

Even though the Hinsdale Central girls cross country team returns its top six finishers from the 2013 Class 3A state meet, so many things are different this season.

“Everyone’s got really positive attitudes and we’ve just had consistent training this summer,” junior Annie Zaher said. “I’d say it’s upped a lot. We’re all really excited about it and we’re training a lot harder than we have in the past. We’re just really excited for the season to start just because of how hard we’ve been training and everything.”

The Red Devils are expected by most to not only qualify for the 25-team state field for the 12th time in the past 13 seasons but also contend for their first top-10 finish since placing second in 2008.

Sophomore Alexa Haff returns after finishing second at state last year to current New Trier senior Mimi Smith by just two seconds at Peoria’s Detweiller Park (16:43 to 16:45 for 3.0 miles).

“That’s a lot to take in, but I just want to go out there and give it my all (this season). Whatever happens, happens,” Haff said.

Also back from state are Zaher, who won the 1,600-meter run at the 3A state track meet in May, seniors Camila Horowicz, Sara Folliard and Sarah Brennan and junior Emma Sullivan.

The season begins with the annual Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Saturday, Sept. 6, at Katherine Legge Memorial Park. Varsity and frosh-soph races will be 3.0 miles, and the open race will be 1.93 miles.

“Coming off this summer, they’re as unified as a team that I’ve ever coached in terms of their synergy and working together and the goals that they’ve set. They’re all on the same page,” Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

“The team is excited, and I’m excited. It’s a great group of girls who not only are talented and hard-working but they’re great competitors and an awesome mix of

freshmen through seniors.”

Just how good the Red Devils will be remains to be seen. In the pre-season 3A state polls, the Red Devils were ranked No. 6 by the Illinois Track and Cross Country Coaches Association and MileSplit Illinois and No. 13 by DyeStat Illinois.

At the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, the Red Devils will compete against defending state champion Glenbard West, third-place New Trier and fourth-place Palatine, the 2013 invite champion.

With unlimited entries in all three races Saturday, the Red Devils will get a chance to display their depth as well as one of their strongest freshmen classes in years.

“It’s a really strong team so we’re excited for the season. It’s a strong team because we do have a lot of veterans, but we do have a lot of new people coming in so that brings new excitement,” Horowicz said.

“Our mindsets are totally different,” Sullivan added. “Everyone has such positive attitudes and if we all are positive and enthusiastic, it’s going to be a really great season.”

The Red Devils also have added motivation. In 2013, they had top-10 hopes on their mind but were 14th at state (328 points), 52 points from 10th place. Becca Marcotte, a top-four team finisher at regionals and sectionals and their only senior, was unable to finish the race.

Haff equaled the highest individual state finish in program history when Jill Hardies was second as a sophomore in 2010.

Zaher was 42nd (17:56), 22 seconds from 25th place and the last all-state spot, followed by Horowicz (103rd, 18:33), Sullivan (121st, 18:43), Folliard (155th, 19:07) and Brennan (184th, 19:50).

State alternates were seniors Molly Leahy and Val Yager, juniors Mackie Stevens and Anna Yang and sophomore Olivia Carter, who ran at sectionals instead of

Brennan.

There's even more depth. Other members of this year's varsity training group are seniors Jillian DeBoer, Tillie Kummerer, Marissa Meyer and Susan Spencer, sophomore Molly Caveney and freshmen Sophia Horowicz, Reilly Revord and Grace McCabe, Mark's oldest daughter.

"It's been a good summer for a lot of reasons. Not only training wise we've just had a really consistent and committed group of girls getting excited for what lies ahead but also we have three new freshmen, all really excited as well," Brennan said. "Also something that's been really great is everyone's been really focused. We're not only working hard during practice but also beyond so all of the little stuff beyond that, like rolling out (muscles), icing, getting sleep. Staying on top of injuries, that's something really important for all of us to focus on."

2013 marked the first state races for Haff, Zaher, Horowicz and Folliard. At the 2012 state meet, Sullivan (101st, 18:07) and Brennan (122nd, 18:22) were the No. 4 and 5 finishers for the Red Devils, who were 11th (304), 28 points from 10th. Folliard, Leahy and Spencer were state alternates in 2012.

Last year also was the first cross country season for Horowicz, who has been a track regular but previously competed in swimming for the fall. This season, Meyer is making her cross country debut as a senior.

"I'm looking forward to (the season) very much. The first time you do anything, it's kind of scary but now I'm used to it. I can look forward to beating my goals from last year and just improving," Horowicz said. "The first time you go (to state), there are a ton of people. There's a ton of excitement but it's really nervewracking when you see all of these people running together because it's bigger than any cross country race you run. But looking back, it's just another race."

Haff burst onto the scene last year as she won the Hornet-Red Devil over Smith and Glenbard West's Lisa Luczak, sixth at state in 2012 and ninth last year. Haff hasn't looked back and shined all season. Haff won the West Suburban

Conference Silver Division Meet over Glenbard West graduate Madeline Perez, the 2012 state champion who was in her first race of the season after recovering from an injury. Perez finished third at state (17:03), the only senior among the top 10.

“(State) was really exciting. It was a new experience and great to be with all of the girls. I really enjoyed it,” Haff said. “I think I’m learning new things every day, but now I’m no longer a freshman. Now it’s all been there, done that, which is really good. I’m going in with more confidence. I’m excited and really hopeful.”

Haff continued the momentum during track, where she was an all-state sixth at the state meet in May in the 3,200-meter run (10:50.36), which was won by Perez. Haff said she dealt with minor injuries throughout her summer training, including her hip.

“(Haff) certainly had a first year to remember and she’s very motivated and ready to surpass even what she did last year,” McCabe said. “She’s very fit right now but probably not as running fit as she was a year ago at this time. She’s fit from a lot of cross training and swimming. Now she’s training normally. It will turn out to be a positive thing for her because her overall strength and the total body fitness she’s gained are really going to help her in the long term.”

Zaher had never competed in cross country or track before high school, but her effort and tenacity combined for incredible state progress as a sophomore.

She was in contention for all-state cross country honors for more than half of the race and placed among the top 50. In track, Zaher usually didn’t win races during the regular season and was second in her prelim heat to Perez despite a school-record 4:58.50, but Zaher took advantage of being fresh for the state finals to run 5:00.08 and win the state title by .42.

Zaher became Hinsdale Central’s first individual state champion in girls track and field and the first individual state champion for McCabe.

“Winning the state title just kept me motivated to keep training so I’ve worked

really hard this summer, probably harder than I ever have, and then having the newcomers come in just keeps me motivated,” Zaher said. “Last year was my first as a varsity cross country runner so this season I kind of know how it works and it’s better, renewed confidence.”

“Annie is at a whole new level,” McCabe said. “I think we’re going to see her do something in cross country that was on par with track. Not necessarily win the state meet but she’s going to be one of the people in the conversations of the very top runners in the state.”

Other strong track seasons have carried over to cross country. Brennan just missed qualifying for state in the 1,600 and Folliard and Sullivan posted numerous personal-best times, sometimes in consecutive races. Horowicz was injured most of the track season but ran well in the Red Devils’ final regular-season races.

“Having a good track season kind of made me excited for the summer and the cross country season,” Folliard said. “I think we just need to work on keeping our positive attitudes because I think that’s something really different this year, just how enthusiastic we all are this season. That’ll really help us get through the long season.”

The freshmen appear excited for their first high school cross country races. Grace McCabe, who graduated from Westview Hills Middle School, Revord (Clarendon Hills Middle School) and Sophia Horowicz (Hinsdale Middle School), Camila’s sister, all could made significant contributions on the varsity or junior varsity.

As an eighth grader, McCabe was third at the 2013 Illinois Elementary School Association Class 2A girls cross country state meet in a personal-best 11:46 for 2.0 miles. It’s the highest individual finish for the Wildcats, who were eighth as a team. Revord was a conference champion and set numerous running records for CHMS.

“We’re deep and there’s going to be a lot of competition for spots and that’s a good thing because that makes your team that much better. When there’s healthy, positive competition for spots, everybody’s performance benefits from

that," McCabe said.

"The bar is raised and everybody's level of expectation is raised. When you're leaders have that kind of mentality, it's contagious for the rest of the team."

The Red Devils will get plenty of challenges in the Silver. Besides Glenbard West, Oak Park-River Forest (13th at state in 2013), Downers Grove North (21st) and Lyons Township have received pre-season rankings among the top 25 in 3A. One new addition to the schedule this year for the varsity is the seventh annual Flashrock Invitational Sept. 20 in Carmel, Ind.

One aspect for the Red Devils this season has remained the same.

"Our goal is always to be the best we can be," McCabe said. "We've set our goals very high. Internally, there are more product goals. We're going in with no expectations other than that we're quite frankly a completely different team than a year ago and it's a really exciting thing."

"Basically if everyone can have the best season they've had thus far in high school or as freshmen, I think our team has potential to do a lot of great things," Brennan said. "It'll be really cool to do it with such a great group of girls."

-- by Bill Stone