

The increased vocabulary of senior Becca Marcotte speaks volumes about the potential of this season's Hinsdale Central girls cross country team.

"She's stepped up a lot (as a team leader)," junior Sophie May said. "She talks now."

Once again, the Red Devils should have something to say come state meet time. And it should be louder than in recent years.

Marcotte, juniors Sarah Brennan and Sophie May and sophomore Emma Sullivan return from last year's Class 3A state lineup that took 11th (304 points), 28 points from 10th place. Juniors Sara Folliard, Susan Spencer and Molly Leahy also were part of the postseason lineup.

Other possible contributors include sophomore Annie Zaher, a state track qualifier in the 1,600, junior first-time cross country runners Camila Horowicz and Val Yager, senior Amanda Koronkiewicz, juniors Jillian DeBoer and Tillie Kummerer, sophomore Mackie Stevens and freshman Alexa Haff.

The Red Devils graduated Jill Hardies, the only four-time all-state runner in program history, but they return their next four state finishers and several individual improvements should make the lineup significantly stronger.

"I think that we could be top five in the state. If we keep our uninterrupted training going, without any injuries, I think that is very possible," Marcotte said.

"I think the team is excited. I think that we have a lot of potential. I feel like we've just been consistently training and getting better."

Over the past dozen years, Hinsdale Central consistently has outperformed all other programs at state other than 2012 state champion Naperville North and Palatine. The Red Devils captured the program's first state title in 2006, the last year of two classes, and were fourth in 3A in 2007 and second in 2008.

Over the summer, the Red Devils added to their history with their best overall training as a group.

"We have a big group of varsity girls who have worked really hard over the summer and they believe in themselves," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"The workouts that this team is doing as a top-12 group in terms of their longs run, their tempo work, is the best collective work we have ever had in the summer by any team we've ever had, and that includes some pretty darn good teams. They've come along not only physically and fitness-wise, but in terms of emotionally and bonding with each other and really buying into that idea of team. I'm excited and the girls are just as excited as can be."

In the preseason rankings, the Red Devils are No. 9 by MileSplit Illinois and No. 18 by DyeStat Illinois.

The team once again will get an early gauge in their annual season and home opener, the Hornet-Red Devil Invitational at Katherine Legge Memorial Park. The field includes projected top-three state contenders Glenbard West and Palatine and top-10 rated Naperville Central and New Trier.

"We've done the work, we want it. It's just time to go and make it happen," McCabe said. "Our goals are very high and we know we're ready to far exceed our state meet performance of a year ago."

"My goal at the state meet is to put seven runners under 18:00 on a day with reasonable conditions, like last year. I think we're going to see a big step up this year in terms of the junior varsity and frosh-soph levels as well. It's up and down the line."

At state last year, Marcotte was the team's No. 2 finisher (83rd, 17:57) behind Hardies (8th, 16:49), a three-time top-eight state finisher, at the fastest overall girls state race on the Detweiller Park course in Peoria. May (98th, 18:06), Sullivan (101st, 18:07) and Brennan (122nd, 18:22) were the team's No. 3-5 finishers.

All four state returnees overcame injuries just to compete at state or

enjoyed breakout seasons with the realization that even more success was possible.

Marcotte has many reasons for her enthusiasm. She is the healthiest she's been since her freshman season, when she was the team's No. 2 finisher at state (87<sup>th</sup>, 18:10) and qualified for state track in the 3,200-meter run.

Already, she has been projected to contend for all-state honors for a top-25 state finish, if not challenge for the top 10.

"This is the best I've felt in a long time, very long time," Marcotte said. "(My summer training) was pretty uninterrupted so just consistency (has helped)."

There's also a different feeling for Marcotte as a senior -- the only senior among the Red Devils' top-seven varsity lineup this season. Although the overall team size remains similar, this senior class of 10 is the smallest in recent memory.

Last year's state lineup not only graduated Hardies, but also Becky Ventura and Katie Gelman. A four-year varsity runner, Marcotte's ups and downs and her ability to overcome them gives her a unique perspective and has earned respect from her teammates.

"I'm sad it's my last season, but I'm just going to give it everything I've got because it's the last chance I have to prove myself as a high-school athlete," Marcotte said.

"I don't really consider myself any different from anybody else (as a senior). I'm just another team member. I don't really think of it as I'm a senior. I feel like I've been kind of mentoring the younger, inexperienced (runners), the incoming freshmen. I feel like I've done well as a leader over the summer."

Marcotte's first big setback was a pulled hamstring injury that especially hampered her sophomore cross country and track seasons. She also has been trying to overcome an iron deficiency the past two years.

In May, Marcotte still managed to return to state track in the 3,200 in May by running the qualifying time at sectionals with her third fastest time ever. McCabe said the iron issue finally appears to be conquered.

"Becca is a quiet leader, but she's really emerged as a leader in every way," McCabe said. "It's a young team, but it's not an inexperienced team. I think it's kind of an ideal blend of youth and experience. Becca is going to be a great leader. (And) we have a great junior team of leaders."

"We had a lot of seniors graduate, but they took a lot of us under their wing. Now I guess you could say we have a younger team, but we have experience, though," Brennan said. "It's different now because now I lead a lot of the workouts. Last year, I'd run with Becky Ventura and I would almost never have to lead a workout or long run. It's kind of neat to see a different perspective because I was always in the back of the pack just running along, head down."

Brennan made the postseason lineup after not competing all the way until the conference meet to rest a quadricep injury. After spending most of the regular season on elliptical machines, she took second on the frosh-soph level at conference and then was the team's No. 4 finisher at the Lyons Township Regional (13th).

"I trained all season long, still. I didn't really ever stop. That was pretty awesome to be able (to run at state)," Brennan said.

"It's been a good summer (of training). It was a solid base. I started out a lot more conservative than I have before, but I think it was almost better. It taught me a lot. It'll be nice this year to get in more races before the conference and state series."

May also had a rough 2011 season because of injury but came back strong as a sophomore and continued to improve and gain confidence as the season progressed. Besides state, May was the team's No. 3 finisher at regionals (6th) and sectionals (28th).

"(Recently) I was saying this is my best season coming into it health-wise. Our team does a lot of the little things so that definitely will help

us in the long run to prevent injury," May said.

"I'm kind of nervous. This is my first season where I've really had a previous season and can look back and say this is how I did last race or the last time I ran here. Seeing how I do from last year compared to this year, that's exciting to have for once."

Sullivan also hopes to make progress upon a solid freshman season as a consistent varsity contributor. She started the season on froshoph but then became a top-five mainstay, including the team's No. 4 finisher at sectionals (28th).

Sullivan said she has enjoyed passing on her race knowledge to this year's freshman group.

"Since I've experienced a year, all of the meets and stuff, I know what to expect and how to push myself and when to push harder throughout the season," Sullivan said.

"We're at such a higher level (as a group) than last summer because we've been training so much harder and stronger and we've just improved dramatically. We have more of a team (dynamic) so I think that'll help us a lot more than last year."

Brennan and Spencer have been part of two postseason lineups, and Kummerer was part of the 2011 postseason lineup. Spencer is among several who have "really stepped up her game." Leahy ran cross country for the first time in 2012.

More depth has come from Zaher and newcomers Horowicz, Yager and Haff.

Zaher had never run cross country or track before she joined the Red Devils last fall and had a decent freshman season. In track, Zaher gained training and confidence and took it all the way to qualifying for state in the 1,600.

Horowicz and Yager are track runners competing in cross country for the first time. McCabe became familiar with Haff last year when the Butler Junior High eighth-grader won the conference cross country

meet ahead of second-place Grace McCabe of Westview Hills, McCabe's daughter.

"We'll see how (Haff) races. She'll certainly be in our top three," McCabe said. "And I wouldn't put anything past Annie Zaher. She's such a competitor. And Becca's fitter than she's ever been."

The Red Devils once again face the challenges of a competitive West Suburban Conference Silver Division. Defending Silver champion Glenbard West, third at state in 2012, returns individual state champion Madeline Perez and two other all-staters (Lisa Luczak and move-in Lindsay Graham) and is favored by many to win the state title. York and Lyons Township, 14th and 20th at state last year, respectively, and Downers Grove North also are state-ranked in the preseason.

At last year's Silver Meet, Marcotte (11th) and May (13th) earned individual all-conference honors with top-16 finishes, and Sullivan was 18th, 5.5 seconds from 16th. Five of the top-nine finishers last year were seniors. Besides Brennan (2nd), Spencer was 19th in the frosh-soph race.

"I think overall we have really positive excitement coming into the season," Brennan said. "We do have really fast people, but we have a really solid pack. It's kind of like 10 people competing altogether on varsity. I think it makes you want everything a little more. Individually, you always want to be running your best, but then as a team you want to be the best you can be."

— by Bill Stone