

Prep Sports | **updated: 9/12/2015 4:14 PM**

Payne, Glenbard West in command at Lake Park

By Michael Eaken
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Glenbard West's girls cross country team has had quite a three-year run in Class 3A.

The Hilltoppers have earned three consecutive state trophies, including a state title in 2013, and also have had two individuals win state championships.

Madeline Perez secured a state title in 2012, with Lindsay Graham adding a state title last season. Graham was shelved for this season while recovering from a growth plate injury on her foot.

Enter Lindsay Payne. The Hilltoppers sophomore is looking to pick up where Perez and Graham left off.

Payne continued her strong start to the season on Saturday at the 41st annual Harvey Braus Invitational hosted by Lake Park in Roselle.

Payne took the lead at the halfway mark and didn't look back, storming to her second consecutive invitational title in 16:28.4, just missing the course record set by Lake Park's Kaylee Flanagan (16:27.7) in 2012.

Last weekend, Payne won the Hinsdale Central Invite in an impressive 16:40.

"It gives me an idea of what I'm capable of doing," said Payne, who finished fifth in Class 3A last season. "I don't want to put too much pressure on myself; my goal is to do my best."

Glenbard West placed five runners in the top 13, easily securing the title with 43 points. Schaumburg (101 points) took second followed by Maine South (104 points), Prospect (119 points), and St. Charles East (146 points).

St. Charles North sophomore Audrey Ernst (16:53.1) took the early lead before taking second, ahead of Prospect junior Brooke Wilson (17:11.2), Elk

Grove junior Emily Stegmeier (17:27.5) and St. Ignatius senior Kyleigh Spearing (17:35.8).

"I'm just blessed to get these athletes," said Glenbard West coach Paul Haas, who has been impressed by Payne's early accomplishments. "These are once-in-a-lifetime athletes. Not only are they talented but they work really hard."

Senior Kathryn Kenwood (17:48) and senior Grace Rodgers (18:13.7) bolstered the Hilltoppers in 7th and 10th place, followed by senior Abigail Shaver (18:21.1) and junior Janie Nabholz (18:24.5), who went 12-13.

Despite losing Graham, the Hilltoppers still have high expectations this season. Rogers, who has been a contributing member on all three state trophy teams, is looking to continue that streak.

"That is something that is always going to motivate us," said Rogers. "Seems like every year we lose someone really valuable to the team, but we realize we are still capable of doing well -- we just have to keep working hard."

Schaumburg lost three seniors from a sixth-place state finish last year, which was the Saxons' second consecutive top 10 Class 3A effort. But the Saxons are again a force this season.

Sophomore Maddie Marasco (17:47.4) has emerged as one of the team's top runners and she continued to impress on Saturday, taking sixth place to pace her team's second-place finish.

"It's been amazing to be up there," said Marasco, who was the Saxons' seventh runner at last season state meet before making big gains last spring in track season. "But it also has been amazing in how much the team supports each other."

Sophomore Lauren Kubinski (18:04.6) took ninth place, followed by junior Ellie O'Connell (18:26) in 15th.

"We're young, but we have a lot of maturity," said Schaumburg coach Courtney Smith of her team's postseason experience in both cross country and track. "It's giving them confidence that they know they can get it done."

Wilson certainly has been getting it done. The Prospect junior won the Fenton Invitational last Saturday and she continued to look tough on Saturday in leading the Knights to a fourth-place finish.

"It was definitely fast," said Wilson, who stuck with lead pack of Ernst and Payne through the first mile. "I saw the clock and it was in the 5:20's -- that was definitely a shock."

Freshman Marissa Valentini (18:33.3) and junior Aileen White (18:39.2) supported the Knights in places 17 and 19.

St. Charles East junior Anna Arrick (18:19.8) and senior Anastasia Honea (18:28.6) gave the Saints a lift by securing 11th and 16th place.

Senior Meagan Biddle (17:57.2, 8th) and sophomore Allison Schrader (18:25, 14th) powered Hoffman Estates to a sixth-place finish with 156 points, 10

points behind St. Charles East.

"I knew the leaders were going to go out faster than I was going to go out," said Biddle. "I was hoping to narrow the gap but they just had a stronger race today. As a team we really didn't do what we could, we are looking to put it all together."

Ernst once again led St. Charles North. Last year she finished 13th in Class 3A and she started this season with a fourth-place finish at the St. Charles East Invite.

Ernst jumped out to an early lead for the second consecutive week, pushing the pace for the first half of the race. The North Stars sophomore was not able to match Payne's finish, but she felt like she took a step forward from her opener.

"After last week I was a bit disappointed," said Ernst who also led in the early going in the St. Charles East Invite. "This week I wanted to put my best foot forward. I definitely had a lot more energy this week."

Sophomore Cassidy Joyce (18:54.9) also had a big race for the North Stars, securing 25th place.

Stegmeier, a junior, has taken a big jump for Elk Grove this season. The Grenadiers junior finished 28th at Lake Park last season, but she narrowed the gap dramatically this season with her fourth-place finish.

Stegmeier started the season by taking second at the Fenton Invitational and continued to open eyes on Saturday at Lake Park.

"During the track season I really stepped it up and it has carried over to this cross country season," said Stegmeier. "I feel like I've earned it with all the work I've put in."

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