

PREVIEW: Red Devils bring healthy outlook toward state return as team

Senior Jill Hardies already is the most successful distance runner in Hinsdale Central girls cross country history, but there's still plenty that she wants to accomplish.

Despite battling a lingering foot injury since her sophomore track season, Hardies has three individual all-state performances in cross country, including fifth at the 2011 Class 3A state meet, and two more in track.

Even more motivated as she enters her senior year, Hardies feels ready after spending the first month of her offseason by doing little or no training.

"I really think that helped me in the long run because I feel great. I'm in better shape now taking a whole month off than I was not taking a break last year," Hardies said.

"I don't want to jinx it, but I think I've finally nicked (my injury). That month really helped me get rid of that, and it was a good mental break because it's been a long three years going right from season to season. I'm finally running normal again after being injured for so long. I feel like my stride's back to how it was my sophomore year because I grew a lot. I am rejuvenated and I'm really excited for this season."

The Red Devils are excited that Hardies' enthusiasm has plenty of company. After battling numerous key injuries throughout 2011, there's a much healthier outlook as the team tries to return to the 3A state meet in Peoria after a streak of consecutive state appearances was snapped at nine last season.

While Hardies was the Red Devils' lone state representative in 2011, they return the rest of their lineup from the Lockport Sectional -- junior and 2010 state team competitor Becca Marcotte, seniors Katie Gelman and Becky Ventura and sophomores Sarah Brennan, Susan Spencer and Tillie Kummerer. Senior Morgan Mulhern was part of the regional lineup, and senior Allison Shaner ran at state in 2010.

The season opens with the annual Hornet-Red Devil Invitational at Katherine Legge Memorial Park Saturday, Sept. 1.

"We always have a lot of motivational quotes and sayings and one this year is 'No Expectations, Zero Limitations,' " Hinsdale Central girls cross country head coach Mark McCabe said.

"It's a good blend of older girls and younger girls, but even many of the older girls feel like they have some unfinished business because of various injuries in the past. Now they're healthy, they're fit, they're excited. We just know that they're ready to do a great deal more than they've ever done so we're going in with high hopes knowing that we put ourselves in the best position that we can."

While last season was a frustrating one, the Red Devils hope to build off the varsity opportunities created by injuries to Hardies and others. With graduated seniors Grace Klein and Taylor Troy also sidelined often, the varsity lineup often was all underclassmen.

Needing a top-five finish at the Lockport Sectional for a state berth, the Red Devils were 12th (300 points), 139 points from fifth. The team's No. 2 finisher, Ventura was 59th, 44 places and 1:20 from the last individual state berth.

"(2011) was a very tough year," McCabe said. "It's hard to look at it that way, but in the end those kind of experiences make you stronger as long as you're willing to fight through them and come back. This team is full of girls who have done that, and now they're seeing the fruits of their labor."

"Jill, obviously, is one of the elite runners in the state. We've got a core group of other girls that will be working together as a group. It's going to be a real team effort this year. The key will be, as always, to be healthy and at our best in the meets that matter the most. And that's going to be a key for us too, to have that cohesiveness (in races) where everybody's pulling each other along."

Hardies finished fifth at state (16:59 for 3.0 miles) behind two graduated seniors and two current seniors in third and fourth - Lake Park's Kaylee Flanagan (16:43) and New Trier's Courtney Ackerman (16:50). Current Maine South junior Emily Leonard (17:00) was a close sixth, and five other underclassmen finished between ninth through 13th.

In 2010, Hardies took second to graduated Ariel Michalek of Oswego East after taking 17th as a freshman. 2009 graduate Elaine Kuckertz is Hinsdale Central's only other runner to achieve all-state as many as three times, taking as high as sixth in 2007 and 2008. Hardies nearly added to her great sophomore year by qualifying for the Foot Locker Cross Country Nationals, but she was tripped at the 2-mile mark at the Midwest Regionals and finished 15th, just missing advancement.

"This year, I have a lot of stuff (to achieve). I want to win a state championship, and I want to get to a national meet, Nike or Foot Locker," Hardies said.

"It's kind of been tough with the pressure, but I've gotten used to it. I've learned to run pretty well under pressure at the big meets. The last two years of cross country have been filled with major ups and downs, but I just want to end on a very good note and say that I accomplished everything that I wanted to. I'm using those disappointments as motivation, not looking back but looking forward. I just want to start racing now."

This year, it should happen sooner than usual. This would be the first time that she'll compete at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite. In 2011, she only competed in one of the first six meets before returning for good in the final dual meet prior to the Silver Meet. Now she feels ready for a great high-school season with a college running future ahead of her. Notre Dame and Wake Forest currently are at the top of her short list of candidates.

Hardies said one of her disappointments during last year's state meet was competing without the team.

"It's all business. It's a little more fun and you're running more for your team than yourself," Hardies said. "It's easier to run for your team than just for yourself."

Ventura also has emerged as a team leader after being one of the few Red Devils not sidelined in 2011. She competed in a team-high 10 of 11 varsity races, sometimes as the only varsity entry.

"I think I made some great strides last year so I'm kind of excited for this year. Plus I'm excited just to have the team back together and for all of us to be running so I don't have to warm up or cool down on my own anymore," Ventura said.

"Last year I kind of learned a lot about pushing myself so I hope I can kind of spread that to other girls in practice and races. I know what it's like to kind of battle through it."

Marcotte spent most of 2011 battling an injured left hamstring that occurred during the offseason. She enjoyed a great freshman year, finishing an all-conference 14th at the Silver Meet and 87th at state as the Red Devils' No. 2 finisher.

Last year, she only competed once before being the Red Devils' No. 2 finisher at the Silver Meet and regionals. Her injury made her sectional race on the treacherous Dellwood Park course a survival test.

"That was terrible, the worst race of my life. I was limping the entire time and in a lot of pain," Marcotte said.

Marcotte spent last track season training rather than competing. She now feels injury free and physically stronger from three months of physical therapy. Her only concern now is a two-week illness upon her recent return from a trip to Guatemala with her youth group.

"I'm excited to see where I am because I've just been training as hard as I can. I just have no idea how I'm going to do," Marcotte said. "For me (my goal) is just being able to get to the state meet and do well and as a team I think we can be top 10 in state if we work hard, if we keep our spirits up."

Peterson and Shaner can't help but feel better. They never got the chance to compete last season because of their setbacks.

Shaner had been the Red Devils' No. 6 state finisher (182nd) in 2010. Two seasons ago, Peterson led the sophomore team at the Silver Meet by taking 10th, but she spent her junior year on crutches after undergoing hip surgery. Once she got off her crutches, she suffered a stress fracture in her foot and then spent the track season building her endurance and stamina.

"It was a rough year, but now I'm back and healthy and excited to start the new year," Peterson said. "It's been a lot of motivation since it's been so long since I've raced, but I'm really excited to get back into it."

After injuries, Gelman bounced back from competing in just two of the first six meets in 2011 to be part of the varsity lineup. At track sectionals, Gelman competed in the 3,200 relay with Spencer and Kummerer while Brennan competed individually in the 3,200. Because of injuries, Hardies ran the shorter 1,600 and finished fifth at state after taking third in the 3,200 as a freshman.

"We definitely talk about last year and about how that helps motivate us for this year," Gelman said. "We feel like this year we'll be able to accomplish everything we can. I feel good. I feel healthy. I feel like we're all healthy and ready to race."

Last year, Spencer competed in every race and Brennan in all but one. Many times, they were promoted to the varsity, including the Silver Meet. Kummerer stayed on the sophomore level for conference and finished a team-best 21st before joining the lineup at sectionals.

"With our first season under our belt, we can use the racing knowledge to our best ability and now focus on times. I want to drop a lot of time and I think everyone on our team is able to do that with the training that we've been doing," Brennan said. "I think our endurance and fitness level is a lot higher than it has been so I think that'll give us a big step up for the season."

"I think we're going to have way more endurance because everybody has gotten a lot stronger. The seniors are really strong and healthy so I think we're going to be twice as good as last year," Spencer said. "I want to definitely go a lot faster than I did last year, push myself harder and help lead the team and just be a stronger team member."

In last year's WSC Silver, the Red Devils were 2-4 in varsity duals and fifth at the conference meet to finish fifth overall. In just her second race back, Hardies (17:22.9) was second to current York senior Emma Fisher (17:07.0), a two-time all-stater who finished 12th in 2011. Hardies won the Silver title in 2010.

Hinsdale Central's junior varsity and sophomores also were 2-4 in Silver duals. The JV took fourth at the Silver Meet and fourth in the final overall standings, and the sophomores were sixth at the Silver Meet and shared fifth overall with Oak Park-River Forest.

Senior Zoe Larson was a team-best 13th for the JV and earned individual all-conference honors with a top-16 finish.

Glenbard West and York shared last year's overall varsity conference title. Glenbard West was a Silver-best sixth at state with York eighth, Lyons Township 11th and Downers Grove North 21st.

Glenbard West and LT return five runners from their state lineups, including Glenbard West all-state junior Madeline Perez (15th in 2011). York has two other returnees besides Fisher, and Downers North has six.

In pre-season polls, the Red Devils are unranked but mentioned among teams to watch. They will get a quick indication of their abilities at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, where they will see defending 3A state champion and pre-season No. 1 New Trier, which returns its three all-staters who placed among the top 11.

"Last year, there were two seniors (on varsity), and this year there's six of us. That's really nice," Gelman said. "All of us are really excited for this season because we feel like we have a lot of potential that we haven't been able to live up to, and this is our year. I feel like all of the excitement just makes us a strong group, and it's going to be a good year."