the race. It kind of felt like practice, which was almost a nice feeling because it was just us," Byrne said.

"I don't know about more pressure (at regionals). We have a pretty good team, especially with Annie back," Byrne said. "I think I was excited to run because it's regionals and that's the biggest race I've ever run. I think it was a really cool experience."

Zaher likened her competitive experience Saturday to racing at Detweiller at Dark, the excitement of her then first race in roughly five months. She should be back racing at Detweiller soon.

"There are no other legs to get injuries so hopefully I'm all done now," Zaher said.

"I'm just so thankful I can compete. I'm just trying to build up my training. I'm at a different point. Most of the people are tapering and I'm just trying to build up mileage. I'm just trying to do the best I can at these meets."