

1996 DISTRICT TOURNAMENT

Hunting for a regional berth

District wins have been out of Ross's reach in recent years

By MICHAEL BOSI
Staff writer

As Fremont Ross volleyball coach Beth Muffler prepares to guide her team into the uncharted waters of the Division I district tournament, she knows the S.S. *Little Giant* has more in common with a naval warship rather than Noah's Ark.

It's minus the monkey.

Last weekend's easy win over Sandusky in the sectional tournament had a been-there, done-that feeling to it. But having never advanced past the district opener, Ross can throw years of playoff frustration overboard with a win Saturday over Wapakoneta at Liberty-Benton in Findlay.

"I think we were a little nervous about getting the monkey off our back and about getting out of the sectional," said Muffler prior to Wednesday's scrimmage at Willard. "But it was nice to get over that. We knew we'd do it — but there's always that little bit of doubt."

The same holds true as the Great Lakes League champion Little Giants (21-1), ranked 15th in the state coaches association's final Division I volleyball poll, enter Saturday's tilt with the Redskins a smarter, more aggressive team than it was in August.

Credit that fierceness to a late-season loss to GLL rival Oregon Clay.

"I think that loss helped a lot. No one likes to lose, but that

If you go

Here are directions to Liberty-Benton High School, site of Fremont Ross's district volleyball match at 4:30 today: Take Ohio 53 South to Ohio 12 West. Follow Ohio 12 through Bettsville and Fostoria and past the I-75 junction in Findlay. The school is 2½ miles after I-75 on the left.

Alternate Route: Take Ohio 6 West to I-75 South and follow to Exit 157 in Findlay. Go right off the exit.

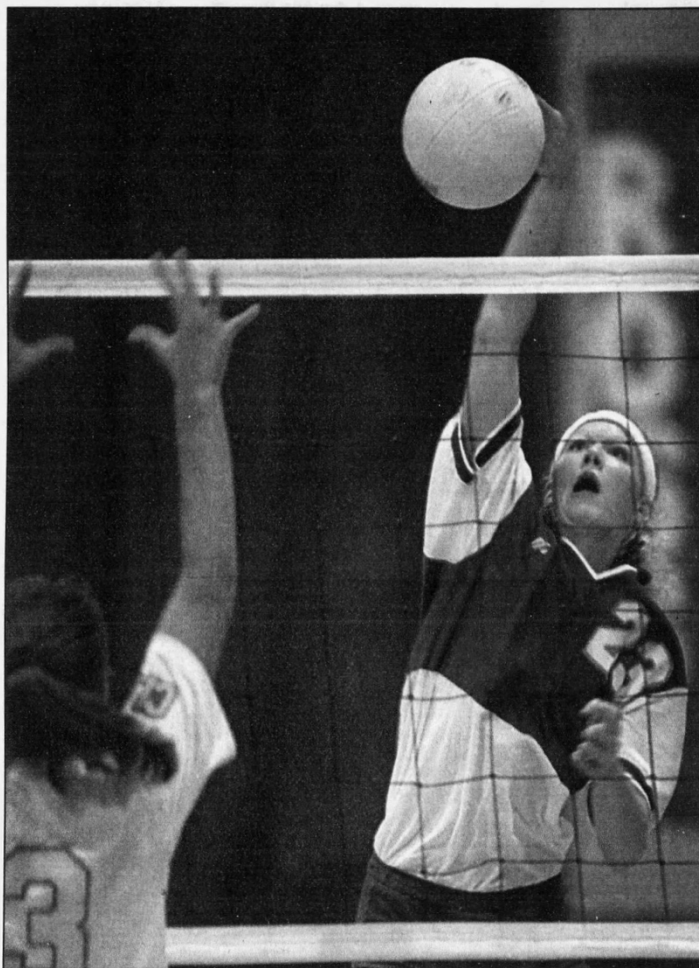
showed that there are teams that can beat us and you have to work even harder," said senior middle hitter Michele Smith, the centerpiece of Ross's multi-faceted hitting corps.

While Smith leads Ross in kills and kill percentage, sophomore Jodi Fick, juniors Sarah Wasserman and Emily Dowell and seniors April Brenamen and Tonya Elder have kept opponents guessing.

Wrongly, most of the time. Sandusky, for example, tried — and failed — to double-block Smith last Saturday.

"We're loaded compared to everybody else," said sophomore Simone Brown, who shares setting chores with junior Nicki Pelfrey.

"A lot of the teams, if they have one good hitter, you can shut her down and then she can't hit," Wasserman said. "If



News-Messenger/Andrew Morrison

See ROSS, B3

EMILY DOWELL of Fremont Ross spikes against Shelli Habbegger of Oregon Clay in a Sept. 17 match won by Ross.

Ross points come from many players

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they shut one of ours down — I don't think that's happened — we can always go to another person and have an option all around.

"It's a good feeling, that way we don't depend on one person."

The Little Giants' extensive artillery has created a new team philosophy: instead of being the hunted, they are now the hunters.

"I feel this year we're just working more together, and we've come across hard teams but we know we can do it if we put our minds to it," said Smith. "We're not as scared as we used to be.

"We've played scared and didn't hit and tried to go around everything before. This year, it's totally opposite."

As much as a floor-denting hit elicits a wave of oohs and ahhs from the crowd, the Little Giants derive just as much energy from their aggressive defense.

"I think since Clay we've really hampered down our defense," said Muffler. "(Seniors) Jamie Hinkle and Marcy Reinbolt have been just getting everybody fired up. They're not afraid to dive for a ball and they're not afraid to run the length of the gym after a ball, and that fires everybody else up. Because of their intensity and their aggressiveness,

everybody else is aggressive."

Which is exactly what Ross will need to be against Wapakoneta. The Redskins, with setters Sarah Borgert and Becky Kohlreiser piloting a 6-2 attack, went 14-8 and finished fourth in the Western Buckeye Conference.

Hitters Andi Askins, Alicia Place and Jessica Steinke are "the main guns," said coach Ray Payne, whose team has also never advanced past the district semis. "If we're going to do it, we'll have to do it with them."

The Little Giants would love to extend their stay at Liberty-Benton to the 8:30 p.m. final against either Mansfield Madison or Bowling Green, but they know not to look too deep into the crystal ball quite yet.

"It's hard. It gets really intense and it's really neat," said Wasserman. "But you can't overlook Wapakoneta and you have to respect that team."

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Ross loses district final

Little Giants finish 22-2

Two other seasons completed

Volleyball teams from Clyde and Old Fort high schools each lost district semifinal matches Saturday.

The Fliers, coached by Nancy Hanger, were beaten 15-10, 12-15, 15-6 by Willard in the Division II district at Hopewell-Loudon.

The Stockaders, coached by Nancy Hoover, lost to Northwood (15-4, 7-15, 15-9) in a Division IV district semifinal. Old Fort's match was also played at Hopewell-Loudon.

By MICHAEL BOSI
Staff writer

FINDLAY — It's too bad the last image fans saw of the 1996 Fremont Ross volleyball team was one of tears dripping from the players' eyes during the Division I Northwest District awards ceremony Saturday night.

Because it was the sweat that poured out of the Little Giants for nearly two hours prior that really told their story in their three-game loss to Mansfield Madison.

The Little Giants hit their hearts out.

But Madison hit better.

The Little Giants blocked themselves blue.

But Madison blocked better.

The Little Giants turned in some truly huge plays.

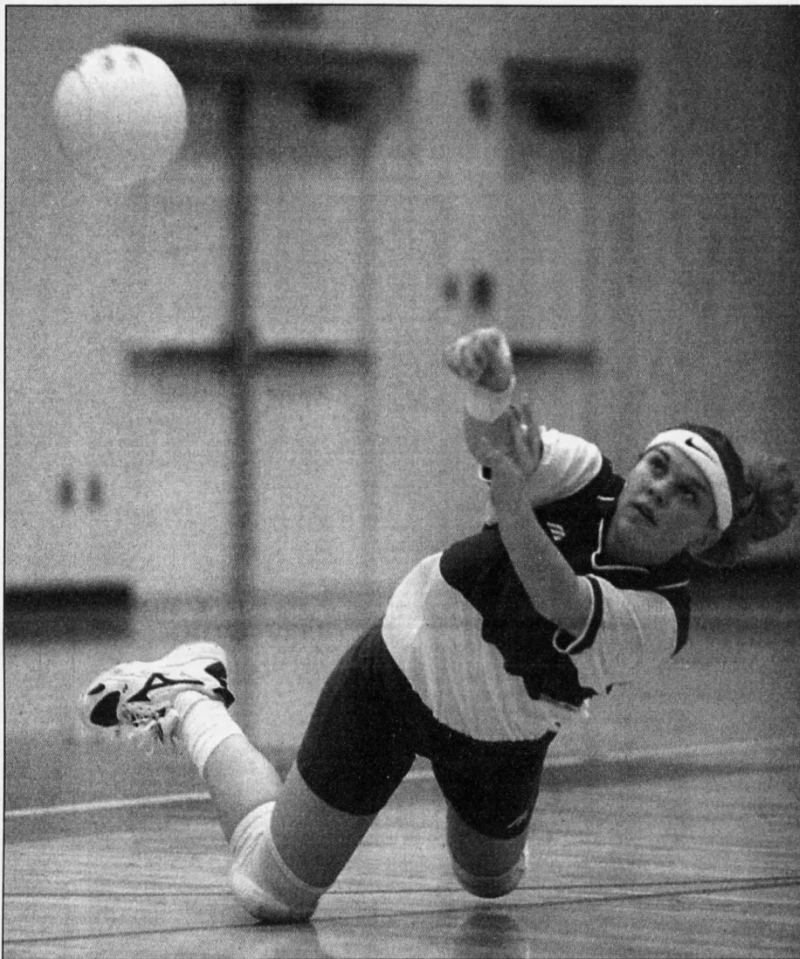
But Madison's plays were a little bigger and a little better as the Rams made Ross the first championship-caliber team to fall short of its ultimate goal Saturday night — about 20 minutes before the Atlanta Braves — with a 15-4, 10-15, 15-6 win at Liberty-Benton.

As Madison (20-5), 15-8, 15-8 winners over Bowling Green in the semifinals, hoisted its district champion trophy across the net, Ross coach Beth Muffler reflected on the Little Giants' historic ride to a district runner-up.

At 22-2, the 1996 edition stands as the school's best-ever team.

"The girls played with a lot of heart, all the heart they could muster," Muffler said. "They're exhausted. They did everything they could do. They fought hard."

It took caution-to-the-wind



JAMIE HINKLE of Fremont Ross hits a diving shot during the first game of Saturday's district semifinal match against Wapakoneta at Liberty Benton High School in Findlay. The Little Giants won that match but lost to Mansfield Madison in the district final.

News-Messenger/Andrew Morrison

See ROSS, B3

Ross second at district

Continued from B1

efforts from the Rams' Megan Pease (12 kills), Regan Pore (13 assists, 3 kills), Kerri Woodring (11 kills) and Michelle Bartlett (18 assists) to vault Madison into next week's regionals at Willard.

"Actually, we thought they were a better team than us so we thought we'd be as aggressive as we could with our serving and with our hitting and just go for it," said Madison coach Sue Subich, whose team has lost in the regional semifinals the last two years.

As it did in its semifinal win over Wapakoneta, Ross surrendered an early lead. An ace, a Pease kill and two Ross errors staked Madison to a 4-0 lead that it never relinquished in the first game.

Woodring (10 points) served the last seven points in a row for the game.

But the Little Giants, led by Michele Smith's 13 kills and a combined 54 assists from Simone Brown and Nicki Pelfrey, as well as numerable diving saves from backliner Marcy Reinbolt, never keeled over and took a marathon second game.

But Ross, which won the teams' Sept. 7 regular-season match, quickly found itself trailing 7-0 after a pair of Woodring spikes in the deciding game.

"I really thought after the second game we were going to win, and even when we were down in that third game, I really thought we were going to win," said Muffler.

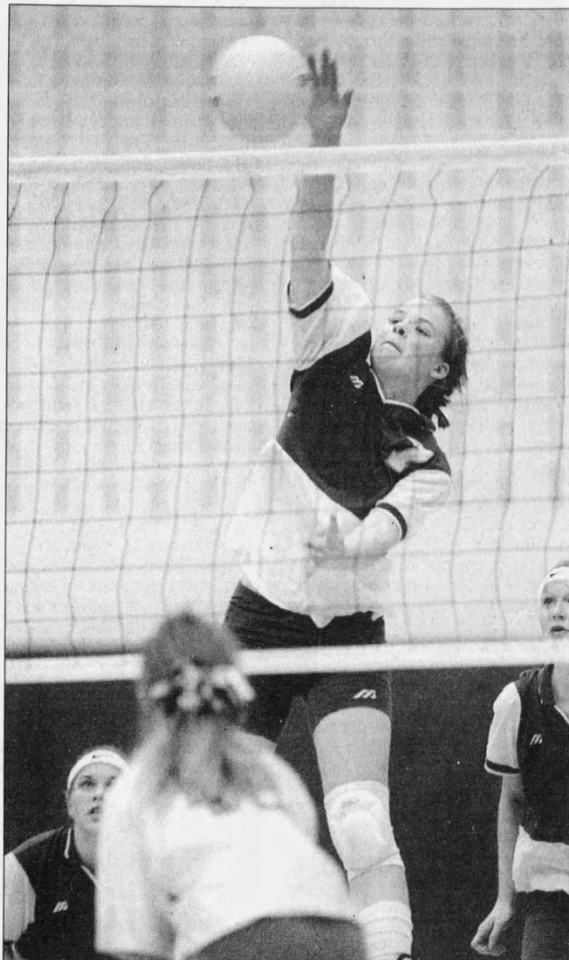
The turning point of the third game came after two straight Smith blocks brought Ross within 9-6. With Emily Dowell serving, the teams traded a furious rally that featured a bit of everything — spikes, saves and courageous play.

Yet, the Little Giants came out on the short end of that rally and never scored again, as the Rams minimized the effectiveness of semifinal hero Jodi Fick and Ross's outside attack.

"They were hitting the spot out of the ball," said Muffler of the state's 10th-ranked team in the coaches poll. "They stayed very aggressive and played an incredible game."

In the semifinal win over Wapakoneta, Ross dispatched of the ghosts of tournaments past with a 15-7, 15-11 win, despite playing tentatively and seemingly uninspired (save Fick's 14-kill effort).

"I felt really good (Saturday)," said Fick between matches. "I had a little tendinitis in my shoulder, but I feel a lot better now. Everyone was playing real-



News-Messenger/Andrew Morrison

JODI FICK of Fremont Ross spikes the ball during the second game of Fremont Ross's win against Wapakoneta Saturday at Liberty Benton High School in Findlay.

ly good and everyone was hitting great."

Fick and Pelfrey each had seven points. Pelfrey added 12 assists, and Brown had 14.

The Redskins (14-9) took advantage of a slow start and miscommunication on the part of the Great Lakes League champions for a 3-1 lead.

"That 3-1 was pretty deceiving," said Wapakoneta coach Ray Payne, "because it was junk. It wasn't an aggressive 3. It was a free ball, and I think someone made an error on their team."

"It wasn't like we earned it," said Fick: "We can really come back well, but sometimes we don't come out as strong as we need to."

Ross exploded to take a 9-3 lead, as Fick reeled off all seven of her service points in the match, including three aces.

Dowell's third of six kills gave

Ross a 14-4 lead, but Wapakoneta, with some frustrating double-blocking on Smith (3 kills), gained three more points before finally succumbing on Fick's seventh kill.

A more aggressive Wapakoneta squad, paced by eight kills and strong blocking from Alisha Pace, drew even for most of the second game. However, the Little Giants were never in danger of losing control and finally gained their first trip to the district finals — and what turned out to be their last win of 1996 — on Sarah Wasserman's slam to mid-court.

"We had a fantastic run at it," said Muffler. "It's our best record ever and the furthest we've ever gone in the tournament, so we're going to hold our heads high. It's a heartbreaker, but we're going to hold our heads high."

Rightly so.