

Becca Marcotte may be the only senior varsity runner for the Hinsdale Central girls cross country team, but on Saturday she ran like a freshman.

Marcotte couldn't be happier.

After battling injuries and a recurring iron deficiency problem the past two seasons, Marcotte began changing her recent history at Peoria's Detweiller Park, the annual site of the state meet, in the First to the Finish Invitational.

While freshman Alexa Haff was second, Marcotte delivered a personal-best time for eighth as the Red Devils earned a convincing second place behind defending state champion Naperville North.

"I'm never satisfied, but I'm happy that I was able to come back and be where I was before. It's nice to be there again," Marcotte said. "I don't even remember the last time I was up there in a cross country race. It's probably freshman year. It feels like it's been a while."

After capturing the season-opening home Hornet-Red Devil Invite Sept. 7, Haff nearly pulled out the title again Saturday. Haff's 17:02.66 for 3.0 miles was edged just before the finish line by Buffalo Grove sophomore Kaitlyn Ko (17:00.96), who was 22nd at the 2012 Class 3A state meet.

Sophomore Annie Zaher (16th, 18:07.84) and junior Camila Horowicz (23rd, 18:21.37) also placed among the top 25 in their Detweiller debuts. Junior Sophie May was 35th (18:43.87), followed by sophomore Emma Sullivan (47th, 18:51.48) and junior Sarah Brennan (76th, 19:12.83).

Marcotte's 17:50.12 edged her previous all-time best of 17:50.54 at Detweiller for ninth at the invite as a freshman in 2010. Marcotte ran 17:57 at last year's state meet for 83rd place.

"Obviously, it felt good. I feel like I'm not satisfied, though," Marcotte said. "I've trained over the summer so hard and I can do more. I'll be happy

until today (ends) and then I'll go back, just willing to train harder. I feel like I deserve to be up there and train as hard as I can. It helps mentally to know that I've been through a lot and I deserve the satisfaction."

The feeling was good all over for the Red Devils (81 points) as they only finished behind Naperville North (35), which put its top five finishers among the top 13 and its top seven among the top 22.

Hinsdale Central was a whopping 70 points ahead of third-place Naperville Central (151), which had been rated ahead of them going into the race. Wheaton Warrenville South (186) was fourth.

"I think everybody is excited about where we can go this season. I think this race kind of proved we can do a lot more than we thought we could," Marcotte said. "When (Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe) told us we came in second, we were happy with it. Then he told us that it's possible we could walk away from the state meet with a (top-three) trophy. That just made everybody really excited."

The Red Devils' performance gained notice. At the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, they didn't even have a team score because they only had four finishers. Because of various ailments, Zaher didn't compete and Marcotte and May had to drop out during the race.

"It feels so much better (for us today). The team aspect is really important," Horowicz said. "When people drop out, you feel so bad for them and your own race doesn't feel as good. The fact that all of us finished and we got second, it's just an amazing feeling. I'm more proud of the second place (as a team) than my own race."

In this week's released 3A girls polls, the Red Devils have been elevated from No. 13 to 4 by the Illinois Cross Country Coaches Association and No. 18 to 6 by DyeStat Illinois. Naperville North is No. 1 in both polls.

Going into the meet, McCabe said he hoped the Red Devils could challenge

for second and just to score fewer than 120 points, maybe under 100 if everything went right.

"To come away with 81 was great. It was a great race," McCabe said. "We always come to Peoria with the confidence that we always run well here, whether it be this meet or the state meet, and the girls certainly proved that true today."

Marcotte is the team's only runner with state meet experience other than last year's 11th-place state performance that also included May, Sullivan and Brennan. The Red Devils were 19th in 2010 with Marcotte taking 87th in 18:10 as the team's No. 2 finisher behind eventual four-time all-stater Jill Hardies.

In Marcotte's eyes, her performance at the 2012 First to the Finish Invite that was so subpar (29th, 18:32) that she momentarily forgot she even competed in the race.

Marcotte enters this season coming off her best summer of uninterrupted training. Still, she had to drop out of the race during the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Sept. 7 after battling illness earlier in the week.

"Here's a kid that was so sick last week she couldn't finish the race and a week later she's running 17:50 on the state meet course. And there's a lot more there," McCabe said.

"I think she's fourth today if she's 100 percent healthy. I couldn't be happier for her. She's been a team leader in every way and it's such a joy to see her reaping the rewards of all of her hard work."

Instead of struggling to compete or even finish like races of the past, Marcotte was thriving Saturday. Realizing all that she has been through and that this is her senior year only fuels Marcotte's passion to compete and work out.

"Usually it's hard for me to push mentally through a race because I just think so negatively," Marcotte said. "I was able to get past that today, just that feeling that I can still do that by thinking positively through pain. It was just normal racing."

Several other Red Devils made huge strides Saturday. Haff may have been a surprising winner of the Hornet-Red Devil Invite over three 2012 all-staters, but she once again put herself in position to win – and nearly did.

As Haff closed in on the finish, Ko, running to Haff's far right, seemed to come out of nowhere and passed her in the final 20 meters for the victory.

"In the last part, I sped up and I thought in my head, 'OK, I've got this,' and then all of a sudden, boom, (Ko) passed me right in the end. I had no idea she was there," Haff said.

"I tried my hardest and looking back, I always think, 'Could I have tried harder had I known she was there?' I gave it my all so that's all you can hope for. Obviously, you can't win them all and I don't hope to, and I don't think I'm ever going to. I'm happy with how I did, and she was really nice. I love when good people win."

In this race, Haff finished ahead of two more 2012 all-staters – Jacobs senior Lauren Van Vlierbergen (17:07.33), a close third Saturday, was seventh at state and Naperville North junior Elly DeTurris (5th, 17:40.73) was 14th. Naperville North sophomore Katie Shannon, 47th at state last year, was fourth Saturday (17:32.04).

"She's a very savvy racer -- to sit with the leaders, not go and take the lead, put yourself in a perfect position and kick it when it's time to kick," McCabe said.

"The only thing that prevented her from winning was (Ko) surprised her a little bit at the end. Not that Alexa let up. By the time she came up to

Alexa, it was too late to react. Again, that's a little thing she files away and remembers. There's nothing you can say about Alexa but that's glowingly positive in terms of what she's brought to the team as a freshman far beyond her years in terms of her maturity and racing sense."

Zaher and Horowicz both were impressive in their Detweiller debuts. They and Haff said they enjoyed the flat terrain, especially compared to the home Katherine Legge Memorial Park course.

Zaher was especially enthused to see what she could do in her first official race since qualifying for the 3A state meet in track in the 1,600-meter run. Bronchitis kept Zaher from competing at the opener or even attending as a spectator.

"It was hard to stay home and miss all of the races," Zaher said. "I was super excited to race again. I was really excited to be back, even if it's a different sport.

"I didn't expect to do so well so it was nice. It felt amazing. I knew I was going to do better than last season, but I really just went in with zero expectations. I just tried to run my best."

While Zaher competed in cross country last season, she had never done consistent long-distance running before, and she was a volleyball convert so she also had a low mileage base from summer training.

This year, Zaher is brimming with summer training and the confidence of just getting better and better during track, especially over the final month, even with considerable elliptical training to nurse an injury.

"Annie has the heart of a lion. She's as good a competitor as we've probably ever had on this team," McCabe said. "We have a lot of girls on this team that have that (intangible). That's why as a team we're very excited about what lies ahead."

Zaher noticed one big change Saturday before her race. Race experience is gradually giving her a greater sense of preparedness and security.

"I was less nervous because I knew more what to expect," Zaher said. "I have big race anxiety. I still get a lot nervous. Before, I would freak out, be shaking at the starting line. That's gone now. I'm better."

Another track standout, Horowicz built off the momentum of a solid showing in her cross country debut at the Hornet-Red Devil. Although slightly disappointed that day by missing a top-25 medal by two places (27th, 19:07.97), she achieved a better individual finish Saturday in a larger field and was just three seconds from the top 20.

"I have a lot more confidence. I've been able to do it twice in a row now so it's not like I had one good race and I can't do it again," Horowicz said. "I feel like I can keep doing this and keep improving."

"Camila's found her sport," McCabe added. "She's gained a confidence the last two weeks that she never had before in track. The sky's the limit for her."

So far, Horowicz has benefited from a somewhat conservative approach to the first half of her race followed by a strong finish. On Saturday, she finished with a 5:58 third mile after starting with a 6:08, followed by a 6:15.

Horowicz said she lost track of all of the runners she passed in surging for the finish line.

"I've figured out it's really easy to pick off people at the end because people just give up," Horowicz said. "If you have any energy left, you can use it to pass all of those people who passed you in the beginning."

Another strong effort in the homestretch came from May as the Red Devils' No. 5 runner. McCabe thought May looked strong at the Hornet-

Red Devil before she dropped out.

"She finished so strongly in the last 400 meters (Saturday). When she's back at 100 percent, she's going to be in a great place," McCabe said.

Like Marcotte personally, the Red Devils discussed that there are bigger goals and accomplishments ahead. The Red Devils haven't enjoyed a top-10 team state finish since five straight from 2004-08, including the 2006 Class AA state championship.

"We said we're going to be really happy until midnight and then get back to work. The season, like life, is a journey," McCabe said.

"We've got eight weeks until the state meet. We're in a good place right now, but we're going to be in a really good place then if every one of our girls, all seven of the varsity runners and all of the other kids that are challenging for those spots, are working their hardest to be the best that they can be."