

2003 Greater Buckeye Conference...

A force on the course

By MATTHEW HORN
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Fremont Ross cross country runner Derek Hill showed up for his first middle-school practice in jeans, rolled them up above his knees and could hardly finish the 2-mile course.

Quite a lot has changed in four years.

Hill, now a junior, was the Little Giants' top runner in almost every meet this season on a team that was unbeaten in dual meets and established numerous team firsts.

Ross won its first-ever

Ross enjoying historic season

league title at the the Greater Buckeye Conference meet on Saturday. It defeated former conference foe Whitmer (four times) and finished in the top 10 at the Tiffin Carnival and Clay Invitational — also each for the first time.

Ross had its top seven runners originate personal-best times in the same race an astonishing two times — at the Cardinal Stritch Invitational at Maumee and the GBC meet.

"That's never happened in my (12) years of coaching," coach Cathy Esposito said.

"This team hits the exact times I give them. I'm not easy on these kids. I ask a lot, and they take it. The boys love to run. This is the best team I've had."

Career-best times from Saturday's race include Hill's

event-winning 16:30, Jay Ohm's 16:45 (third), Nathan Bowen's 16:54 (fifth), freshman Josh Bowen's 17:29 (15th), Josh Ohm's 17:43 (17th), junior Elon Simms' 17:48 (18th) and freshman Michael Flores' 18:03 (23rd).

"We have a lot of depth," Josh Bowen said. "A lot of teams have one runner — our whole team is fast. And we've been getting better

through the season."

And after winning the Marion Harding Invitational and GBC meets the last two Saturdays, the team's focus will switch to districts in Oregon on Saturday where six teams will escape two separate races, and regionals at Tiffin Carnival on Oct. 25 where three will advance.

Central Catholic, which is ranked in the state, and Maumee, which defeated Ross at the Cardinal Stritch Invitational, will be at districts.

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Season full of firsts for Ross

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Esposito said St. Francis could also present a challenge.

But the Little Giants had more runners in the 16-minute range (three) on Saturday than either St. Francis or Maumee are capable of, Esposito said.

"We have more lead runners than they do," she said.

In addition, Esposito has tapered-off the team's work as the season's end nears, and no runner had been in the 16s prior to Saturday's three.

"We've been getting better and better the last two weeks," junior Nathan Bowen said. "Our best race is probably Saturday and if we go on it will be the week after. We have more energy right now."

And Hill should continue to be at the forefront.

"He's a very mechanical runner with great form," Esposito said. "He has the heart to do well. He doesn't verbalize his goals, he just goes out and does it. He gets the least stressed on the team.

"It always looks like he's not running as fast as he is — it's effortless."

Hill has spent the last two summers road racing and won a handful of times.

But while Hill is Ross's No. 1 runner, senior twins Jay and Josh Ohms are the team's undisputed leaders.

"They've been dedicated runners since the seventh grade," Esposito said. "They pace the rest of the team. They are so good at setting goals, that it makes them good runners. It doesn't always come from the coach — they believe in the program."

The Ohms even compelled Nathan Bowen to run with a fractured fifth metatarsal on his right foot.

"I've been working with Jay and Josh since the seventh grade, and I know they want regionals badly as seniors," Bowen said. "They've taught me that you shouldn't take days off. Somebody else will always be working harder than you, so you have to work hard every day."

Bowen knows plenty about the frustration of being injured having had to contend with hamstring strains, ankle sprains and broken bones the last five years. He established a personal-best time in the mile at track districts last year unaware that he was running on a broken right leg that ultimately forced him to temporarily hang up his spikes for July and most of August.

He missed the first part of the cross-country season with the broken toe before returning for the quadrangular meet Sept. 16 at Sandusky and finishing seventh. He said he ran in pain until feeling 100 percent at the Oct. 4 Mar-

ion Harding Invitational, where he finished sixth.

"I knew I had to at least do some work in practice — if not I'd be out of shape and couldn't help the team," he said. "I've only had one season since the seventh grade where I wasn't hurt. I'm used to it."

Bowen stayed in shape by working in the swimming pool and riding a bicycle and established a personal-best time one week after feeling healthy.

"The course was pretty fast — really flat," Bowen said. "I passed a couple runners coming into the finish. I proved to myself at the GBC and Marion that I could hold the pace I started with and pass people in the race."

The Little Giants have been passing people all season on their way to instituting several team breakthroughs.

"Beating Whitmer the first time was the best. They could have put them back in the league, and it wouldn't have mattered," Esposito said of the newly established GBC. "That's pretty satisfying."

Esposito said her team, which includes two sets of brothers among 17 varsity runners, along with the seven Ross girls, spends more time together outside of practice than it does at practice.

"They have so much social fun that practice is just another time to be together," she said. "The difference is it's hard work while you're there. The top seven do what it takes to win. They know they're good."

Simms, who qualified for state in the 400-meters and regionals in four track events last year, might be the key to the Little Giants' hopes of advancing to regionals and state.

"He only has to be a distance runner for two more weeks before it's back to the 400," said Esposito, who is also the track and field coach. "I like for him to push the pack together and provide speed at the end to get the points we need."

Hill might not have known what he was doing in middle school, but he and the team know exactly what will enable their goals to come to fruition after missing regionals by four points last year.

"We have the drive to go to states. That's one of the goals the next two years. We're a lot bigger and our workouts have been harder," Hill said in comparison to last year. "The top seven have been pushing it harder on their own."

Esposito said: "They're ready to do whatever they want to do. Regionals are about pure speed. We'd like our pack within 30 seconds for regionals, and they truly believe they can do it. They see the possibilities if they work together."

High School Girls Greater Buckeye Conference

Team Scores

Napoleon	22
Findlay	68
Marion.....	68
Ross	95

Top Finishers

1. Jennifer Spieldenner (Fi) 17:50, 2. Adelae Bell (N) 19:32, 3. D. Benlen (N) 19:33, 4. Kathryn Huddle (N) 19:42, 5. Jennifer Scatelman (N) 19:61, 6. Ashley Fischer (R) 20:20, 7. Emily Norris (M) 20:25, 8. Gretchen Wesche (N) 20:28, 9. Samantha Imbody (M) 20:36, 10. Michelle Huddle (N) 20:36.

Ross finishers: 13. Alyssa Bowerman 20:42, 25. Alison Adams 23:18, 26. Emily Grayson 23:22, 33. Jean Forgatsch 24:47, 35. Amy Price 25:48.