

Freshman Reilly Revord already has been impacted by her new Hinsdale Central girls cross country teammates.

"It's just been the greatest experience of my life so far," Revord said. "Over the summer, I did everything with them, too, and that was really great and fun. Within the first two weeks, I knew almost everyone during the summer. It's been really fun."

The Red Devils' varsity bonds grew even stronger Saturday, Sept. 20, when they competed for the first time in Carmel, Ind., at the Flashrock Invitational at Northview Christian Church and finished a close second.

Sophomore Alexa Haff won in a course-record 17:49.8 over 5,000 meters (3.1 miles) on a scenic course that will play host to the Big East Conference Championships.

Junior Annie Zaher (4th, 18:21.0) and Revord (7th, 18:38.0) also finished in the top 10.

Freshman Grace McCabe was 15th (18:57.1) and senior Sara Folliard (48th, 19:44.7) was the team's No. 5 finisher, followed by senior Camila Horowicz (51st, 19:52.7), junior Emma Sullivan (83rd, 20:32.4) and senior Molly Leahy (102nd, 20:53.5).

The Red Devils' top five finishers earned individual medals for placing among the top 50. Horowicz was 3.5 seconds shy of 50th place.

"Oh my gosh, the whole trip was so much fun because we normally don't stay overnight. We missed some school, which actually I don't really like," Haff said. "It was great to be with all of the girls and stay in a hotel. It was really fun and the course was absolutely amazing. It was the best course I've ever run on."

The Red Devils also looked good in the results. They only were edged for the title 67-71 by Avon, which was rated slightly below them in the MileSplit national rankings.

Avon, ranked No. 2 in Indiana, finished 2-6-12-13-34. Four more of Indiana's top-seven ranked team were in the field.

Hinsdale Central is ranked No. 2 in Class 3A behind defending state champion Glenbard West after taking second to the Hilltoppers at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite Sept. 6 and winning the First to the Finish Invite Sept. 13 in Peoria.

On Thursday, the Red Devils opened West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual action by beating Downers Grove North 19-38 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park with Zaher, Revord and McCabe finishing 1-2-3.

"The level of competition (at Flashrock) was very similar to our first two (invites). It served our purpose and it was a great experience. The girls had a great time," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said. "We ran well, not our best race, but we had some girls learn some things that are really going to pay dividends down the road in terms of racing style.

"It was an awesome meet, a great setup, a beautiful cross country course. They only use it for cross country. It got us to meet some great competition and it's an overnight, which is good practice for state meet. It's just a good experience all the way around."

Hinsdale Central became the first non-Indiana team to compete at the invite in its eight-year history and plans to return. The Red Devils had competed at the Culver (Ind.) Invitational in years past and McCabe was seeking to add an invite that fit in the schedule that included an overnight stay.

The Red Devils' presence -- and success -- led to a lot of curious looks and questions.

"It was kind of funny. We were joking about it, like, 'Yeah, we're the S.W.A.T. team coming in. No one knows who we are,'" Haff said.

The trip to suburban Indianapolis resulted in a schedule similar to one the Red Devils if they qualify again for the 3A state meet Nov. 8 at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

For state, the team also leaves school Friday and stays overnight for Saturday's competition. The Red Devils competed in Peoria for the First to the Finish Invite Sept. 13 but left early for Peoria that Saturday morning.

"It was kind of like a pre-state practice for us. It was just really fun overall," Revord said. "I loved going out to eat and we got to just hang out in the hotel rooms afterwards and we went to Meijer for the next morning. I'm really looking forward to state."

"It's really fun to do an overnight trip," Zaher added. "Obviously, you have to be serious about it because of the competition, but it's fun to hang out with the team. It was definitely fun for us."

Haff was the only runner to break 18:00 Saturday, edged the former course record by two seconds. Second-place Avon sophomore Taylor Nicholson (18:03.4) was 13.6 seconds behind with Greenwood Community sophomore Allie Dalton (18:15.0) a distant third. Avon senior Malyka Abramson, the 2013 invite champion in 17:57.3, was sixth (18:35.7).

Nicholson and Dalton were fifth at 10th at Indiana's 2013 state meet, respectively. McCabe said four of the top six of seven Indiana girls were in the race.

"That was very exciting (to win). It's very weird. I went into it and I didn't really know what to expect," Haff said.

"Everything's different. It's a 5k. It's a different experience and you go in there with an open mind and just be prepared. Every race I try to go into with an open mind. You never know how you're going to feel and you don't know how the other girls are going to feel on a given day. I don't think you should ever go into a meet completely expecting it to go one way or another. I think it was really just the same as every other meet for me (in that sense). My goal is always to try my best and go my hardest and that's what I did."

Because there was no familiar competition, the Red Devils had to run their own races with perhaps the lone help coming from teammates. Haff was fresher because she did not compete Thursday and combined that with good strategy for another great performance.

"(The race) went out crazy fast. (Haff) was fourth at the 800-meter mark and a good little gap from the leader, but she ran a smart, patient race and ended up

winning by 15 seconds," McCabe said.

The victory was just part of the enjoyment for Haff. She had nothing but good things to say about the course.

"It was literally gorgeous and rolling hills. The grass was like golf course grass. It was picturesque," Haff said. "You didn't really repeat very much. If you repeated something, you were going back in the opposite direction. It was kind of weird, but it was perfectly marked so it was great."

One difference was the meet was on Eastern rather than Central Daylight Saving Time. The Red Devils competed in the first race at 9 a.m., which would be 8 a.m. Central time and roughly at least two hours earlier than most of their varsity races on a Saturday.

"Going into the race, I wasn't feeling that well just because it was early morning and we had traveled the night before, but after the first mile I really started to kick it in," Revord said. "I felt good throughout the race. I was really satisfied with my overall race."

This also was the first meet in which the Red Devils competed after having a conference dual meet Thursday.

Zaher still turned in another strong race Saturday even though she not only ran Thursday but won the race in 17:54 on the hilly KLM. McCabe said a fresher Zaher may have pulled out third Saturday, but she still held off Hamilton Southeastern senior Rachel Nichwitz (18:27.8), fourth at Indiana state in 2013.

"That was a really competitive field. There were a lot of the top teams from Indiana. I'm happy that I was still able to run a good time and it's a good course to run at. I'm still happy with it," Zaher said.

"On Thursday, I just really wanted to stay in the lead to score (one) point for the team and went out hard. It ended up impacting me (Saturday) because my legs were sore. I wasn't 100 percent, but I've learned to roll out and ice and prepare myself for that two-day (racing) thing."

Revord was right behind Abramson and was 6.7 seconds ahead of Fort Wayne Carroll junior Madison Fruchey (18:44.7), 36th at Indiana state in 2013.

Revord and McCabe were the only freshmen among the first 29 finishers.

"I wasn't as nervous for this race. It was a really competitive race, but it was just a race to go all out and have fun," Revord said. "I knew it was a 5k instead of 3 miles so it was a little bit longer. You could tell the difference when you're running it. It's definitely just building my confidence, just being able to run up there and know that I can do well. I can push myself to do my best every single race."

The Red Devils already have an experienced lineup with six 2013 state returnees and a bond that has grown through a dedicated summer of workouts, including their annual trip to Lake Geneva.

Saturday's invite only helped to strengthen that camaraderie.

"There are so many great memories we created. We have all of these little jokes and stuff and just getting to know more about the girls, especially Reilly and Grace because they're little freshmen. I still feel like I'm a freshman myself," Haff said.

"I think it's great. Sometimes (my teammates) know me more than I know myself. You may think one way but you come off as another way. They're all like my sisters. We are together so often. My dad actually came down so it was great having him there, but when I wasn't with him, I still felt like I was with my family. That's how close we are with all of the girls so it's a really special experience."

Against Downers Grove North, Zaher won by eight seconds over Revord (18:02) with McCabe (18:23) third. Folliard (18:51) was fifth with Sullivan (19:39) and Leahy (19:41) eighth and ninth.

-- by Bill Stone