

Even though Glenbard West senior Lisa Luczak admirably competed with strained Achilles tendons, the most painful part of her fourth and final Class 3A girls cross country state meet Saturday, Nov. 8, at Peoria's Detweiller Park, wasn't the race.

"Friday night when it was my last senior race and the last time as part of the team for cross country, I started crying," Luczak said. "I didn't want it to end. I love every one of the girls and it means so much to me. The teamwork, the coaches have been a huge part of my life. For it to be over is so sad."

Luczak made the most of her final chance. She pushed all the way through to earn all-state honors for the third straight year to help the Hilltoppers finish third as a team with just 94 points.

Junior Lindsay Graham became Glenbard West's second individual state champion in the past three years as she won the 3.0-mile race in 16:23, a distant 25 seconds ahead of second-place Jacobs senior Lauren VanVlierbergen (16:48).

Freshman Lindsey Payne was fifth (17:00) despite temporarily losing her shoe and Luczak 22nd (17:19) to also earn top-25, all-state honors.

Junior Grace Rogers (17:43), junior Kathryn Kenwood (17:46) and sophomore Janie Nabholz (17:48) were 45th, 48th and 51st, and junior Abby Shaver was 107th (18:15). Other members of the state team were senior Megan Ozog, juniors Nicole Berneche, Kate Dorsey, Caitlyn Reick and Christina Sedall and freshman Claire Kenwood. Numerous other team members drove down by themselves or on the fan bus to support the team as well.

This is an unprecedented third straight top-three state trophy for the Hilltoppers. They won the program's first state title in 2013 and also were third in 2012.

"We were all exhausted and proud of ourselves because we knew we gave it our all," Luczak said. "Of course, we're going to strive to be first, but we knew we did our best and we're happy to get third and be one of the top-three (trophy) teams and it's a huge accomplishment. We're a little sad we didn't win, but overall we're happy with how we did, especially how Lindsay won. We couldn't be happier we had a state champion on our team."

Graham captured her state title with the fifth-fastest time ever in the state finals. Her 25-second margin of victory is the biggest at the state finals in the largest class since the girls race increased from 2.0 to 3.0 miles in 2002. The state meet went from two to three classes in 2007.

2014 graduate Madeline Perez, the program's first state champion, holds the Detweiller course record of 16:02 from her 2012 victory as a junior. In 2013, Graham finished 17th at state (17:14) despite competing the last month of the season with tendinitis in both knees.

"It means everything. It's like everything I worked so hard for. The last 300 meters I knew this was about to come true and I just had to finish strong," Graham said. "I'm really proud of everyone, especially Lisa for running when she was injured like that. I remember what it was like."

Naperville North finished strong collectively to win its second straight title with 73 points after taking second to the Hilltoppers in 2013. Palatine (91 points) edged the Hilltoppers by three points for second place.

"Hats off to Naperville North and Palatine. They just ran great, but I thought our kids ran pretty well, too," Glenbard West coach Paul Hass said. "You can't say enough about Lindsay Graham and her race. She just took control of that race and with not looking back."

The Hilltoppers' program now owns five trophies after having earned just two before the current run.

This third-place trophy was a little tough to take only because 94 points is the best score for a third-place team in 3A since the expansion to three classes. That total would have won four of the previous seven 3A state meets and been second in the other three.

"I couldn't be happier for what they have done and accomplished," Hass said. "I'm sure they would have liked for a better finish and place-wise as a team, but you can't control that. All you can do is your very best and always happy to get a

trophy.

“This is our fifth consecutive top-10 finish and third consecutive top-three finish. I’m extremely happy with that and something we should be proud of. I don’t see the girls being disappointed. They shouldn’t be. They ran great and what more can you ask of the kids when they get a trophy for the third consecutive year. If you’re not happy with that, then you’re not doing something right or your goals aren’t what they should be. I think we put our best foot forward today and you’ve got to be happy with it and we’ll go get them next year.”

The Hilltoppers actually ran so well as a group that even if Luczak had not competed or been unable to finish – both unfortunate possibilities – they still would have finished third.

Because of her Achilles tendons and an earlier hamstring injury, Luczak didn’t compete from the Lake Park Invite Sept. 13 until the West Suburban Conference Silver Division Meet Oct. 18. She sat out the Lake Park Regional with Ozog competing instead before returning for the Niles West Sectional Nov. 1.

“She’s run like four times in the last four weeks and most of those have been in meets,” Hass said. “I can’t say enough about what Lisa Luczak does for us and what she’s done the last four years. It’s been a pleasure having her on the team and she’s just such a team player. We couldn’t have done what we did today without Lisa Luczak and such a gutsy performance. We’re happy to have her back today.”

Naperville North continued the momentum of easily winning the St. Charles East Sectional, probably the state’s strongest, with 32 points and five in the top 11. On Saturday, the Huskies’ top-five finishers were 9-12-14-30-31 while Palatine’s were 3-22-26-32-37.

Fourth-place rival Hinsdale Central (137 points) had beaten the Hilltoppers without Luczak in their Oct. 5 at Katherine Legge Memorial Park but Glenbard West, back at full strength, won the Silver Meet Oct. 18 at Proviso West to earn a share of their third straight overall title with the Red Devils.

"I think I actually went faster than (state) last year so I guess it went better," Nabholz said. "Last year when I was a freshman and we just came out and won it, I was like, 'Whoa, I can't believe we actually won.' This year I actually realize how hard it is to be a 1, 2 or 3 place as a team."

Collectively, the Hilltoppers performed better than they did in rolling to the Niles West Sectional title with 34 points. Even with Graham's dominating run Saturday, the Hilltoppers reduced their No. 1 to 5 split from 1:36 at sectionals to 1:23 and No. 2 to 5 split from 55 seconds to 46.

Kenwood and Nabholz joined Graham in improving their time and place from the 2013 state meet. Last season, Nabholz (45th, 17:58) and Kenwood (63rd, 18:12) were the team's No. 5 and 6 finishers. Shaver also ran a lifetime best.

"I improved my place by a lot and just had more experience and was more motivated," Kenwood said. "I think I enjoyed both (state meets) the same. If anything, I was more nervous this year."

Luczak and Rogers are the only members of all three trophy teams and have actually been the respective No. 2 and 4 team finishers each time. Graham, Nabholz and Kenwood also contributed to the 2013 state title run.

The only other Glenbard West program to earn three consecutive trophies is girls volleyball, which won the 1983 Class AA title after being second in 1982 and third in 1981.

"It's just really special and I'm so proud of the team the past few years," Rogers said. "Freshman year it was my second varsity race and I was new to it. I was just excited and didn't know what state was about really. It was fun. I didn't know what was good or how we were going to do. Then last year was really special because I got all-state (21st) and we won and everything. Today I don't think I did anything spectacular, but I did my part and the team did well and I'm happy for everyone."

Luczak also earned all-state honors for the third straight year to join Perez as the only three-time all-staters in program history. Graham also was all-state for the third time, but she competed as a freshman for Glenbard East before transferring schools.

After being 53rd in her first state trip (17:59), Luczak was sixth as a sophomore (16:45) and ninth last season (17:03). On Saturday, Luczak found herself battling for the last spot. The 25th-place finisher was two seconds behind Luczak, and 26th place was three seconds back.

"I'm just proud of myself running the race and doing the best I could. It's never fun running in pain but I was doing it for the team and I was even lucky enough to run so it was very satisfying," Luczak said.

"I was like, 'OK, this has been such a crummy year as far as injuries are. You have to pull out a top-25 finish. I need to prove myself.' That was the goal. I heard the numbers (yelled by spectators) so it was going to be really, really close. I just gave it my all and I'm just happy to be in the top 25. So close, but I made it so that was pretty accomplishing."

Graham's performance put her among the state's elite. Nineteen of last year's all-staters qualified for this year's state meet, including three of the top five finishers – New Trier senior and defending state champion Mimi Smith, Hinsdale Central sophomore and defending runner-up Alexa Haff and Jacobs senior Lauren Van Vlierbergen, who was fourth.

Graham's winning time was one second ahead of the 16:24 for Naperville Central senior Amanda Fox, the 2011 3A champion, and one second behind Woodstock senior Kayla Beattie's second straight 2A title in 2010 (16:22).

In Saturday's 2A final, Peoria Notre Dame junior Maryjeanne Gilbert (16:12) ran the second-fastest time ever to Perez's 16:02. York senior Emma Fisher moved to third with her 16:15 for second place to Perez in the 2012 3A race.

"Seeing (Graham) in the lead was really awesome. She was creaming everybody.

It was awesome,” Payne said. “It inspired me to do well, too, and I’m so proud how the rest of the team did, too. They all did so well, too, and Lisa doing as well as she did even with her injury. It’s her last year. It’s so cool.”

Payne had an impressive state debut, especially considering that she lost her shoe in the early going of the race. Hass and Payne estimated that she lost five to 10 seconds to get the shoe back on her foot.

And, of course, there were her nerves entering every race.

“I was freaking out. I was really nervous, yeah, but a little nervous energy helps. It ended up working out OK,” Payne said.

“(My shoe) just fell off in the first mile or so. It was pretty rough. I was just kind of pissed. I literally sprinted for a good 30 seconds or so to catch up with the top people. By that time, even though normally I would have been exhausted, I just literally dug deep enough to just keep going. I was tired, but I kept going. I don’t know how I did it, but I just kept going.”

Payne had hoped to finish among the top 10 and she made the top five as the top finishing freshman. She nearly was fourth behind Palatine junior Kelly O’Brien (3rd, 16:55) but was outkicked down the stretch by Haff (4th, 16:59), who has been battling a hip flexor.

Payne also was excited that she broke the 17:00 barrier, although her official time was rounded up to the next second.

“It was surreal. I wish I could do it again. It went by so fast,” Payne said. “I was like, ‘Wow, I’m finishing.’ It was the fastest thing. I couldn’t even explain. It was awesome. I’d really like to do it again.”

Payne came a long way as a runner even as she also was busy with club soccer for most of the season. She reduced her soccer obligations the final few weeks in preparation for state.

The only other two all-state freshmen were St. Charles North’s Audrey Ernst

(13th, 17:09) and Hinsdale Central's Grace McCabe (20th, 17:17). Besides Van Vlierbergen, the only other top-10 seniors were McHenry's Lauren Opatrny (17:04) and Smith (17:05) in seventh and eighth.

"It was hard (this season), very hard, a lot of hard decisions I had to make, a lot of hard work I had to put in, but overall it was really cool and it was a really cool new experience," Payne said. "(Cross country) got me acclimated to high school. It got me so many new friends, so many new people I can look up to. I learned a lot about myself and what I want to do from now on. I didn't really know I could do this in the beginning. I never would have dreamed of getting this so it's cool."

Rogers once again was an anchor and leader for the "Wolfpack," which shored up the team's No. 4 through 6 finishers. At one mile Saturday, they were among the top 80 in 5:47 to 5:48. They had moved among the top 60 by two miles and were still within three seconds of each other.

"This little Wolfpack talked about how we gave it our all and tried our best," Rogers said.

"The race was awesome, the finish with all of our fans, hearing people during the race. The race is kind of awful, but after the race when all of your friends and family are there and you're there with your team, you see how great we did and everyone's super happy. That was the best part."

Shaver competed at state for the first time after being an alternate the past two. Her personal-best time also represented the biggest time drop among the runners from the Spring Invite – 28 seconds from her 52nd-place finish that day that helped the Hilltoppers win the invite despite Luczak or Payne not competing.

"It was pretty nervewracking, especially (Friday). I was getting pretty nervous but once we got here this morning, I just put it all aside and told myself I was ready for it and I trained for this and it was exciting for me," Shaver said.

"It went really well. I got my best time and I felt just pretty strong the whole time. At the beginning of the year, I didn't think I'd be running at state. I thought I'd just

be where I normally am, first or second alternate, but then towards the end of the year I was running really well and told myself I could do it. I guess it's just a goal for next year, to stay where I am or move up."

Besides another all-state run, Luczak put herself in some more elite company by just reaching the starting line. Luczak joined Perez, Kyna Forkins (1997-2000) and Muffy Crossman (1982-85) as only the fourth Glenbard West runner to compete at state four times. Luczak and Perez are the only ones to compete every time with a team qualifier.

Luczak received two cortisone shots in both ankles before the Silver Meet but has received no medication since, other than Advil. She said now that the season is over, she will be receiving a blood plasma injection Nov. 18 to help the healing process. She will be unable to run for at least three weeks, a choice she could not make during the season.

"It'll be nice to get it done, get it over with. It couldn't be better timing now that the season's over and just rest and focus on getting healthy," Luczak said.

"I'll definitely be one of those annoying graduates who stalks all of the girls and sees their progress, but I love them so much and feel like they're sisters and excited when they do well and it means so much to me. I hope they keep improving and it'll definitely be sad to not be with them. I'll be running in college with a new team but it'll never be the same as this team meant to me. (Saturday) definitely was a fun day, a day that I'll definitely remember."

-- by Bill Stone