

Hinsdale Central senior Sara Folliard is looking forward to her second and final chance to compete at the Class 3A girls cross country state meet Saturday, Nov. 8, at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

"It's really exciting for us because that's just one of our goals for the season," Folliard said. "We always want to be downstate, which is very exciting. It's a great meet to be at."

The Red Devils appear poised to have their highest state finish in years after winning the Marist Sectional Saturday, Nov. 1, at Midlothian Meadows.

Sophomore Alexa Haff, second at state in 2013, won the 2.98-mile race in 17:02.72 in her first race since Oct. 9.

Junior Annie Zaher (4th, 17:27.95) and freshman Grace McCabe (7th, 17:41.12) also earned top-10, all-sectional medalist honors. Freshman Reilly Revord was 11th (17:51.69), 1.28 seconds from 10th, followed by Folliard (31st, 18:22.87), senior Camila Horowicz (55th, 19:02.35) and junior Emma Sullivan (68th, 19:19.96).

The Red Devils qualified for the state meet as a team for the third year in a row and 12th time in the past 13 seasons. The 3A state meet is at 1 p.m., followed by the 3A boys at 2 p.m.

"Throughout the whole season we've just been working towards this so this was just exactly what we expected and we just hope it keeps going to improve for state," Zaher said.

"It was really great having (Haff) back just because we were at full strength. It was great to have (Haff) come back and run so well. It was like she never left. I feel so excited that our whole team is back and I know we can do big things (at state) so I'm super excited."

The Red Devils (50 points), ranked No. 2 in 3A behind defending state champion Glenbard West, won the sectional comfortably ahead of second-place Lockport (82). Downers Grove North (112), Neuqua Valley (124) and Downers Grove South (158) were the other advancing teams out of the sectional.

The only previous sectional team champion in Hinsdale Central history went on to capture its only state championship in 2006. The Red Devils' other top-three team trophy came with a second-place finish in 2008, the second year of three-class competition.

"We did what we needed to do (at sectionals) with the knowledge bigger and better things are in store at state," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"Our goal is to go and be the best we can be. We have the confidence that we've faced all of the best teams all year long. We raced on that course (Sept. 13) in the most competitive regular-season meet and done well. I think there are five teams down there that'll be in the hunt and we'll be one of them."

The Red Devils have been ranked No. 2 ever since they won the First to the Finish Invitational at Detweiller. They even handed Glenbard West its only loss, 25-30 Oct. 9 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park, but the Hilltoppers came back to win their last meeting at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 25 to achieve a share of the overall Silver title with the Red Devils.

Haff also should be in contention for the individual title after her 16:45 in 2013 earned second to current New Trier senior Mimi Smith (16:43). However, eight of last year's top-10 state finishers and 19 of the 25 all-staters also are expected to compete Saturday.

Haff's solid victory Saturday by 9.34 seconds over Plainfield North junior Rachael Lau (17:12.06) gave her reassurance that her cross training to recover from a hip/leg injury has been going well. Lau was 24th at state in 2013.

"You can't really dwell on things that happened in the past. You have to look forward and improving yourself," Haff said.

"My goal is always just to go out and give my best. I wasn't sure what to expect (Saturday) because I have been injured and been out. I wanted to see what I could do. I'm happy with the outcome and it's great to be out there with the girls and with the team again."

Zaher was 42nd at state (17:56), 22 seconds from 25th place, and the team's No. 2 finisher. Horowicz (103rd, 18:33), Sullivan (121st, 18:43) and Folliard (155th, 19:07) were the No. 3-5 finishers. Sullivan, the only one with previous state experience, was the No. 4 finisher (101st, 18:07) for the 11th-place Red Devils in 2012.

In 2013, the Red Devils were hoping for at least a top-10 finish. They ended up 14th (328 points), 58 points shy of 10th.

"I'm just really excited because I think our team has the potential to do anything that we want to at state meet. I'm just really excited to be a part of that and hopefully contribute to that," Folliard said.

"It's going to be awesome, I think, because I learned a lot of things last year, your first year at state. There are a lot of lessons to be learned so I think I'm in a better position this year to do well. I just want to do the best that I can, prepare well and just leave everything out there."

There's also the experience and confidence from track. Zaher won the 3A state girls track title in the 1,600-meter run and Haff was an all-state sixth in the 3,200. Folliard and Sullivan didn't qualify for state but probably had their best seasons.

"Hopefully this year we can reach our full potential and everyone can just be the best they can for race day," Zaher said. "(All-state is) definitely one of my goals -- and the goal for a couple of other girls on the team."

Grace McCabe and Revord may be newcomers to state, but they're not to the atmosphere. McCabe, for one, has visited state many years in the past watching her father coach the Red Devils.

"It's really cool. It's like I moved up to this point now because I'm on the team," Grace McCabe said. "We've been consistent so we'll be consistent at state, too, and see what we can do."

Besides racing at Detweiller, the freshman and the Red Devils replicated the state experience by joining the Flashrock Invitational for the first time Sept. 20 in Carmel, Ind. The team traveled Friday and stayed overnight before competing Saturday morning, the same routine they will follow this weekend.

"It's just going to be a fun weekend at state and it's going to be a great time and everybody's looking forward to it," Revord said. "It's been quite a journey and it just feels really great that the whole team had a pretty good day (at sectionals). It's just really exciting that now we're going to get to state and just show them who's boss."

Haff also won sectionals in 2013 by nearly 38 seconds. On Saturday, Haff was in the lead group at the mile in 5:32 with Lau and Marist sophomore Maryclare Leonard, 20th at state last year, right behind her. Haff and Lau were side by side at two miles in 11:35.

"Fitness wise, (Haff is) where she needs to be but this just gives her confidence that's indeed true," McCabe said. "It's always nice to be at full strength. The team and I were all excited having all of our best runners and best people on the line."

It also felt right for Haff to be at a meet and actually compete. This was Haff's first race victory since winning the St. Charles Invitational Oct. 4. The past two races, she has been a spectator after cross training on her own earlier that Saturday.

"I'd usually get there an hour or so before the race started," Haff said. "It was really weird. I liked going but not warming up and not being with the girls. You're there but not there."

Zaher enjoyed a breakthrough last season by taking sixth at sectionals at Katherine Legge Memorial Park. She was sixth at two miles Saturday in 11:44, moving up nine spots from her 5:37 mile.

Zaher then passed two Lockport's No. 1 and 2 finishers over the final mile, including sophomore Morgan Bollinger (5th, 17:34.80), eighth at state in 2013.

"I followed a race strategy that I set out before, which was to go out more conservative and then pass people through the woods, which I did," Zaher said. "Usually in the past couple of races I've been starting out too fast and I didn't want to do that today. Just in race strategy I felt that this worked for me so I was happy with it."

McCabe made the team's biggest move in the race from 20th at one mile (5:39) to 10th at two miles (11:55). She ended up 2.45 seconds behind Lockport's Emmie Hahn (6th, 17:38.67), the highest finishing senior. Revord was eighth at two miles (11:52).

Folliard made a huge improvement from being 59th and the team's No. 7 finisher at sectionals. She put herself among the top 40 throughout the race and moved up to be the top No. 5 team finisher at the sectional.

"It was a decent race, solid. I wasn't totally happy with it, but it was definitely better than last year's (sectional)," Folliard said. "You learn things every race about preparation, and the weather. We had some cold meets earlier in the season that helped us prepare for today. That definitely was handy."

Last season was the first for Horowicz in cross country. She was injured most of the track season and entered this season conservatively training and competing to make sure she was ready for the postseason.

"It's definitely hard to sit out (early races), but it happens and you've just got to work through it," Horowicz said.

"I'm excited to be back there where I'm not new at this sport. I know what to expect. It's a lot of fun. (I've learned) just to trust in my training. I've done the work and I've earned the spot to be there and I've got a great team behind me so just compete."

Glenbard West has been ranked No. 1 all season long and should return three all-staters and five runners from its championship lineup. Haff and junior No. 1 runner Lindsay Graham have split their two meetings this season.

Naperville North, Palatine and New Trier also have been ranked among the top five throughout the season. Naperville North was second at state in 2013 with New Trier and Palatine third and fourth.

“As long as we go out and give our best effort, that’s all you can ask for,” Haff said. “We want to do what we’re capable of. Every person has to go and give 110 percent. If we do that, it’s just going to play out as it should and we’ll see how it happens.”

-- by Bill Stone