

In 2012, senior Madeline Perez made Glenbard West girls cross country history by becoming its first individual state champion in record time.

She added to that history Saturday by contributing to another first.

After battling her way back from a calf injury to rejoin the lineup Oct. 19, Perez finished third to lead the Hilltoppers to their first team state championship at the Class 3A state meet at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

Glenbard West scored just 75 points behind four all-state individuals – one of the lowest totals in state finals history – to win by 37 points over defending 2012 state champion and pre-race favorite Naperville North (112). 2011 state champion New Trier (173) was third. The Hilltoppers were third last year.

"It means the world. I think that was all of our goals going into the season," Perez said. "We had our ups and down and at some points it was looking a little bit scary but we all pulled through in the end and I'm so excited for everyone.

"Last year was super special and I'll never forget it and I was definitely going into the race wanting to defend my title. It just wasn't my day, but winning this team title really was my main goal this year. To do that, I couldn't ask for anything else."

Perez (17:03 for 3.0 miles) only finished behind New Trier junior Mimi Smith (16:43) and Hinsdale Central freshman Alexa Haff (16:45).

Junior Lisa Luczak (9th, 17:14) finished among the state's top 10 for the second year in a row and sophomores Lindsay Graham (17th, 17:25) and Grace Rogers (21st, 17:28) also earned all-state honors for placing among the top 25, followed closely by freshman Janie Nabholz (45th, 17:58), sophomore Kathryn Kenwood (63rd, 18:12) and junior Megan Ozog (74th, 18:18). State alternates were senior Annika Manning and sophomores Nicole Berneche, Kate Dorsey, Caitlyn Reick and Abby Shaver.

This is head coach Paul Hass' 17th season with the program, the last 11 as head coach. Mark Staron is the assistant coach.

Cross country joins volleyball (1983) as the school's state champions for girls sports. Glenbard West's boys cross country team won a state title in 1960.

"They're going to be a part of history forever and it's just so great to see them run so well and to be the ones who brought the first state championship home to Glenbard West girls cross country," Hass said. "It's a tremendous honor we don't take lightly, but I'm just proud of the kids that I could help them get there. I'm just very, very happy for all of us, not only the team but just for the school, too."

Last year, Glenbard West finished third (138 points) to Naperville North (113) and Lake Park (134) for its first state trophy since taking third in 1979 and second in 1980 – the first two IHSA-sanctioned seasons of the sport.

Perez won that race in 16:02 —the fastest time in any girls race at Detweiller -- Luczak was sixth and Rogers was 59th as the Hilltoppers' No. 4 finisher.

Naperville North, however, returned four of its top-five finishers this season, including three all-staters. The Huskies were rated No. 1 throughout the season by all three weekly state polls while Glenbard West was minus Perez and overcoming other injuries.

"There are a lot of other good teams out there. We thought that we could and we knew that we had a chance, but we just didn't believe it until we won so that's pretty exciting," Luczak said.

"We're on cloud nine right now. It's crazy, just (being) the first one ever and how hard we worked. We deserve it and it feels so good to finally get rewarded from all of our hard work. It's like the best feeling in the world. When we were coming back on our bus ride, I shouted, 'Best day ever,' and it's so true."

It truly was a team effort. This is the first time the Hilltoppers have had four all-staters in one race, although they had a good start with three returning 2012 all-staters. Graham was 20th last year for Glenbard East before her family moved to Glen Ellyn.

Still, the Hilltoppers raced so well as a team that even if the all-state finish by Graham or Rogers were eliminated from their top five, they still would have

pulled out the team championship.

"I think that's really cool because it just shows how strong our team was," Rogers said. "(Third) was awesome last year but this just means so much more. We all worked so hard. We didn't focus on place or anything, but we all knew we can keep improving and working our best -- and eventually winning."

It's been a long but steady climb back to the top for the program since Hass took over as head coach in 2003 for the retiring Sue Pariseau after serving as an assistant. In 2010, under Hass and Staron, the Hilltoppers made their first state team appearance since 1997 and finished ninth at state, followed by sixth in 2011 before securing back-to-back trophies.

"That's why I said this is for past, present and future Hilltoppers because they're as much a part of the program and brought us to kind of where we are today. We just kind of want to keep bringing that legacy forward," Hass said.

This truly was a race for the ages, even in the eyes of the all-time IHSA records. Since the first three-class state meet in 2007, Geneva (51 in 2008) is the only 3A champion to score fewer points. The only teams to score fewer points in the previous highest enrollment divisions are Wheeling's all-time best 50 in 1984, when there was just one race, and Palatine's Class AA champions in 1990 (65) and 1992 (65).

"It was the best team performance of the year, and that's a credit to the girls. Some girls come to state and don't always run their best but for the last several years we have gone to state and run our best," Hass said.

"Naperville North is a great team and to be considered in the same breath as them, that's something. I thought we had a good team as well and I think we just had to go out there and do our best and see what happens and I think we certainly did that today."

Perez becomes the only Glenbard West girls cross country runner to achieve all-state honors three times. Luczak joins 1999 graduate Kyna Forkins as the program's only two-time all-staters and Perez as the only runners to have two top-10 state finishes. A move-in from Glenbard East, Graham also was an all-

state last year for the Rams.

With her all-state effort, Rogers helped the Hilltoppers eclipse the previous best of three all-state performances by the 1980 lineup of Paula Bresnan (14th), Darcy Rutherford (16th) and Suzy Treis (25th).

Rogers, who was 59th in 2012 (17:44), 34 seconds from 25th place, easily was all-state Saturday, 12 seconds ahead of 26th place.

"It's been my goal since after last year's state meet. That was my goal in my head throughout the summer and the season," Rogers said. "I knew I was happy with how I was doing but I knew for state I had to push myself really hard and not let up because I knew it wasn't going to be easy."

Rogers did have some adversity during the race she never expected. At the starting line, she surged her arm forward and immediately ripped loose one of the two bottom corners of her race bib secured by safety pins. During the race, her arm detached the other bottom corner.

"Every once in a while, the bib would come up into my neck," Rogers said. "I tried, but it wouldn't stay down. It was really annoying. I wish I never would have accidentally hit it."

Glenbard West teamwork was evident throughout the day, even afterwards. While a victory seemed possible, it wasn't certain until the final results were posted at the park. The wait seemed endless as officials reviewed the race video to verify the results via computer chips attached to the runners.

Hass and the Hilltoppers awaited the results near their team tent just behind the awards stands. At another part of the park by the finish line, Kelly Hass, Paul's wife and the girls track team's head coach, waited for the final results to be posted.

Kelly used her cell phone to call Paul with the triumphant news. The green-dominated tent area erupted into mass elation celebrating the gold.

"It was like disbelief. I couldn't believe that we won. I was just like, 'What?' " Nabholz said. "And then everyone just started cheering. It was just a really great

feeling.”

“We had a lot of tough competition. After we finished, I kind of thought we got second or something so we were all not talking about it or anything until we knew for sure,” Ozog said. “Once we found out, we were just so happy and it was so much fun. It still is fun.”

The Hilltoppers got to celebrate in style Saturday night. They returned to Glen Ellyn escorted by the police and fire departments. They then were treated to a pep assembly at Biester Gym, where they were greeted by numerous teammates, family and friends.

“We heated up the bus before we left because we knew it would get cold,” Kenwood said. “We just had our heads out the window (of our van), just kind of screaming. Some people didn’t know what we were doing. Other people did. It was fun. It felt cool to have an escort.”

Having the ultimate race at state required plenty of work -- and incredible patience. Because of various injuries, this lineup only was together three times - state and in winning the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 19 and the Lake Park Sectional Nov. 2.

Perez competed in the final four races after being smart about her comeback. Graham had been the team’s frontrunner in Perez’s place but then she had to overcome a knee injury.

“Give credit to Lindsay for carrying us through and Lisa when Madeline was out. Lindsay stepped up to be a great frontrunner and that’s a lot of pressure to do that and she did a great job,” Hass said. “Lisa battled and Grace Rogers battled. We didn’t miss a beat. That made us tougher, I think, as a team so that when Madeline did rejoin us, it was just another shot of energy into an already very, very good team. And the rest is history.”

Initially fearing her season could be over, Graham persevered. She did sit out the regional but returned for the last two meets with her left knee heavily bandaged. She trained in preparation for state only with workouts on the elliptical machine and swimming rather than running.

"I've been doing everything so that my knee could stay at least halfway decent so that I was at least able to run. I'm happy that it finally came to fruition today," Graham said. "(I raced for the team) 100 percent. I didn't really care so much about my individual goal anymore. I just wanted to help the team."

Perez wanted to come back and compete as quickly as possible, not only as the defending state champion but as a senior and team co-captain with Faith Bischoff. While outside pressures could have made her return too soon, she and the Hilltoppers were smart enough to wait until the time was right.

"It just killed me to not be racing that whole time. It was definitely hard to sit back but I knew I was going to work as hard as I could and just seeing the team race without me was really that driving factor," Perez said.

"In my mind, I never told myself this (season) was over. I can't ever accept defeat in that sense. I knew I had time and I was never going to give up and let anything stand in my way. It really helped me to think about the team all of the time to do what we could do at state and try to get that title. If the injury continued, I wouldn't put myself out there and it was a matter of trying to get in as much (training) as I could before the meet."

The difference was evident immediately at the Silver Meet. The Hilltoppers won with just 23 points. They then won the Fenwick Regional with 23 points, their first regional title since 1983, and their second straight sectional title at Lake with 30 points, 76 ahead of fellow trophy team New Trier.

"You could see what happened when (Perez) rejoined the team. There was a little spark," Hass said. "I think it just solidified the team and the team really realized what we have here and it's really something special."

"I feel like when (Perez) came back, it kind of gave us more comfort," Luczak said. "No matter what with Madeline, even if she was hurting, we knew she'd be running with us at state. She's so determined to do anything. We were really determined to do our best without her and knew when she came back, we knew we'd be that much better. We knew she was coming back so we weren't nervous at all."

Even at a training disadvantage, Perez still almost became the first back-to-back state champion since Woodstock's Kayla Beattie won 2A titles in 2009 and 2010 and the first in the largest class division since Geneva's Rebecca Mitchell was Class AA champion in 1996 and 1997.

Perez spent most of the race battling at the front with Hinsdale Central freshman Alexa Haff, the only person to have beaten Perez among her three previous races at the Silver Meet. Perez ran the first mile in 5:21 and the second in 5:42.

New Trier junior Mimi Smith was contending for third with Jacobs junior Lauren Van Vlierbergen (4th, 17:07) but stayed within range. As the third mile opened, Smith was seven to eight seconds back and was in range to begin going after the leaders.

Smith put on a surge in the final 1,000 meters, first passing Perez with about half a mile and then going stride for stride with Haff before gaining an advantage in the final 400 meters.

"I knew it's the state meet and girls are going to go out and be with you. I wanted to execute my plan and see how everything turned out. I executed my plan. I just didn't have the juice I had hoped for in the end," said Perez, whose final mile was 5:59.

Smith was 10th at state as a freshman and 12th last year, the sixth highest finishing non-senior in Saturday's 3A race. Just the previous Saturday at the Lake Park Sectional Nov. 2, Perez had won in 16:44.70, 10.25 seconds ahead of the second-place Smith. This time, however, Smith was able to stay closer, especially during the second mile, and exploit her speed down the stretch, which helped the Trevians win the 3,200-meter relay at the girls track state meet in May.

Had Perez never been injured, or even if she had a couple of more weeks of conventional training, the outcome certainly could have been different.

"I think that as my training was progressing, I could tell I wasn't quite in the shape that I was in at this point in time (last season). Still, I was going to give it my all regardless," Perez said.

"With the time that I missed, it definitely would have been nice to have a couple of more weeks to ease into things. Looking back, it's unfortunate what happened to me this season and like I've said, the team title was enough to really say I can't ask for anything more than that. Mimi Smith and Alexa Haff, who beat me, ran great races and you can't take anything away from them, either. What's done is done but I still have track and I still have that to look forward to and to continue on from there."

Last year, Luczak was disappointed that only two seconds kept her from a top-five finish. She was edged 16:43 to 16:45 by current Fenwick junior Olivia Ryan, who ended up 22nd Saturday (17:29).

Luczak was seven seconds from fifth but only one from sixth. Sixth-place Palatine sophomore Kelly O'Brien ran 17:13, and Buffalo Grove sophomore Kaitlyn Ko and Lockport freshman Morgan Bollinger were seventh and eighth, also in 17:14.

"Usually I'm never happy with a race and today was one time where I was actually really happy since I had a hard season. To pull out ninth place, I was pretty happy," Luczak said.

"The main thing is I didn't care about (ninth individually). When I heard that our team got first and I contributed to that, I was like, 'Wow.' I just felt so good. I made our team get first place. I was one of the factors. It felt really good."

If not for her late-season injury, Graham also probably would have been in the top 10, if not among the top five. At Detweiller Sept. 21, Graham finished just ahead of Smith for second overall and the top finisher from Illinois in the Richard Spring Invitational.

Graham was one second from the top 15 and nine from the top 10.

"It's very hard when you see the pack ahead of you and that's where I need to be or should have been. I guess I just take it step by step," Graham said. "I know last year I'd say I felt a bit better, a lot better (running at state) than today, but I knew in my head I really had to push it as hard as much as I could because any amount of points could be the difference between a title and second place."

Nabholz and Kenwood also are newcomers to the program. Ozog was a state alternate last year after competing at state with the 2011 team, which finished sixth (221), 43 points from third-place Naperville North. Ozog finished strong this season after being hampered by foot problems.

"We knew we could do this from the beginning. We knew we had what it takes so we're just really glad that we just showed it to everyone," Ozog said.

"When I was a freshman, we weren't really expected to do anything else. We weren't expected to get first or anything. It was just so exciting because it was my first time going to state. I feel like we had a lot more on the line this year because we all knew we could do so well. I felt like it was a lot more competitive and we were there to do something special and we were not just to be there for being there."

By contrast, Rogers missed most of last season recovering from a back injury. She didn't compete until early October and only ran for the varsity twice – at sectionals and state after winning the frosh-soph race at the Silver Meet.

This season, Rogers – and an often injury-stricken Luczak – didn't miss a meet. They were the key components to the Hilltoppers winning their final Silver dual meet against Lyons Township Oct. 10, when the team competed without Perez, Graham and Ozog.

"I was lucky to stay healthy, but I worked really hard at doing all of the little things and I didn't want to take any risks not getting to run," Rogers said. "It's not fun to not run. I just was really focused on staying healthy this year and lucky to actually stay healthy."

"That's shocking (for me). With track, I missed half of my season from the flu. I was hurting, but I just ran through it," Luczak said.

“What I know from it is that you just need to think of yourself as I’m contributing for the team. I know that even though I’m hurting, I’m still better than a lot of girls in the state who aren’t hurting. You just need to run and try your best no matter what. You were chosen and it’s an honor and you really need to do that. Lindsay, the effort she put in, and Madeline, that’s just incredible.”

Rogers’ effort proved to be one of the most important on the team. She emerged as a consistent runner who continuously improved individually and as leader for the team’s group of No. 4-to-7 finishers, affectionately known as the Wolfpack.

“It felt good to set a pace for everyone, not just for state but the other meets. It was nice to know that I could control how well other girls could do in a positive way,” Rogers said.

“We’d talk that everyone just try to stay together and stay close to each other. And our coaches always told Kathryn and Jamie their goal was to keep their eye on Grace and run with her and they always did. Not only did I push them and help them, but they pushed me to run faster. They helped me a lot and it was a good thing.”

Nabholz was a standout runner at St. James School. She was the team’s top finisher in the frosh-soph race at the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Sept. 7, and then ran with the varsity the remainder of the season.

Nabholz was the 10th-highest freshman finisher Saturday behind two other Silver runners, Haff and Oak Park-River Forest’s Mary Blankemeier (5th, 17:07).

“I honestly didn’t know when I started the season that we would be going to state and I’d be going to state and it just feels really great,” Nabholz said. “Once I found out that we were going to state, I was just so happy and I really wanted to make Madeline and all of the seniors proud before they graduated and then we won so it was pretty great.”

Kenwood had no previous running experience, playing only soccer as a freshman. She was persuaded into joining by sophomores Christina Sedall, who ran at state in 2012, and Reick, a state alternate the past two years. Rogers,

Sedall and Reick competed together at state track in the 3,200 relay.

"It was different. I knew from last year that we had a really strong team, getting third, and I was glad to be a part of it," Kenwood said. "My goal at the beginning of the year was to be top 12. It felt good to reach it. It was a really good year for the whole team."

The Hilltoppers' team race rang true throughout the Detweiller course. Practically the entire program's other 31 runners – and many students not with the team – made the trip to Peoria, most on the school fan bus. The non-competing teammates also added to the signage that they brought to motivate the runners at regionals and sectionals.

"Oh my gosh, you felt like every corner you had somebody cheering for you. The number of girls who took the fan bus was just so exciting. I think that's really cool for the school to set that up. Honestly, to say, with parents, family, friends, the turnout was really amazing and truly made a difference. For them to cheer and share that moment was great because it's just as much their trophy as ours."

Graham came into the season already friends with Lućzak but said that the team's camaraderie has been one aspect that has impressed her the most.

"The Glenbard West team is more of a family. I miss my friends at Glenbard East, but the Glenbard West girls are especially close," Graham said. "I actually didn't expect them to be so accepting of someone new. I didn't think they were going to be mean, but they were especially nice. The first day I came, it was like I had been there."

Perez said the Wolfpack nickname was coined by 2012 graduate Maddie Nagle, who initiated the program's resurgence when she qualified for state individually in 2008 and 2009. In 2011, Nagle and fellow senior Katie Born led the Hilltoppers to a share of the overall Silver title, their first conference title since 1990. The Hilltoppers have won the last two overall Silver titles outright for the first conference three-peat in program history.

"We had some fairly lean years there and eventually trying to turn the program in the direction I wanted it to be as far as where we would be competitively, Katie Born and Maddie Nagle were instrumental in that. They were the ones who eventually realized Mr. Hass may know what he's talking about," Hass said with a smile.

"When they bought in and achieved success, I think it set a model for others to buy in and achieve success as well and ever since then, the girls believed in me and Mark and as a result comes some great things together moving forward. They trust their training and I think we have a great relationship of communicating with one another on why we're doing things. If they have a question, they should ask it. That's a very open relationship between the athletes and coaches in that aspect and we can talk about things so if you're sore, let me know. It's been a great journey."

Perez still has a ways to go. The track season awaits and she's also the defending 3A state champion in both the 3,200- and 1,600-meter runs. The extraordinary effort also helped the Hilltoppers finish third as a team for their first trophy in girls track.

She and her cross country teammates have left a long-lasting impression on Glenbard West athletics.

"I'm hoping that this just doesn't inspire cross country runners but hopefully all female athletics at Glenbard West kind of to take that jump, and all athletics, period, guys and girls. Hopefully we have made our impact on that," Perez said.

Rogers perhaps did the best job of summarizing Saturday's whirlwind day when trying to dissect the most memorable parts.

"The finish of the race, after the race, hanging out with the team, the bus ride home," Rogers said. "It was just an all-around good day – the awards ceremony, taking pictures with the trophy. Everything was really fun and happy and exciting."

-- by Bill Stone