

**Instead of being tripped up by the proverbial banana on the sidewalk, a couple of bananas picked up Hinsdale Central freshman Alexa Haff's cross country performance Saturday, Oct. 5.**

**Haff was battling for the lead at the St. Charles North Invitational when she encountered a couple of people dressed like bananas and hot dogs cheering on the runners.**

**"It was the strangest thing. I was running and actually started laughing because it was so weird," Haff said. "It was probably the most fun for me racing."**

**Haff's talent took over. She covered the 3.0 miles at Leroy Oakes Forest Preserve in an impressive 17:25 to win by 27.4 seconds over Metea Valley senior Kendall Cast (17:52.6). St. Charles North senior Ashley England (3rd, 17:55.0) also broke 18:00.**

**"It's a challenging course. (For Haff) to run 17:25 on that course on that day in those conditions is one of the better times ever run there," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said. "That's a stellar time, and that was all by herself for most of the race."**

**The Red Devils had many strong races in their first trip to the invite as their 71 points won over Geneva (87 points), Minooka (92) and the host North Stars (96). They remain ranked No. 5 in the weekly Class 3A state polls.**

**Hinsdale Central sophomore Annie Zaher was eighth (18:34.9) and junior Camila Horowicz (12th, 18:44.9), and senior Becca Marcotte (18th, 18:58.2) also finished in the top 20, followed by sophomores Emma Sullivan (33rd, 19:38.2) and Anna Yang (42nd, 19:57.9), who was making her varsity debut.**

**This was Haff's first race since Sept. 26 and her second title in three invite races. Haff won the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Sept. 7 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park and was second at the First to the Finish Invite Sept. 14 by 1.7 seconds.**

**The top competitors in this invite, Cast and England, were 38th and 40th at the 2012 3A state meet, respectively.**

**"(Haff) felt great. She looked great," McCabe said. "The last 300 meters, it looked like she was just floating on a day when it's humid, the course is a little sloppy, and the course is challenging to begin with. She felt like a million bucks."**

**There were plenty of reasons to feel stressed. This was the Red Devils' first time competing at the invite after usually competing that day at Wheaton North's Falcon Classic flight meet.**

**When the team arrived, the varsity found out that its start time was flipped with the frosh-soph and was now going to the first girls race, rather than the second.**

**McCabe said the race times were switched because of concerns of oncoming rain. An earlier storm already had affected the course.**

**"We didn't really have time to walk the course (warming up) so that was kind of overwhelming for me," Haff said. "It was weird, but my teammates and everyone calmed me down. Obviously, it turned out well."**

**The spectator diet of bananas and hot dogs also made a difference for Haff. She saw them twice during the race, the first time near the halfway point.**

**"It was good because that's the part where you start to slow down so they were there to pick you up," Haff said. "I think I felt really good when I was running this race and probably because I was in such a good mood from those people. This is definitely one of my favorite races so it was good."**

**The course was somewhat reminiscent of the Red Devils' home course at KLM Park. There were plenty of hills and roughly a repeat of one big loop. "It was kind of hard because the race was moved earlier so we didn't have**

time to run the whole thing," Zaher said.

"It was good at the beginning but then everyone kind of was confused at the end because we didn't really know where the finish was. There was a long, gradual hill at the beginning, but there were downhills, too, so it was kind of like KLM, actually."

Zaher reached the finish in a better place than she envisioned and was named the varsity's Athlete of the Meet. She was the highest-finishing sophomore, holding off eighth-place Batavia sophomore Dakota Roman by 2.0 seconds.

"It's probably been one of my better races of the season," Zaher said. "I was new to the course so I didn't really know how it was going to go, but I tried to stay with Becca at the beginning and then I was able to break off and run faster so it was good."

In May, Zaher qualified for the state meet in track in the 1,600-meter run, but this is Zaher's first time on the varsity after competing in the sport for the first time last year.

"Annie had a really good race," McCabe said. "Annie races best when she just goes out and we don't do too much talking beforehand. She's a competitor and, like Alexa, they love to race and love to compete with people and that's what cross country is all about."

Like Hall, Zaher also is learning along the way. After a bout with bronchitis, she debuted with probably her best race so far by running 18:07.84 for 3.0 miles in the First to the Finish Invite at Peoria's Detweiller Park, annual site of the state meet.

"I was so well rested for that race and so well prepared. Hopefully, I'll (get a personal record) the next time we're there (for the state meet Nov. 9)," Zaher said. "It's been a pretty good season so far. I've been injury free so that's been good and hopefully I'll get some better times at the meets coming up."

**In her last invite race at Minooka Sept. 21, Zaher not only competed in her first flight meet but she was the Red Devils' entry in the No. 1 flight since Haff did not race. Against the other teams' top runners, Zaher was fifth in 18:41 for 3.0 miles.**

**"I didn't expect to run in the first flight and that was another new course that we had never run before," Zaher said. "That was an interesting experience, just being the only person from Central in that race. Not having any teammates in the race was a new thing for me.**

**"That was probably not one of my best races. I think I started off too fast. I didn't really know how to pace myself without my teammates there for perspective. I have to learn to pace myself without having anyone there. A lot of times you find yourself alone in the races."**

**Haff did not compete at Minooka because she has been competing in just one race per week, regardless of the schedule. That week, she competed two days earlier (Sept. 26) at Schiller Woods against host Oak Park-River Forest and Glenbard West.**

**This past week, Haff competed at Leroy Oakes after sitting out the Red Devils' 24-33 West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual victory over York at KLM.**

**"We've been very careful with her," McCabe said. "It's going to pay off for her because she's going to be fresh and healthy and fit, feeling good at the end when it counts."**

**The Red Devils still controlled the race with York. Horowicz (18:54 for 3.0 miles), Zaher (19:04) and Marcotte (19:09) finished 1-2-3. Sullivan (19:29) was sixth and Sara Folliard (19:39) and Tillie Kummerer (21:25) were 12th and 13th.**

**While it's hard to not compete, Haff agrees with the plan. Besides being her first high-school cross country season, Haff primarily was a soccer player only until last year, when running for Butler Junior High in Oak Brook became her priority.**

**"Last year was my first year racing and we had to race like maybe once every two weeks or so. I'm not used to racing so often and I'm not used to the wear and tear," Haff said.**

**"And even our practices, they're so much more intense. Last year, it was like, 'Go out and run for 30 minutes,' and you're like, 'What?' Now it's kind of like the total opposite. It's like, 'Run for 30 minutes,' and it's, 'Yes.' It's different."**

**-- by Bill Stone**