

RECAPS

STORY: Red Devils continue strong start, finish fourth at Peoria Woodruff Invite

Hinsdale Central senior Jill Hardies can't help but smile when she comes to compete at the Detweiller Park state-meet course in Peoria.

"I love this course. It's my favorite course, and I always run well here. That's what (Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe) always says," Hardies said.

"I know this course really well. I've ran here every year. It's flat so it plays to my strengths in track, where it's just flat and fast. There's something about it that I always run well here."

Hardies should have one more high-school race at Detweiller in the Class 3A state meet Nov. 3. After a one-year absence, the Red Devils plan to be competing with her as a team.

On Saturday, the Red Devils once again showed they're among the 3A state team contenders by finishing fourth in the 3A race at the Woodruff Invitational at Detweiller Park out of 29 teams, including seven of the top-15 teams in this week's Illinois Prep Harrier website 3A rankings.

Hardies finished second in the 3.0-mile race (17:15) to New Trier senior Courtney Ackerman (16:45). Sophomore Becca Marcotte (29th, 18:32) also earned a medal for a top-50 finish, followed by freshman Emma Sullivan (56th, 19:06), seniors Becky Ventura (57th, 19:06) and Veronica Peterson (68th, 19:20), Zoe Larson (150th, 20:33) and sophomore Sara Folliard (154th, 20:37) and senior Amanda Koronkiewicz (181st, 21:05).

Sullivan and Folliard made their Detweiller racing debuts, and Marcotte, Peterson and Koronkiewicz ran in Peoria for the first time since 2010.

No. 13-ranked Hinsdale Central (206 points) finished just one point behind third-place Fremd (205) and three ahead of fifth-place Jacobs.

No. 6 Naperville North (59), which tied for third in 3A last year, won the team title over No. 2 and defending 3A state champion New Trier (87). No. 12 Barrington (219), No. 9 Lockport (224) and No. 3 Wheaton Warrenville South (227) were sixth through eighth, and No. 14 Naperville Central (282) was 11th.

At the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Sept. 1 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park, the Red Devils were sixth with New Trier second, Wheaton Warrenville South fourth and Naperville Central fifth.

"I thought if we came out of here in the top five, we'd be in really good shape. We ended up fourth, one point out of third, which placewise was good, but at the same time, if you told me we were going to do that and run like we did, I would have said there was no way," McCabe said.

"Quite frankly -- and the girls agree -- we didn't run that well as a team. Nobody ran poorly, but there are three or four girls walking away hungry for more, and that's why you come down here, to learn things. If

we look at what we're ready to do and what we'll do later on, it's very encouraging."

That includes Hardies, who appears on pace to become the first four-time all-stater in program history.

At the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, Hardies said she went out too fast in the opening mile to challenge winner Madeline Perez of Glenbard West and eventually ended up fifth behind Ackerman (second) and New Trier sophomore Mimi Smith (fourth).

"I just went into (Saturday) with a lot of excitement and determination and vengeance from last week. I just needed to prove myself more than I did last week," Hardies said.

On Saturday, Hardies and good friend Ackerman worked together for the first mile (5:31) before Ackerman pulled away during her usually strong second mile. Stuck in no-man's land the rest of the way, Hardies held onto second by finishing three seconds ahead of third-place Smith (17:18).

"I think I could have run a lot faster timewise, but 17:15 is a big time drop from last week (17:59.28) so I can't be too disappointed," Hardies said. "I could feel (Smith) coming on pretty strong so I had to kick. It was nice to beat her because last week she beat me.

"I stayed mentally much longer into the race and I didn't give up the entire time, unlike last week. I'm just proud of it because I felt a lot stronger and I kept mentally engaged, and that's what cross country basically is, a mental game, not like track, where it's speed. If your fitness is there, it's just from shoulders up. I'm finally remembering how to race cross country again because it's different mindset going from the (1,600-meter relay and 1,600) in track."

Fifth at state last year in 16:59, Hardies has run as fast as 16:34 at Detweiller, when she took second at state in 2010. The only underclassmen to finish ahead of her at state last year were Ackerman (fourth) and Lake Park senior Kaylee Flanagan (third), who won the 3,200 at the 3A state track meet in May.

Hardies was named the varsity Runner of the Meet, not as much for where she finished but how she raced.

"She's started to develop that little bit of patience in her racing and training, which is paying big dividends for her," McCabe said.

"Jill ran a really good, solid race. She's healthy, she's feeling good. When Courtney Ackerman gapped her, she didn't give up. She kept the focus. She stayed mentally engaged and she ended up running a really good race."

The Red Devils had a much different look than the 2011 Woodruff Invite. Last year, Ventura was the Red Devils' lone competitor in the varsity race. Although she felt she could have run better Saturday, she still was 32 seconds faster than in 2011 (78th, 19:38).

"It's a lot different, definitely a lot different. I enjoy it a lot more, racing with your teammates. It's almost like an extra confidence," Ventura said. "It's a lot more fun, a lot more rewarding knowing you've got a group of 10 girls running together instead of one.

"It's good considering we hit what we wanted to do (top five), but we didn't do as well as we were hoping to, which means we have a lot more to grow still. I'm definitely eager to race next week and do a lot better."

Ventura and Peterson ran together Saturday as they did at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite. Providing a little extra motivation was Sullivan, whose goal was to try and at least stay with them in her varsity debut.

The trio was together at the mile mark but back among the top 90. They moved to among the top 65 by the second mile.

"It does (give me confidence) because I like I can do so much more. I know what I can do now," Sullivan said. "I was tired because I felt like I pushed myself the last 800 to start passing people. I was tired and sore after the race."

"I ended up going to the finish and it was like, 'Here comes Emma.' I was like, 'Oh, way to go,'" Ventura said. "She definitely pulled it through at the end. It was definitely a good race for her, which we're proud of."

Sullivan was the Red Devils' top finisher at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite in the frosh-soph race (eighth). She found out late in the week that she was going to be in Saturday's varsity race.

"I was a little intimidated by varsity, but I managed to get that out of my head and feel like this is just an ordinary race. I have to do the best that I can," Sullivan said. "(My teammates) were just like, 'focus on your race and it's nothing more than a normal race.' They said to get out to a good start because there's going to be people pushing you. It felt like it wasn't state but like a sectional meet because there were so many teams."

Peterson ran perhaps the most inspirational race. Her grandmother, whom she was very close to, died Friday.

"To run like she did today, based on what's going on in her life, I couldn't ask for anything more," McCabe said. "I'm just proud of Veronica that she was here. Just the fact that she and her parents wanted her to be here and do this just says a lot about what they're all about."

Larson continued her strong senior season by earning a spot again in the varsity race, as well as Runner of the Meet honors. One of the top junior varsity runners in 2011, Larson made a couple of varsity appearances.

"She ran a great race, the best race of her life, and ran aggressively," McCabe said.

Larson's time Saturday dusted her showing in the Woodruff open race last year by 53 seconds. She also beat her Hornet-Red Devil time by 56 seconds.

"I was proud about that. I think I could have pushed myself a little more the second mile. I felt a little tired. But I had a good finish," Larson said.

"It's a little intimidating (on varsity) because everyone else is so great at running, but it's good to get the experience. It motivates me to try to pass more people because I know it's tougher competition."

The Red Devils had some extra motivation Saturday. They unveiled new Nike uniform tops in the race – white with red shoulders and the printing sublimated into the fabric -- a red H in the front and red Central down the back, both outlined in black.

McCabe said the lightweight material is similar to uniform tops used by Olympic-level track athletes. The Red Devils ordered similar uniforms last year, but they were never used in competition because of a printing error, and a replacement set never arrived in time. Those tops are used by the Red Devils for workouts.

"We were going out for a (warmup) stride in our uniforms. When we finished, we were like, 'These are awesome,'" Ventura said. "You can feel the difference. It sounds weird, but you don't feel like you have a shirt on. They're so light, so breathable. Sometimes with other uniforms that are skin-tight, you kind of feel the heat sticking to your body. You can just feel the breeze running right though."

On Thursday, the Red Devils begin West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual action by visiting No. 7 Downers Grove North.

Open race

As Hinsdale Central sophomore Sophie May gutted out the final moments of the 2011 Woodruff Invitational, the pain began increasing.

May had torn the adductor muscle in her inner thigh and was sidelined for the rest of the season.

"It was thankful toward the end and I was going into the chute. I was kind of limping in there and like, 'Oh gosh. This is bad,'" May said. "I stopped and then I knew right away something was wrong."

On Saturday, May had just about everything go right in her first meet back on the same course. She finished eighth (19:39 for 3.0 miles) and right behind sophomore teammate Susan Spencer (7th, 19:34) as the Red Devils' No. 2 finisher.

Sophomore Tillie Kummerer (38th, 20:53) also earned a medal for a top-50 finish, followed by senior Meg Knister (60th, 21:24), sophomore Anya Patel (79th, 21:46), seniors Grace Cook (80th, 21:46) and Julia Tabaczyk (96th, 22:04) and sophomores Molly Leahy (114th, 22:19) and Rachael McCann (118th, 22:20) and freshman Madeline Sullivan (185th, 23:15). Sophomore Jillian DeBoer was unable to finish because of illness.

"I told Sophie (Friday) there's no race I'm looking more forward to than yours just because it's been a long time and she's worked so hard to get back," McCabe said. "Afterwards, I said my hunch was right because nobody out there had a better than she did. She looks great, she feels great and this is just the tip of the iceberg for her."

May was named a Runner of the Meet. She had considered competing at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, but

she sat out that race to make sure she was completely ready to compete in Peoria. She also received a big boost from Spencer, who made a strong comeback from dropping out after one mile of the frosh-soph race at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite.

“My goal is always to be near (Spencer). I started off the race too fast in my opinion (6:07 first mile), but after things kind of got on the right pace and I was behind Susan, I felt good that I was keeping somewhat close to her. She really helped me push myself today,” May said.

“I had some energy at the end so I was kind of upset at myself for that, but I felt really good overall, no pain or anything, so I was really happy with that.”

No team scores were kept in the open race, but varsity champion Naperville North also would have won the race by taking the top five spots.

At the one-mile mark, Spencer (6:02 first mile) was battling for second and May was fifth. By the second mile, they were seventh and eighth behind the runners that beat them.

Spencer finished five places higher than in last year’s open race but was 10 seconds slower.

“It was kind of my first official race and I thought it was a good starting point. It definitely helped me to see Sophie up there and I was really happy because she looked strong,” Spencer said.

Like May, Spencer was happy just to run a solid race after what happened during her previous race.

“My legs were hurting and mentally I was not really engaged (at the Hornet-Red Devil) and I just dropped out. It was a learning point from that. This being more my official first race, I’m fairly excited for the season,” Spencer said.

“I just told myself (Saturday) was a different race. I’ve just got to forget about that race. That was just a fluke, something I’ll learn from and hopefully will never happen again. And I learned a lot from that race in a way. I’m stronger now, I guess, from it.”

Patel, Cook, Leahy, McCann, Madeline Sullivan and DeBoer made their Detweiller racing debuts. For Cook, this followed her first varsity race at the Hornet-Red Devil.

“I was very nervous. It was scary,” Cook said. “It’s a little intimidating (on varsity) because there’s only seven or eight girls running from your team. It’s a lot more intense and a lot more pressure, and there’s some of the best girls in the state running.”

After she continued to make strong improvements as a junior, Cook plans to run at a small liberal arts college (Dennison, DePauw, St. Olaf or Dickinson). In track, she and senior Katie Gelman were part of the Red Devils’ 3,200 relay at the conference meet.

Cook’s time Saturday not only was a 45-second improvement from the Hornet-Red Devil but equaled her all-time best set at last year’s Silver Meet. One key was having Patel as a running mate for the first time in a race.

“We crossed the finish line together. We were walking through the chute with our arms around each other. We were both so tired but we pushed each other a lot and we helped each other throughout the race,” Cook said.

“I told myself I could stay with the people in my group and was able to improve my time. I think it was just a mental thing, telling myself before I couldn’t do it and now I’ve learned I actually can because I practice with them every day.”

May and Spencer also gained confidence from their performances. Since last year, Spencer realizes how the team’s training has made her physically stronger. May has learned how race preparation can contribute to better results.

“I hope to just continue with how well I’ve done this race and without any pain, and just continue being smart about the way I’m training, how I’m taking care of my body. I did a lot of good things coming up to this race,” May said.

“She’s learned to live her life like an athlete and to take care of herself, do all of the little things that she needs to do to stay healthy and to be at her best,” McCabe said. “The future is very bright for Sophie May.”

-- by Bill Stone