

Hinsdale Central junior Annie Zaher and freshman Reilly Revord are among the tallest runners in most girls cross country races.

"We stand out," Zaher said. "Sometimes when we're running, we try and measure it, but I'd say we're about the same."

After their races Saturday, Sept. 13, in the First to the Finish Invitational at Peoria's Detweiller Park, they and all of the Red Devils felt 10 feet tall.

Sophomore invite champion Alexa Haff and the Red Devils enjoyed one of the program's greatest regular-season team performances as they won the team title with three top-five finishers on the annual course of the state meet.

Hinsdale Central (63 points) nearly had half the point total of runner-up Naperville North (122), second at Class 3A state last year and ranked No. 2 in the state behind defending state champion Glenbard West. Third-place New Trier (128) was third at state last year.

The Red Devils, 14th at state in 2013, now are ranked No. 2.

"We were all just really happy after. We felt like we really just had a good race overall for everyone," Zaher said. "This is definitely a step forward but we still have a lot of work to do so we're still going to train hard. This will just give us the motivation, to capture this feeling of happiness and keep it going."

Haff, second at state as a freshman, won in a personal-best 16:41.1 for 3.0 miles -- even faster than her 16:45 that earned second at state as a freshman. Second-place Jacobs senior Lauren VanVlierbergen (17:00.7) was fourth at state in 2013.

Zaher (17:04.1) and Revord (17:18.7) were close behind in third and fourth, and freshman Grace McCabe was 14th (17:39.5). Senior Sara Folliard (42nd, 18:20.0) also earned a medal for a top-50 finish, followed by junior Emma Sullivan (63rd, 18:39.0) and seniors Camila Horowicz (124th, 19:20.7) and Molly Leahy (165th, 19:49.7).

"It was great. All of the girls did so well," Haff said. "Every time I just want to improve and do better and keep working as hard. It's going to be a fun season,

hopefully, stay free of injuries. I know we're going to have a great team. We'll keep encouraging people, keep working hard."

"It was definitely a great day for most everyone," Revord said. "It was just a great feeling afterwards, very happy, very excited, especially for the whole team, too, because we did great individually and as a team."

Hinsdale Central won the meet for the first time since 2009. Saturday's 49-team field featured 14 of the top-25 ranked 3A teams by DyeStat Illinois and five of the seven returning top-eight finishers from the 2013 state meet. New Trier senior and defending state champion Mimi Smith was fifth Saturday (17:20.6).

"I remember the first time we won (this invite), it was a bit of a surprise. That was cool in that way, but I've never walked away feeling we had as good of a team performance 1 through 5 than we had today. For today, it was a great performance," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"It's not where we'll be at the end of the year, but it's certainly where we want to be right now. There are a couple of other people that I think can get into this top 5 mix in the next six weeks (before state Nov. 8) and that depth is what is so crucial."

Within the impressive individual performances, there were many exciting moments. Haff and VanVlierbergen were stride for stride most of the race. Haff ran 5:23 at the mile and 11:06 at two miles and had built roughly a four-second lead heading into the final 800 meters.

VanVlierbergen is the defending 3A state track champion in the 800, but Haff increased her margin of victory by about 15 seconds during the last half-mile Saturday.

"I started to realize, 'I've got to go now,' and that's where I started to pick up speed," said Haff, whose final mile was 5:35.

"She's definitely ahead of where she was a year ago and ran a great race," Mark McCabe said.

Haff's victory was a bit of a personal triumph, too. At last year's invite, she appeared headed for victory but Buffalo Grove's two-time all-stater Kaitlyn Ko made a surprising surge and passed Haff in the final 20 meters before she could respond. Ko won the race by 1.7 seconds (17:00.96 to 17:02.66).

"Coach McCabe had that conversation with me after the meet and I never forgot it," Haff said. "This year, it's a lot easier being a sophomore. I kind of know what to expect so that it plays a huge help. I think I've relaxed a little bit more because I know what to expect. I'm going to keep working hard and see where it takes me."

Smith, who was not at last year's invite, won state by two seconds over Haff. Ko, now a junior and seventh at state in 2013, was 44th at the invite Saturday (18:21.3). Lockport sophomore Morgan Bollinger, eighth at state last year, was 53rd (18:30.4).

VanVlierbergen ran an especially impressive race, considering that she remained with Haff while adapting to the tie for her long hair falling out early in the race.

"While she was running, she was fixing her hair, putting it into a pony tail," Haff said. "It was crazy. I don't know what I would have done. I was in shock. I don't know how she did it, but she fixed her hair and it looked great and I was like, 'You go girl.' "

Zaher nearly caught VanVlierbergen at the end on the strength of another personal-best time. Zaher comfortably beat her previous Detweiller best from the 2013 state meet (42nd, 17:56) and significantly beat her time from the 2013 invite (16th, 18:07.84).

Zaher did it all despite spending most of the race running by herself.

"It wasn't too difficult because I had the leaders in sight so that was good and I train a lot by myself so I was able to push through it," Zaher said. "I've got to work on my kick, but it was close (to second). This is just like a whole new level for me. I never thought that I could run this fast, even last year, so it's just really exciting to have these times."

While it was hard for Zaher to compare her satisfaction to winning the state track title in the 1,600, the smiles sure looked similar.

"It just makes me happy to see improvement. I guess it's just satisfying to know you're hard work is paying off," Zaher said.

"Annie took the race by the horns and was aggressive from start to finish. It's the best cross country race she's ever run in her life," Mark McCabe said.

Also standing tall in more ways than one was Revord. She also spent much of the race running by herself, fixated mostly on Zaher. The true measure of success for Revord came when she was challenged from behind.

"Somebody came by and passed me and I was like, 'No. You're not passing me,' so I passed them back because I really wanted to go for it and give it my all," Revord said.

"(And) there's more there," Mark McCabe said. "She's a competitor, and when there are people around, she's going to do everything she can to beat them. And to run 17:18 as a freshman in your first race on this course is really outstanding."

Revord ended up with a 1.9-second gap on Smith, who herself had 2.4 seconds on sixth-place Minooka sophomore Ashley Tutt (17:23.0). Tutt was 26th at state last year and one place shy of the final individual all-state award.

"Definitely one of my goals was to just know where Annie is and know where she is on the course. It was just awesome being able to see her run, too," Revord said. "We've tried to measure (ourselves) but it's pretty much the same height. She might have like a couple of millimeters, but if you see us running next to each other, we're pretty much the same size and same height."

Grace McCabe, Mark's daughter, basically equaled her 12th-place finish at the Hornet-Red Devil, two places behind Revord, and was 9.7 seconds from 10th place Saturday. McCabe, also was 3.5 seconds from 13th, felt that a stronger second mile than 6:02 would have helped her place. She finished in 5:57.

"I think I had more left in me (afterwards) than I should have today," Grace

McCabe said. "I need to work on the middle part of the race. I can always do better probably than I think I can in the middle of the race."

"Grace was happy today. To run 17:39 first time down on this course is awesome, although she kind of walks away feeling there's a little more there in that middle mile," Mark McCabe said. "I think she's kind of licking her chops, thinking maybe if I could have held it more in that middle mile and maybe got out just slightly quicker, she probably would have been in the top 10."

Folliard, the only senior in the Red Devils' top five, arguably had the strongest individual effort. She slashed roughly 40 seconds off her previous personal best anywhere and was almost one minute faster than when she was seventh in the invite's open race last year (19:18.98). Folliard beat her 2013 state time (155th, 19:07) by 44 seconds.

"It was definitely a lot better than any race I've ever run before. It was a huge PR for me," Folliard said. "I was really happy. I just put myself in it from the beginning, just kept it from there. I had a good first mile and then I didn't hear any times until the finish. Then I saw the time and I was like, 'Ah. OK. Good.' "

Mark McCabe is optimistic about the breakthrough. He said Folliard and Grace McCabe have such strong kicks that they have tended to be too conservative in the early stages of races. They either run out of time or, such as a huge race like Saturday, get congested and cannot finish as well as they would have liked.

"Quite honestly, two or three times talking to (Folliard), I was choked up because I was so proud of her and I know how happy she is," Mark McCabe said.

"Running's not a sport like basketball, where you might hit the half-court shot to win the game and it'll never happen again. Once you make that breakthrough in running, you're there to stay."

Folliard also credited the team for her success. Folliard was the Red Devils' No. 6 finisher at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, three places behind Sullivan, but knew going into Saturday that she could be a factor.

"I just knew that if there's any possibility that I'm ever scoring points, I need to do the best I can for the team, just to make sure we're doing everything we can,"

Folliard said. "It's really exciting. It feels really good. It's a good thing to have early in the season just to give us some confidence."

After just two meets, Revord and Grace McCabe continue to gain confidence as varsity runners. McCabe ran at the cross country state meet for Westview Hills Middle School but that was on a different course in Normal and just 2.0 miles. Revord set numerous running records for Clarendon Hills Middle School.

McCabe previously had visited Detweiller numerous times as a spectator when the Red Devils competed at the IHSA state meet.

"It was fast, very fast, good footing," Grace McCabe said. "It was really cool. It was very exciting (to compete). We talked about the course a lot, like different parts, how many loops you have to take."

"I was a little more nervous than I was for the first time at KLM, just knowing that it was the state course, but it was also better because there weren't as many hills so it went by quicker," Revord said. "High school is like such a big step up from where you were in middle school. It's just great to run well and be able to cheer everybody on."

The Red Devils' bus ride this week will be even longer. They are competing for the first time at the Flashrock Invitational in Carmel, Ind., and on a slightly longer 5-kilometer (3.1 mile) course.

Like all races -- good, bad or average -- the Red Devils filed Saturday's victory and performance away by the time Sunday morning came around.

"There's always the next race and things you can do and there's always more there, room for improvement," Mark McCabe said. "We know at the state meet if we walk away feeling like we did today, we'll walk away feeling really good. As long as we continue to follow the plan and do all of the little things we need to do, good things will happen."

-- by Bill Stone