

**Hinsdale Central's Alexa Haff began the girls cross country season as a freshman simply hoping to be among the best.**

**"I remember the Hornet-Red Devil (Invitational Sept. 7) and I just wanted to go in there and maybe, hopefully get top 25 or something," Haff said.**

**On Saturday, Nov. 9, Haff nearly was the best in the entire state.**

**Haff put herself in the mix for the Class 3A state title and pulled off an impressive second place at Peoria's Detweiller Park.**

**Haff (16:45 for 3.0 miles) finished just two seconds behind New Trier junior Mimi Smith (16:43) with Glenbard West senior Madeline Perez, the defending state champion, third (17:03).**

**"I did not expect any of this. It's a lot to take in and I feel blessed and so fortunate with everything," Haff said. "I just wanted to go and just give it my best and I know I did so I'm happy. I get my break (from running now) so I'm excited."**

**The Red Devils took 14th as a team (328 points) in their second consecutive state team appearance and 11th over the past 12 seasons. Sophomore Annie Zaher was 42nd (17:56), followed by junior Camila Horowicz (103rd, 18:33), sophomore Emma Sullivan (121st, 18:43) and juniors Sara Folliard (155th, 19:07) and Sarah Brennan (184th, 19:50).**

**Senior Becca Marcotte dropped out of the race around two miles. Team alternates were juniors Molly Leahy and Val Yager, sophomores Mackie Stevens and Anna Yang and freshman Olivia Carter.**

**This season, Haff ended up winning all but two races this season, both of them at Detweiller Park and both by two seconds.**

**"Alexa certainly left in all on the course and ran excellent," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said. "Alexa couldn't have done any more. She left it all on the course. She walked off there, as she should have, like she did everything she possibly could on that day."**

**"This year, you couldn't look at one of her races and say she didn't step up and be the best she could be on that day. In a state like ours with the competitiveness of the runners, as a freshman she won every race she was in other than two -- and she was second in those two. That's incredible, really something to be proud of."**

**Haff and Perez battled for the lead throughout most of the race. Haff crossed the one-mile mark in 5:19 and two miles at 11:03.**

**Heading into the final half mile, Haff broke from Perez and she could not answer, but Smith did. Smith put on a powerful sprint, and Haff responded but was just edged at the finish.**

**Smith, 12th at state last year, helped the Trevians win the 3,200-meter relay at the girls track state meet in May.**

**"Mimi, at the end, with 400 meters, I had no idea she was there. She just came out of nowhere and boom, she took the lead," Haff said. "I'm happy for her. I got to talk with her, too. She was so nice. I'm just really happy right now for everyone. I'm happy for myself and proud of myself and all of the other girls. It was a good day."**

**Things did not go smoothly for the Red Devils as a team. Hoping to at least crack the top 10, if not ultimately the top five, they finished 52 points from ninth and 10th and, respectively, 73 and 72 points behind sixth-place Minooka (255) and seventh-place Schaumburg (256).**

**Marcotte has usually been their No. 3 runner and among the team's same top-five group throughout the state series. Zaher also was in contention for top-25, all-state honors through the first two miles in 11:28 but struggled during a final mile, in which she said she wasn't helped by seeing Marcotte off to the side and out of the race.**

**"(Our goal was) we were thinking somewhere between fifth and eighth," McCabe said. "If Becca finishes, we're seventh. With Annie, I have no doubt in my mind that she would have been in the top 15. She was rattled. There were a number of things that contributed to what**

happened.

**"We had a situation where we have one senior (Marcotte) on a 12-person state team so we have everybody coming back and they learned a lot of things this year in terms of anytime something doesn't go exactly quite how you hoped, there's always a silver lining in a dark cloud. We're not pretending we're happy with it. We're walking away frustrated that it's a lost opportunity, but at the same time how you come back from that kind of disappointment is a true measure of character and eventual success."**

**Haff had a breakthrough season, especially considering that she really only had consistent training and competition as an eighth grader at Butler Junior High. Her consistency and demeanor puts her in position for continued success in years to come.**

**"Alexa is very savvy in every way as a racer," McCabe said. "As a mature high school freshman, she understands what it takes to be a champion, what you have to do to make that happen and she lives her life in that way and she races that way. She's wise beyond her years."**

**"Like all of us, (Haff) gets nervous before races. She handled all of the pre-race hoopla and distractions really well. We've talked about that a lot, a race is a race is a race no matter where you're running it, what meet it is. You just need to focus on the process and not be distracted by the external things that you have no control over. She did a really good job of handling that."**

**While girls cross country can often be dominated by underclassmen, Haff is the highest finishing freshman in Class 3A since Kelly Whitley was second in 2007 for Geneva's state championship team. From 2008-12, only three freshmen finished among the top 10 since then and none higher than sixth. There were three Saturday with Oak Park-River Forest's Mary Blankemeier fifth (17:07) and Lockport's Morgan Bollinger eighth (17:14) and sixth freshman all-staters.**

**Haff also equals the program's highest individual finish by Jill Hardies, the Red Devils' only four-time all-stater who was second as a sophomore to**

**Oswego East junior Ariel Michalek by two seconds in 2010. Hardies finished 17th as a freshman.**

**"She's dedicated. She's one of the most dedicated people I know. Every day in practice she gives 120 percent and I think that really shows when she races," Horowicz said.**

**"We're all so happy for her, her first state meet as a freshman doing that well. We all feel really proud of her because at the beginning of the season we didn't know her and we've gotten to know her and adopted her as our little freshman. Seeing her up there is just awesome."**

**At least once during the regular season, Haff beat seven of Saturday's eight top-10 finishers that she faced during the regular season. That included topping the second-place Smith by 4.22 seconds at the Hornet-Red Devil (17:29.88 to 17:34.10).**

**The following weekend, Haff finished second for her only time during the regular season in the First to the Finish Invite at Detweiller. Buffalo Grove sophomore Kaitlyn Ko passed Haff right at the end before Haff could answer to win by 1.7 seconds (17:00.96 to 17:02.66). Ko was seventh Saturday (17:14).**

**At the Lyons Township Regional Oct. 26, Haff won in 16:56.08, the course's second fastest girls time ever to Riverside-Brookfield senior Mailin Struck (16:50.22 Sept. 7), an exchange student from Germany who won Saturday's 2A girls title in 16:35.**

**"I didn't try to think like (I could win state). I just wanted to give it my best," Haff said. "I just tried to take every race individually and take every day one day at a time. You learn as you go on, and I've learned from my teammates and my coach and everyone. They've really helped me along the way."**

**Perez won last year's state title in 16:02 but she missed most of this season recovering from a calf injury. Smith was 12th (16:56) in the fastest overall girls state race ever and 10th at state as a freshman (17:08) to**

**helping New Trier win the team state title.**

**The only other top-five returnee from last year's state meet, Fenwick junior Olivia Ryan (5th in 2012), went out hard with the leaders, fell way back and then recovered to pull out 22nd (17:29).**

**"We went in with a general plan. (Haff) was going to stick with whoever was in the lead and then see how things played out and after the second mile, see how she felt and respond to any moves and go in the last 200 if they were still together," McCabe said. "She followed the plan to perfection. She just couldn't have raced it any better."**

**Perez didn't race this season until the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 19, and Haff beat her by 15.2 seconds (17:27.8 to 17:43.0 for 3.04 miles). Like Haff, Perez then won different regional and sectional races, including the Lake Park Sectional title Nov. 2 by 10.25 seconds over Smith.**

**This week, Perez made a verbal commitment to compete at Georgetown University. A three-time all-stater in cross country, Perez helped the Hilltoppers (75) win their first state team title after finishing third in 2012.**

**"(Perez) had led for most of the race (Saturday) and I just kind of stuck with her," Haff said. "She's a great racer and I feel so honored to run with her. I actually got a chance to talk with her a little bit after. She's so sweet and she came up to me afterwards. She's literally an amazing role model and I look up to her."**

**As strong as Haff ran at Detweiller in September (basically what Perez ran Saturday), Haff improved her course time at state by 17 seconds on a day where the course was somewhat soft from recent rains and winds were strong at times. Also improving on their September Detweiller times were Zaher (18:07.84 Sept. 14), Sullivan (18:51.48) and Folliard (19:18.98).**

**After arguably the best team season of training, better mental preparation for the actual state race, especially among the first-timers, was a common theme among the Red Devils' lessons learned.**

**"As a team, other than Alexa, nobody walked away feeling that they had their absolute best race at the state and yet, and a big yet, if everybody's able to finish the race, we still ended up somewhere around seventh place," McCabe said.**

**"Nobody needs to be a superwoman when they go down to the state meet. They just have to run the race that got them down there. We saw that was true, and it's true every year. It's just a matter of duplicating and maintaining what they've done to get there. We look eagerly ahead to next year with that lies ahead."**

**Marcotte, Sullivan and Brennan were the only Red Devils with previous state experience. Zaher, however, joined Marcotte as a state qualifier in track in May as a freshman in the 1,600-meter run.**

**"The whole experience was pretty much the same because we did the same exact thing as last year," Sullivan said. "I guess with the team it was a little different. A couple of the people weren't on the team. That aspect was different but other than that it was pretty much the same."**

**Zaher was among the program's most improved runners after 2012 was her first season of organized cross country or track.**

**After being all-regional (5th place) and all-sectional (7th), Zaher had another aggressive race Saturday but could not sustain it the final mile after being in all-state contention. She missed 25th by 22 seconds after a 5:42 third mile, seven seconds slower than her average pace.**

**"That (third mile) was definitely a struggle. At the beginning of the race, I went out too fast (5:19 first mile) and that kind of caught up with me the third mile," Zaher said.**

**"I guess I learned not starting off too fast and being less nervous because it's just a race and I thought it would be a way bigger deal. I thought there was more competition. It wasn't really that different from First to the Finish. I guess my expectations were different from what the race actually was."**

**A healthier Marcotte was optimistic about improving upon her state finishes last year (83rd, 17:57) and as a freshman in 2010 (87th, 18:10). Several Red Devils were unaware that she dropped out during their races, but Zaher realized that Marcotte had stopped.**

**"It was hard to see, just knowing it was her last cross country race and she had dropped out. It was just kind of sad to see a teammate in that position," Zaher said.**

**This state meet was the first of any kind for Horowicz, a sectional track runner who formerly was a swimmer during the fall sports season. Yager and Yang also were first-time cross country runners as non-freshmen.**

**Horowicz just missed her goal of beating her personal-best 18:21.37 at Detweiller in September.**

**"It was a really great opportunity. I didn't do as well as I would have liked, but just the whole experience to go down to the state meet and experience that was kind of just an awesome opportunity," Horowicz said.**

**"Most of us haven't run in the state meet and this was just a chance to deal with the atmosphere of what state cross country is like. Next year, we'll be prepared and know what to do. Things happen. You can't always have a perfect race when you need one. The important thing is to go after it next time and try again."**

**Sullivan went into the race hoping to at least finish among the top 80 and significantly improve on her 2012 state race (101st, 18:07), in which she was the team's No. 4 finisher.**

**"I wasn't satisfied with it because I felt like I could have pushed it more in the race. I don't think I really was mentally engaged so I think it affected my race," Sullivan said. "I just know the feeling or not giving it your all and kind of regretting it. I think knowing the feeling, I don't ever want to feel it again. I could have given more than I did, which was disappointing."**

**Folliard also progressed well with several strong races mostly on the junior varsity level. She worked so hard on not panicking for her first state race that it may have somewhat backfired.**

**"It was really exciting because I had been working for that all season," Folliard said. "I got really nervous on the bus ride over, but once we started warming up and getting ready for the race, it was like any other.**

**"I think I could have done a lot better and that I wasn't really mentally into it. I'm not sure why. I was disappointed with it. Maybe I think I calmed myself down too much."**

**Brennan was not close to her state finish of 2012 (122nd, 18:22) but just being able to compete again was a personal triumph.**

**Brennan has been dealing with a stress fracture in her left femur, a leg that has had a history of injuries. Brennan competed at regionals and had discomfort but she continued to train and was cleared to compete after sitting out sectionals in favor of Carter.**

**After running at practice Monday, followed by cross training Tuesday, a training run on Wednesday was the final verdict that Brennan could compete safely.**

**"I was really excited to have the opportunity to race and I was feeling good doing the warmup and doing strides so I just kind of went in with no expectations and just see where the chips may fall, but they didn't fall very good," said Brennan with a laugh.**

**"There wasn't a lot of pressure. I was going into it as (our) seventh runner. I still went in with the mindset like do whatever I can to help the team. I was still happy that I had the opportunity. I'm really thankful for it."**

**Even during the drive back, the Red Devils began anticipating a great future in track and next cross country season. Marcotte not only was the**



only senior on the state team, but she and JV standout Amanda Koronkiewicz were the only seniors among the top training group.

"It'll be a much more experienced varsity team next year, still a young team. There will be a lot of competition for varsity spots, which is always a good thing," McCabe said.

"Overall, it was a very successful season and some great strides and progress made by so many of the girls. We're only losing one senior (Marcotte) but she's a good senior in terms of what she's brought to the team in every way in terms of leadership and being a great role model. She's a big loss, but she's mentored the other girls very well and they'll step into those shoes, as happens every year."

Brennan and junior Susan Spencer were co-captains this season with Marcotte and Koronkiewicz. Horowicz said example of team unity could come out of nowhere, even in the school parking lot as the Red Devils prepared for the state trip.

"We were all gathering in a group and talked about our favorite memories. At that moment, the team was more than a team and a family," Horowicz said. "I think that was just one of the best experiences. It just ended up happening."

Throughout this season's success, Haff constantly spoke of Hinsdale Central's cross country family – the coaching staff, teammates and her parents and relatives – for making great things possible and meaningful.

Haff knows she has plenty to anticipate on and off the cross country course.

"(I'll) just keep doing what I'm doing, I guess," Haff said. "I'm ready for more fun to come."

-- by Bill Stone