

Hinsdale Central freshman Alexa Haff pulled off quite a surprise for her first high-school cross country race Saturday, and she was glad to share the excitement.

Just hoping to be competitive, Haff won the powerful season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational at Katherine Legge Memorial Park by covering the new 3.0-mile course in 17:29.88.

The three runners to finish right behind her were all-state runners in 2012, including second-place New Trier junior Mimi Smith (17:34.10).

"I did not think I was going to win at all. I just tried my best. That's all I could hope for," Haff said. "I was trying to tell myself, 'It's OK. It doesn't matter what place you come in, just give it your all and it paid off so I'm happy."

"I just want to thank everyone, (Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe) and everyone on the team. It was my first race so I was so nervous and they helped me so much. I was freaking out before the race and they calmed me down. I wouldn't have been able to do it without them and my parents, everyone just cheering me on, so thank you."

As impressive as Saturday's field win, the opportunity to win became significantly greater when Glenbard West senior Madeline Perez, the defending Class 3A state champion and Hornet-Red Devil champion, did not compete. Haff still had to race strong and smart to achieve McCabe's pre-race goal for placing among the top 10 for an individual medal with hopes of her possibly challenging for the top five.

"(I said), 'Just put yourself in the lead group and then take it as it comes, and she ran a beautifully executed race,'" McCabe said.

"It didn't surprise me. She's got talent. She's very fit and most importantly, once you're at that level, it's the little things that separate you from the other people like yourself. As a freshman, she's just incredibly good and

mindful of self-care, sleep, nutrition. It showed today, where she was in (a high-caliber) field. What a great start to her high-school career."

Haff and junior first-time team member Camila Horowicz (27th, 19:07.97) were the Red Devils' top two finishers behind Emma Sullivan (43rd, 19:52.25) and Sarah Brennan (67th, 20:23.93).

Senior Becca Marcotte and junior Sophie May were safe after both having to drop out during the race. Both thought they could bounce back after being sick during the week, but racing at a highly competitive level and in hot conditions took their toll.

"(May) looked awesome the first half of the race and all of a sudden, the next lap, she didn't come around," McCabe said.

Sophomore Annie Zaher was slated to run but was scratched before the race by bronchitis. With only six entries, the Red Devils did not have the necessary five finishers for a team score. In a field with five top-10 rated preseason teams, Palatine edged Glenbard West 59-61 for the title followed by Naperville Central (86), New Trier (90) and Minooka (128).

The Red Devils hope to have a full, healthy lineup when they compete at Peoria's Detweiller Park, the annual site of the state meet, for Peoria High School's First to the Finish Invitational.

"We're completely injury-free on the varsity level and we get uninterrupted training all season long and these last 10 days we've been nailed with illness. It's been going around the building," McCabe said.

"You'd rather have somebody sick than injured because with sickness, in a couple of days you're over it with the training they've got under their belt. That's why you work hard all summer."

This summer, McCabe said the Red Devils had their best collective training on the varsity level for a program that has a state championship and

second place to their credit.

Haff not only could handle the workload. She was among the group's top runners.

A soccer player since kindergarten, Haff ended last cross country season as a winner, claiming the eighth-grade conference championship for Oak Brook's Butler Junior High. She didn't race in seventh grade and had a rough first race in sixth grade, hurting her leg and staggering to the finish line.

"Soccer was when I really liked to run," Haff said. "(Winning conference) was kind of the same thing, too, the same feeling, the same rush. It hasn't sunk in yet."

Haff combined that desire with heart and strategy Saturday. For the new KLM course, runners go around the perimeter of the park twice like old times but they now start and finish at the north end of the park rather than the south. Instead of the long, straight homestretch of the past, the runners now turn after a group of trees and go straight from the east to west end before looping back for an uphill run to the finish line.

She was among the frontrunners from the outset and found herself battling Glenbard West sophomore Lindsay Graham before pulling away with about 600 meters left.

Smith put on a kick to catch Graham (3rd, 17:35.06), 20th at state for Glenbard East last year before moving to Glen Ellyn in the offseason. Fourth-place Glenbard West junior Lisa Luczak (18:00.19) was sixth at state last year but has been battling preseason shin tendinitis and illness.

"I didn't know how the other girls were going to try and finish and I knew to just try my hardest for those last 200 meters," Haff said. "I think it was actually Camila's dad (yelling), and he was like, 'Oh, you can't wait. Go

now. Go now,' and I was like, 'OK. I guess now is the time.' I just ran my hardest, and I was happy with the final result."

Last year, Perez won in a course-record 16:59.40 with Smith (17:20.00) and Luczak (17:36.27) third and fourth. While it's not a perfect comparison to KLM times of the past, even with the new configuration, the rugged challenges of KLM basically remain, although now at different junctures of the race.

Haff, who had never seen the invite, was as intimidated by the 17-team field and numerous fans as much as the competition.

"Very overwhelming. It was very nervewracking and I tried to block it all out and (everybody) really helped me to do that and that was really good," Haff said. "Everyone was just like, 'It's OK. Just do your best and that's all we can hope for. It doesn't matter how you do. We're still going to love you.' That helped me."

Horowicz also shined in her first cross country race ever. She initially thought she was in the 30s or 40s out of more than 270 finishers but she actually just missed a top-25 award by two spots and 1.11 seconds.

"I think it went really well. I was freaking out all morning. How's this going to be? There's going to be like 200 people in my race," Horowicz said.

"But actually it was fun. I liked it better than track, which was weird because I really like track."

Horowicz has competed for the Red Devils' track team the past two seasons and has been part of the sectional lineup in the 3,200-meter run, one more shorter than most cross country races. In the fall, however, Horowicz previously competed for the girls swimming team and was part of its conference lineup.

Horowicz gained a little persuasion to try cross country from fellow junior

Val Yager, who joined track for the first time in the spring. In her debut Saturday, Yager was a team-best second in the 1.93-mile open race.

"We're just like those awkward juniors who don't know what we're doing," Horowicz said with a laugh. "It was really hard doing both swimming and running because I'd be a season behind each year. This fall, I was like, 'I have to pick one or the other,' and I thought I can do a lot better in running than I can in swimming."

Horowicz should contend for her first state berth in track, but already she's among the possibilities for the Red Devils' state lineup Nov. 9.

"I haven't been to a high-school state meet yet and I just feel like that would be really, really awesome, just personal pride," Horowicz said. "Just knowing how to race a cross country race, it's a big learning experience. I already know what I want to do next week, what I have to improve on, but I also feel good. I have one race under my belt and I can actually do this. This sport is not too hard for me."

The Red Devils are ranked from No. 9 to 18 in this week's three 3A state polls. In Peoria, the Red Devils hope to get an early gauge team-wise against numerous state-ranked teams, including defending state champion Naperville North, O'Fallon, Naperville Central and Minooka again and conference foes Lyons Township and Downers Grove North.

"Camila was awesome (Saturday). Typically, with the three girls we were missing, Camila would have been our fifth runner," McCabe said. "If you put her as our fifth runner and our other three are where they should have been, we're right in the mix with everybody."

"There are a lot of pieces to the puzzle to be excited about and when the puzzle gets put together, it's going to be a pretty good one."

Open race/Frosh-soph

For her girls cross country racing debut, Hinsdale Central junior Val Yager couldn't have asked for a more perfect open girls race at Saturday's Hornet-Red Devil Invitational.

That is, except for maybe the final moments of her 1.93 miles.

"I had been in first place for a while. At the end of that last lap and about 200 (meters) to go, this girl just took off and I was, 'Ahhh,' " Yager said.

"I couldn't quite get her, but it's OK. I'm a little disappointed. Definitely, for my first race as a starting point, I'm very happy."

Yager was among many Red Devils who excelled on the new course at Katherine Legge Memorial Park help them finish second to Palatine 20-44. Wheaton Warrenville South was third with 94 points.

Yager (12:14.26) was second to Palatine's Anna Buckstaff (12:05.96) and well ahead of Palatine's Bridget Silveira (3rd, 12:29.93).

Junior Susan Spencer was sixth (12:40.39) and also earned a top-10 medal. Junior Tillie Kummerer (13th, 13:12.19), senior Amanda Koronkiewicz (14th, 13:16.22), sophomore Emma Stapleton (16th, 13:28.41), freshman Taylor Reinhardt (18th, 13:31.45) and juniors Tori Burke (23rd, 13:36.38) and Maddy Melin (24th, 13:36.40) also earned awards for placing among the top 25.

Reinhardt and Burke were among the Red Devils' Runners of the Meet along with freshman Alexa Haff, who won the varsity race in her high-school debut ahead of three returning all-starters. Camila Horowicz, another first-time cross country runner as a junior, was the Red Devils' No. 2 varsity finisher.

"Val Yager ran a great race," Hinsdale Central coach Mark McCabe said. "It's funny. I thought our three best races of the day were three first-time cross country racers (Yager, Haff and Horowicz).

"Susan Spencer had missed a little bit of training, and Amanda had a good first race back. It was a good team effort (in the open girls)."

The Red Devils' frosh-soph team was sixth (187 points) in another 3.0-mile race. Sophomore Mackie Stevens pulled out the last individual honors by taking 25th (20:29.06) just ahead of sophomore teammate Anna Yang (26th, 20:30.88)

Freshman Olivia Carter was 31st (20:44.44). The Red Devils' other top-seven finishers were freshmen Molly Caveney (54th, 21:35.44), Alyson Chatterjee (62nd, 21:58.65), Abby Berberich (66th, 22:13.76) and Tracy Wohlever (70th, 22:20.14).

Yager is not a stranger to running. In the spring, she joined the track team for the first time and mostly competed at 800 meters. To remain with many of her track teammates from the distance crew, Yager said she decided to join cross country.

"I think we just come together as a team more (in cross country) because it's a smaller team," Yager said. "It's longer distances, obviously, so you do a lot more running together, and it's fun."

One thing that did surprise Yager was the size of the race and crowd. The Hornet-Red Devil accommodated six girls and boys races and 21 schools, six of which only entered the boys or girls races.

"It was fun. It's just crazy with all of the people and all," Yager said. "It's very exciting. I was so nervous, but I loved it. It was fun."

The open girls race is the last time the Red Devils will have a race that isn't at or near the usual 3.0-mile distance. Yager is confident she can meet the challenge.

"I don't know (how I'll do). We'll see. Hopefully it goes well," Yager said. "I'm excited. It'll be fun. That's what I figure. We train for much more than (3.0 miles) so it'll be good."