

Senior Lisa Luczak already is one of the greatest runners in Glenbard West girls cross country history.

Even though she didn't have her highest finish at the Class 3A state meet last season, she was more than happy to contribute to the greatest day in Glenbard West girls cross country history.

The Hilltoppers captured their first team state championship in the sport at Peoria's Detweiller Park Nov. 9 and all of the memories and jubilation that went with it, concluding with a pep rally that night at the school's Biester Gymnasium.

"By far that was the most fun meet and post-meet we've ever had before," Luczak said. "Just going back to the gym and having so many people from West there and just receiving the trophy and realizing this is what we got for all of our hard work and having the whole team there, it really just felt like it was such a team effort. It was an amazing feeling. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

The Hilltoppers are projected by many to win state again as they prepare for their season opener Saturday, Sept. 6, at the Hornet-Red Devil Invitational at Katherine Legge Memorial Park in Hinsdale.

They return six of their seven runners from the state championship lineup — Luczak, senior Megan Ozog, juniors Lindsay Graham, Grace Rogers and Kathryn Kenwood and sophomore Janie Nabholz -- although they did graduate three-time all-stater Madeline Perez, the 2012 individual state champion.

Also back are four of the five state lineup alternates — juniors Nicole Berneche, Kate Dorsey, Caitlyn Reick and Abby Shaver -- with only Annika Manning graduating. Other lineup candidates include junior and 2012 state competitor Christina Sedall, senior Julia Sakach and freshmen Lindsey Payne and Claire Kenwood, Kathryn's sister.

Not surprisingly, the Hilltoppers are rated No. 1 in the preseason by both DyeStat Illinois and MileSplit Illinois. However, 2013 state runner-up Naperville North — rated No. 1 going into last postseason — also has six runners back from its state lineup.

“How many teams have 10 of their 12 coming back – after a state championship or trophy season? We’re fortunate with that,” Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said. “We’re definitely excited about our potential but our mantra always is potential unrealized doesn’t get you anything.

“We’re just going to keep on working hard and do what we do every year, that’s just focusing on every girl improving. Hopefully, things work out in the end and we accomplish some of those other goals that are certainly out there for us. We can’t focus on that. We have to focus on the here and now and improving every single day.”

At state, Glenbard West (75 points) defeated Naperville North (112) behind having four individual all-state performances at one state meet for the first time in program history. Perez (17:03 for 3.0 miles) finished third to current New Trier senior Mimi Smith (16:43) and Hinsdale Central sophomore Alexa Haff (16:45) after not competing until the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet because of injury.

Luczak finished (17:14) ninth and Graham was 17th (17:25) to both earn all-state honors for the second time, and Rogers was 21st (17:28), six seconds ahead of the 25th-place finisher. Nabholz was 45th (17:58) as the team’s No. 5 finisher, followed by Kenwood (63rd, 18:12) and Ozog (74th, 18:18).

Naperville North’s top-five finishers were 10-14-19-44-57 with graduated Maria McDaniel was 14th. Third-place New Trier (173) and fourth-place Palatine (214) are ranked among the top five in state again this season.

“Everything about that day was so perfect. Until the race and on, everything was so great,” Rogers said. “I remember every single moment, what I felt, the songs that were stuck in my head, everything. It was just a great day.”

The Hilltoppers were expected to contend for a top-three team trophy after taking third in 2012 but a state title was far from a sure thing. One key was the Hilltoppers’ perseverance in Perez’s absence. As a team, they finished second to Palatine at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, third to Palatine and New Trier at the Richard Spring Invite at Detweiller Park in mid-September and third to New Trier and Naperville North at Wheaton North’s Falcon Classic flight race in early

October.

“We brought it home when it counted the most and that’s obviously the goal this year,” Hass said. “We have that going for us, knowing that you don’t have to be successful early in the season. It’s nice, but it’s the end of the season that counts and that’s what we’re focused on.”

No girls team has won consecutive state titles in the largest division since Geneva in 2007-08. What’s scary is these Hilltoppers could realistically perform even better at state than they did in 2013.

While 20 of last year’s all-staters were non-seniors, and Smith is back to defend her title, several Hilltoppers should be in the mix for all-state success, if not better. No girl has won consecutive individual titles in the largest school division since Geneva’s Becca Mitchell in 1996-97.

“I’d say definitely harder (to repeat as champions) because people are expecting us since we won last year so we kind of have that target on our back. But at the same time, that kind of helps us want to work even harder,” Luczak said. “There are also a lot of great teams, but I think with the talent we have that we can repeat what we did last year.”

Luczak has competed at state three times and Graham, Ozog and Rogers twice. The Hilltoppers were third at state in 2012 with Luczak (6th), Rogers (59th) and Sedall (78th) in the lineup and sixth in 2011 with Luczak (53rd) and Ozog (126th). Also at state in 2012, Graham was an individual state qualifier for Glenbard East and finished 20th before transferring to Glenbard West after her freshman school year.

Luczak now is in position to join Perez as the only three-time all-staters in program history. Luczak and 1999 graduate Kyna Forkins as the only current two-time all-staters as Hilltoppers.

“Any place below ninth (at state) would be absolutely amazing,” Luczak said. “That’s my ultimate goal, but it would also as a team be great to have a lot of (all-state) people – and I think we can under the top 10.”

Graham is on many people's short list of contending for the individual state title after she was second to Perez in the 3,200-meter run at the 3A state track meet in May.

At state cross country, Graham probably would have finished at least in the top 10 last year if not having to overcome tendinitis in both knees throughout the postseason. Graham had some time conflicts with her job during summer training, but it didn't affect her training, which including about "20 percent" more cross-training elements designed to prevent injury.

"First, I just want to beat all of my times at the beginning from last year," Graham said. "I think we are pretty motivated. It can't get much worse than last year (at state personally) for me. But I was just glad I could help out."

And don't count out Luczak. Hampered by injuries last track season, Luczak reached back for her best race of the season at sectionals to return to state in the 1,600. Hamstring issues hampered her for yet the third time in her career early this past summer, but Luczak has recovered and returned to full training.

"You never want to underestimate Lisa Luczak. The goal is to keep her healthy as long as we can," Hass said. "She and Lindsay are both disappointed where they were (at state) last year. They're really out there to try and improve and that's a big motivating factor for both of them and to accomplish what other people are saying about that. They have every ability and talent to put them in that elite group in the state."

Rogers enjoyed a breakthrough season to also be among the 11 sophomore or freshman all-staters. Rogers missed most of her freshman season recovering from injury before coming on strong in the postseason.

"It was like a big confidence booster but it also made me really want to work hard," Rogers said. "It's giving me a goal to do even better than last year. I was happy with (21st) but once you do, you never want to fall back. You want to keep doing better."

Last year, Nabholz overcame adversity to reach the varsity lineup. She spent most of the summer running in a protective boot while recovering from a stress

fracture.

Nabholz tried to combine running with club soccer last summer but she has since been careful to keep the training seasons separate. Nabholz played high school soccer in the spring on the sophomore level.

"I think I'm probably healthier (this season). I had a little (iliotibial band) problem but nothing compared to a stress fracture," Nabholz said. "(My varsity experience) probably helped me work harder with training. All of the other girls are so good so it's really great to have people to push me that hard."

Better and uninterrupted training also should pay big dividends this season for Kenwood. Last season the former soccer player tried cross country for the first time and quickly emerged. Kenwood then joined track for the first time in the spring after playing soccer as a freshman. Kenwood's sister, Claire, also is a soccer player trying cross country for the first time.

"(State) was the best experience of high school so far, being with the team and running. It gave me a lot of friends and showed me something that I actually enjoy doing," Kenwood said.

"(Hass) was showing me the difference from last year to this year and it was really different. I ran a lot more. People actually ask me questions and I know the answers. I feel stronger. I know I ice more often, follow more of the (workout) rules. When I'm running, I feel better than I did before."

Ozog also appears in line for a great senior year. She has learned to conquer the foot problems she still overcame last season with more icing and rolling her feet with golf balls.

"Every year I've been thankfully improving so I'm really hoping I can drop some time," Ozog said. "Since I've been here four years, I know how things work. I'm happy I can help other girls with how it works. Last season, I'd say that we added a lot of things to our routine and it got a little harder. At first, it was a bit annoying that we had to up and ante but now we realize it came out being worth it and we're willing to work that hard. And we have to work that hard until the end."

Another legacy the seniors would like to leave is the Hilltoppers extending their streak of overall Silver varsity titles to four straight. The Hilltoppers have won the last two outright after sharing the 2011 crown with York by winning the Silver Meet after losing their dual. The program previously had only won conference in 1979 and 1990.

Last year also marked the program's second straight sectional title and first regional title since 1983.

Glenbard West will get plenty of competition in the Silver from pre-season ranked teams Oak Park-River Forest (13th at state in 2013), Hinsdale Central (14th), Downers Grove North (21st) and Lyons Township. The Red Devils are rated as high as No. 6 by MileSplit Illinois as they return their top six finishers and have freshmen who will make an immediate impact.

Luczak, Ozog and Julia Kochert are this year's senior captains.

"I am really excited since it's my senior year and I think the whole team is excited because I feel like this is the closest we've ever been before," Luczak said.

"Teamwise I think the biggest thing is just for us to stay healthy and not get injured. Also a big thing for us is to make sure we really bond well and we really spend time, especially with older kids helping out the younger kids, and friendships forming. I feel that's the biggest thing to be successful."

-- by Bill Stone