

After the 2012 Class 3A girls cross country state meet, Hinsdale Central senior Becca Marcotte left Peoria's Detweiller Park wanting one more chance.

"Nothing very memorable from last year (at state). It wasn't my best race," Marcotte said. "After the race, I just kept on thinking, 'The next summer. I'm just going to train so much harder so I can have a good race.' "

As Marcotte prepares for her third and final state race Saturday, Nov. 9, she and the Red Devils are in a much better place. They qualified for state for the second year in a row and the 11th time in the past 12 seasons when they finished third at the Hinsdale Central Sectional Nov. 2 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park.

Freshman Alexa Haff continued her outstanding season as she won the 2.95-mile race in 16:50.78. Sophomore Annie Zaher also was all-sectional by taking seventh in 17:50.03, followed by Marcotte (20th, 18:21.31), junior Camila Horowicz (37th, 18:44.98), sophomore Emma Sullivan (42nd, 18:53.95), freshman Olivia Carter (50th, 19:03.31) and junior Sara Folliard (60th, 19:19.18).

The Red Devils (103 points), who only needed a top-five sectional finish to advance, placed behind Lockport (62) and Downers Grove South (95). Neuqua Valley (121) and Downers Grove North (129) also advanced out of the sectional. Sixth-place Lyons Township (134) missed a state team berth for the first time since 1998.

"Your No. 1 goal going into sectionals is to move on and we accomplished that," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said. "It was not our best team race or even close to it, but I thought we had four really strong races in there. If anybody wasn't happy with her race, she knows exactly what to do to be happy this Saturday. I think we're in a good place heading into state."

The 3A girls state meet is at 1 p.m., followed by the 3A boys race at 2 p.m. Awards for both 3A races is at 3 p.m.

Other than Marcotte, the lone senior in the lineup, Sullivan is the Red Devils' only other runner Saturday with previous state meet experience from last year's qualifier that finished 11th (304 points), 28 points from 10th-place Maine South.

All of the Red Devils have competed at Detweiller, however, when they raced there Sept. 14 for the First to the Finish Invitational.

"It feels really good to be knowing that we're actually going to go to state and we're all going to get to race there," said Horowicz, a first-year cross country runner. "(I'm glad) just to be able to say that I finished a cross country season. I don't want to have any expectations for next week, just hoping everyone runs their best."

The Red Devils are hoping for their highest team finish since taking second in 2008 to add to their 2006 state championship trophy. They have been rated among the top 10 throughout this season by the three weekly state polls, generally at No. 5. They were ranked from No. 6 to 8 in the final regular-season polls.

Defending 2012 champion Naperville North and Glenbard West with 2012 defending individual champion Madeline Perez are the favorites to win, along with 2011 champion New Trier and Palatine. Glenbard West, New Trier and Palatine were third, fourth and fifth last year behind Lake Park.

"This is a completely different situation than a year ago as far as team chemistry. The girls have much higher goals than they did a year ago," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"Last year, our goal was to be in the top 10, but it was a challenging goal. Our state meet performance was very strong but then always we pride ourselves in that we always run well in Peoria at the state meet and at the earlier invite. That gives the girls great confidence as well."

As a freshman, Marcotte was the No. 2 state finisher on the Red Devils' 19th-place team in 87th (18:10). An injury sidelined her from post-season competition in 2011, when only four-time all-stater Jill Hardies qualified individually.

Marcotte also was the team's No. 2 finisher at state last year (83rd, 17:57), but wanted to take more advantage of the fastest state race ever.

**"As a team, (finishing) top five would be awesome because that's what we went into the season thinking about," Marcotte said. "It's good to be going senior year so I can end it well. Certainly (this state race will be) a lot different because I'm a senior and it's my last cross country race of high school and I'm kind of going into it as a leader so that kind of makes the dynamic different."**

**Top-25 finishers earn all-state honors. Haff is projected by many to finish among the top five, if not become the Red Devils' first individual state champion. As a sophomore, Hardies took second to Oswego East's Ariel Michalek in 2010.**

**"You just have to focus and kind of block all of that (others' predictions) stuff out. I just want to go out there and give it my all and see what happens," said Haff, who has won all but one of her races this season.**

**"I'm looking forward to going with the team, bonding and take in the whole experience so it's going to fun. As long as we all try our hardest, that's all we can ask for. As Coach McCabe says, the pieces will all fall into place."**

**This was the first time Hinsdale Central played host to a sectional, and the event ran well despite heavy rains flooding the race path in the southeast corner of the park.**

**The new 3.0-mile course unveiled at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite Sept. 7 had to be shortened with runners cutting in front of the paddle tennis courts rather than circling around them. Hay bales helped footing in the area along the west side of the park where runners have to leap across the path cut by the creek.**

**"We wanted to do it right, do all of the little things right, to make it a special meet, and then we got the rain, modifying the course," McCabe said. "That definitely was an additional challenge in there. Between Jim Kupres and Jim Lewandowski, our head buildings and grounds man, we pulled it off and it was absolutely great."**

**Haff was in command of the sectional race early, crossing the mile in 5:36 with a six-second lead over Lockport freshman Morgan Bollinger. Haff ended up winning over the second-place Bollinger (17:28.07) by 27.29 seconds.**

"I always go in with a goal to try my hardest and kind of let things play out as they do. I just felt good and went with it and kept going," Haff said.

"(Haff was) totally in control in the race. She looked great. She felt great," McCabe said. "She ran her usual smart race and was mindful of conditions and made sure she came through healthy and feeling good."

It's been quite a season so far for Haff, who began her high-school career by winning the Hornet-Red Devil at KLM. Neuqua Valley and Downers North were the only top-six teams Saturday to have previously run at KLM this season.

"You obviously love to have the home-course advantage, but when it's KLM it's intriguing and it was hard with all of the flooding and rain," Haff said. "(The course had) a few muddy parts but for the most part, I'd say it was pretty good conditions."

Zaher continues to excel in her first varsity season of cross country, earning all-sectional honors after fifth at the LT Regional Oct. 26 for a top-five medal.

Zaher particularly excited that she was 1.14 seconds ahead of eighth and 1.34 ahead of ninth. Zaher was eighth at the mile and still eighth halfway through the race.

"I think I just passed two girls, but usually I'm the one being passed at the end so it was nice to actually pass people," Zaher said. "I was so happy to be able to pass some people in the last 200 stretch because we really work on that hill. That was the best part of the race, probably."

Zaher does have state experience from track. In May, she qualified for state in the 1,600-meter run after running on the frosh-soph level indoors.

"It's a lot different because the whole team is going so cross country has just more of a team aspect to it that track didn't have," Zaher said.

"(Saturday) felt just amazing and just like track sectionals. I'm just excited to run at the (state) course again because it's such a fast course so hopefully I'll (get a personal record) at that meet."

Horowicz is a track veteran who also has competed at sectionals but this is her first season of cross country. Horowicz was a freestyle sprinter for the girls swimming team the past two fall seasons.

"It's a really big deal (for me to reach state). I feel really proud of that," Horowicz said. "There was a time where I didn't think that was going to happen and now it's actually happening. It's just kind of like, 'Whoa.'

"It's a pretty good feeling. It's like a team effort so being a part of that team is something really special."

For Carter, sectionals was her first varsity race ever.

Carter was added to the lineup after junior Sarah Brennan ran at the regional. Carter said the day of the regional McCabe told her she may join the lineup for sectionals and then found out for sure early in the week.

"I really like that it was here (at KLM) because I knew this course and I do like this course a lot. But I was very nervous, though," Carter said. "It was very similar to a normal race, just definitely harder competition. Going into it, I wasn't really sure where I stood in terms of the other girls, all of the other runners."

Carter made tremendous strides during the race, climbing from 109th at the mile in 6:29 to 68th near the halfway point.

"Olivia stepped in like a veteran and did a great job for her first varsity race," McCabe said.

Another key performer for the Red Devils was senior Amanda Koronkiewicz. She sang the national anthem before the girls race.

A team captain with Marcotte, Brennan and junior Susan Spencer, Koronkiewicz takes private voice lessons and is a part of the school and extracurricular choirs.

Koronkiewicz previously has sung the national anthem at Hinsdale Central

soccer, lacrosse, basketball and track events.

"Probably this one (is the most memorable) because it's the first time they've had a national anthem at a cross country meet, at least that I've seen," Koronkiewicz said. "It was cool because it was my home course, too, so it was nice."

Especially with Saturday's weather, Koronkiewicz's preparation almost sounded as though she was about to race.

"I was a little worried because it was so cold, but I just drink a lot of water before because that helps," Koronkiewicz said. "It's kind of like running. You drink a lot of water. (And) just staying warm. That's also like running. There are a lot of crossovers between singing and running."

At the 2012 state meet, Perez won in a girls Detweiller all-time course-record 16:02. Haff beat Perez at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 19, which was Perez's first race of the season after recovering from a calf injury. Perez has since won the Fenwick Regional by 22.15 seconds over junior teammate Lisa Luczak and the Lake Park Sectional by 10.25 seconds over New Trier junior Mimi Smith, another top-five contender who was 12th at state last year.

Other prominent 2012 all-state returnees in this year's 3A field include Fenwick junior Olivia Ryan (5th last year), Luczak (6th), Jacobs junior Lauren Van Vlierbergen (7th), Maine South senior Emily Leonard (9th), Naperville North junior Elly DeTurris (11th) and senior Maria McDaniel (21st), Glenbard West sophomore Lindsay Graham (20th) and Buffalo Grove sophomore Kaitlyn Ko (22nd).

"We talk about her plan and a general frame of reference," McCabe said of Haff. "If she follows her plan (at state), she's going to be in a very good place. We'll let the predictors predict what they may."

The only race in which Haff has not finished first this year was at Detweiller in First to the Finish, where she was second to Ko by 1.7 seconds (17:00.96 to 17:02.66) with Van Vlierbergen third in 17:07.33. McHenry junior Lauren Opatrny, 29th at state in 2012, beat Ko at the Schaumburg Sectional.

**"I remember (Detweiller) was flat as a pancake. It's a big change from KLM," Haff said. "I think the flatter courses are easier. Obviously, you get faster times but every course is different. I don't really have a preference. If it's a hilly course, I'm not the only one (having to run it). The other girls are there, too."**

**As a freshman, Sullivan also was fortunate to experience state, and she's looking to use that experience to her advantage this time.**

**Sullivan was the Red Devils' No. 4 state finisher (101st, 18:07), just behind current junior Sophie May (98th, 18:06), who has been sidelined this season by health issues.**

**"Just going out hard and fast is something you need to do at the state meet," Sullivan said. "I remember getting boxed in and I know that I got pinched in the first turn so by knowing that I know how to get out faster for the race.**

**"Just compared to last year, I feel like our team has improved so much. I feel like we're going to do so much better than we did last year, and I'm excited for it. Just because it's state, it makes my mentality so much more intense. I just want to go out there and do the best that I can."**

**--by Bill Stone**