

Rams rule Ross again

Ross's foul trouble keys Madison rally

By MICHAEL BOSI
Staff writer

WILLARD — Lacking any player with superhuman qualities possessed by, oh, the Dawn Zermans of the world, the Fremont Ross girls team, which knew that it takes an army and not a single soldier to win a war, preached a team concept until their purple faces turned blue this season.

It was imperative for the Little Giants to have all five players on the floor — if not more — contributing to the offense and defense. And more often than not, 15 times to be exact, they found enough players to do the job, and the assault-by-committee translated into a "V" for victory.

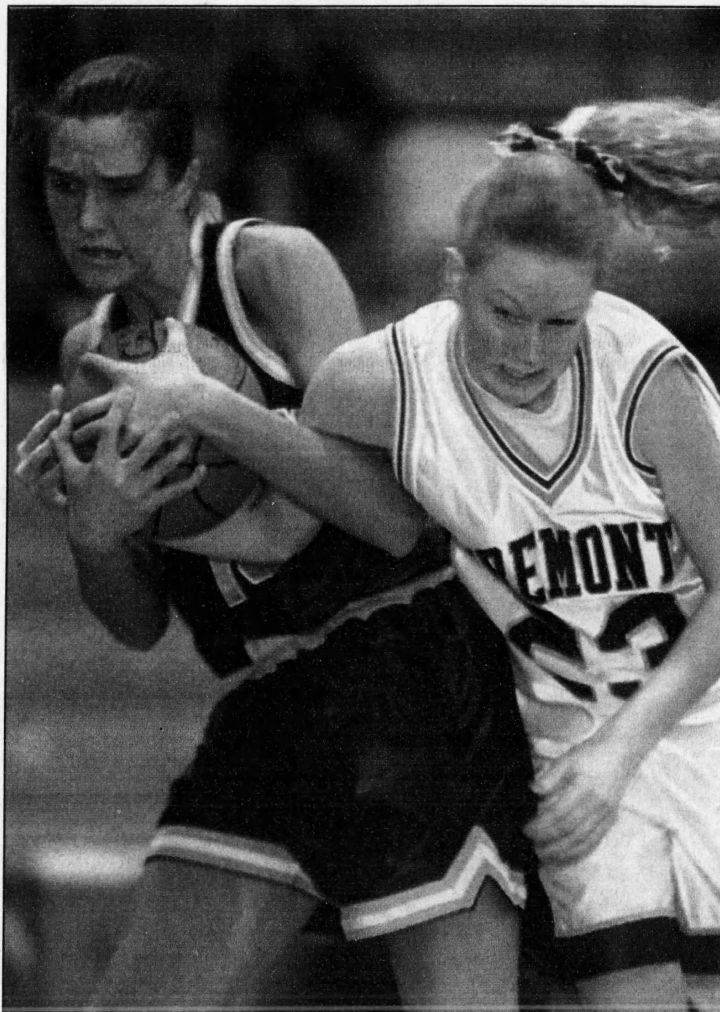
But with its season on the line, Ross simply ran out of players.

And then it ran out of time. This war is over.

The Little Giants led for all but 3:37 of their Northwest Division I sectional final against top-seeded Mansfield Madison Saturday night, but those 217 seconds were all the Rams needed, along with the foul trouble that burdened Ross like an ironclad cannon, to advance to the district tournament a 40-35 winner.

While Madison gets to take on Wapakoneta next week, Ross ends its season 15-7 and pondering the invincibility of this Ohio Heartland Conference school, which also ended Ross's volleyball team's season last fall.

"We gave everything," said Ross's Jodi Fick. "Foul trouble at the end hurt us a lot. When



News-Messenger/Andrew Morrison

FREMONT ROSS'S Emily Dowell battles Madison's Jocelyn Pelasky for the ball in the third quarter of the Rams' 40-35 Division I sectional victory Saturday at Willard High School.

See LITTLE GIANTS, B3

Little Giants defied expectations this season

Continued from B1

you have your five starters out there and they're all in foul trouble, it's going to hurt you."

Just 13 seconds into the fourth quarter, Marcy Reinbolt joined teammates Emily Dowell and Michele Smith in the four-foul funk. In the last minute, Reinbolt and Tonya Elder, one of Ross's quickest defenders, left the game with their fifth fouls.

That took the aggressiveness out of Ross's defense and paved the way for Madison star Jocelyn Pelasky to amass 15 of her 20 points in the second half.

"This one was a tough one," Ross coach Sue Wolf said. "We just ran out of people. They gave it their all. I think nobody expected us to be in this ballgame and we came with the intention that we were going to win."

Pelasky had just five field goals, one a 3-pointer that brought Madison within 14-12 late in a scoring-starved second quarter. But the senior first team All-District 6 selection went to the charity stripe 20 times, and easily could have had a 30-point night had she not missed 11 free throws.

Frustrated with just five first-half points, Pelasky controlled the second-half tempo. When the Rams needed a drive, she drove. When they needed to stall, she stalled. And when they needed a basket most, she got it.

"She was getting away with a little bit," Smith said. "But I'll give her credit, she's a good player."

After the first quarter, Ross's offense struggled to generate much of anything, especially in the fourth quarter when it made just one field goal.

Hope Van Tilburg made her only basket with 4:17 left, and after Reinbolt missed a 1-and-1 free throw, Pelasky scored with

3:37 left, giving the Rams their first lead of the game, 35-33.

Thirty seconds later, Megan Pease widened the lead to four points with an offensive board.

"Not until the last couple of minutes of the game when we got up by two and then four did we really have the momentum, the command momentum," said coach Mike Leeper. "We gained it a few times by playing good defense, but never until the end did I think the kids realize that this game was in our hands."

That's because it wasn't. At best, Madison's free throw shooting was abysmal, as it missed 22 of its 37 attempts. Ross was 9-of-14 from the line, but missed on three straight 1-and-1's in the fourth quarter to keep Madison in the hunt.

Though they were without their leading scorer, Amy Smith, for the second straight game, the Little Giants came out ablaze in the first quarter, riding two baskets apiece from Dowell (11 points, 12 rebounds) and Michele Smith (12 points, 10 rebounds) for an 8-2 lead in the first 4:33. An Erin Tuckerman jumper gave the Little Giants a 12-4 lead with 3:25 left in the quarter.

Meanwhile, the Rams suffered every nightmare of a nine-day layoff. Their last action was a 47-45 loss to OHC rival Mansfield Senior on Feb. 13, and it showed with 4-for-23 first-half shooting.

Plus, as Michele Smith said, "We all wanted it bad. All three seniors and few others played volleyball against them, and we had that in mind. We wanted it even more."

The teams lost their shooting stroke in the second quarter, although a free throw from Dowell and another pair from Smith in the final 1:22 sent Ross into halftime ahead, 17-12.

In the third quarter, Ross regained its eight-point lead, 23-15, on a pair of Dowell free throws, but after Madison called timeout and Leeper warned his team that its season could end in about 15 minutes, the Rams came on a 12-4 run, capped by a second-effort putback by Pelasky to tie the game at 27.

The teams traded baskets and went into the fourth tied, 30-30, at which point Wolf volleyed a challenge her team: "You have an eight-minute ballgame, so you better begin to find some guts."

They may have found their guts, but they had a hard time keeping track of Pelasky.

"She did a nice job of crashing the boards and made a couple of nice penetration moves that got herself untracked, but they played great defense on her," Leeper said.

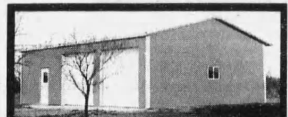
The Little Giants' schedule shows they faced 18 different opponents. Perhaps the expectations many had for this young team could have been considered a 19th. Without Zerman, Cari Ritzman and Dena Schepflin of last year's senior class, few

thought Ross would gain a Great Lakes League title, and fewer gave the Little G's a chance at winning a tournament game.

"I think that fired us up more than anything," Fick said.

"We're a different team. We're not that team. And we just went out there every game and did our best. We might not have had the same talent, but we had great teamwork, and that's what won most of our games. I think we did a really good job, and the comparisons didn't hurt us, I think they helped us."

Maybe. But mostly, the Little Giants helped themselves.



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