

When Glenbard West senior Kathryn Kenwood first joined the girls cross country program as a sophomore, she began to envision a future in running.

That included the possibility of having younger sister Claire as a teammate.

"Sophomore year, and Claire is going to be a freshman the next year, I was like, 'Claire, you're running next to me next year. They're going to be calling out the Kenwood sisters (at the awards ceremonies),' " Kathryn recalled.

"She's like, 'Ha ha, you're funny,' but now she's the seventh runner and she's getting up there."

Their second – and final -- season as teammates should culminate in a big way – at the Class 3A state meet at 1 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 7, at Peoria's Detweiller Park. The sisters were part of the Hilltoppers' lineup that earned the program's sixth consecutive state team berth by finishing third at the Lake Park Sectional Saturday, Oct. 31, in Medinah.

Sophomore and state title contender Lindsey Payne dominated the 3.0-mile race as her 16:58.9 won by 41.4 seconds.

Senior Grace Rogers was seventh (17:57.1), 2.7 seconds from fifth and the last runner to break 18:00.

Freshman Katie Hohe (22nd, 18:29.6), Kathryn Kenwood (27th, 18:35.6), junior Janie Nabholz (33rd, 18:38.6) and senior Abigail Shaver (37th, 18:43.8) followed with 14-second split among them. Claire Kenwood was 45th (18:55.8).

"I definitely think there are some positive thoughts associated with running in Peoria so we're all just ready to have our best races there this season," Claire Kenwood said.

"It's definitely exciting (competing with Kathryn). I think my whole family is just big fans of cross country so they're all excited to see us race at the same time, too."

Especially with such a veteran team, many of the other Hilltoppers also truly feel like sisters.

It also makes them that much more determined to go out on a high note, which includes contending for the program's fourth consecutive trophy for a top-three state finish. And that is with senior and 2014 individual state champion Lindsay Graham never competing this season because of injury.

"The (senior) leadership is great," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said. "We just love them as people. It's just great to have them around. They make it fun to come to practice and we enjoy coaching them."

"They've run the biggest meets in cross country and track so they know what it takes. They know our routine and our process and that our training works. They just have that confidence going into something like this. We've been down there several times and run well every time so we're pretty confident going into Saturday."

Last year, the Hilltoppers were third at state (94 points), three points behind second-place Palatine, after winning their first state championship in 2013 (75), 37 points ahead of second-place Naperville North, and taking third in 2012 (138), five points from second.

Rogers has been a top-five finisher for all three trophy lineups.

"I think everyone's going out to run their best race all season. We're ready to do that and if we end of that note, there's no way we can be upset," Rogers said.

"This, literally, is the last week for me. I'm kind of taking it all in this week and to make the best of it and have a really good weekend (at state). You've got to learn to enjoy every minute of it because it's a sentimental time."

After winning the Oct. 24 York Regional 33-41 over Wheaton Warrenville South, the Hilltoppers (89 points) finished behind the Tigers (75) and New Trier (50), which put six in the top 15. Maine South (115) and York (200) also advanced to state as teams.

Each of the past three seasons, the Hilltoppers have swept the regional and sectional titles after never previously winning a sectional and just one regional but also one comparable district title in 1979 en route to a third-place state finish.

"We maybe didn't have our best race (at sectionals), but I don't think we ran poorly. You put five in the top 30 or so at sectionals, not bad," Hass said.

"I think we have the potential to run better. I think we will run better. And the (wet, cold and muddy) conditions were the same for everybody so I don't think that's an excuse. You've got to take your hat off to New Trier and Wheaton Warrenville South. They ran really, really well."

The Hilltoppers also have run well this year, dominating the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 17, probably the state's strongest conference, and winning all but two of their regular-season invites.

Sectionals and the high-powered Twilight Invitational Oct. 7 at Naperville North are the only times that the Hilltoppers haven't finished first or second. At the Twilight Invite, the Hilltoppers were fourth behind defending 3A state champion Naperville North, defending 2A state champion Yorkville and Minooka. Glenbard

West was edged for the Hornet-Red Devil Invite by Minooka 72-75 Sept. 5.

“(Sectionals) was definitely a different feeling after the race. We’re disappointed in some of our races and how we did as a team, but we’re not really that upset, and we’re not discouraged,” Rogers said. “We know we’ll learn from that. I think we’re feeling pretty confident about this week and we’re excited.”

Besides Rogers, Kathryn Kenwood and Nabholz previously have competed twice at state. Payne and Shaver made their state debuts in 2014.

Claire Kenwood was among the team’s five state alternates in 2014. Hohe would give the Hilltoppers at least one freshman competing for them at state during the current six-season run.

Also on this year’s state roster are senior Kate Dorsey, sophomore Marika Tammaru and freshmen Claire Connolly, Abby Hoffman and Nicole Kaiser.

“Going into the season, my goal was just maybe to be an alternate on the state team. I just wanted to be on the state series team,” Hohe said. “I didn’t ever think my season was going to go this well so I’m really excited to be competing this weekend definitely.”

Another year of experience should pay big dividends for the older Hilltoppers.

Payne was fifth at state last year (17:00) and that was while juggling club soccer training and workouts throughout the season. She has focused strictly on cross country this fall and is on the short list of state contenders behind Naperville North senior Judy Pendergast, ninth at state in 2014 (17:06). The only other higher-finishing 3A returnees who will compete Saturday are Palatine senior Kelly O’Brien (3rd, 16:55) and Minooka junior Ashley Tutt (6th, 17:01).

At the Twilight Invite, Pendergast beat Payne by 14.7 seconds. Payne has beaten O’Brien and Tutt head-to-head this season.

“I’m definitely really nervous but all I can do is my best,” Payne said. “I don’t want to put too much pressure on myself or psych myself out or get too nervous. I want to appreciate the experience.”

In 2014, the Hilltoppers had one of the best performances by a third-place state team ever. The field once again is stacked with arguably an even stronger top 10. Naperville North has been rated No. 1 pretty much the entire season. Other projected top-10 contenders from other sectionals include West Suburban Conference Silver Division rivals Hinsdale Central (4th last year) and Lyons Township, Batavia, Prospect, Lockport, Lake Forest and Minooka (8th), which lost one of its top runners to injury since the Twilight Invite.

"In the middle of a race, you have no idea what place you're in. You just run your best and control what you can control," Hass said. "That's always been our mantra from years past and years forward. Just do the very best you can and usually more times than not things work out in your favor.

"(Individually) you can't control place and Lindsey's going to do the very best that she can and run the way she's capable and run her strategy."

Payne overcame some tense opening moments in the 2014 state race. She stopped to tend to her shoe after the back of it was stepped on by another runner.

"I always expect the worst. Mr. Hass says 99 percent of the thing you worry about never happen," Payne said.

On Saturday, Payne showed her progress by dominating a race in conditions that could have freaked her out. Wheaton Warrenville South junior Sara Atkins was a distant second (17:40.3).

Rogers said the rain and mud were especially prevalent in the forest area, making every turn treacherous.

"(The course) was pretty bad. I'm not going to lie. But I know that if we can run in that, we can really run in anything," Payne said.

"During warmups, I couldn't feel my legs. I was telling (assistant coach Mark Staron and Hass), 'I don't know what to do.' After they race, they're like, 'Did your legs warm up?' I'm like, 'No. But it's OK.' Honestly, I was just trying to grit through it and all I was thinking about was I know my teammates are finishing hard.

They're running their hearts out so I run for them."

Rogers, Kathryn Kenwood and Shaver return stronger and wiser after running at state girls track together in May with the 3,200-meter relay.

At state last season, Rogers (45th), Kathryn Kenwood (48th) and Nabholz (51st) were the team's No. 4-5-6 finishers with Shaver No. 7 in 107th.

"I think that being the second time (at state for me) I know how it works a little bit better," Shaver said. "I was a little bit overly stressed the first time I ran. I think I'll be a little more comfortable this year and I know I can push myself more based on our training. I'm stronger than I was last year."

"(My state goal is) just to enjoy it more. Looking back at it, a lot of it is just a blur with all of the panic and everything," Kathryn Kenwood said. "You always want to take it all in. You trust in the training you've had."

In the 2013 state championship season, Rogers (21st) was the Hilltoppers' fourth

all-stater in the race for being among the top 25. Nabholz (45th) and Kathryn Kenwood (63rd) were the team's No. 5-6 finishers. Rogers also was the team's No. 4 state finisher in 2012 (59th).

"I think it's going to be different than last year without Lindsay (Graham), but we have this Lindsey (Payne) so that's good. I'm really excited," Nabholz said. "I'm still having some shin pain but I've just been cutting down my mileage to not as much. I'm ready to go strong."

The Hilltoppers traditionally have run well in Peoria at state and when they compete there for the Richard Spring Invitational as their third invitational of the season in late September. They won this year's invite Sept. 19 with Payne winning the individual title in 16:34.0.

"The (Richard Spring) invitational was kind of my breakthrough race this season. I PRed by like 30 seconds," Hohe said. "That was kind of my big race for me so I'm excited to do it again and have another big breakthrough run."

Hohe is not alone. The seniors are especially motivated to end their great careers with personal and, hopefully, team triumphs for their final Detweiller races.

"I'm definitely excited because I know a lot of the girls have run (state) multiple times prior. I forget that I only ran last year because I've been on this team for so long but I think it's more special in a way because it's my last time but also only the second time," Shaver said.

"I don't know if we have a super-specific goal but basically just all click on the same day, have really good races together, a team effort. Just that everybody feels good and performs well on the same day because we know we can."