

Glenbard West junior Lindsay Graham had her own high expectations for a great girls cross country season.

Although she internalized them and just kept working hard, she couldn't help but be the favorite to win the Class 3A girls cross country state meet Saturday, Nov. 8, at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

"It definitely was pressure but it was also like, 'Hey, people recognize that I can do this and I need to recognize that I can do it myself,' " Graham said.

Graham concluded her season the way she wanted by winning the 3A title convincingly in 16:23 – the fifth-fastest time ever on the 3.0-mile course in a state final. Her effort also helped the Hilltoppers (94 points) finish third and earn their third straight top-three trophy.

Graham also set a record by finishing 25 seconds ahead of second-place Jacobs senior Lauren Van Vlierbergen (16:48). It's the widest margin of victory by any 3A/Class AA state champion since the girls race was increased to 3.0 miles from 2.0 miles in 2002. The state meet moved to three classes in 2007.

"It means everything. It's like everything I've worked so hard for," Graham said.

"The last 300 meters I knew this was about to come true and I just had to finish strong. I kind of peaked around my shoulder after the 2-mile and I saw Lauren pretty close, not that close. She was still there so I had to make sure I had to keep pouring it down to keep the distance."

Graham joins 2014 graduate Madeline Perez as Glenbard West's only individual state champions. Perez won her title also as a junior in 16:02 – still the course record. In 2013, Perez was third (17:03) for the Hilltoppers' first state championship team after battling a calf injury most of the season.

"You wait your whole career for one (state champion) and then to have two in a span of three years is something I can't put into words," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said. "It's just a testament to the hard work that certainly Lindsay put

into doing everything right. It was a really great effort.

“She just ran out of this world. I knew she could do it. When I saw how fast the people were running today (in 2A and 1A), I thought she could really put it out there, and she’s only a junior. We’ll go at it next year, and we still have track ahead of her.”

There has never been a back-to-back individual state champion 3A history. New Trier senior Mimi Smith, the defending 3A champion, was eighth Saturday (17:05). The last back-to-back state champion in Class AA was Geneva’s Rebecca Mitchell in 1996-97.

This year marked plenty of firsts for Graham. She preceded her state title with her first individual conference, regional and sectional cross country victories. She also set two course records and won nine of her 12 races, finishing second in the other three.

“I worked my butt off honestly. I’m so happy it all paid off,” Graham said. “I just learned when I put my mind to something I can accomplish it and not count myself out.”

If Graham needed any additional confidence for state, senior and good friend Lisa Luczak was there to help. After the team made the trip to Peoria Friday, the two were working on a jigsaw puzzle when Luczak told her the opportunity was there.

“I told her, ‘You know, this is your time. You can do it. You can definitely win. Of course, the goal is to do your best, but you can be tops in state,’ ” Luczak said.

“I knew that she could win. I knew all year. She deserved to win. She’s worked so hard and she’s so talented. She did what she always does and blew us all away. Everyone was really, really proud of her.”

In May, Graham entered the state meet for girls track in a similar position. She ran the fastest sectional time in the 3,200-meter run with another personal record (10:36.83). At state, she didn’t feel her best and finished second to Perez (10:34.60 to 10:40.73), who also won the 3,200 as well as the 1,600 as a junior.

"I remember I had a chance to win state track last year, but Madeline beat me to that. I'm really happy with this because cross country was what I really wanted to do well in," Graham said.

"I definitely felt better in this race than I did in the track race. It was just another way that I can stay tough even if I'm not feeling that great."

Graham's time Saturday still put her in elite company. She moved into the No. 5 spot by one second ahead of Naperville Central senior Amanda Fox when she won the 2011 3A title.

On Saturday, Peoria Notre Dame junior Maryjeanne Gilbert moved into the No. 2 spot by winning the 2A race in 16:12. The No. 3 time is 16:15 by York senior Emma Fisher when she finished second to Perez in 2012. Woodstock senior Kayla Beattie's second straight 2A title from 2010 in 16:22 is the No. 4 time.

"I think it's cool (being among the top 5)," Graham said. "I didn't care about the time. I just wanted to win."

At the mile, Graham was in the lead pack in at 5:24 with Van Vlierbergen and Hinsdale Central sophomore Alexa Haff, second at state in 2013. By two miles, Graham (10:55) had opened a 10-second lead on Van Vlierbergen.

Palatine junior Kelly O'Brien (16:55) pulled out third with Haff (4th, 16:59) passing Glenbard West freshman Lindsey Payne (5th, 17:00) down the stretch. Despite having to reattach her shoe in the first mile, Payne was the only freshman to finish in the top 10.

"(I'm most happy with) probably my finish. I think I stayed really strong up that final hill," Graham said. "I didn't feel bad during the race, but I didn't really feel as good as during sectionals (personal-record 16:34.54 for 3.0 miles). I'm still so happy with how it went, but I didn't feel really good."

Graham earned top-25, all-state honors for the third time. Luczak and Perez currently are the only Glenbard West runners to be all-state three times because Graham attended Glenbard East as a freshman before transferring. Graham was 20th at state in 2012.

Last year, she appeared on verge of being a top-10, if not top-five state finisher as the Hilltoppers' No. 1 runner in Perez's absence. By the postseason, Graham was battling tendinitis in her knees. She curbed her training and sat out regionals and still managed 17th at state (17:25), the third of a program-record four Glenbard West all-staters in one race.

That determination led to domination by a healthy Graham Saturday. To increase her chances of staying healthy, Graham perhaps ran less at times this season yet worked as hard, if not harder, through more cross training.

"It just makes everything worth it. Last year I didn't do that well, but now I finally got to see it pay off," Graham said.

"It's always hard to get that first one and the hard work paid off," Hass said. "I'm so happy for her because she works so hard and this year is finally satisfied and getting what her dream was."

In the season opener Sept. 6, Graham finished second to Haff at the Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Sept. 6 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park in a then-course record 16:52.79 to 17:03.48.

On the same course Oct. 9 in the teams' triangular meet with Lyons Township, Graham ran 16:35 to break Haff's course record by 17 seconds. Haff, starting to feel the effects of a hip flexor injury that kept her out of the conference and regional meets, finished 27 seconds behind.

That triangular was the regular-season finale. Graham went undefeated throughout the postseason without any serious challenges. She won both the regional and sectional by 41 seconds over the second-place Payne.

“Probably at that triangular at Katherine Legge, I think that was like a turning point (for my confidence),” Graham said. “I thought that (race) could be state title material if I could keep working with that.”

In the home finale Sept. 18 at Camera Park, Graham won in a course-record 16:42, breaking Perez’s 16:53 mark from 2011. Graham had run 16:58 in the Hilltoppers’ previous home meet Sept. 9.

Two days later at Detweiller, Graham was second at Peoria Notre Dame’s Richard Spring Invitational to Gilbert (16:51.1 to 16:30.2). Graham also finished to nationally-regarded St. Ursula Academy (Cincinnati, Ohio) senior Annie Heffernan, the Division I Ohio state cross country champion in 2013, in the No. 1 flight at Wheaton North’s Falcon Classic (17:13.0 to 17:00.6). Heffernan did not compete in this year’s Ohio state championships Nov. 1 because of a shin injury.

Graham certainly can sympathize. Being able to give her best Saturday, one of the few challenges in Graham’s way was conquering the Detweiller Park course itself.

“I still don’t like it. I don’t like how it’s all tilted in that one part. I just wish it was flat,” Graham said. “Just to push up that (final) hill is hard, but I’m getting better.”

-- by Bill Stone