

William H. "Billy" Stierwalt. One of the most beloved Little Giants

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL



News-Messenger file photo

FORMER FREMONT Ross basketball player Fred Shearon hugs William H. Stierwalt Jr. during introductions at the Division I sectional at Willard last season. Stierwalt is the father of "Billy" Stierwalt III. Ross will host a memorial alumni game to support the Billy Stierwalt Scholarship Fund on Friday.

Stierwalt's star shines

By MATTHEW HORN
Sports Writer

Billy Stierwalt never had the opportunity to play basketball for Fremont Ross coach Mark Gedeon.

Stierwalt suffered from muscular dystrophy and was confined to a wheelchair.

But that doesn't mean he wasn't an integral part of the Little Giants' basketball program. In fact, he was not considered a manager or statistician as his duties indicated — he was a teammate.

And on Friday he will be remembered and honored at the Pur-

ple Pit as Ross will host the first Billy Stierwalt Memorial Alumni Basketball Game at 6 p.m. All proceeds — in the form of donations at the door — will go to the Billy Stierwalt Scholarship Fund.

"We all have a very finite time here on earth," Gedeon said. "We know Billy is now upstairs watching practice and games. He's running and playing in those games whereas before he was confined to a wheelchair for a good portion of his life. That probably makes people happy now knowing that he has that freedom."

And nobody in the Little Giant family will forget the constant courage, passion and resiliency demonstrated by Stierwalt. The 2005 graduating senior class donated a plaque reading, "Don't cry because it's over ... smile because it happened." that will hang near Stierwalt's spot on the bench.

Rather than pounding fists with Stierwalt after their introductions prior to each game, the Ross players will touch a banner hanging near the plaque for inspiration, motivation and to show that Stierwalt's memory

lives on. Gedeon said Stierwalt was somebody that had so much to offer others because his heart exuded love to those around him.

"Billy was a tremendously positive person," Gedeon said. "He was very goal oriented with school work, and he always tried to do the best he could even with his limitations. If there was something to do, he put his best foot forward, and since he had the disease I never heard him complain once. He never said, 'Woe is me.'

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'Billy' chant still resonates

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"He was very loyal and had a tremendous sense of family. His immediate family and his extended family showed our players how special family is, and he carried that over to the basketball program as well. You could see the closeness in that family and how much the family really meant to each and every one of them. The things that strike me the most were his tremendous positive attitude, great sense of work ethic, loyalty, love of his family and how he strived to do the best he could every time out no matter the limitations."

Stierwalt died at the age of 18 after spending three weeks in a coma. His heart stopped, and he was resuscitated and taken to St. Vincent Medical Center in Toledo and never emerged from intensive care.

Gedeon said Stierwalt would have wanted his teammates to grieve his death in a manner similar to the way he led his life — fighting while outwardly thankful for the gifts he felt he received.

"A lot of times we have to live in the now," Gedeon said. "We have to enjoy the fortunate situations that we've been blessed with. We have some great relationships we've developed in Fremont, and we should cherish the times together rather than focus on what we don't have sometimes."

"(Stierwalt's last days and ultimate death) wore on everybody a lot mentally and physically. November was definitely a tough month for all of us in so many different ways. Knowing he was not going to recover and be back with us in a physical sense — any time you have a loss sometimes we're a little selfish and we think about what it takes away from us personally."

Gedeon was proud of his players. "Throw the wins and losses out the window from last year," he said. "I was most proud of how my players grew up during that time. Most teenagers don't have to deal with the loss of a classmate and the amount of caring, maturity and their sensitivity to the whole issue — I knew, especially the day of the funeral — I was working with quality young men. Some of them became young men during the time."

Gedeon said the team shared the pain.

"A lot of times communication is key when you deal with adversity," he said. "Instead of bottling it up, we talked about it — often before we could actually get to telling the whole team. Seeing the strength of our young men and knowing they were coping with a difficult situation we hoped to be strong for each other. It affected all of us in different ways and me a lot and knowing everyone went to the funeral and it was always a team — to me that was very impressive."

Gedeon's favorite story pertaining to Stierwalt is how the chants of "Billy" became part of the environment at Ross.

"One of his first practices at the high school the day after cuts we met in the center of the gym to discuss the positives and negatives of practice and what to expect the next day," Gedeon said. "One of the players said we're not a whole team without Billy's table for scoring and running the clock. We ended the huddle with 'Billy.' He always put a smile on our face. It evolved into a school-wide thing where people

would see Billy and just yell 'Billy.' 'We end practices and camps with youngsters and still end the practice huddle that way. We've told kids the importance of the word. For all the things that Billy represents — the quality of person and character he showed and how all of us if we lived our lives that way how much better the world would be and how much we could do to help ourselves and others as well.'

Dan Thompson — who will participate in Friday's game — was a 2003 graduate who played for Gedeon and grew close to Stierwalt.

"After going to school all day, no matter what, you'd go into the gym and he'd be there and you could go over and kid with him," Thompson said. "No matter how you were feeling, he was always in a good mood. He looked at life in such a great way it made everybody around him happy."

Thompson said that even on the rare occasions when Stierwalt's disease prevented him from attending a game, he was still there in spirit.

"My favorite story is probably not actually a time I was with him," said Thompson, who used to attend games all over Northwest Ohio with the Stierwalt's. "One of our away games late in my senior year he wasn't able to make it. A few of us called him to tell him, and he was right there next to the radio even though health wouldn't allow him to travel. That was awesome — even when he didn't feel well and couldn't be there, he was always there. He made the team feel more like a team."

Gedeon had Stierwalt in his math class three years ago and suggested to his parents Bill and Cindy that he may enjoy a role as team manager. Gedeon said Stierwalt took to the role immediately, and everybody enjoyed having him around.

Gedeon even solicited Stierwalt for advice on occasion.

"He was a legendary Fremont sports fan," Gedeon said. "He was very knowledgeable and definitely very observant. After games I'd go over and ask him what he thought, and he was usually right on. He was definitely aware of what was going on and could pick up on intensity and execution."

"Billy's job was to keep me on task. We have so many objectives to cover every day, and I'm pretty detailed. With his help we could not only teach the team in an organized way but make practice very competitive. All the players considered Billy a teammate. If we had team meals, Billy was there as well."

The alumni event will consist of two games — a competitive league game for those who haven't necessarily played much basketball since their graduation and a championship league for players who are still more active. Forty-four players had signed up as of Monday.

"The people in this game probably never met Billy but are willing to come back and honor someone who was part of the program or from Fremont," Gedeon said. "I think that loyalty is a little bit about what Billy was about."

The Billy Stierwalt Scholarship Fund provided Fred Shearon and Joe Diller with \$1,000 awards last year. Both will play in the game Friday.

"We're looking for ways to continue the scholarship to recognize the Ross boys basketball player that best emulates the characteristics that Billy had."

Deaths

William H. 'Billy' Stierwalt III

Oct. 2, 1986 — Feb. 22, 2005

William H. "Billy" Stierwalt III, 18, of Fremont died Tuesday afternoon at Mercy Children's Hospital in Toledo.

He was born in Fremont to William H. Jr. and Cynthia (King) Stierwalt. Billy was a member of St. Ann Catholic Community and a senior at Ross High School, where he was a member of the basketball team, serving as manager for the past three seasons.

He was an avid Michigan fan and loved all sports, especially the Detroit Lions, Cleveland Indians and sprint car racing. This past summer he worked at Bassett's Market in Bellevue.

Surviving in addition to his parents are sisters, Cynthia T. Stierwalt at home, and Naomi G. Stierwalt; grandparents, Paul and Lola King; grandmother, Jean Stierwalt, Fremont; and aunts and uncles, Tom and Kathy Stierwalt, Fremont, Rick and Pat King, Grandville, Mich., and Mark and Sue King, Fremont. Preceding him is his grandfather, William H. Stierwalt Sr.

Visitation: 6 to 9 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 9 p.m. Sunday at the Herman-Kinn-Karlovetz Funeral Home and Cremation Services, Fremont.

Mass of Christian Burial: 11 a.m. Monday at St. Ann Catholic Church with Father Jerry Chmiel officiating.

Burial: St. Joseph Cemetery, Calvary section.

Memorials: In lieu of flowers to the Billy Stierwalt Scholarship Fund, in care of Croghan Colonial Bank, St. Ann Catholic Community, the MDA or Easter Seals.

Online condolences: www.herman-kinnfuneralhomes.com



**BILLY
STIERWALT**