

As a sophomore girls cross country runner, Hinsdale Central senior Sara Folliard just missed finishing among the top 20 in the frosh-soph race at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet.

At her final Silver Meet Saturday, Oct. 18, Folliard just missed the top 10 for the varsity in the state's toughest conference.

"It's awesome because (as seniors) we've all been working so hard over the years. For ourselves to keep improving our senior year, it's really awesome because it all pays off for us," Folliard said.

The Red Devils also have come a long way the past couple of years as a team. Their reward Saturday was a share of their first overall Silver title since 2008 by finishing second (58 points) to defending Class 3A champion Glenbard West (20) at Proviso West after winning their dual meet 25-30 Oct. 9 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park.

Junior Annie Zaher was third (18:35.22 for 3.04 miles) and freshmen Grace McCabe (5th, 18:52.85) and Reilly Revord (9th, 19:11.32) also placed among the top 10. Folliard was 11th (19:31.72), followed by junior Emma Sullivan (24th, 20:11.26) and senior Camila Horowicz (30th, 20:30.25).

The Red Devils have been ranked No. 2 to Glenbard West in 3A the past five weeks. Because the overall Silver title is a combination of results from the Silver Meet and conference duals, Hinsdale Central came into Saturday in first place with a 6-0 dual record.

As a result, the Red Devils only needed to finish second Saturday to guarantee at least a share of the overall title.

"We've all been working so hard and for our dreams to be coming true, it's really exciting," Folliard said. "It's a step in the process. It's not our ultimate goal because we want to be our best at the state meet (Nov. 8), but it's awesome that we've been able to do well at this point, too."

This is the Red Devils' first overall Silver title since 2008, also the last time they earned a top-three team trophy at the state meet by taking second to Geneva.

Glenbard West has won or shared the last four Silver titles, the last two outright, before the Red Devils handed the Hilltoppers their first conference dual loss since 2011.

"It's important to us and, in our conference, it's a big deal to win a conference championship," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

The Red Devils competed without sophomore Alexa Haff, the defending Silver Meet champion and second at the 2013 state meet. Haff could have run but was kept out to protect a slight injury.

Haff finished second to Glenbard West junior Lindsay Graham (course-record 16:35) in the teams' dual meet after Haff ran a then course-record 16:52 to win the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invite Sept. 6 at KLM over the second-place Graham.

On Saturday, Graham (17:50.18) and Glenbard West freshman Lindsey Payne (18:19.74), third at the Hornet-Red Devil, finished 1-2.

"It's a slight injury, which is not a big thing at all, but there are too many important meets coming down the road where we want to have (Haff) at her best. And we have the luxury of doing well without her in the meets leading up to those," McCabe said.

"We knew that going up against Glenbard West without being at full strength was going to be a challenge. We certainly wanted to do our best and knew going in that we would still come out with nothing less than a conference championship. It was good for other girls to shine even brighter and make even more of a contribution than usual."

Zaher may not be used to being the team's No. 1 finisher in cross country races but she's no stranger to being a frontrunner. Besides this season, Zaher won the 3A state title in the 1,600-meter run at the girls track state meet in May.

"It was hard not having (Haff) because we knew we had to step it up. It was a different lineup than we usually have, but I still think we did well," Zaher said.

"(Personally) it wasn't really different at all. I just go out there and be competitive

and did the same thing like I've been doing all season. It's nice to see (Haff up) there, but I think I can do OK just on my own."

Saturday presented other challenges for the Red Devils. Because of water on York's East End Park course in Elmhurst, the meet was moved from there on Thursday to Proviso West, which also played host to the 2013 Silver Meet.

Several parts of the Hillside course also were muddy or wet, including a huge puddle that runners had to run through or try to avoid three times. It was true cross country and a race defined more by survival and perseverance than in hopes of going after personal records.

"Conditions have been worse," Zaher said. "This was like a tropical island compared to St. Charles North (for its invite Oct. 4 at LeRoy Oakes). It was so cold and really windy. Then there was the part (at Proviso West) with the mud and water so I guess the creek at KLM helped us out with that a little bit. We've faced conditions like this before."

Folliard has experienced just about everything that cross country has to offer. She was the only four-year senior runner in the Red Devils' varsity lineup Saturday. Horowicz, a track veteran, joined cross country for the first time in 2013. Both were members of the team's state lineup.

At the 2013 Silver Meet, Folliard helped the junior varsity share that overall title by taking second in that race in 19:25.9, a time actually more than 14 seconds slower than Saturday. In her two frosh-soph Silver Meets, Folliard was 23rd in 2012 and 33rd in 2011.

"It's been really exciting for me because I've been working hard over the years. I've just really been focusing on being more competitive and aggressive in the races and it's paying off," Folliard said.

"I didn't get quite as well as I was hoping to get today because I think the conditions were really hard and I kind of wasn't as competitive as I should have been, but it was still really good. I would say it was definitely a solid race. It's not like my best race this season, but it wasn't a bad race. It was solid, right up there."

Folliard missed the top 10 Saturday by more than 20 seconds but finished just ahead of Glenbard West's No. 7 runner, junior Abby Shaver (12th, 19:32.54). Folliard was 11th at both the one-mile mark (6:03) and two-mile mark (12:41).

"Sara's done a great job of becoming consistent. She's developed athletic integrity, and that's something we talk about all of the time," Mark McCabe said. "That's something some athletes never develop, where teammates know they can count on your every time to be at or near your best. She's been huge for our team."

Zaher improved significantly from taking eighth last year but also was a bit disappointed. Zaher continued her strong season by improving on last year's eighth place finish. She still was disappointed that she could not at least beat Payne after taking third in the dual and leading by a stride at Saturday's two-mile mark in 12:30.

"Last year I got all-conference and that was really cool for me. Now this year I earned it again so that was cool," Zaher said.

"Today was just an OK race for me. I was not really happy with the place so I have to work on that a little more. (Top 2) was my goal, but there are more races so that's good. I would say somewhere in the third mile (Payne) just kind of broke away and I couldn't respond."

Just like the dual, Grace McCabe battled down the stretch and held off Glenbard West junior Grace Rogers (6th, 18:53.21) at the finish by .36. In the dual, McCabe and Rogers were sixth and seventh within one second of each other.

McCabe was named the varsity's Athlete of the Meet.

"That was definitely our varsity race of the day, although I also thought Sara Folliard had a solid race," said Mark McCabe, who also is Grace's father. "Grace was a tough competitor on a tough day. Grace is a gamer and we have a varsity team, top five, full of gamers who on race day bring it every time and that's what it takes."

Grace McCabe combined with Zaher to give the Red Devils two top-five individual Silver Meet finishers for the first time since 2009. Rogers was an all-state 21st and the Hilltoppers' No. 4 state finisher in 2013.

"People kept saying, 'Grace, Grace (down the stretch).' Which one is it? When they said Grace, I tried to picture that all of it was towards me," Grace McCabe said.

"I think we still have a lot left in the tank. (This race) wasn't that different. It was kind of like a lot of invitationals, lots of teams and a lot of people. It's obviously an important race but it was kind of like just go out and do our thing. A race is a race is a race like dad likes to say."

The addition of Grace McCabe and Revord has been a huge boost to the varsity lineup. Revord hoped to be up with McCabe and also was a bit disappointed that she only could place among the top 10, although she finished strong to beat out Downers Grove North sophomore Emma Moravec (10th, 19:11:55) by .23.

"I wanted to go out and do well, but I didn't have my best race. I was a little more nervous for this race, only knowing that the course was super muddy and I didn't want to slip, and knowing that Alexa wasn't running that we had to step it up. Other than that, it was more of a normal, kind of like Glenbard West-Hinsdale Central rivalry race."

Revord was the team's No. 3 finisher in the Glenbard West dual and fourth overall. On Saturday, Revord was fifth at the mile (5:59) and 10th at two miles (12:30), two seconds behind Moravec.

"It was not a good race for me. I don't run well in the cold weather and I just need to figure out how to do better. But you can't have a good race every time," Revord said. "I was hoping third, to beat Lindsey Payne again, but it just wasn't my race. I was (up front early) but then right after we went through the mud, my legs got cold so then they stopped functioning, shut down."

The Red Devils return to KLM one last time this season for the 3A Hinsdale Central Regional at 11 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 25. The boys regional race is at 11:45 a.m.

Hinsdale Central only needs a top-six finish to advance to the Marist Sectional Nov. 1. The other teams in the regional are Silver rivals Downers Grove North and Lyons Township and Downers Grove South – all state ranked – as well as Argo, Curie, Morton, Proviso East and Proviso West and individuals from Kelly. Downers North (82) and LT (125) were third and fifth Saturday, respectively.

Hinsdale Central and Glenbard West will not meet again until the state meet Nov. 8 at Peoria's Detweiller Park. Last year, the Red Devils won their second straight regional title.

"We're definitely excited (for the postseason)," Zaher said. "We know we haven't shown all that we can do yet so it's really exciting the next three races to really try our best now."

-- by Bill Stone