

Ross repeats as champ

By MICHAEL BOSI
Staff writer

OREGON — Adversity has stared the Fremont Ross girls basketball team in the face from the very beginning of the Little Giants' preseason workouts.

And with good reason.

When the star of the show, Dawn Zerman, took her act to another galaxy, questions abounded: Who could pick up the scoring slack? Who could shoot from the perimeter? Who could take the steering wheel of a team that was a flashy Lamborghini among plastic toy Tonka trucks a year ago?

But just like no one will win the Daytona 500 this weekend by completing only 499 miles, Ross endured the season-long Great Lakes League race, found the answers to its questions and stood in the Winner's Circle Thursday night, beating Oregon Clay, 51-47, to become the proud owner of its second straight league championship and third in

the last four years.

Unlike 1995-96, the Little Giants (14-6, 8-2 GLL) will have to share the honors this year with Toledo Whitmer. But half a trophy is better than what most prognosticators gave Ross back in November.

"It feels great. It's a great accomplishment," said senior Marcy Reinbolt, whose fast-break layup with 15.8 seconds left ignited the Ross crowd's "GLL, GLL" chants.

Ross led from start to finish. Clay tied the game at 30 late in the third quarter, but Ross hit the bull's eye on six of its eight fourth-quarter free throws to stay on top.

Junior Amy Smith withstood a jammed finger to lead Ross with 16 points, 11 in the first half, and classmate Emily Dowell had 12 points, five assists and four steals as the Little Giants became the fourth girls team at Ross to win the GLL this school year.

"We always try to work hard and we worked hard in practice this week to accomplish this GLL championship and this is what

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News-Messenger/Steven Garner

EMILY DOWELL of Fremont Ross goes toward the basket Thursday during the Little Giants' 51-47 win at Oregon Clay. Ross's win, along with Whitmer's win at Fostoria, left the two squads as co-Great Lakes League champs.

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Little Giants win league

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we've wanted," said Reinbolt, who had nine points, four rebounds and two assists. "This was one of our team goals this season and it's what we really wanted to come out with."

You got the feeling things were going almost too well back in December, when the Little Giants were reeling off six straight wins to start the season. The early death toll included Sandusky Bay Conference winner Huron, soon-to-be-even-more-hated rival Sandusky and Whitmer.

But when most teams were hitting their strides, the Little Giants hit the skids. Jolly Ol' St. Nick stuffed three straight vacation losses in Ross's stockings, and those started an up-and-down second half that has included a gut-check defeat at Clyde and a Round 2 setback at Whitmer.

The Little Giants came into the final league contest having lost four of their last six on the road. They were also coming off their worst loss of the season against ninth-ranked Rocky River Magnificat and were without guard Jami Toeppke (knee) for the seventh straight game.

But Ross proved a long time ago it should not be counted out. "I said if everybody stepped up their game instead of one person

trying to do it that we had a chance to win this," coach Sue Wolf, whose vocal cords were certainly in championship form throughout the game, said outside of a jubilant locker room. "My thoughts dropped a little bit when Jami Toeppke got hurt (at Whitmer Jan. 18) because we rely on her so much for defense, but we had a couple of people step up and play well, and that's what a team's about."

Emotions ran high for the Eagles, whose seniors Beth Kohler and Stacie Cousino were honored with a ceremony prior to their final game at the Nest. The tears had barely dried when sophomore Erin Tuckerman gave Ross a 12-2 lead with a 12-foot jumper with 3:43 left in the first quarter.

In the second quarter, senior Michele Smith, who had 11 rebounds and five points, turned an offensive putback into a 3-point play to give Ross its biggest lead of the night, 21-9.

"I knew they were going to be aggressive and hard, and I just had to get the rebounds because I knew that was going to be the decision in the game," Smith said.

"The biggest thing is we just got outbatted on the boards," said Clay coach Roger Achter, whose team finished 13-7, 6-4 GLL.

Sophomore guard Jodi Har-

ington, who kept the Eagles in the game all night with 13 points and five assists, hit a 3-pointer to bring Clay within 25-18 heading into halftime.

But like the second half of the season, this one was a little rocky.

Down 30-25 with 3:14 left in the third quarter, Clay used a free throw by Miller, a pullup jumper from Harrington and a Miller finger-roll to knot the game at 30.

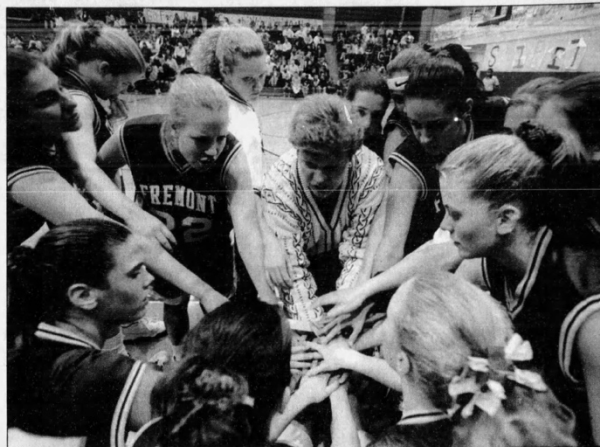
Yet the scoreboard, ergo the momentum, never shifted in the Eagles' favor.

"I thought we had a chance when we tied it up and I was hoping if we would have held them we could get back into a zone and make them shoot from the outside," Achter said.

Ross patiently ran its offense in the second half, scoring eight of its nine field goals from less than five feet.

Dowell, who has averaged 10.0 points per game, worked a pick-and-roll with Amy Smith to put Ross back up, 32-30, and junior Natasha Watson, the heir apparent to Michele Smith in the paint, had a 3-point play 30 seconds later to make it 35-30.

Megan Beshalske, who had three blocks, made two free throws with 2:16 left in the game to bring Clay within 45-42, but Reinbolt and Tuckerman, who has stepped into Toeppke's vacated position in very solid fashion,



News-Messenger/Steven Garner

FREMONT ROSS coach Sue Wolf urges her team to play smart during its final timeout Thursday at Clay.

hit clutch charity shots with under a minute left.

In a microcosm of the first 19 games, many faces filled many roles Thursday.

"Amy Smith and Emily Dowell are great players and then having Erin Tuckerman step up like she did, that was awesome," Reinbolt said. "For a sophomore JV player to step in like that and

play a starting role, she's really stepped up her game."

The same can be said of the entire team. And that's what makes champions.

LITTLE GIANTS NOTES: The hoopsters' championship victory adds to the list of girls winners started by the cross country, volleyball and tennis

teams in the fall. Four of Ross's basketball players were also on Beth Muller's volleyball squad, while Jami Toeppke was part of Cathy Esposito's cross country contingent. ... Ross outrebounded Clay, 26-19. ... The Ross junior varsity team (10-10, 5-5 GLL) set the stage for the night's excitement, winning 61-57 in overtime against Clay, which entered 16-4.