

Hinsdale Central freshman Alexa Haff has had a great cross country season, but she faced her biggest test Saturday at the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet at Proviso West.

For the first time, Haff was competing against Glenbard West senior Madeline Perez, the defending Class 3A state champion who was making her season debut after recovering from a calf injury.

"I had heard she's been injured, obviously, and she hadn't been running and this was her first race back and I had no idea what to expect," Haff said.

Haff and Perez were stride for stride throughout most of the race until Haff gained a slight lead and then pulled away down the stretch to win the Silver Meet in 17:27.8, 16.2 seconds ahead of Perez's 17:43.0

Haff is the Red Devils' first Silver champion as a freshman and first to win since four-time Silver champion Jill Hardies as a sophomore in 2010.

"It still hasn't sunk in yet, but it's a lot to take in at once. I'm excited. I'm happy," Haff said.

"I just wanted to go in and try my best and that was my goal, and I think I did. That's all that matters and I'm happy with the way it turned out. I felt good so I kept going. I wasn't sure how (Perez) was feeling. I just wanted to do my best and see how much I could push myself and I guess it worked out."

Sophomore Annie Zaher (8th, 18:47.4) and junior Camila Horowicz (15th, 19:10.2) also earned all-conference honors for top-16 finishes, followed by sophomore Emma Sullivan (19th, 19:20.6), senior Becca Marcotte (23rd, 19:39.7) and junior Sarah Brennan (34th, 20:02.1).

The Red Devils (66 points) finished second to Glenbard West (23) and second in the final overall standings to the Hilltoppers, third in state in 2012 who won

their third straight overall Silver title and second straight outright.

The Red Devils and Hilltoppers won't meet again until the state meet Nov. 9. Hinsdale Central begins its quest for a state berth at the 3A Lyons Township Regional at 10 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 26.

"While it was a very impressive performance (by Haff), I think there's still more in the tank than even she showed today," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said.

"I said a lot of the girls should walk out of here feeling really good about today and there are a lot of people that are walking out feeling that maybe I'm not 100 percent happy but they should be looking forward to what lies ahead."

Haff is the sixth Hinsdale Central runner to win the conference meet. None of the previous Red Devils won it more than once.

During the regular season, Haff won five of her six races this season, and she was second in the other Sept. 14 by just 1.7 seconds to Buffalo Grove sophomore Kaitlyn Ko at Peoria's Detweiller Park, site of the state meet Nov. 9.

"(Before the season), oh my gosh. I would have been like, 'You're crazy (I'd win the Silver Meet), no way.' I knew I was on varsity and I just tried to keep my place there and hang with the girls. I had no idea how I'd do," Haff said.

"I'm just happy with how I've done so far. Obviously, you love to win. That's what you work for and why you train so hard. I guess I'm grateful for all of them. It's just because of my coach and family and teammates. I wouldn't be here without them. Honestly, it's just everyone giving me so much encouragement."

Haff and Perez ran the first mile at 5:32. Haff had a body-length lead as she passed the two-mile mark in 11:31. Running into a stiff wind coming out of the

forest area, it really wasn't until the final stretch that Haff pulled away with a vicious kick that she often hasn't needed in previous victories.

"I didn't know until I crossed the finish line that it was mine," Haff said. "Even going down that like last 200 meters, I wasn't sure how close she was. I had no idea. I just gave it my all."

Perez also was second at the 2012 Silver Meet to York graduate Emma Fisher, who was second at state. In her freshman race at the Silver Meet, Perez was tripped during the race and ended up 26th.

"Alexa ran an awesome race so kudos to her," Perez said. "It's my first race back so it's just a starting point. My goal was to have our team win conference and that happened.

"She has a great career ahead of her. To be a freshman running that is just amazing. She had a really awesome race today."

If not for her injury, Perez and Haff would have previously competed against each other twice at the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invite Sept. 7 and the dual meet Sept. 26 at Schiller Woods.

Besides Perez, Haff beat Glenbard West's two other 2012 all-staters for the third time this season Saturday, sophomore Lindsay Graham (3rd, 18:00.2) and junior Lisa Luczak (5th, 18:14.8).

"We were hoping Madeline was going to run because Madeline's one of the very top runners that Alexa hasn't raced against this year. It's her first race back and we knew that, but it was a great opportunity," McCabe said.

"Because she's a freshman, I've wanted (Haff) to race somewhat conservatively. She can hang with people and out kick them, but she's been feeling all along that there's a little bit more in the tank. I said, 'Today is the day to explore that.

Madeline will take it out. She's got a good kick, but she's not going to run a strategic race. She's going to get out and hammer it because she's a competitor. Let's sit on her the first half of the race and when you feel it's time to go, let's do that.' She's learned a lot about herself that there is more in the tank."

Other Red Devils ran inspired races in their varsity Silver Meet debuts. Zaher gave the Red Devils at least two top-10 finishers at the Silver Meet since 2009.

"I thought (top 10) was a possibility, but I wasn't expecting to do it. That was really my goal going in," Zaher said. "I knew that I could probably make all-conference. I knew I had it in me to run this."

Last season, Zaher joined cross country for her first team running experience of any kind. By track, she had gained the confidence and fitness that she qualified for state in the 1,600-meter run.

"Annie Zaher ran the kind of race she's capable of running," Zaher said. "She's really turning it on at the right time, and that's not surprising at all because Annie is a competitor first and foremost."

Zaher was among the most improved varsity runners Saturday, considering that eight of last year's 10 all-conference runners who weren't seniors returned for Saturday's varsity race.

At the 2012 Silver Meet, Zaher was 33rd in the frosh-soph race as the Red Devils' No. 6 finisher.

"Last year, I was actually happy with that race. That was actually one of my best races of the whole season," Zaher said. "This year was better. It was obviously way more competitive. I'm running on the varsity level, but it's still a conference race."

Horowicz gave the Red Devils at least three all-conference runners at the Silver Meet for the first time since 2008. While a solid distance runner in track, this is her first season in cross country rather than swimming.

Going into the season, Horowicz said she would have laughed had someone said she could be all-conference. Her progress made her hopeful by Saturday.

"I was hoping for it, but you never know with a field like this. It takes a lot of work to do that, in this conference especially," Horowicz said. "It was a decent race (for me), not great but not terrible."

Horowicz still showed the right combination of poise and competitiveness. At one mile, Horowicz was 34th but at what she felt a proper pace for her at 6:07.

By two miles, Horowicz moved up to 19th in 12:27, just behind Marcotte. There still was work to do in the final half mile as she passed LT sophomore Hannah Dutler (16th, 19:12.1) and York junior Kathryn Hagstrom (17th, 19:15.8).

"I knew where I was at the end. People were like, 'You've got to get two more to get all-conference,' " Horowicz said.

"I like it because it forces you to go faster at the end. When you know you have to catch two more people, you know how much faster you have to get, you know what you're going to get at the end of it."

Sullivan and Marcotte were the lone returnees from last year's Silver Meet lineup. Sullivan, 8.5 seconds from 16th Saturday, was 18th in 2012, 5.5 seconds shy of 16th.

Brennan competed for the first time since Sept. 26. Last year, she was second in the frosh-soph race in her season debut.

"Best race of the year (for Sullivan), and she's coming, coming in terms of that. You're going to see Emma getting better and better," McCabe said.

Whatever the emotions were after their particular races, the Red Devils were determined to hold to their Midnight Rule of letting them go by Sunday.

How was Haff going to celebrate her historic victory until midnight?

"I'm still coming back to school to ice, everything, as usual. I want to go home and sleep and I have a lot of homework this weekend, but I get to relax so that's good," Haff said. "You kind of just have to put it in the back of your mind and just continue doing what you've been doing."

"Alexa is far beyond her years in terms of celebrating in a way that makes her happy and then realizing there's bigger and better things that lie ahead," McCabe added. "Alexa is mature and savvy far beyond her years both with her racing sense and her outlook on competition and her focus on self-care and doing all of the little things."

At regionals, the Red Devils should get the necessary top-six finish to advance to the Hinsdale Central Sectional Saturday, Nov. 2.

Other state-ranked teams at the regional will be WSC Gold champion and defending sectional champion Downers Grove South, LT and Downers Grove North. The Lions (86 points) and Trojans (98) were third and fourth at the Silver Meet.

In 2012, Hinsdale Central edged Downers South 42-44 for its first regional title since 2008.

-- by Bill Stone