

Ashland ace stops Ross



News-Messenger/Andrew Morrison

PITCHER JODI KUSMER, right, is comforted by Emily Dowell after Fremont Ross was beaten by Ashland in the district semifinals Tuesday in Tiffin.

Little Giants tourney run ends, 7-5

By MICHAEL BOSI
Staff writer

TIFFIN — Joni Derr had one thing on her mind as she rocked back and mustered a little extra oomph on her pitches in facing her last two batters Tuesday.

"I just wanted to go home," the Ashland senior said after her 18th and 19th strikeouts put an end to what seemed like a never-ending, 11-inning 7-5 victory over Fremont Ross in the Division I district softball semifinals.

Derr can go home and come back to Tiffin Columbian again Friday, when Ashland will face the winner of Thursday's Findlay-Shelby game.

The Little Giants will go home for good after they play their final Great Lakes League game Thursday against Toledo Whitmer.

But neither team was in a hurry to get to the exit Tuesday, although both came very close to ending it on several occasions before a four-run Ashland 11th inning — aided by three of Ross's four errors — drove the dagger into the Little Giants.

Or did it?

Ross, which tied the game at 3 with three runs in the bottom of the seventh, had the tying run at the plate after Erin Lytle's two-run single. But Simone Brown and Char Horn became the penultimate and final strikeout victims for Derr.

"It was the good, the bad and the ugly," Ross coach Cheryl Schell said. "There were some great things happening out there. But just one inning ..."

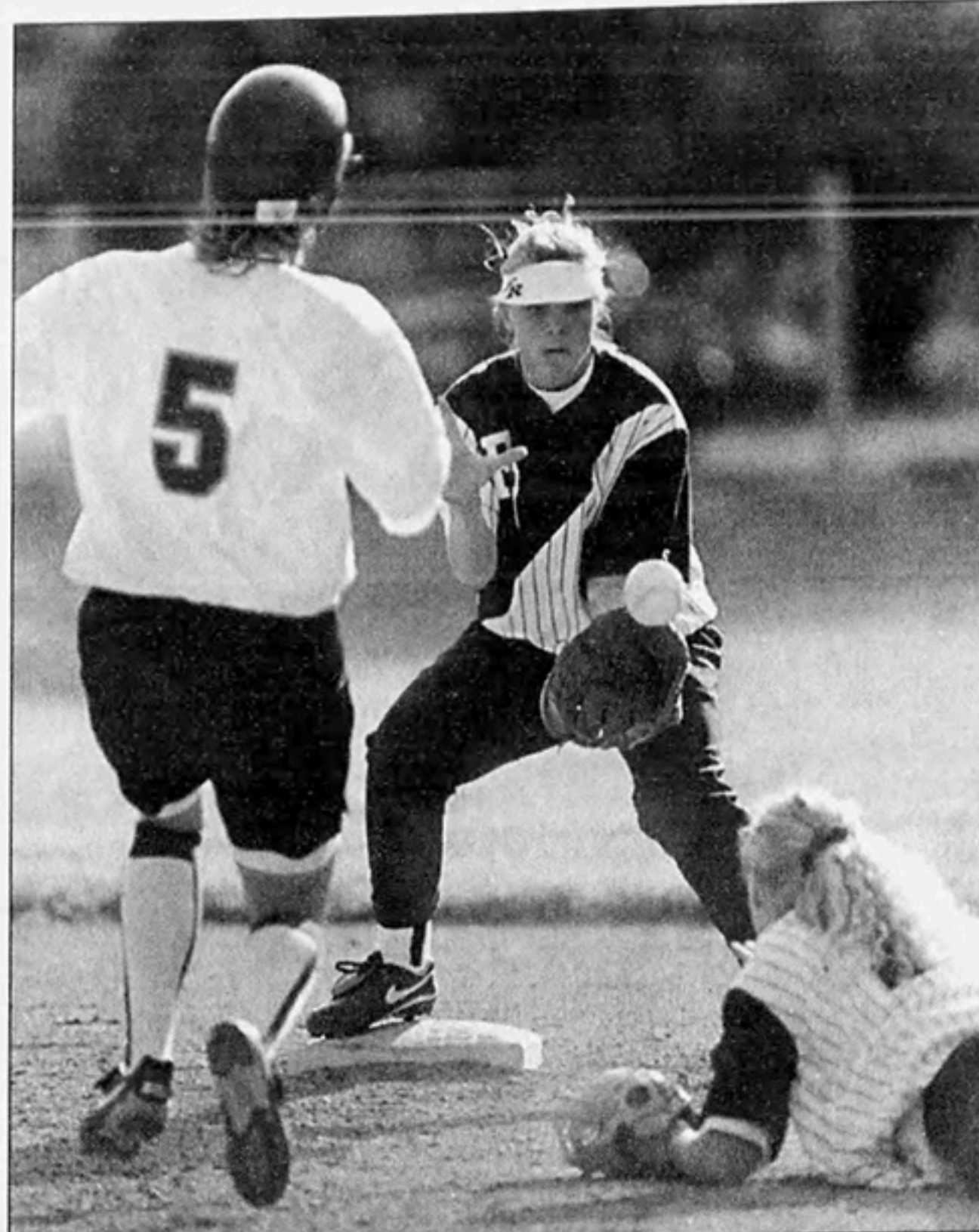
Indeed, Ross's Jodi Kusmer, who more than matched Derr's intensity with her own biting finesse, saw the bottom fall out of her defense around her in the 11th.

To wit: Julie Mulkey reached on a dropped throw at first base; Jen Fulk reached on a dropped line drive to center field; and after Tuttle's double made it 6-3, the final run scored when Mindy Fryman's grounder to short went sour.

Baseball

Ross boys
lose to
Defiance
B3

See **ROSS, B2**



JAMIE HINKLE of Fremont Ross, center, awaits a flip from second baseman Emily Dowell to force out Ashland's Jen Fulk in the top of the ninth inning Tuesday. The Arrows won the game, 7-5, in 11 innings to advance to the Division I district final. Ross has one remaining game with Toledo Whitmer.

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Ross loses to Ashland

Continued from B1

"Our gloves failed us. Really it was not what we did at the plate — we did enough at the plate to win the game — but defensively we didn't do enough to win it," Schell said.

Even the helpings at the plate were on the meager side.

After Ross left a runner at third with two straight failed bunt attempts in the second inning, Derr (10-3) struck out nine of the next 12 batters.

"She's been pitching well in the last 2-3 weeks ... We've ridden it," Ashland coach Tom Williams said.

The Arrows (18-4) gave their ace a 3-0 lead in the top of the third. After a walk and a sacrifice bunt, Nicki Tuttle reached when first baseman Michele Smith pulled her foot off the bag early, leading up to Fryman's RBI single off Kusmer's glove. Derr grounded into a fielder's choice before Felecia Jones ripped a two-run single past diving second baseman Emily Dowell for the three-run lead.

That calmed Derr exponentially.

"It did. With me being a senior this year, when I go out there, the underclassmen are real tight, and I'm out there saying, 'Don't be tight, don't be tight.' But I was having a hard time myself because I know this is my last year, and if we don't do it this year, it's over," said Derr, who hopes to play softball at Michigan.

From the fourth through the seventh inning, Kusmer (14-3), who fanned six and walked three, allowed just two

baserunners and got the benefit of a double play in the fifth.

Ross, which had just one hit entering its last at-bat, proved the most dangerous animal is one backed into a corner.

Jamie Hinkle singled and Nicki Pelfrey drew the first walk off Derr. Smith bunted the runners along before catcher Sarah Tuttle threw away Lytle's safety squeeze bunt, scoring Hinkle and putting runners at second and third. Simone Brown, subbing for the injured Jodi Fick, drove in Pelfrey with a grounder to shortstop, bringing up Horn.

Derr thought she was home free when she got Horn to check swing on a 1-2 pitch. But given a second life, Horn tied the game with a line-drive single to left.

The next three innings were of the close-but-no-cigar variety. Ashland had runners aboard in all three. The Little Giants got a two-out double from Jenny Schaaf in the 10th but came up empty.

It was the second straight year Ashland ushered Ross out the tournament door.

"These are the kinds of games that keep you sharp and force your kids to make great plays," Schell said. "This was fun, but the ending was not — not at all."

LITTLE GIANTS NOTES: Fick was out with a broken left thumb, while Britany Brudzinski was a last-minute scratch — literally — when she incurred a paper cut on her right eye on the bus ride to Tiffin. ... In two tournament games against Ross, Derr compiled 34 strikeouts in 18 innings. ... Lytle had three RBI.