

Even though she is a senior and four-year program member, Mackie Stevens is a newcomer to the Hinsdale Central girls cross country team's fairly experienced Class 3A state meet lineup.

Stevens, junior Molly Caveney and two freshmen will be the Red Devils' first-time competitors for the state race at 1 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 7, at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

"It's really exciting because I've gone down twice now (as an alternate) and haven't run, just a lot of positive excitement going this weekend," Stevens said. "(I'm anticipating) probably just the atmosphere that state has as a whole, just the excitement of a place to be surrounded by so many people that love what you love."

Stevens and the Red Devils also are enthusiastic about what they could accomplish.

On Saturday, Oct. 31, they continued to excel by winning the Hinsdale Central Sectional on a cold and drenched Katherine Legge Memorial Park course. Sophomore Reilly Revord won the race (18:01.53 for 3.0 miles) after also winning regionals, and senior Annie Zaher (18:08.95) and sophomore Grace McCabe (18:18.12) were second and fourth.

Stevens was 12th (18:40.44), followed by Caveney (46th, 19:48.38) and freshmen Bella Pisani (54th, 20:09.38) and Caitlin Chval (57th, 20:17.59).

"It was a great team effort. I'm especially proud of the way we overcame some adverse conditions," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"I said earlier in the week Saturday is one lousy weather day. I was actually happy about it. A lot of teams get psyched out and negative. The girls did a great job ignoring the conditions, stepping up and running great races. Times were pretty meaningless but they were really good races considering the conditions."

Considering the treacherous race conditions, Revord gained further confidence by pulling out the sectional title by 7.38 seconds over Zaher with Lyons Township freshman Sarah Barcelona third (18:12.18). Revord won the LT Regional title by 7.66 seconds over the second-place Barcelona Oct. 24.

"Definitely I think just knowing that I can perform in such conditions and still out with victories (helps)," Revord said. "Especially last year that was what I was struggling with, performing in higher meets and conditions (like sectionals). Just to come out of it was really nice and showed how much I've grown from last year."

As a team, the Red Devils also appear in position for their best race at the state meet.

This was just the third sectional title in team history, joining last year's fourth-place state team and the 2006 Class AA state champions. The Red Devils (65 points) won by 19 points over Lockport (84) and Lyons Township (84). Downers Grove South (131) and Benet (142) also advanced.

Last season, Hinsdale Central was fourth at state (137 points), 43 points from a top-three team trophy, with Grace McCabe (20th) earning all-state honors for a top-25 finish. Zaher (28th), eight seconds from 25th, and Revord (58th) were the team's No. 3-4 finishers.

The Red Devils had been rated in the teens throughout the 3A regular season up to the last poll Oct. 20, but that was before Zaher competed for the first time at regionals. Current junior Alexa Haff was fourth at state in 2014 but has been injured this entire season.

"There's definitely a lot of excitement and motivation for the team to do well because we all know we're capable of doing such great things because we've put in so much hard work during the season," Stevens said.

"I'm really excited to see how the team does at state. I think we're really capable of doing great things. I'm really happy with how the whole season went. I think it's almost exceeded my expectations, being regional and sectional champions."

Defending state champion Naperville North has been No. 1 most of the season. Other expected teams in the hunt from other sectionals are West Suburban Conference Silver Division champion Glenbard West (3rd last year), Batavia, Prospect, New Trier (7th), Minooka (8th), Wheaton Warrenville South (9th), and Lake Forest.

New Trier and WW South finished ahead of Glenbard West at the Lake Park Sectional.

Last year, the Red Devils posted one of the best fourth-place scores in 3A history. Saturday could be even tighter.

"We've talked all year when we get back to full strength and what we think we can do," Mark McCabe said. "There are a lot of teams in the hunt for top 3, 5 and 10. There will be really, really good teams that in most years would be challenging for the top 3 and still finish ninth or 10th, if all teams run well.

"The bottom line is all teams won't run well. We like to think of Peoria as our home away from our home course. Just run your race and do what got you there

and the results will take care of themselves. Everybody's running well. Everybody's healthy. We're in a good place right now in every way."

The KLM home course made sectionals a greater challenge. Conditions were cold with constant rain, sometimes hard. By the time of the 11 a.m. girls start time, the creek that runners must cross along the west side of the course was flooded.

"I think those are probably the worst conditions I've run in between the cold and amount of water we had to run through in the creek," Stevens said.

"It was a fairly large jump to get out of the creek. The rest of the course seemed to be kind of muddy and puddles every so often but nothing that we're not capable of dealing with."

Zaher and Caveney both took tough spills crossing the creek but persevered. Fortunately, Mark McCabe and Hinsdale Central boys coach Jim Westphal said that they did not hear of any serious injuries as a result of the creek or course conditions.

Mark McCabe said during pre-meet preparation, there was only about 3 to 4 inches of water in the creek and its entrance and exit were smoothed down.

"That's the best shape it was in for a couple of years and within an hour it was like boom (flooded)," Mark McCabe said. "The course was as well prepared and ready to go as it could have been. There's nothing you could do about all of that rain that came. I've never seen the creek, anything like that before. That was unprecedented, I think."

Zaher's fall was among the worst. She hit her knees hard against the outside edge of the path partly because she was in the lead pack and had no gauge of determining just how deep the water had become.

"My knees, they're fine as long as I don't have to kneel. As long as there's no kneeling in the (state) race I'll be fine," Zaher said.

"The first time around I underestimated how deep (the creek) is and thought, 'Oh, I'll just go through it,' and I hit my knees pretty hard on the rocks, but I got up and kept running. I kind of just focused on racing and then afterwards it was like, 'Wow, I'm really bleeding. This hurts.' I didn't let it get to me because all of the runners had the same conditions and I hoped I would be the one to run and tough it out."

Several Red Devils agreed that their previous experiences running at KLM helped them anticipate and deal with the rough areas.

The creek, however, was overwhelming and somewhat unexpected.

"It was overflowing when you were running through it. Crazy, actually dangerous, but that's cross country for you," Revord said.

"I'm not going to lie. It was pretty challenging. I was in the front pack but towards the back of it, I saw everybody go down, fall. It took a lot of leg strength because the water was so deep and there was mud. The girls race was challenging because you didn't really know what to expect. A lot of guys fell (in their later race), but they kind of knew what was coming because they saw us all wipe out in the creek."

Revord's third strong postseason race despite the conditions puts her among those mentioned as a top-10 state contender, much less an all-stater.

On Oct. 17, Revord was second at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet only to Glenbard West sophomore Lindsey Payne, a title favorite along with Naperville North senior Judy Pendergast, who ran one of the fastest Detweiller times ever Sept. 12 (16:18.9).

Payne and Pendergast were fifth and ninth at state last year and among the top three returning 2014 finishers who qualified this year, along with sixth-place Minooka junior Ashley Tutt. Glenbard West senior Lindsay Graham, the defending state champion in 16:23, has been injured all season.

"I think I'm just usually going to go how I go out and be really aggressive and just run like I've never run before," Revord said. "All of the races have been building up confidence that I can perform this well and Peoria is one of my favorite courses. It's good to be back there. And just the mentality that I've been working hard and deserve to do well."

Grace McCabe is among just 11 Hinsdale Central runners who have earned all-state honors. Last year was just the second time the Red Devils had two all-staters in one race. There has never been three.

"Reilly's the sectional champ and Annie Zaher is just beginning to scratch the surface. After (sectionals), she realized she's probably ready to do more this coming week than she was anticipating two weeks ago," Mark McCabe said.

"Grace had her best race of the year. I've said that two weeks in a row. To get in the top four at sectionals is a pretty big accomplishment. For Mackie Stevens, we said (before sectionals) if she's running in the top 15, she's running a great race and she's 12th."

Caveney probably had the gutsiest sectional race of the group. Her early fall in the creek resulted in a foot injury.

"She ran the whole race like that and feel again about 100 meters from the finish. What she did to make her race happen was crucial for the team," Mark McCabe said. "She's doing OK but we've really been on top of treating (her foot)."

Which freshmen will run at state is to be determined. Kayla Byrne and Taylor Waldron, usually the top freshmen finishers this season, competed at regionals. Chval, usually the fourth finisher among the group, said Monday that she is now focusing on the basketball season. Chval and Pisani found out the Monday after regionals that they would be competing Saturday.

"I knew we could be in, but I wasn't really expecting it. My initial reaction was kind of scared, nervous, but excited I was most of the time," Chval said. "It was definitely not my best race but it was a really fun experience as coach wanted it to be running with the varsity."

Zaher will be competing at state for the third time. She was 42nd as a sophomore for the 14th-place Red Devils en route to winning the 3A track state title in the 1,600-meter run that May.

Like Stevens, she will feel like a state newcomer of sorts on Saturday because this is only her third race in a season that was nearly completely in jeopardy.

"It's definitely a different perspective this time around. I really value the team so much. This is my last race. Cross country is just such a team sport and this is going to be really special no matter what happens," Zaher said.

"I'm definitely happy with the races I've been running. I'm happy more to help the team out. We have good excitement and energy going into the last state meet. Last year, we all ran pretty well but the other teams ran very well. We'll kind of be in that same situation. There are a lot of good teams going into it and who hits it that day. I'm hoping we'll hit it."