

King calls takes his final swing

# King set to exit Ross baseball throne

Served as head coach for 11 years with 112 wins

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FREMONT - It's easy to compare baseball to life.

Each often takes a long time, but you don't know when the moments to remember will come. Both can be painful.

Fremont Ross coach Mark King, who will retire after the season, has used one to help him navigate the other. Baseball has always been there for King.

Sometimes that had little to do with the sport, and everything to do with the

escape sharing time where King was most comfortable.

King had knee replacement surgery last summer, the last of five operations in three years.

"I didn't think about it until May," he said. "I was already scheduled for surgery and I decided to leave the classroom. A coach should be there daily.

### 'The time is right'

"We build student-athletes. It's bitter-sweet to walk away. You know the time is right."

There's a chance King wouldn't have returned this season, but he wasn't going to leave on a sour note. Not when there might be six sophomores on the field as part of a hard-working group with class and strong bonds.

"Last year there was a physical toll and knowing this is my last year teaching ... we were 7-20 last year," King said. "I didn't want to walk away that way. I want the team to be at a level where I'm satisfied as coach and I can come back and watch them compete at a high level in the TRAC (Three Rivers Athletic Conference)."

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MOLLY CORFMAN/THE NEWS-MESSENGER  
Fremont Ross coach Mark King is a father figure for the Little Giants' baseball family.

## King

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King hasn't coached a base in a few years and throwing batting practice is an ordeal.

"The athletes and the game have changed at the high school level," he said. "I'm old-school. Some of the philosophies and perceptions from the kids have changed.

"It's time for a fresh look. I won't be far away. It's time to roll over to a new idea and gameplan."

### 'He keeps you guessing'

King has certainly been known to make you earn his respect. He's also the type of man who makes you want to earn his respect.

"I love Coach King's enthusiasm about baseball," senior pitcher Jacob Paxson said. "He's been around it his whole life and he shows us how to love it.

"He wants what's best for us and we have to give him everything because he gives it to us."

The Little Giants recognize and thoroughly enjoy when stoic King becomes King clown (That might be an exaggeration).

"He'll come out and we expect him to be serious and he's joking," Ross senior shortstop Grant Gallagher said. "That's my favorite thing.

"When he's serious, it sets the tone. It's nice he balances it. He keeps you guessing a little. It's fun."

King is tough — possibly intimidating — on the outside. Baseball is the way to his heart.

"People think he's just grumpy all the time," Gallagher said, "but he cares. He's not making a million bucks. It means a lot how much they're willing to work with us.

"He gives back and he spends on top-notch jerseys. We have three hats."



MOLLY CORFMAN/THE NEWS-MESSENGER  
Fremont Ross coach Mark King has a tough exterior, but his players love to earn his respect.

Indeed, King loves baseball. It's not the swag that makes players feel special.

And it's not why he was recognized as coach of the year for his sportsmanship, ethics and integrity by the Ohio High School Athletic Association.

It mattered little that 2016 was the only losing season for King. His mother, Lola, was in hospice care and died during the year.

He was called off the field twice during games for fear she was about to die. The character King demonstrated was a perfect snapshot of his career.

"Nobody likes to lose, but the game is bigger than wins and losses," King said. "We want to create an environment where we teach things the right way. What gives me closure — so many players have succeeded in the game of life.

"We've proven we play the right way and respect the game. I've been involved

with high school baseball for 36 years. It's nice to go out on a final note with your peers' respect."

### Like sons, brothers

King's world revolves around baseball, so it can be hard to separate his genetic family from the baseball version. Not that he tries.

His son, Jared, played for King in high school and is now an assistant.

"I grew up in a baseball family," he said. "My dad was JV coach at Ross. I grew up at the field and my son grew up at the field."

Paul King died of ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) after Jared's senior season in 2008. King found out shortly after visiting his dad with the rundown of that day's game, per ritual.

"It's ironic my dad died of a baseball disease," King said.

The Little Giants played St. Francis in

their ALS fundraiser game shortly after King's mother died.

"To see they honestly care and the way they treated me with her illness," he said. "They care passionately about my life and I'm knocking on retirement. That speaks volumes for what we're trying to do with the program.

"Athletics is only one aspect of the relationship. They're even better young adults. They showed they care and it meant a lot."

The team signed a ball for King.

"We were able to have a day of baseball and play a game everybody loves with him on a day when he's remembering his family," Paxson said. "We didn't want it to be somber.

"We wanted it to be an energetic day playing the game we love. We recognize Coach has faced adversity and we had a special day together."

Kids no doubt make adults earn their respect too. The Little Giants know King is knowledgeable and they trust him.

"He kept my head up," Gallagher said of King. "I knew he cared and it meant a lot. I started by the end of the year."

King has 112 wins in 11 years as head coach. More importantly, baseball provided him with opportunities to teach and love.

And learn.  
"When I started I was much more high strung," he said. "I wore on my sleeve what was on my mind. I learned patience from the kids. Watch before you share expectations so you make sure your expectations are feasible."

That's a good idea in life as well. For the retiring King, it's the same thing.

"I live here," he said.  
It couldn't have been more appropriate that he was standing near the Ross dugout when he said it.

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