

Now a veteran of girls cross country races, Glenbard West sophomore Janie Nabholz tended to her aches and pains, kept her composure and finished strong at the Class 3A Niles West Sectional Saturday, Nov. 1.

"I started out a little slower (than regionals Oct. 25). I felt pretty good," Nabholz said. "I had more left. I think it was because I started out slower than last week so I had more at the end."

Nabholz and the Hilltoppers hoping they can have their best race one last time. They will try to defend their Class 3A team state championship at the state meet at 1 p.m. at Peoria's Detweiller Park.

Junior Lindsay Graham easily won in a personal-best 3.0-mile race time of 16:34.54 as the Hilltoppers put six runners among the top 11 to win their second straight sectional title.

Sophomore Lindsey Payne was second (17:15.87) over New Trier senior Mimi Smith (3rd, 17:17.25), the defending 3A individual state champion.

Senior Lisa Luczak (5th, 17:25.85), who rejoined the lineup after sitting out regionals, also earned a top-10, all-sectional medals. Junior Grace Rogers (18:06.35), Nabholz (18:10.65) and junior Kathryn Kenwood (18:11.83) were 12th, 14th and 16th and junior Abby Shaver was 28th (18:31.87).

"Today I didn't feel very sore so I was just hoping to stay with Kathryn and I did. We stayed together for a while," Nabholz said.

"I think I know more of what to expect (at state) and hopefully we can go in like we did last year and get the job done. We don't really focus on what we did last year. We focus more on what's to come."

Glenbard West (34 points), ranked No. 1 all season, cruised to their third straight sectional title over second-place and top-five rated New Trier (57).

This was only the third sectional team title in program history after the

Hilltoppers won their second straight regional title Oct. 25 at Lake Park. York (153), Fenwick (178) and Loyola Academy (195) were the other three teams to advance out of the sectional.

"I think it was a better team performance overall (than regionals)," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said.

"Hopefully we'll have our best race (at state) and there's no reason we can't. We're very happy with where we're at right now, but we're not done yet. We still have another week to go."

Last season, the Hilltoppers were expected to at least add to their trophy collection in 2013 after taking third in 2012.

This time, they come in as the prohibitive favorite. They return three all-staters in Luczak, Graham and Rogers and Nabholz and Kenwood from the championship lineup who competed Saturday.

"We're feeling good. Everyone's running really well, especially today. This was a big confidence booster," Rogers said. "It's kind of sad that it's already here. I'm glad it's here, but I just love cross country so much I wish it were longer. It's such a fun season and such a fun time of the year. I'm so happy to be back at this point of the season and where we are as a team."

Hinsdale Central, the only team to beat the Hilltoppers this season, has been ranked No. 2 since mid-season. Naperville North, Palatine and New Trier have consistently been ranked among the top five.

The Red Devils beat Glenbard West 25-30 Oct. 9 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park in their West Suburban Conference Silver Division dual meet. The Hilltoppers then dominated the Silver Meet 20-52 Oct. 25 at Proviso West with Luczak in the lineup for the first time since Sept. 13 but still would have won without her.

The last team to win consecutive 3A state team titles is Geneva in 2007-08. Naperville North, New Trier and Palatine were second through fourth last season.

"We're tweaking a few things here and there as far as race strategy goes, but we'll be ready to go (for state) and put our best foot forward, literally, and see what happens," Hass said.

"Our goal from day one all the way to the end is keep on focusing on ourselves and getting better. If we run our very best race and another team beats us, hats off to them. I'll be happy if we run our best. Last year, we ran our very best race of the whole year at state and that's what we'll focus on. That's all you can control. That's all you can do."

Graham is on the short list of contenders for the individual state title, especially after a personal-best time Saturday. Glenbard West's only individual state champion is Madeline Perez as a junior in a course-record 16:02 in 2012. Perez was third last year (17:03) after injuries kept her sidelined until the conference meet.

Top-25 finishers earn all-state honors. Luczak and Graham have been all-state the past two seasons with Graham achieving the feat for Glenbard East as a freshman before transferring.

In 2013, Luczak (9th, 17:14), Graham (17th, 17:25) and Rogers (21st, 17:28) were the team's No. 2-3-4 finishers. With Rogers' first all-state effort, the Hilltoppers achieved a program-best four all-state runners in one state race for the first time.

In 2012, Luczak and Graham were sixth at 20th at state, respectively. Last year, Graham emerged as a top-five state contender early on yet still was 17th after battling through tendinitis in her knees throughout the state series and sitting out regionals.

"I feel better, a lot better. It'll be a lot better than last year (at state)," Graham said. "It's like totally different. I'm in a way better place now (this season)."

Saturday's impressive performance was just one of seven strong individual races by the Hilltoppers. Even with a strong 1-2 finish, they cut their 1-5 split from 2:02 at regionals to 1:36 and their 2-5 split from 1:21 to 55 seconds.

"Lindsay Graham just ran lights out again and is getting stronger and stronger every week. I don't think this course is fast actually," Hass said.

"(Payne) just ran so smart, ran a great strategy to take down the defending state champion, at least on this particular day. (Luczak) worked so hard in the pool. For her to come back and run and get fifth and look very, very strong doing that, I couldn't be happier. (Rogers) had a solid race. She'll tell you that probably wasn't her best race but she's so consistent that even when she's not on, she gives you everything she can. I think (Nabholz) maybe had her best race since the Lake Park Invite (Sept. 13). She just ran lights out and finished so strong. She passed a ton of runners as did Kathryn Kenwood, just running very, very strong. When you're seventh runner runs 18:31, you're usually doing something right. (Shaver) has worked so hard and is just getting better and better."

This season, Graham is undefeated against 3A runners since taking second at the season-opening Hornet-Red Devil Invitational Sept. 6 to Hinsdale Central sophomore Alexa Haff, last year's state runner-up to Smith.

At the Richard Spring Invitational Sept. 20 at Detweiller Park, Graham finished second to Peoria Notre Dame junior Maryjeanne Gilbert (16:51.1 to 16:30.2), who will be competing in the earlier Class 2A state finals. Graham was second one other time Oct. 4 at Wheaton North's Falcon Classic in the No. 1 flight to nationally-regarded St. Ursula Academy (Cincinnati, Ohio) senior Annie Heffernan (17:13.0 to 17:00.6), the Division I Ohio state cross country champion in 2013.

On Saturday, Graham won her first individual sectional title after her first titles at the regional and conference meets.

Graham won the Hinsdale Central dual in a then personal-best 16:35, breaking Haff's previous course record 17 seconds. Haff did not compete at the Silver Meet or regionals but won the Marist Sectional Saturday at Midlothian Meadows by 9.34 seconds (17:02.72 for 2.98 miles).

In all, eight of the top-10 state finishers and 19 all-staters from 2013 competed Saturday and advanced. Last year, Smith won the state meet by two seconds over Haff (16:43 to 16:45) after finishing second at the sectional to Perez by 10 seconds.

Graham's victory Saturday gave her reassurance that she can continue to run well for state. She beat her regional time (16:44) by 10 seconds after a 5:33 first mile, 12 seconds slower than regionals, but with an explosive 5:21 third mile, 27 seconds faster.

"I needed to run that fast today. I felt good. I needed to get a good time today," Graham said. "We're looking good (as a team). Lisa ran amazing. She hasn't run in like three weeks and then she just ran a really good time. Everyone just stepped up and did well."

Payne's effort put her ahead of two three-time all-staters in Smith and Fenwick senior Olivia Ryan (4th, 17:19.85). Payne also beat Ryan at the Lake Park Regional. Payne spent most of the race battling with Smith but pulled out second behind a 5:29 third mile.

"I went into it not really expecting to get second. Other races I knew I really could, but this one particularly I was really worried because I knew that they both had really strong kicks," Payne said.

"I'm surprised that I was able to outkick them today and that was really cool because I really surprised myself. Halfway through the race I was like, 'Aw, I probably won't get second,' but I ended up doing it so it was really cool."

Payne is the only member of Saturday's lineup who has not competed at Detweiller either at state or during the regular season.

"We've sort of talked about (state)," Payne said. "(My teammates have) said it's really fun because it's really close, like a family dynamic feel. They said it's really cool because we all stay together, eat together, sleep together. It's a really experience, but it is a lot of pressure."

The Hilltoppers annually compete at Detweiller Park for the Richard Spring Invitational, but Payne missed the Sept. 27 meet because of club soccer obligations. Without Payne and Luczak in the lineup, the Hilltoppers still won the invite.

Payne said she reduced her soccer obligations for sectionals and won't participate in soccer at all this week preparing for state.

"I can't do it. It's worth it. It'll pay off," Payne said. "I skipped soccer most of the week so I think that really gave me energy (Saturday). I felt better than I did last week (at the finish) and I think I pushed it a little harder even, too. I think the (cooler) weather helped a lot."

Luczak came back even stronger Saturday after sitting out regionals to help her injured Achilles tendons heal. In her first race since Sept. 16, Luczak was fourth at the Silver Meet after receiving cortisone shots in both ankles earlier in the week.

This was Luczak's third straight top-five sectional finish after also taking fifth in 2013 and third in 2012. She was 15th at sectionals in 2011 and 53rd at state as the No. 2 finisher for the sixth-place Hilltoppers.

Since the Silver Meet, Luczak has been cross training with swimming and biking.

"I knew that I was going to be in a lot more pain than conference because I wasn't really running with anything to help me besides a couple of Advils," Luczak said.

"It was definitely tricky since my Achilles still really hurt, but I just came in with the mental attitude knowing that it's going to hurt but I just need to run through it, run for my team, run for my school and do my best."

The 2012 and 2011 sectionals also were at Niles West but that 3.0-mile course was different. Saturday's course had fewer turns and, instead of finishing near the baseball diamond on the west side of the school, ended on the track like the Lake Park course.

“Actually, it was pretty much the same running on the track compared to running on the grass next to it,” Luczak said. “The track, mentally for me, is always faster, but it didn’t really make a big difference. I always love this course. It’s nice for my Achilles since there aren’t any hills, just a fun, nice course to run on.”

Luczak said Saturday she will see how she feels to determine if she will take another cortisone shot prior to state. Hass said her participation Saturday wasn’t in much question because Luczak was determined and doctors told her she would not do further damage by competing.

“She would just have to deal with the pain and she is one of the toughest kids I’ve ever coached. She’s tough as nail and you saw that today in her performance,” Hass said. “She’s the biggest team player we have. She’ll do whatever it takes and put her body through anything for the team and she showed it today.”

As usual, teamwork fueled the rest of the Hilltoppers finishers. At the mile, Rogers ran 6:01 with Nabholz, Kenwood and Shaver at 6:05. Rogers, Nabholz and Kenwood were within three seconds of each other at two miles.

“I think we ran great as a team, better than we did last week and it felt good to run with everyone,” Kenwood said. “Grace was ahead and it was more Janie and I, but then we started catching up to Grace, which was good. We were all within a good distance.”

At state last year, Nabholz (45th, 17:58) and Kenwood (63rd, 18:12) were 14 seconds apart as the Hilltoppers’ No. 5 and 6 finishers. Rogers improved upon finishing 59th as a freshman at state in 2012.

“(My state goal is) better than last year. I just want to push myself to do as good as I can,” Kenwood said. “I learned that it’s still the same race that you run every week. You’ve just got to run it how you can.”

On Saturday Rogers was 8.45 seconds from 10th but nearly four seconds ahead of Fenwick sophomore Anne Mannion (11th, 18:10.23). Nabholz, just .42 behind Mannion, and Kenwood finished just ahead of New Trier’s No. 4 and 5 finishers in

17th and 18th.

Nabholz finished 36 seconds faster than at regionals behind her third mile, a 39-second improvement.

“Individually, I’d like to stay with Kathryn and Grace probably (at state). As a team, (we want to) just do the best that we can,” Nabholz said.

Shaver made her sectional debut after her postseason debut at the Lake Park Regional. She finished in 6:02 after a 6:24 second mile.

“I went out too slow and I got boxed in on the first lap so I spent most of the race trying to catch up, but I didn’t have too bad of a time,” Shaver said.

Shaver has been a state alternate the past two seasons so she’s used to the state series but from a different perspective.

“It’s just a completely different atmosphere (in the postseason). I don’t think I’ve fully grasped it. Normally I’m worrying about other people running it and what they need and now I have to worry about myself,” Shaver said.

“It’s kind of intimidating (to run at state), but I think just representing my school and knowing that I worked hard for it and that we can bring it, I’m just excited to be able to be part of the team.”

With Luczak returning to the lineup, senior Megan Ozog became a top alternate after competing at the regional. Ozog was the No. 7 finisher for the state championship team and also ran at state in 2011. She was a state alternate in 2012 after competing at sectionals.

“It was kind of fun to see everyone race because I never get to see that,” said Ozog, a senior tri-captain with Luczak and Julia Kochert.

“I’ve been at state all four years. I’m excited. Most of the girls have been before, but just as a senior I can set the tone for it’s a serious trip, but it’s also a lot of fun.



You want to make sure that you don't want to make yourself nervous and everything, but you can also have fun on the trip, too."

-- by Bill Stone