

Glenbard West sophomore Grace Rogers spent most of last year's cross country season being more of a cyclist than a runner.

Just before her high-school debut in the 2012 season opener, Rogers was diagnosed with a back injury. It was the beginning of a long, and mostly stationary, road to recovery.

"They'd all go out and run (at practice) and I and a couple of other girls who had long-term injuries would go just bike in the weight room," Rogers said.

This season, Rogers has competed in the Hilltoppers' first two meets. So far, her appreciation of being healthy and her usual competitive fire have been a strong combination.

While sophomore Lindsay Graham captured first place comfortably, Rogers and junior Lisa Luczak also had top-10 individual finishes that helped the Hilltoppers easily win Lake Park's Harvey Braus Invitational Saturday in Roselle with just 45 points.

"I'm getting to compete in the meets. It's a lot better of an experience when you actually get to run," Rogers said. "It's awesome. I love it. I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything.

"I think (this season) I'm a lot more concentrated on all of the little things and staying healthy. I don't want to risk not running again because it's not fun."

Graham covered the 3.0 miles in 17:08.4 to win by an impressive 19.4 seconds over St. Charles East junior Torree Scull (17:27.8). For Graham, a 2012 all-stater, it was her first cross country victory at a major invitational.

Luczak (17:33.5) edged Metea Valley senior Kendall Cast (17:33.8) for third place at the invite for the second straight year.

Rogers was seventh (17:52.7). Junior Megan Ozog was 13th (18:10.3) and freshman Janie Nabholz (21st, 18:25.2) was the team's No. 5 finisher in her varsity debut. The Hilltoppers' other finishers were senior Annika Manning (44th, 19:16.0) and juniors Hannah Arduino (79th, 20:11.7) and Colleen Luczak

(87th, 20:23.0). Teams were allowed eight varsity entries instead of the usual seven.

The Hilltoppers still miss defending state champion Madeline Perez in their lineup, and sophomore No. 5 runner Christina Sedall also did not compete. There still was more than enough firepower.

The Hilltoppers finished almost 70 points ahead of second-place St. Charles North (114 points), which was just in front of Hoffman Estates (115) and Schaumburg (118).

"I thought we ran exceptionally well, kind of stepped up," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said. "Without our No. 1 and 5 runners, the girls could have gone either way on that one, but we talked about doing what we can with what we have. I'm very proud of the way they stepped up and represented the team and the school."

Ranked No. 2 in Class 3A behind defending state champion Naperville North, the Hilltoppers will compete at Peoria's Detweiller Park, the annual site of the state meet, this Saturday in Peoria Notre Dame's Richard Spring Invitational.

In their last visit to Peoria, the Hilltoppers earned a team trophy for taking third at the 3A state meet. On Saturday, Naperville North won the other major race at Detweiller, Peoria High School's First to the Finish Invite, with Hinsdale Central a strong second.

Glenbard West's race at Lake Park completed a tough week of training during which mid-summer, 90-degree temperatures resurfaced. With the dangerous heat, the Sept. 10 home meet with Glenbard South was canceled, and the team held a twilight practice instead.

Every the school days were a challenge. Hass said he was told Glenbard West is the only high school in DuPage County without air conditioning.

"I thought the girls dealt with it very well," Hass said. "There's any excuse not to do well (Saturday). I thought they ran exceptionally well."

Graham also dealt better in her chance to win an invite for the second week in a row. At the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invite Sept. 7, Graham was in contention for the lead but was beaten down the stretch and then caught near the finish to end up third.

At Lake Park, Graham was in contention for the lead at two miles with Scull when Graham decided to pick up the pace.

Her 5:31 third mile put the race away. She even received a boost from a yelling Kelly Hass, Paul's wife and the girls track team's head coach. Paul Hass felt that Luczak might have caught Scull from behind had the race been a little longer.

"I wanted to make a move going into the second mile, but (Scull) responded right away so I waited a little bit. I could feel her dropping off and I knew I needed to make a distinct move," Graham said.

"I knew I didn't want for it to get down to the end like it did last weekend. I felt like I couldn't really go any faster at the end."

Last season, Graham was admittedly surprised when she was all-state in cross country in taking 20th in a personal-best 17:01. Scull was 31st, 19 seconds behind Graham.

A move-in from Glenbard East, Graham competed at Lake Park last year during regionals, which also included Glenbard West, and finished seventh behind Perez (1st) and Luczak (3rd).

Also an all-stater in track in the 1,600-meter run, Graham probably felt at home during the final moments of Saturday's victory. The course concludes with a 300-meter run around the school track to the finish line.

"In track, I was better than I was in cross country last year. I've never won a big cross country meet before so it was a cool thing to experience," Graham said.

"Lindsay's results speak for themselves. I'm so proud and so impressed with what Lindsay did," Hass said. "It's her first win at a high school invitational in cross country and well deserved. She's working hard and it's working out great."

Rogers also made significant strides from the Hornet-Red Devil. She ended up 16th but that was only thanks to a strong second-half effort after being significantly further back than she had hoped. Only near the end of the race did she pass Ozog, who went out strong and ended up 18th, .81 of a second behind Rogers.

On Saturday, Rogers ran with Ozog from the outset and got out among the frontrunners. The result was Rogers' second-fastest race for the Hilltoppers.

"I was really happy with it. Megan and I ran together for most of the race and worked really well together," Rogers said.

"I was behind her the whole race at the Hornet-Red Devil and joined her at the finish. This week, we worked together until the end. I think I did a lot better, not just the time but I felt better and ran better. I got off to a great start and kept moving throughout the race."

Last season, Rogers didn't compete until a Sept. 27 dual and then improved exponentially. She not only earned a spot in the sectional lineup in a time trial, but she then was the team's No. 4 finisher at the state meet in 59th place in a personal-best 17:44.

"I wasn't expecting to do as well as I did. I feel like there's something about state where you just run out of your mind and everyone does so well. I was shocked," Rogers said.

Manning did not compete at the Hornet-Red Devil Invite, but that was because she was attending a wedding. In her first chance to showcase her offseason work, Manning, the team's No. 7 varsity finisher at the 2012 Lake Park Invite, beat that time by a whopping 39 seconds Saturday.

"I did surprise myself when I finished. I wanted to get around 19:40, 19:30. That race was probably one of my best," Manning said.

Whether it's her training or the sense of urgency as a senior, Manning wasted no time getting out to a good position and maintaining it.

"I've just been working a lot harder this year. I really wanted to finish my senior year up there and maybe make it on the state team or something," Manning said. "For workouts, I've been pushing myself a lot more and even race strategy, I went out a lot faster than I usually do at the beginning of the race."