

Last season, Hinsdale Central sophomore Alexa Haff burst onto the girls cross country scene by winning the talent-packed, season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational at Katherine Legge Memorial Park.

She managed to even outdo herself at this year's invite Saturday, Sept. 6.

Haff not only defended her title but broke 17:00 on the 3.0-mile course for an impressive victory in a field that included four of the top nine finishers and two more all-staters from the 2013 Class 3A state meet.

Haff (16:52.79) prevailed by 10.69 seconds over Glenbard West junior Lindsay Graham (17:03.48) after winning the 2013 invite in 17:29.88, 31.58 seconds slower than Saturday.

Last year, Haff went on to finish second at state to New Trier senior Mimi Smith, who was eighth Saturday (17:36.46). Graham was 17th at state battling tendinitis in her knees.

"I tried to stay with (Graham) and see what I could do and keep going," Haff said. "I just wanted to see how hard I could push myself the first meet back. I was really happy with it and happy with my race so it's going to be a good year.

"You kind of have to drown that (pre-race hype) out, focus on what you're doing and just try to better yourself and let the race play out as it does. You've just got to go out there and give it your all. You always want to do well."

Haff had plenty of company. The Red Devils were just as impressive as a team as they finished second (68 points) only to defending 3A state champion Glenbard West (36), which placed five in the top 15. Palatine (103), fourth at state in 2013, was third.

Junior Annie Zaher (6th, 17:34.35) and freshman Reilly Revord (10th, 18:00.13) also finished among the top 10 and freshman Grace McCabe was 12th (18:01.39). Junior Emma Sullivan (19:04.97) and senior Sara Folliard (19:08.01) were 39th and 42nd, and senior Molly Leahy was 84th (20:30.57). Seniors Camila Horowicz and Sarah Brennan from last year's state meet lineup did not compete to rest injuries.

The Red Devils have risen to No. 3 in all three 3A weekly state rankings behind Glenbard West and Naperville North, last year's state runners-up. The invite featured eight teams ranked among the pre-season top 25, including six that received top-10 rankings. Two pre-season polls had the Red Devils No. 6 while DyeStat Illinois had them at No. 13.

"We've been looking forward to this first meet. It's been a long time since we started training, close to three months, so we were kind of anxious to get that first meet and see where we stand," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"While we're not all the way where we want to be, we had some great races and a lot of other people (who didn't compete) that are excited about getting in and being a part of that mix. I think we just had outstanding races from our top four (finishers)."

Haff and Graham established themselves as the frontrunners fairly quickly. The result remained in doubt until Haff pulled away in the final stretch heading into the long, uphill climb to the finish.

Last year, Haff won the invite by 4.22 seconds over Smith, who edged Graham at the finish for second by .96.

"It was great returning and being back. I was more prepared this time so it was great to be out there with all of the girls racing after all of the summer training," Haff said. "As a sophomore, even though I still feel like a freshman, it was really nice because I knew what to expect I wasn't expecting all of the (course) flags and people last year, but this year I was like, 'OK, I've got this.' "

Haff finished sixth in the 3,200-meter run at the state girls track meet in May but had her summer training affected by injury. She spent plenty of time cross training, particularly swimming, and enters the cross country season pain free.

"Quite honestly, she's probably is as fit as she's ever been but not as running fit as she had been a year ago at this time," McCabe said. "Obviously, she is in a very good place right now, which will serve her well as the season goes on because she has a strong foundation. She ran much faster (than the 2013 invite) and I think she's got more upside, even more than a year ago when she was second in the

state."

Zaher also put herself among the elite frontrunners after she won the 1,600 at the state track meet. The only other runners to finish ahead of Zaher were Glenbard West freshman Lindsey Payne (17:23.13) and Palatine junior Kelly O'Brien (17:28.20), sixth at state last year. Glenbard West senior and two-time all-stater Lisa Luczak was fifth Saturday (17:31.86).

Zaher's time Saturday already is 20 seconds better than any meet last year, her first on the varsity.

"It was definitely a good, competitive race, a perfect way to pace ourselves," Zaher said. "I think we surprised a lot of people but I think we knew going in that we had a lot of good racers in this. Today was just a day to test ourselves and see how hard we worked over the summer and a baseline for the rest of the season."

Zaher almost missed competing in the invite for the first time. She was sick in bed Monday and missed practice Tuesday. Last year, she was sidelined by bronchitis and didn't even attend the invite. As a freshman in her first season of competitive running, she was a spectator because of a rolled ankle.

"I was kind of freaking out, but I was pretty dead set in running in this race no matter what condition I was in. I'm glad. I really wanted to run this race," Zaher said. "I think a lot of us ran to our potential. I think I did, too. I landed where I wanted to in the pack so that was good."

Revord and Grace McCabe both excelled in their high-school racing debuts after much racing success at Clarendon Hills Middle School and Westview Hills Middle School, respectively. Their eighth-grade races, however, were only 2.0 miles.

"I was a little nervous. I've never run 3.0 miles before. (But) no pressure on me, no nothing. I was just excited to go out there and run," Revord said.

While Revord never previously attended the invite or even saw the Red Devils, McCabe has been at the invite several times before, including last year, mainly because her father is the head coach.

"Last year, I think I was like, 'Oh, I'll be running in this next year.' I think that was why I probably wasn't nervous because I've been there before and knew the layout," Grace McCabe said.

Revord pulled out 10th by .60 over Glenbard West junior Kathryn Kenwood. Grace McCabe and achieved her goal of finishing "right around that area."

"It was definitely a goal to get in the top 10. I was expecting like a little bit less (maybe top 15) since it was my first 3.0-mile race, but I'm very happy with the result," Revord said. "I definitely thought I could have gone a little faster and I hope to just increase my time, which will be a goal throughout the entire season."

"Reilly and Grace had awesome first high-school, 3.0-mile races. Finishing 10th and 12th on our course in that field is just a sign of things to come," Mark McCabe said. "Them having their first race, Annie coming off being sick, Alexa not being as far along running-wise as she was even a year ago, it's a great upside for all four of those girls."

The Red Devils now make their yearly regular-season trek to Peoria's Detweiller Park, the annual site of the state meet, for the First to the Finish Invite Saturday, Sept. 13.

They enter the invite as the state's second-highest-rated team behind consensus No. 2 Naperville North and four other top-10 teams also will be there – Minooka, Lockport, Naperville Central and New Trier. Also competing at the Hornet-Red Devil, Minooka (124), Naperville Central (128) and New Trier (130) finished fourth through sixth.

Hinsdale Central then makes its first appearance at the Flashrock Invitational Sept. 20 in Carmel, Ind.

"For the first meet, I couldn't be a whole lot happier and these next two weeks are very similar in competition and depth of the fields," McCabe said.

-- by Bill Stone