2001 Division I Sectional Tournament

# Girls tourney capsules

**DIVISION I**
**at Shelby**

**Today's games:** Ashland (6-13) vs. Tiffin Columbian (11-9), 6:30 p.m.; Mansfield Madison (12-8) vs. Sandusky (6-14), 8:30 p.m.

**Seeded teams:** 1. Fremont Ross (16-4), 2. Mansfield Senior (17-3).

**Dark horse:** Tiffin Columbian — Coach Larry Kisabeth always has his team primed for the tournament.

**Players to watch:** Sashay Price, Ross; Alison Decker, Ross; Tyanda Hammock, Mansfield Sr.; Camea Williams, Mansfield Sr.; Sheena Devese, Sandusky; Alex Miller, Columbian.

**Outlook:** Ross shoots for its second consecutive sectional title Saturday when it faces the winner of the Madison-Sandusky game. The Little Giants defeated eighth-ranked Mansfield Senior to get last year's crown. This year's road is much easier, but Ross has suffered three of its four losses in the last six games. The Little Giants are hoping to get a third game with Great Lakes League rival Findlay in the district final at Hopewell-Loudon. The Trojans beat Ross twice during the regular season.

# Expectations follow seniors into sectional

## Ross gets second chance to make big splash

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

The expectations took root when they were eighth-graders.

The Fremont Purple girls basketball team won the Great Lakes League championship with stars Sashay Price, Alison Decker, Taneshia McKinstry and Sammantha Schneider.

"People were always talking about it, that they thought we would be good when we got to be juniors and seniors," Schneider remembered.

Two years later, those four players were all on the Ross varsity, inspiring dreams of grandeur in 2000-2001, the year they became seniors.

**Inside:** Tourney pairings, roundup. **Page B4**

Today, six Ross seniors — Fallon Bailey and Kira Wojdyla later joined the Purple foursome — will embark on their final tournament run as the Little Giants meet Mansfield Madison at 8:30 p.m. in a Division I sectional semifinal at Shelby High School.

They're hoping to redeem a regular season that fell just short of that advanced billing.

Ross went 16-4, the school's best girls record since 1996, but finished two games behind Findlay for the GLL championship. The Little Giants dropped three of their final six games.

"I really thought we could go undefeated," said Ross coach Sue Wolf, who before the season said this year's team could be the best in

See SENIORS, B4

News-Messenger/Ben French

**FREMONT ROSS SENIORS** (from left) Kira Wojdyla, Taneshja McKinstry, Fallon Bailey, Alison Decker and Sammantha Schneider will begin their final tournament trail tonight at Shelby High School. Another senior, Sashay Price, is missing.

# Seniors set for tournament run starting tonight

Continued From B1

her 26 years. "It didn't quite happen. But what were we short, 10 points?"

Ross lost its four games by a combined 12 points. Three of the Little Giants' defeats came in overtime or on an opponent's bucket at the buzzer.

The only loss that wasn't a nailbiter was the first one, a 49-42 defeat to Findlay in the Purple Pit. But there was an extenuating circumstance: Junior point guard Laura Wilson, the only non-senior starter, broke a finger 20 minutes before the end of practice on the day before the game.

Still, close wasn't always good enough for the seniors, who took a moment after practice this week to reflect on the season and look ahead to the tournament. The only player missing from the roundtable in the Ross Hall of Fame room was Price, who didn't attend practice that day.

"I think our hard work is a success," McKinstry said, summing up the regular season. "But accomplishing what we wanted to do, I don't think it was a success. We wanted to beat Findlay, and we knew we could do it. But we came up short."

Decker — the team leader in scoring, rebounding and assists — prefers to focus on the group's progression.

"I think we did good things, too, though. 16-4? It's better than when we were sophomores," Decker said. "We all were playing when we were sophomores. We were like 9-11, and we are still basically the same basketball team. Now we're seniors, and we're 16-4. We're beating some good teams. I'm happy with that. It obviously shows we've come a long way. ... It either comes down to we make it or break it (in tournament)."

After finishing 9-12 in the 1998-99 campaign, Ross went 16-7 last season and won a sectional title. All the starters returned from that team.

The Little Giants began this season 13-1 but fell to Findlay, Lorain Admiral King and Mansfield in the final six games. But the highlight of the season may have come during that same stretch on Feb. 6 at Clyde, when Ross beat the second-ranked Fliers 57-51 before a packed house.

"I'm always looking for improvement," Wolf said. "I think we've done a good job getting better every year."

The seniors say they've grown closer, too. It began during the summer, when the team played in two leagues and went a combined 63-5. The seniors have kept the camaraderie alive by instituting team nights, meals and other special occasions, like dressing up for the boys games.

"I've never been on a team, since I've been on varsity, that does stuff like we do this year," McKinstry said. "Last year, we never got together. I think when you're friends off the court, you get along a lot better on the court.

"We just know each other really well. We're real honest with each other."

The starting seniors carry the bulk of the scoring load, Bailey and Wojdyla have each enjoyed shining moments this season.

Bailey, the team's defensive specialist, scored a rebound bucket with 9.7 seconds remaining in double overtime as the Little Giants survived a scare from Oregon Clay on Jan. 18.

And Wojdyla, who had scored just 16 points in the first 19 contests, came off the bench in the final game to pour in 27 points in a 64-59 victory at Whitmer. She set the school record for 3-pointers with five.

"I'd just been sitting the bench for so long," Wojdyla said. "I just wanted to get out there and do something. We were down four people, so I might as well do something now. We weren't going to lose."

Wojdyla's effort was especially gratifying for the seniors, who were waiting for her to have a break-out game.

"We were talking about it before the (Whitmer) game," McKinstry said. "We knew once she got the opportunity to get out there, she'd be a good player and do a lot of good things."

Said Bailey, "We laughed. We told the other team, 'Somebody ought to guard that girl.'"

The Little Giants are planning to delay their exit as long as possible with a lengthy tournament run.

They hope last year's sectional title is a stepping stone.

"I think getting to districts last year probably helps a little. ... We've played hard teams," Schneider said. "We know we can beat them. The intimidation from other teams isn't there as much as it was last year."

But the Little Giants say they still need the support of the fans who have followed them for years.

And maybe a little more.

Decker said she'd like to see the Ross stands full of fans starting tonight.

"They might not come to this sectional game on Saturday," she said. "But if we win, then they'll all come. There were maybe 30 people at our sectional game last year. We all of a sudden blow out Mansfield, the No. 8 team in the state. At districts, our stands were filled. All these people drive all the way up to Hopewell-Loudon to see us because all of sudden they think, 'Oh, maybe we should support the girls team.' No, you need to start supporting us now."


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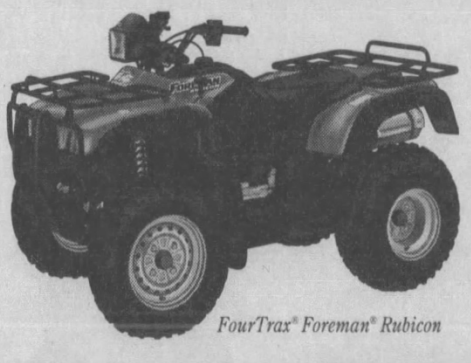

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# Rams upend Giants in final

## Ritchie heroics sink No. 1 seed

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

SHELBY — Carrie Ritchie began Saturday's Division I girls sectional final on the Mansfield Madison bench because she took an ill-timed trip to Las Vegas.

But when the chips were down, Ritchie's number came up for the Rams.

Madison's best player banked in a tiebreaking 10-footer with a minute to play then salted the game with two free throws as the Rams defeated Fremont Ross 37-33 and ended the Little Giants' tournament run before it began.

The Rams (14-8) advance to meet Celina on Thursday in the Division I district at Hopewell-Loudon. Mansfield Senior defeated Tiffin Columbian 60-53 in the other sectional final Saturday and will meet Findlay in the district.

Ross, the sectional's top seed, finishes at 16-5. The Little Giants started the season 13-1 but dropped four of their final seven games.

"If you're talking numbers, most people would say it's a great season," Ross coach Sue Wolf said. "I'm sorry, but I don't think we did everything we were capable of doing. We didn't stay together as a team like we should have."

Madison coach Andy Booth benched Ritchie, a District 6 Coaches Association first-team selection, for Tuesday's sectional opener against Sandusky after she missed three practices because of the family trip to Las Vegas.

The 5-foot-11 senior, who has signed to play volleyball at the University of Michigan, didn't start Saturday and entered the game with 3:39 to play in the first quarter.

As the game wore on, Ritchie took over ballhandling duties against Ross's pressure defense. She ended the game with 10 points, nine rebounds and six assists.

"Without her, I don't think we win this game," Booth said.

Sophomore center Brooke Brafford led Madison with 14 points. She scored six points in the first three minutes of the third quarter as the Rams took control.

Junior point guard Laura Wilson led Ross with 13 points. Sashay Price, one of six seniors who played their final game, added nine.

Ross never led in a game that turned into a defensive war. The Rams committed 25 turnovers. But the Little Giants couldn't capitalize. They hit only 13 of 49 field-goal attempts (26.5 percent).

"This was a low-scoring game," Wolf said. "I don't think either team shot the ball very well. When you force a turnover, you've got

See ROSS, B3

# Ross offense fails in loss to Rams

Continued From B1

to do something with it. We needed to push the ball up the floor a little harder, and we didn't we do that."

Said Booth, "That was probably the best defense we've seen all year. It wasn't so much the press after a bucket; it was the pressure after a rebound, double-teaming, roaming the court. ... I don't know that we actually won the game. We just kind of survived the game."

Madison jumped ahead 8-2, but back-to-back 3-pointers from Kira Wojdyla and Wilson allowed Ross to creep within 12-8 after one quarter.

The Rams led 16-10, but the Little Giants held them scoreless for almost six minutes and tied the game at 16 on a 15-footer from Price. Two Wilson free throws countered a Brafford deuce to tie the game at 18 at the half.

Ritchie fed Brafford, who at 6-foot-1 had her way inside against an undersized Ross front line, for three buckets early in the third as Madison grabbed control again. The Rams led 29-24 late in the quarter before Price swished a trey to get Ross to within two heading to the fourth period.

After Madison took a 33-27 lead, the Little Giants held the Rams scoreless for 5:40 and went on a 6-0 run. Taneshia McKinstry's layup with five minutes to play tied the game at 33.

Neither team scored again until Ritchie banked home what turned out to be the game-winner. Wilson tried to tie the game in the final seconds, but her inside shot was blocked away. Ritchie nailed two free throws with 15.6 seconds remaining to end Ross's hopes.

Madison got its eighth win in nine tries. The Rams began the season 0-4 but won their first game of the season in overtime at Shelby.

That began a comeback that saw Madison upend Mansfield Senior and Lexington, each of which finished 17-3.

"We did say after our (first) game that we get to play two more games here," Booth said. "You jokingly say this is our home away from home.

> "That was probably the best defense we've seen all year. ... I don't know that we actually won the game. We just kind of survived the game."
>
> **— Andy Booth, Madison coach**

"Obviously, Fremont has had a great season. We were very wary of them, but I didn't sense that our kids were nervous facing them."

Madison outrebounded Ross 34-22.

Senior Sammantha Schneider led the Little Giants with five boards.