

Ross bows to Bulldogs

Tournament-tested Celina downs Giants, 4-0

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

TIFFIN — Whether it's basketball or softball, the Celina High School girls have become accustomed to making long tournament runs.

The way the Bulldogs played Thursday during a 4-0 victory over Fremont Ross in the Division I softball district final, they may be poised for another one.

Celina senior Sarah Piper, who pitched her team to the state tournament as a sophomore, fired a three-hit shutout as her defense

grabbed nearly everything the Little Giants hit.

The fifth-ranked Bulldogs (26-4) showed the patience of a team oblivious to tournament pressure, scoring twice in the third and twice in the sixth to punch their ticket to the Columbus Regional.

Several of the softball players also competed on the Celina girls basketball team, which advanced to the regional final in March before being knocked off by Toledo Central Catholic.

"The girls were very relaxed," Celina coach John

Hendricks said. "You can tell they've been here before. I think you've got to give a lot of credit also to the basketball program. A lot of these same girls had the same success this year. We joked before the year; we said, 'You know, ladies, the last time you went to regionals in basketball, we went to state in softball.' Now here we are two games away from going back."

Ross, which bows out of the tournament at 20-7, had two chances to score against Piper, and both were spurned by Jen Mielke

and Kristy Gabel, the top two hitters in the order.

Mielke collected her first inning with a single to center field, and Gabel reached on an error after she lined the ball to third base. But Piper retired the next three batters to leave the Little Giants stranded.

With one out in the third, Mielke collected her second hit of the game, a short to left, and Gabel followed with another single to left. But after a Tiffany Garcia bunt moved the runners to

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News-Messenger/Ben French
FREMONT ROSS CENTERFIELDER Kristy Gabel helps up second baseman Emily Bibler after Bibler made a catch while falling backward in the second inning Thursday in Tiffin.

Ross lacks big hit in loss to Celina

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second and third, Piper got Kira Wojtyla on a long fly ball to left field.

After that, Piper faced the minimum number of batters. Garcia reached on an error in the sixth, but she was promptly erased on a double play.

"I have nothing but admiration for Celina, and I'm real proud of my kids," Ross coach Mike Gilbert said. "We hit the ball right at them. They hit the ball and found the holes. That's the way the nature of the game is. I hope Celina goes all the way. It makes us look better."

Celina manufactured two runs in the third. Designated hitter Abby Lehman singled to left, and she moved to third on sacrifice bunts by

Lisa Vondrell and Piper. That brought up leadoff hitter Billie Jo Carder, who scalded a grounder in the hole at shortstop. Mielke made a diving grab but had no chance to throw Carder out at first.

"We wanted to get her to third with Little coming up," Hendricks said. "It worked out perfect because the shortstop makes a heckuva play. If Sarah doesn't punt her over, that run never scores."

Carder then stole second and advanced to third on an error in center field. Lindi Strable scored Carder on another single.

"Getting two runs this time of year with our defense playing like that and with Sarah pitching as well as she did today, that should be enough," Hendricks said.

In the sixth, Celina's Kelly VanderHorst doubled and later scored

on an error, and pinch-hitter Megan Piper singled home Beckstedt.

The defeat doesn't dampen when Gilbert considers a successful season for the Little Giants, who replaced seven seniors from last year's team.

"I'm thrilled with it. I think they overachieved," Gilbert said. "The games we lost, the teams were good teams. You can't complain when you're getting beat by excellent teams. ... The effort was there, and the girls had fun. It's nice playing a team ranked fifth in the state because it shows us how far we've got to go."

Said Hendricks, "Mike does a nice job. We knew they were going to be tough. ... It's a good win for us to beat a good program," Hendricks said. "They're going to be a team to contend with for years to come."



News-Messenger/Ben French
ASHLEY ZUNIGA, the senior pitcher for Fremont Ross, raises the ball to fire to the plate Thursday in Tiffin.

The News-Messenger, Fremont, Ohio

Sports Editor, Timothy R. Wolfrum, 334-1042

Giants capitalize, advance

Freak play allows Ross to win district semifinal in final at bat

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

Fremont Ross softball coach Mike Gilbert was willing to try anything to wake his team from the Saturday slumber that threatened its tournament run.

The Little Giants trailed Tiffin Columbian 2-0 when Gilbert held a pair of vocal summits along the Alumni Field first-base line before each half of the fifth inning. He inserted three pinch-hitters to no effect in the bottom of the fifth.

Little did Gilbert know his Little Giants were about to get an assist from good fortune.

Ross tied the game in the

Tourney trail

Saturday: Ross survived Tiffin Columbian 3-2 at Alumni Field with a run in the seventh inning.

What's next: The Little Giants (17-5) meet either Findlay or Celina at 5 p.m. May 16 in the University of Tiffin District final. Findlay and Celina meet on Thursday in Findlay.

HAMMER

bottom of the sixth inning when two runners scored on a routine throw from the Columbian catcher to pitcher Erin Rupp.

Then, the Little Giants won the Division I district semifinal 3-2 an inning later when Kristen Hammer scored from second base on an infield single.

"We're pretty good at coming back when we're down," said Hammer, who singled to lead off the inning. "I kinda knew we were going to come back."

Hammer kept chugging around third base after Jill Diedrich beat out an infield single. The play at first was close, and Columbian first baseman Emily Graham held her stretch a little too

long, allowing Hammer to score easily.

"All year long we've been opportunistic," Gilbert said. "We have to be because we've played some really good teams. You have to take advantage of every opportunity."

When I saw her (Graham) sitting on the ground with the ball, I'm trying to get Kristen to go home as fast as I could." Ross (17-5) advances to the University of Tiffin District final to meet either Findlay or Celina at 5 p.m. May 16. The Trojans and sixth-ranked Bulldogs meet Thursday in Findlay.

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Giants move to district final

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Columbian led to 14-7 after playing its fifth game in 12 days. The Tornadoes lost a game to Shelby in the 13th inning Friday when a throw from catcher to pitcher went awry.

That may well be the reason Columbian won't be advancing in the tournament.

With her team down 2-0, Ross senior shortstop Jen Mielke led off the sixth inning with a bloop single to center field. Kristy Gabel followed with an infield single, and Tiffany Garcia moved the runners up with a sacrifice bunt.

Then, after a pitch to Kira Wojtyla, the Columbian catcher overthrew Rupp, and the ball trickled between two infielders and into center field.

Mielke and Gabel scored to tie the game as the Tornadoes chased the ball.

"The girls, I thought, did a good job except for that one bonehead play. That happens," Columbian coach Mike Hampy said. "This is going to be hard to get over, but we wish them (Ross players) luck."

In the seventh, Hammer

reached on her infield single and moved to second on a bunt by Emily Bibler before Diedrich's single ended the game.

Columbian grabbed its 2-0 lead when Tessa Miller blasted a two-run double to deep right-center field in the top of the third inning. The Little Giants' defense and pitcher Ashley Zuniga kept it close from there. Mielke fielded three ground balls, two of them deep in the hole between second and third, in the fourth inning, and Bibler executed a double play in the fifth by scooping a hard grounder from Miller and tagging out base runner Stephanie Crabbil before throwing out Miller at first.

Ross was just trying to hold on

long enough to produce a little magic.

"We always seem to pull it out in the seventh inning," said Mielke, who went 3-for-3. "There's always a part of me that says, 'Oh my gosh.' I'm always worried, but I always know we're going to pull through in big games."

"Our defense is always solid. Our bats have been a little weak lately, but when we need the hits we'll get them."

Said Hampy, "Their shortstop was tough. She robbed a couple of them. Fremont Ross plays fundamental. That's what won it."

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