

After being patient but sometimes frustrated, Hinsdale Central sophomore Emma Sullivan is running her best cross country races of the season at the perfect time.

"Definitely during the middle of the season I was kind of disappointed with my races," Sullivan said. "I knew (from) last year my times and everything and I wasn't hitting them as I did last year, but now I can feel a breakthrough coming."

Sullivan ran a solid race at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 19, and she topped that at the Class 3A Lyons Township Regional Saturday, Oct. 26.

Sullivan proved to be the final piece in the Red Devils winning their second straight regional team title by edging Downers Grove South 43-44 in Western Springs.

Freshman Alexa Haff won the 2.97-mile race in 16:56.80 -- the second fastest time ever on the LT course -- 19.33 seconds ahead of second-place LT senior Lexy Rudofski (17:15.41).

Sophomore Annie Zaher (5th, 17:53.61) also earned a top-five medal, junior Camila Horowicz (9th, 18:09.57) also finished in the top 10 and senior Becca Marcotte (13th, 18:27.11) and Sullivan (15th, 18:28.65) were among the top 15, followed by juniors Sara Folliard (24th, 19:20.55) and Sarah Brennan (29th, 19:39.44).

"I thought we had five really solid races," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"(Haff) was just very much under control today and she wasn't anywhere close to pushing herself. (Zaher) keeps coming every week. She's a battler. (Horowicz) ran her usual race plan and moved up well and she helped pull Becca along as

well, which was good. And Emma put nose in it, the second week in a row where she's really felt good. She's coming on just the right time."

As the Red Devils' No. 5 runner, Sullivan finished right behind Downers South's Michaela Hackbarth (14th, 18:28.65) but edged the Mustangs' No. 5 runner, Meaghan Bosman (16th, 18:33.10) by 2.98 seconds for the two-point swing that ultimately decided the team results.

Last year, the Red Devils edged Downers South 42-44 for the regional title. Sullivan said the Red Devils didn't find out that they won Saturday until McCabe told them moments before the awards ceremony.

"We all kind of thought we got second because it was pretty close. It was a good surprise to find out that we won," Sullivan said.

"I knew that (Downers South) was going to be a competitive team against us. I knew that I had to get ahead of some of their girls. I was behind both of them but then I passed two of them and then (Hackbarth) outkicked me at the end. At least I was ahead of one of them."

This is the Red Devils' eighth regional title in program history and the third stretch in which they've won in consecutive seasons. When the Hinsdale Central boys team won its proceeding race, it marked the first time in school history that both cross country programs won regional titles in the same year.

The next step is achieving the program's second consecutive trip to the Nov. 9 state meet and 12th in the past 14 seasons via the Hinsdale Central Sectional at 11 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 2 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park. The Red Devils need a top-five finish among the 18 teams but they and Downers South are the only top-10 rated teams in the field.

The 2006 Class AA state championship team is the Red Devils' only sectional champion. Last year, the Red Devils finished third at sectionals (119 points) behind Downers South (64) and Sandburg (100), both teams that they finished higher than at state.

"While it's always nice to win regionals, it's a small stepping stone towards what we really want to accomplish," McCabe said. "We knew that it would probably come down to us and Downers South for the championship. Our goal wasn't to win. Our goal was just to kind of take care of business and take it a step forward to next week and focus on each individual race and let the results play out where they may."

The Red Devils had the experience of competing at LT's course Sept. 19, but fourth-year varsity runner Marcotte and Sullivan were the only returnees from last year's regional lineup. This is the first high-school cross country seasons for Haff and Horowicz, a two-year track member.

"(Regionals) was fun. I liked it. It was a good experience," Horowicz said. "There was some pressure, but we've been trying to win a lot of our dual meets anyway. The goal all season has been just do the best you can and it was like the same thing this time. Of course, we wanted to win but it wasn't like do or die."

Haff sat out the LT dual, but she ran like she owned the course. Haff finally pulled away in the final mile after she and Rudofski crossed the mile mark in 5:35. Haff reached two miles in 11:30 to lead by 1.5 seconds.

The only faster girls time on LT's course came Sept. 7 at the LT Invite from Riverside-Brookfield senior Mailin Struck (18:50.22), a foreign exchange student from Germany who is competing in Class 2A.

"I think that's very cool. I still felt like I had a lot of energy left at the end," Haff said. "I wasn't exactly sure about the competition and stuff like that. I just

wanted to see what I could do. It was a little bit cold (and windy) today so I wasn't really sure what to wear, but I guess it all worked out. You always want to do your best and I was happy with the way things turned out."

Five returnees from the LT dual made significant strides. Zaher dropped 50 seconds from her 18:44 last month to pull out the individual medal by 4.24 seconds over Downers Grove North sophomore Kaitlyn Bonfield (17:57.85).

With one mile left, Zaher was fifth in 12:00, half a stride ahead of Bonfield and one second ahead of Downers North sophomore Grace Maletich (11th, 18:13.02).

"During the middle of the race, I kept trying to pass people up and then I realized I was sixth so if I pass just one more girl, I could get all-regional," said Zaher, a frosh-soph runner last year before becoming a state qualifier in track.

"I feel like since I've run so many races now, I get less nervous before them. I improved a lot on this course with my time so it was good. Everyone's healthy and no one's really injured so we hope to do well at sectionals."

Sullivan slashed 37 seconds from her time in taking seventh in the dual as the Red Devils' No. 5 finisher. Marcotte dropped seven seconds and Horowicz dropped 25 from their 1-2 finish in the dual, and Folliard cut 14 seconds from when she won the junior varsity race.

Sullivan also ran 19:06 at LT in the 2012 regional for 17th in that race.

"I was surprised when I saw 18:30. I was really happy with myself," Sullivan said. "During the warmup, the course felt fast and I had a feeling that it was going to be a good day so I was ready for it. I'm happy, but I'm not satisfied. I can always do better. I would say this is my best race of the season so far."

McCabe said Folliard was drastically affected by illness. Brennan, who didn't race until the conference meet in 2012 to recover from a strained quadriceps muscle, has been hampered by femur and iliotibial (IT) band issues the latter part of this season.

"I'm just happy to be a part of it. I like being able to be with the team and be able to run with them," said Brennan, a team captain. "I know I'm not really contributing a lot points-wise, but (I'm trying) to be able to keep them calm before the race and just be there for them."

Last year, Sullivan was among the few Red Devils who was a constant mainstay in the lineup once she was promoted to varsity full-time. While Haff was limited to one race per week as she transitions to high-school competition, the Red Devils otherwise have been fairly unscathed by injuries that have kept varsity regulars out of the lineup for significant periods of time.

"The whole team aspect has helped me lately in just realizing that I'm doing it for the team and not just me personally," Sullivan said. "If you say to yourself, 'You're doing it for your team,' it just makes you want to do it so much more. Just pushing ourselves during workouts, pushing each other just helps us want to do it more and it makes us more excited to do it for each other. I can feel like the next two weeks are going to be a good two races for us."

At sectionals, the Red Devils will have the added advantage of being on their home course. This is the first time that Hinsdale Central has played host to the sectional.

Downers North, which was fourth at the LT Regional (70 points), just behind the host Lions (55), is the only sectional team among the projected contenders to compete at KLM this season. The Red Devils won that Oct. 10 dual 20-30.

"I think it'll be a great benefit because it's our home course. We know the hills and stuff more than other teams because we practice there," Sullivan said.

"Knowing the course helps us so much better. I think it's just going to be a great home advantage to us."

-- by Bill Stone