

2020-2021 Limited Season Review



Ross' Brooklyn Baptista rips down a rebound. DOUG HISE

Baptista most prolific shooter in Ross history

Matthew Horn
Fremont News-Messenger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Fremont Ross' girls basketball team has more wins after two games in the Three Rivers Athletic Conference than it did all last season.

Every 3-pointer senior Brooklyn Baptista knocks down this season will extend her program record for career makes. She made nine in one game last season.

Ross adds three freshman starters in Destiny Robinson, Carma Johnson and Abby Cahill. In many ways, that apparently means the team can improve and develop at the same time.

"Their maturity level is high for freshmen," Little Giants coach Juan

Vela said. "They want to win and they play hard. They do the little things it takes to win. I knew they had skill. When junior high played in summer, they wanted to compete with whomever was on the court.

"That shows maturity. With that personality and character, you'll win ballgames. Mix in skill."

Despite limited time together, the youngsters made an immediate impression on Vela.

"They came in when they were allowed," he said of offseason coronavirus restrictions. "They love to be around ball and for a coach who loves to be around ball, it's nice to coach kids with that love. As a varsity coach, you never know what will happen from tryouts.

"To be with us now is a good thing. They're enjoying it. If we can learn and grow while we're winning, it would be awesome. I'm excited because they love the game. They love practice. They love to play with the team."

Baptista canned nine 3s in one game last season for a program record. She has 128 for her career.

"I expect more growth," Vela said. "She's playing better defense. Her strength is shooting. We expect her to continue to make shots for the team. Being a senior with experience, we expect her to show leadership.

"We have other scorers."
Sophomore Mylah Williams is also a returning starter.

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Baptista

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"She's grown up from last year," Vela said. "She's more patient with the offense and she's figuring out the defensive part. A lot of high school kids focus on one part of their game. She's trying to

be a complete player.

"She can score and pass. It's nice to see her grow her game to help the team."

Junior Hannah Sheidler is first off the bench.

"What makes this team unique is that any girl is willing to play whatever role it takes to win," Vela said. "They have one thing in mind — to win. Any girls can have a double-digit night and they're fo-

cused on defense to give themselves a chance to win.

"The coaching staff is excited."

Sophomore Janiah Holmes and junior Makenna Englund are also in the mix.

Ross won six games last season, including none in the TRAC. It beat Toledo Whitmer and fell to Toledo Central Catholic this season.

"In the big picture, I can only control what I can control," Vela said. "When we step into the gym, it's a blessing. You hold onto the moments now more than you did in the past because of COVID. For now, we need to control what we can with a positive attitude in the moment."

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Baptista scores 19 points in Ross loss

Josh Morgret

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WILLARD - The game marked a step up in competition for both teams.

Visiting Fremont Ross fell 56-42 to an experienced Willard team in a non-conference matchup Wednesday. Willard advanced to the regional final in Division II last season.

Willard averaged 75 points coming in and scored at least 85 twice.

"I loved the defensive effort," Little Giants coach Juan Vela said. "I thought we were flying to the ball and closing out hard. I thought we did a good job on the big girls in the first half."

Ross (4-2) never led, but it wasn't easy for the Crimson Flashes (4-0). Destiny Robinson scored a bucket as the Little Giants trailed 11-8 after one quarter.

Brooklyn Baptista completed a three-point play and dished an assist to Robinson as Ross remained within 16-15. Baptista scored 19 points.

"They have been pounding on people and those three freshmen are just going to be outstanding," Willard coach Barry Pfahl said. "Then, you add Baptista to that, who can shoot it from the balcony. We knew they would be a challenge."

Robinson, Carma Johnson and Abby Cahill are freshman starters.

Ross trailed 23-17 at the half. Willard cranked up its defensive pressure and extended the lead to 32-19.

"We needed this kind of game to prepare us for what is going to come down the road," Pfahl said. "In the back of my head, I was really anxious to see how we would do against athletes with that quickness and that physicality."

The Little Giants had one more push, holding Willard without a field goal for almost four minutes to close the third quarter. The trailed 34-28 nonetheless.

"Offensively, we could not get in a rhythm at all," Vela said. "They also did a good job defensively. It was more of an offense thing that we could not get in a rhythm."

Willard surged to 44-31 and led by double digits from there.

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Brooklyn Baptista drives to the basket as Clyde's Brooke Newsome, left, and Kristen Harrah defend. DOUG HISE

Ross

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"Willard did a good job at protecting the ball and making plays down the stretch," Vela said. "They are consistent and they are to the point. They knew exactly what they were looking for as a team. That is why they are good."

Four seniors and one junior start for Willard. Sophomore Mylah Williams, who scored 12 points, and senior Baptista join the freshmen for Ross.

"It is a learning process, obviously," Vela said. "I want to get away from (saying) freshmen and I want to look at

them as varsity players. They need to make varsity plays. I want them to play like varsity players."

Willard is not an easy test. McKenna Stephens led all scorers with 24 points and added 13 rebounds.

"Every game we should get better and better and better," Vela said. "We have a young team and there are so many situations in a game that we will see. We might not be able to see those in practice."

"We will get something from every game. We did not give up. We fought. I told the girls that if we made more basketball plays, the game gets more interesting. That is something we have to grow from."



Ross' Brooklyn Baptista rips down a rebound. DOUG HISE

Little Giants win nine of first 11 games

Matthew Horn

Fremont News-Messenger
USA TODAY NETWORK

Brooklyn Baptista cares about the future of Fremont Ross' girls basketball program.

She wants to make the most of the time before she leaves. Three Little Giants freshmen make Baptista feel wonderful about both through 11 games.

Destiny Robinson, Carma Johnson and Abby Cahill are freshman starters.

"Just win and have everybody coming together working as one," Baptista said. "I'm a senior, they'll be there. I hope they continue to win. We have a solid group who know the game, and have passion and love the game."

"Nine (wins) is great, but we're not satisfied. We'll work 10 times harder to get where we want. We have a chance to make a (postseason) run. Our team has that ability."

Ross won nine games. It lost to Toledo Central Catholic in the Three Rivers Athletic Conference and an experienced

Willard team.

Teams play only one round through the TRAC this season.

"It's great coming out with nine of 11," Baptista said. "Playing as well as we are with three freshmen who know how to play, everybody wants to get better every day. Everybody knows how to compete and wants to be out there."

"We're unselfish. Offensively, we get it. We all pass the ball. Defensively, we've been getting more consistent. It's coming together on both ends."

Baptista isn't surprised by the team's surge.

"Not necessarily 9-2, but I expected us to come out winning with the three freshmen coming up," she said. "They want to win. They play well together. They mesh well moving up to varsity. Usually there are nerves or (freshmen) back down."

"No. They don't. They love to compete."

Robinson steps in at point guard and Baptista slides to shooting guard.

"She can handle the ball like no other,"

Baptista said. "I had different roles. Having those different stages in my career has helped my game. I can play pretty much anywhere. Anybody can play anywhere."

Baptista has considerably less pressure to force shots. She leads the team at 12 points per game but always has help near double digits as well.

"I might score five in one game and the next game 20," she said. "I'm not about scoring. It's more what can I do to help the team win. We all score. If my shot's off, Destiny can hit shots. You never know. It's unpredictable."

"I want to know what teams say to defend us, we can all score."

Mylah Williams is the fifth starter. "In the paint, I don't know how she finishes sometimes," Baptista said. "She's been hitting shots. Keep shooting."

Makenna Englund and Hannah Sheidler provide depth. Sheidler is more aggressive trying to get to the bucket this season.

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Basketball

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"Having them off the bench, not missing a beat," Baptista said. "Hannah can find ways in the paint and shoot the 3 ball. She's a big factor. Coach (Juan Vela) can put anybody in at any moment."

Janiah Holmes returned to bolster the lineup after missing the first nine games.

"We got better in the first half, but she makes us even better," Baptista said.

Ross won six games last season, none in the TRAC. Baptista wants to again extend the season with a few wins after helping the Little Giants earn a sectional crown as a freshman.

"Hold myself to high standards because I know there are lot's of young

girls that look up to me," she said. "I want to set a good example for them. Being a great basketball player is more than being able to play the game.

"It's leadership, positivity and building a team that shares great values and goals to win."

Baptista has even more incentive to help establish a program foundation. Younger sister, Isabella, is in seventh grade.

"The seventh- and eighth-grade classes right now have some good competitors," she said. "Knowing I will be leaving the program with athletes coming up to help build the program will make it exciting to come back and watch them."

First, she wants the youngsters to see herself and the freshmen win a few games at district.

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GIRLS BASKETBALL



Ross' Janiah Holmes PHOTOS BY MATTHEW HORN

Janiah can keep climbing higher for Fremont Ross

Matthew Horn
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USA TODAY NETWORK

Sophomore Janiah Holmes is most often first off the bench.

This is true of the player rotation for Fremont Ross coach Juan Vela. It's also the case when Holmes isn't in the game.

Holmes is a valuable sub. She's also quick and consistent to pop off her seat and cheer for teammates, which is even more important with fewer fans during the pandemic.

There was plenty to celebrate Thursday as the Little Giants beat visiting Toledo Whitmer 55-29 for a sectional crown in Division I. Holmes, who is starting to emerge on the court, had nine of her 16 points in the first quarter.

"The emotion and energy bring it out of us," Ross senior Brooklyn Baptista said.

The Little Giants (17-5) play Saturday's winner between Toledo Start and Toledo St. Ursula on Thursday at Lake.

Vela has never had a team more quiet. There is no hesitation, however, to have an impact when a clock is running.

Holmes was a starter from Day 1 as a freshman. She didn't back down.

"Come out ready to play," Holmes said. "You just have to keep working. Work in the offseason and get better."

Holmes is athletic and extremely versatile with her job description at 5-foot-11. Her strengths are defense, passing and rebounding.

"A lot," Baptista said. "Whether it's rebounding, offensive or defensive.



She's a hell of a defender. She's lengthy and her defense helps. Her game offensively taking it strong to the basket and finishing has improved."

Vela often wants Holmes to be more aggressive.

"Janiah can almost be too unselfish," he said. "The team we have, they love to play. They're not selfish. They're just kids enjoying basketball."

And rewards that come with execution.

"It's special because I never had a moment like this before," she said of the

sectional championship. "It feels good."

Vela sees a high ceiling for Holmes.

"Finally, she came out of her shell," Vela said "She's more relaxed. She's reading the defense. She's taking better shots. The biggest thing is she's unselfish and she's playing better defense. Janiah has a lot of potential.

"She hasn't even scratched the surface."

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Horn

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ent.”

The Wildcats and Bellevue found silver linings during the pandemic. Four seniors helped Clair reinforce how logical it is to maximize every window of opportunity right now.

Plus, honestly, anything left for a conference champ is icing. Basketball hasn't started in Michigan.

“The message was always to be appreciative,” Clair said. “You try to do that every year, and sometimes it's hard to get across. This year it wasn't hard. We got 22 games in. Some have 10. We appreciate the opportunity every day because you don't know when it could be taken.”

“It was easy to understand. It made the girls focus.”

Bellevue was forced to cram most of its games into the second half of the season, following its last quarantine. It allowed the team to find a common level mentally and consistency on the court.

“It's my last year playing for Bellevue,” Santoro said. “To not have the fans there is sad. We're used to the atmosphere at Bellevue with so many people. In the big picture, it's a blessing we get to play with everything going on in the world.”

“At the end of the day it benefited us. A blessing in disguise. We're finding chemistry and we're peaking.”

Port Clinton scuffled for wins and its bright spot went largely unseen in person. Freshman starter DC Lanier established a record for 3-pointers in a single season.

It doesn't make any of them selfish or narcissistic to want more eyes on them. Of course they want more eyes on them.

Still, they understand the world they live in. They're doing their best so nothing can take basketball away.

They're also trying to make every special moment feel like it's supposed to feel.

“I'd be lying if I said we didn't talk about it,” Clair said. “Social media and live stream picked up. We communicated as much as we could and support comes through Twitter and Facebook. People were disappointed they couldn't be there live, but we feel the love in other ways.”

“I don't think it's a disappointment. Whether the gym is full, or it's just your parents and grandparents, nobody will forget this season. It's been amazing. It will go down in history. [Fewer fans] can't take that away.”

Woodmore won at Elmwood to climb into a tie for first place in its penultimate NBC game.

“It felt like a big game atmosphere, but you look around and from the outside they might not view it that way,” Clair said. “Just because people aren't shoulder to shoulder, it doesn't mean you can't have a big game environment.”

“Players have to find the right mindset. Our leadership didn't let us dwell on it.”

Without crowds, players have to summon energy from within. There is no roar to buoy emotions after a 3-point dagger, you have to find it elsewhere.

“I like a crowd,” Lanier said. “It's part of the game for me. Having the crowd excited, or even booing. The crowd brings up the energy. There's a difference between playing in an empty gym

and a gym full of people.”

“I wish COVID was over. I like my friends being at games and family from everywhere. It's a lot better than having to pick four people. It's not fair, especially for people who love basketball and want people there to see them.”

“COVID is stressful.”
Lanier tries to use pregame visualization while listening to music.

“At the beginning, we didn't know how many games we'd have,” she said. “Then, it was silent. It was awkward. Usually you hear coaches yell. Other than that and parents you hear, it was quiet. We tried extra hard to hype teammates.”

“We're a team, our feelings are the same.”

Cheering sections were comprised of those who chose to use one of each player's allotment of four tickets. They got two tickets for road games.

“The gym would be so packed if not for COVID,” Baptista said. “It's frustrating and disappointing as a senior with all the talent we have and the energy there would be in the gym if it was open to everyone. If there were fans, it would bring more energy.”

“They still made noise. The JV girls tried to do cheers to bring up the energy. There was still a little home-court advantage.”

Woodmore players got two tickets either way. Clair's parents, who were fixtures at his games as a player and coach, elected not to use them.

“You always look in that spot in the stands and know where they're at,” he said. “They're there [in spirit]. It's difficult. They watched live stream. I got used to it, but it's not the same. You wished you could have the same atten-

dance and support systems there with you that you had through the years.”

Clair might have startled his girls a little when he introduced practice protocols and restrictions that included everything but hazmat suits. Most people don't like repeating mundane tasks like a robot and it becomes a grind suddenly making the minutia significant.

“If we could do anything to help our cause, I wanted to do it,” he said of designated locations and rotations. “There was initial shock with the rules. They adapted well.”

Ross and Port Clinton quarantined once apiece, and Woodmore didn't encounter a team shutdown. None had games eliminated.

“We understood what was on the line,” Baptista said. “We were good with masks and all that stuff. When we were in the gym and within those four walls, it was basketball. That's all we had to worry about. Coach [Juan] Vela always says tomorrow is never promised, so work hard right now.”

“I'm just thankful there is a season and to get in 22 games and be able to be in the tournament. I'm thankful my senior year we're still going.”

Teams won't care how many witness postseason net cutting parties. Until they have a chance to think on it.

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All District Division I

Division I

Fremont Ross' Juan Vela is coach of the year. He established a career-best with 18 wins.

Little Giants senior Brooklyn Baptista and sophomore Janiah Holmes were second-team. Baptista averaged 12.8 points and 4.4 rebounds, and Holmes averaged 12.5 points and 8.3 rebounds.

Ross freshman Destiny Robinson was third-team. She averaged 11.8 points and 4.9 rebounds, at 5-foot-5.

