

2001 Division I District Tournament

Giants set aim for Arrows

Hammer point man for team's success

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

It may drive Fremont Ross fans toward madness, but there's a method to the way T.J. Hammer brings the basketball up the court.

Granted, Hammer hasn't been a point guard for long, but, trust him, he knows all about the 10-second rule for advancing the ball past midcourt.

And, no, the slow, hypnotic pace of Hammer's dribbling — it's the same even if he's pressured by an opponent — is not meant to give Ross fans heart palpitations.

The faithful get restless at around six seconds and progress into full-throated warning between seconds seven and eight. Hammer is almost always over the line before nine seconds.

And he uses the time wisely.

"I hear 'em yelling, but I count in my head," Hammer said. "And I watch the clock. I'm thinking about how the wings are going to break, what offense we're in, what the defense is giving us and taking away."

Although the 6-foot-2 Hammer leads the Little Giants in only one statistical category, his court savvy and leadership may hold the key to how long Ross can extend its postseason. Hammer led the team in assists with 32 through the regular season. His nearest pursuer, center Bryan Root, had 36.

Ross coach Mark Gedeon said Hammer's deliberateness is an indicator of the sway his senior leader holds over the point guard position and the Little Giants, who enter district play against Ashland on Thursday at Willard High School.

"It just shows his composure," Gedeon said. "He knows how much time is left. I don't even think he's had a 10-second violation all year. It just shows how much control he has, awareness of the situation."

"He is making sure we don't go too fast. It allows everybody to get set; it's dictating tempo. We're getting the defense on their heels a little bit. They're getting edgy."

Hammer, a two-year starter, averaged 8.4 points and 4.7 rebounds during the regular season. But what he adds in leadership and motivation is immeasurable.

"He's just a really good leader," said Terrence Jones, a sophomore guard. "Everybody looks up to him. He knows what to do."

Root, who has played with Hammer since elementary school, put it best: "He just always wants to win."

"He's a big part of our team. He gets the ball up the floor; he gets everyone where they're supposed to be; he knows every play. He's the team leader."

See HAMMER, B2

News-Messenger photo illustration/Ben French



T.J. HAMMER has relegated his individual statistics for the good of the Fremont Ross boys basketball team. Hammer leads the Little Giants in only one statistical category — assists — but his play may determine how far Ross goes in the postseason.

Ashland playing in second district in past 24 seasons

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

Ashland couldn't afford the luxury of celebrating the demise of Ohio Heartland Conference nemesis Mansfield Senior on Friday.

The Arrows had business of their own after Fremont Ross beat Mansfield in the first of two sectional finals at Willard High School.

They had to get past Sandusky in the nightcap before even considering the ramifications of the Tygers' early exit.

And Ashland had won exactly one sectional title since 1977. "I didn't think we reacted either way," third-year Ashland coach Chris Stokes said of the Little Giants' upset of the third-ranked Tygers. "We wanted to win a sectional of our own. With Mansfield Senior being a league team, we were rooting for them. But I thought Fremont Ross deserved to win. I told coach (Mark) Gedeon, you really appreciate seeing the effort his kids put out."

Ashland got through its sectional final — barely. The Arrows made only 1 of 12 free throws in the fourth quarter but held on for a 51-49 victory over the Blue Streaks.

Ross (16-6) meets Ashland (17-4) in the Division I district semifinal at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Willard. The Little Giants defeated the Arrows 64-61 in last year's sectional final.

The winner of Thursday's game will face the winner of Thursday's Sylvania Northview-Toledo St. John's game for the district championship at 5 p.m. Saturday at Bowling Green State University.

"It's neat to know that if you play the way you're capable of playing and compete at a high level, you've got to opportunity to go over and play for a district championship," Gedeon said.

The Little Giants have a point to prove with opposing sectional coaches, who granted Ashland the second seed over Ross. Each team entered the draw with a 14-4 record.

"We're not looking past Ashland," Ross senior center Bryan Root said. "We're still the underdogs in this game. They're the No. 2 seed, and we weren't seeded."

"We're still the underdogs in this game. They're the No. 2 seed."

— Bryan Root,
Ross center

Said Gedeon of the seeding, "We talked about it. It's just one of those things. It's tough when there are teams from different leagues. You don't know who they played."

Ross and Ashland share two common opponents, and they are the Little Giants' tournament opponents. Mansfield swept Ashland in OHC play, both by double-digit margins, and the Arrows swept Madison comfortably. Ross struggled to get past Madison in a regular season game and the sectional opener.

Ashland is led by cousins Matthew and Mark Hess. Matthew Hess, a versatile 6-foot-3 senior forward, averages 14.4 points per game. He was named the OHC and District 6 Coaches Association player of the year.

Mark Hess, a 6-5 sophomore forward, averages 14.5 points per game and shoots 64 percent from the field.

"We're very concerned with Mark Hess," Gedeon said. "He is a load. Last year as a freshman, he was the first player off the bench. He knows how to use his body very well, whether it's pinning or posting up. He's a very good passer."

See ROSS, B2

Hammer makes Giants go with selfless attitude

Continued From B1

That's why Hammer accepted the unfamiliar role of point guard before the 1999-2000 season when classmate Kelly Lytle went down with a summer knee injury. Hammer had played a wing position his entire career, except for a short stint at the point for the junior varsity as a sophomore.

Gedeon said Hammer emerged from a group of seven candidates to take over the position. He directed a talented team led by Reggie Jones, Juan Vela and Steve Dagg. The Little Giants went 17-5 and won a sectional championship, while Hammer scored 3.2 points per game and recorded 80 total assists.

"T.J.'s been huge," Gedeon said. "Last year, I don't think he got any of the credit he deserved on how important he was to the success of our program."

"Basically, T.J. realized that somebody's got to take over and make sure we execute. ... He picked up that new position pretty well. Point guard is the toughest position, I think, in high school basketball to learn how to play."

But now, after another Lytle knee injury put him back at the point this season, Hammer wouldn't have it any other way.

"I want to have the ball. I want to know what's going on," he said. "I'll do what I have to do to get us a win. If I gotta score one night, I'll try to score that night. If I just have to be smart and get the ball to Terrence or Bryan or Alfonzo (Vann), then that's what I'll do."

But Hammer's contributions are hardly limited to his ballhandling and passing. He can also get to the rim.

Good leaping ability and an extra 15 pounds gained during offseason weight

training allows Hammer to score in the paint. His 60-percent shooting percentage from two-point range attests to that ability.

"I think he surprises us," Jones said. "Sometimes he doesn't score, and people don't expect him to shoot it. When he feels it, it's going up and it's going in."

Then there's the leadership, a trait Hammer said he learned from Vela. Vela took Hammer under his wing and helped him learn to be a point guard.

Gedeon said Hammer is like a coach on the floor. Player and coach get together nearly every afternoon before practice to look at game tape or talk about what's going on with the team.

Hammer said he tells his teammates to "play smart, keep your heads up, don't get down if you make mistakes. It's going to happen sooner or later. Keep playing."

Said Gedeon, "I've never heard T.J. say a negative comment about another player. He only refers to everything in a very positive standpoint. I think that's what makes him an effective leader. He can get people to raise their level of play."

But Hammer's game isn't perfect. He shoots only 41 percent from the free-throw line, a dangerous number for someone who handles the ball so much late in games, and he has a knack for getting in foul trouble.

During Friday's sectional title upset of No. 3 Mansfield, Hammer picked up three fouls in the first 2 minutes, 47 seconds. Although the third foul was loudly questioned by Gedeon and the Ross fans, Hammer acknowledged that he shouldn't have been in that situation.

"I just get too pumped up early in the games. I've just got too much adrenaline," Hammer said. "I've got to calm that down."

Ross makes district appearance Thursday

Continued From B1

from the high post and a very good finisher."

Ashland's huge front line also includes 6-8 senior Matt Schlingman, who averages 10.9 points per game.

Still, Stokes is concerned about the Little Giants' overall size and athleticism. Ross outrebounded Mansfield on Friday even though the Tygers entered the game with a 13-board margin over opponents.

"I think we've got a height advantage, but the Ross guards are bigger than ours," Stokes said. "Root and (Alfonzo) Vann are strong. I think that's the reason they had such success against Mansfield. They were able to rebound with them."

Ashland's other starters are guards Jerome Anderson, a 5-9 senior, and Casey Cooke, a 5-11 junior. Anderson, the point guard, injured his ankle in the first game of the season and has been playing with a chip fracture ever since. Stokes said he is playing at about 85 percent efficiency.

As usual, Ross will be looking inside first. Vann enjoyed a breakout week at the sectional, scoring 24 and 15 points,

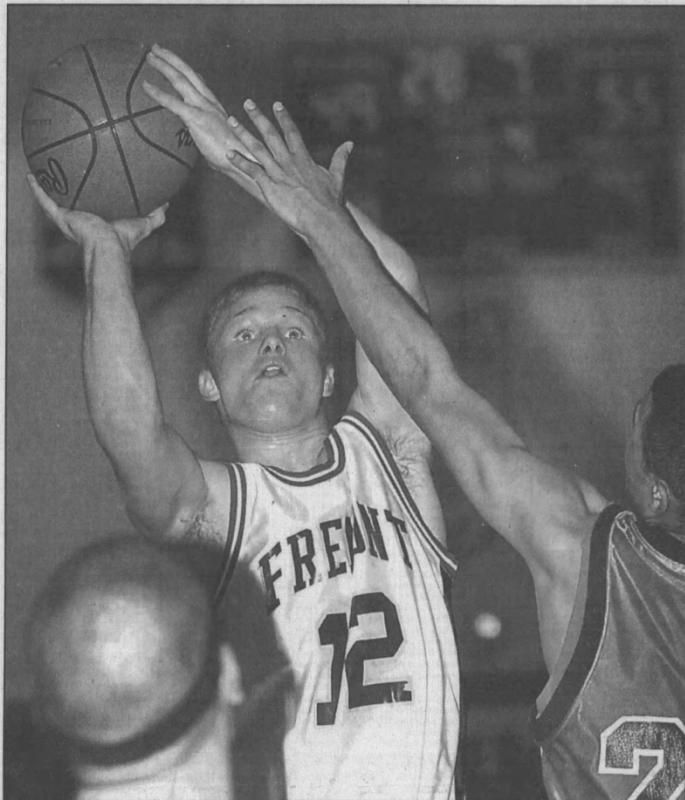
respectively, in the victories over Madison and Mansfield.

"The key is winning the battle of the paint, whether it's from an offensive or defensive standpoint," Gedeon said. "Whoever gets the most points in the paint is probably going to win the game. Rebounding is probably No. 2. I think our guards have an advantage trying to get on the glass. They're going to have to do a great job helping us out. We're obviously giving away a few inches in the post."

NOTES: Gedeon has not settled on a starting lineup for Thursday's game. Junior guard Mike Price, who scored 14 points and made several crucial plays off the bench against Mansfield, may be inserted back into the lineup. Either way, the Little Giants hope to exploit a depth advantage. Ashland, which plays seven players, appeared to wear down late in the Sandusky game, Gedeon said. ... The Arrows' only other sectional title in the past 24 years came at Ross's expense. Ashland won the 1993 sectional crown when a lob pass deflected by Ross's Mike Patterson and Charles Woodson found its way into the Arrows basket at the buzzer for a 45-44 victory.

DIVISION I DISTRICT: Ashland 59, Ross 53

Arrows pierce Ross season



News-Messenger photos/Ben French

LEE ROOT of Fremont Ross puts in two of his 10 fourth-quarter points Thursday as Ashland's Jerome Anderson, right, plays defense. Root led a furious comeback, but Ashland claimed a 59-53 victory in the Division I district semifinal at Willard.

Ashland big men ground Little Giants

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

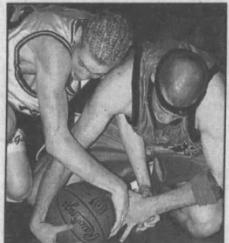
WILLARD — Fremont Ross had come to depend on its inside game to keep the team afloat when the going got tough.

But Ashland had an answer for Bryan Root and Alfonzo Vann, and it sank the Little Giants in the Division I district semifinal Thursday at Willard High School.

The Arrows' big front line held Root and Vann to a season-low seven points then held off a frenzied Ross comeback for a 59-53 victory and their first berth in the district final since 1977.

Ashland went on a 15-0 run over a span of 7 minutes, 35 seconds in the first half and never trailed thereafter. Root and Vann each sat out a large portion of the run with foul trouble.

"When we don't have our go-to guys inside, it's very difficult for us to get that natural offensive flow that we're used to having all year," Ross coach Mark Gedeon said. "You've got to give Ashland a lot of credit. I think their shot blockers affected some of our big guys inside. They tried to rush



JARRED STULL, left, of Ross and Mark Hess of Ashland play head games as they scramble for the ball Thursday at Willard.

their shots a little too much."

Said Ross senior guard T.J. Hammer, "We just dug ourselves too big of a hole and couldn't get out. We missed a lot of bunnies. Everyone was missing layups."

Without Ross's big guns, Ashland's 6-foot-8 center, Matt Schlingman, scored 13 first-half points on his way to a game-high 15.

Inside: Shelby downs Bellevue in Division II district. Page B2

Vann managed seven points, and Root, the Little Giants' leading scorer, did not score.

"We knew — and I think Mark (Gedeon) knew that, too — going into the game that the inside game was going to be the key to what happened," Ashland coach Chris Stokes said. "We challenged our kids. We knew they had a great team by beating (Mansfield) Senior. I thought our kids stepped up to the challenge."

Terrence Jones led Ross with 14 points and eight rebounds. Hammer had 13 points, and Lee Root scored 10 points, all in the fourth quarter.

Sophomore forward Mark Hess, another member of Ashland's front line, scored 13 points and pulled down seven rebounds.

The Arrows (18-4) advance to meet Toledo St. John's (19-3) in the district final at 3 p.m. Saturday at Bowling Green State University.

See GIANTS, B2

Giants finish season at 16-7

Continued From B1

Ross trailed by as many as 18 points — at 38-20 with 3:45 to play in the third quarter — and still faced a 14-point deficit entering the final period.

But Lee Root, a junior bench player who clinched Friday's upset of No. 3 Mansfield Senior with two clutch free throws, led an impassioned comeback.

His double-pump 3-pointer from the right wing got the Little Giants as close as they would get, at 50-47 with 2:20 to play.

"We all thought we were going to get it. We thought it was ours," Hammer said.

Said Gedeon, "Lee had a great ending for us. ... He's a competitor. The whole Root family are competitors. He's just a microcosm of what I believe Fremont Ross basketball should be. He came up and made some big shots for us and gave us the opportunity to get back into this ballgame."

"I'll remember the way the game finished up, with our kids doing what they've done all year, playing with a lot of heart and energy."

Matthew Hess and Hammer traded short jumpers to keep the margin at three with a minute to play. But Ashland hit 5 of 6 free throws in the final seconds, and Ross finally ran out of shots.

Ashland hit only 1 of 12 free throws in the final period in beating Sandusky in the sectional final but did just enough from the line to stay ahead of Ross. The Arrows made 7 of 15 free throws in the fourth quarter Thursday and 11 of 22 for the game.

"We're going to Bowling Green. All you've got to do is win by one," Stokes said.

Ross missed its first seven 3-point attempts Thursday and finished 5-of-22 (22.7 percent). The Little Giants connected on only 20 of 59 (33.9 percent) field-goal attempts.

Ashland hit eight consecutive field goals in the first half and into the third quarter. The Arrows made 22 of 37 (59.5 percent) field-goal attempts.

"For us, the telling tale is our shooting percentage. When you shoot 34 percent from the field and you miss some bunnies, obviously there were three possessions you could have made up," Gedeon said. "It's disappointing to come this far and have your worst shooting game of the year."

But the Little Giants definitely put together a season to remember. They won the Great Lakes League, the first boys basketball league title for Ross in 47 years, and claimed the school's fifth consecutive sectional championship by getting past tourney nemesis Mansfield Senior. Hammer, Bryan Root and Vann are the only three seniors.

"We're all real close. We hang out together," Hammer said. "I'll remember just being together with those guys and winning championships."

NOTE: Ross guard Mike Price wore jersey No. 4 instead of his usual No. 10 Thursday. But it was not a tribute to Kelly Lytle, the senior point guard who once wore No. 4 before knee injuries ended his basketball career. Price forgot his jersey and had to wear the extra jersey, which happened to be No. 4.

Basketball

High School Boys

Ashland 59, Fremont Ross 53

Division I district

at Willard

ASHLAND — Casey Cooke 2-0-4, Jerome Anderson 3-0-8, Matthew Hess 2-4-8, Mark Hess 5-3-13, Matt Schlingman 6-3-15, Danny Krispinsky 2-1-7, Greg Emmons 2-0-4. Totals 22-11-59.

ROSS — Terrence Jones 5-2-14, T.J. Hammer 6-1-13, Alfonzo Vann 3-1-7, Bo Martin 1-0-2, Bryan Root 0-0-0, Mike Price 2-0-5, Lee Root 3-2-10, Gabe Sanchez 0-0-0, Luke Lyle 0-2-2, Jarred Stull 0-0-0. Totals 20-8-53.

Ashland	16	13	13	17	—	59
Ross	7	11	10	25	—	53

3-point goals: Ashland 4-8 (Anderson 2-5, Matthew Hess 0-1, Krispinsky 2-2), Ross 5-22 (Jones 2-13, Hammer 0-2, Price 1-4, L. Root 2-3).

Turnovers: Ashland 16, Ross 8. Rebounds: Ashland 31 (Mark Hess 7), Ross 30 (Jones 8).

Records: Ashland 18-4, Ross 16-7.

Gedeon, Hill honored

Ross coach is best in Div. I; Bears' star picked in Div. 4

News-Messenger reports

Fremont Ross boys coach Mark Gedeon and Gibsonburg girls star Heather Hill were atop the lists as the Associated Press Northwest All-District high school basketball teams were announced Wednesday.

Gedeon, who led the Little Giants to their first league championship in 47 years, was named the boys co-coach of the year in Division I. He shared the honor with Mansfield Senior's Gregg Collins. Ross beat the Tygers in a sectional final on Friday and will play Ashland at 7:30 p.m. today in a district semifinal at Willard.

Hill, who scored 23.5 points per game for the 18-5 Golden Bears, was named girls co-player of the



GEDEON



BABIONE



KNIGHT



CROOKS

year in Division IV. She shared the honor with Leipsic's Candy Myers, who scored 24.4 points per game.

St. Joseph Central Catholic landed a pair of seniors on the first teams in Division IV. Forward Aaron Knight, who scored 24.9 points per game, was named to the boys first-team and senior forward Rachel Babione, who net-

ted 19.7 points per game, was honored for the girls.

Clyde senior Rachel Crooks, who scored 16.2 points per game, was named to the Division II girls first team. Lakota's Brandy Ritter, who scored 18.1 points per game in her senior season, was named to the girls first team in Division III.

Ross's Bryan Root and Oak Harbor's Nathan Vandersluis were second team selections. Girls second team selections include: Alison Decker and Sashay Price of Ross and Abby Richard of Woodmore.

Among the boys coaching-award winners was Kalida's Dick Kortokrax, whose team went 17-5 to give him more victories in Ohio than any other boys coach. Kortokrax has a career mark of 683-239 in 41 years. Paul Walker, who built a legendary program at Middletown, won 695 games, but 121 of his victories came in Kentucky.

Inside: See complete boys and girls lists. **Page B2.**

Northwest All-District teams

COLUMBUS — The 2000-2001 Associated Press Northwest All-District boys and girls basketball teams, as selected by a media panel from the district.

BOYS

DIVISION I

FIRST TEAM: Tavares Clay, Lima Senior, 6-foot-1, senior, 19.6 points per game; Dennis Springs, Tol. Scott, 5-5, sr., 15.5; Jamaal Mays, Tol. Libbey, 5-10, sr., 18.9; Greg Friday, Findlay, 6-5, sr., 20.7; Matthew Hess, Ashland, 6-2, sr., 14.4.

SECOND TEAM: Issian Redding, Sandusky, 6-5, jr., 20.1; Doug Kanney, Celina, 6-4, sr., 17.1; Steve Horner, Sylvania Northview, 6-6, sr., 19.4; **Bryan Root, Fremont Ross, 6-5, sr., 14.2;** Lance Hood, Mansfield Senior, 6-7, sr., 12.1.

THIRD TEAM: Travis Boley, Celina, 6-5, sr., 15.6; Sammy Villegas, Lima Senior, 6-6, sr., 14.3; Danny Williams, Tol. Libbey, 6-4, sr., 17.3; John Floyd, Tol. St. John's, 5-11, jr., 13.9; Terron Hereford, Tol. Waite, 6-3, sr., 16.5; Dominic Hairston, Tol. Rogers, 6-3, jr., 20.5.

Player of the year: Tavares Clay, Lima Senior.

Coaches of the year: **Mark Gedeon, Fremont Ross; Gregg Collins, Mansfield Senior.**

Notable Honorable Mention

Antoine Stockett, Sandusky; Todd Thomas, Tol. St. John's; David Veres, Tol. Whitmer; Jason Gottfried, Tiffin Columbian; Mark Hess, Ashland; Ryan Pore, Mansfield Madison; K.R. Schlievert, Findlay; **Terrence Jones, Fremont Ross; Alfonso Vann, Fremont Ross; T.J. Hammer, Fremont Ross;** Ryan Taylor, Tol. St. John's; Kalin Holland, Bowling Green; Ryan Stager, Oregon Clay; Ryan Vinciguerra, Sylvania Northview; Matt Rheinecker, Sylvania Southview; Charles Wynn, Sylvania Northview; Chris Hanna, Bowling Green; Matt Schlingman, Ashland; Terrence Davidson, Mansfield Senior; Aunre Shaw, Mansfield Senior.