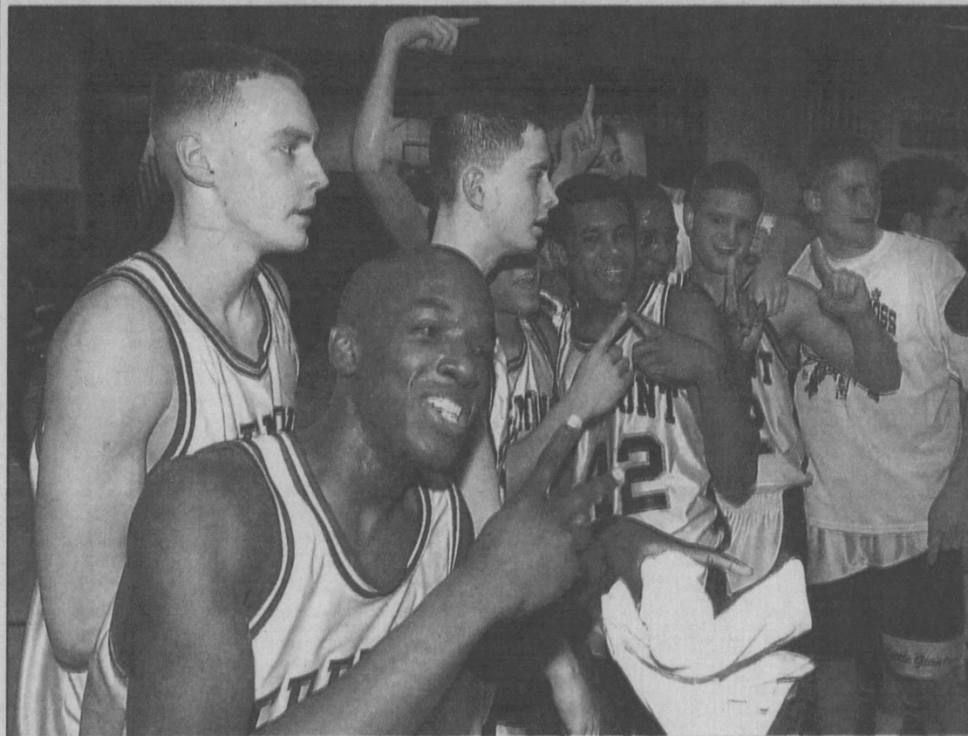


2000-2001 Great Lakes League Champions

A throne at last



News-Messenger photos/Ben French



Countdown to a GLL crown

At right is the magic number for Ross to clinch its first league title in 47 years. The number dwindled with each Ross victory or losses by its nearest competitors. When the number was 1, the Little Giants clinched a title tie. When it hit 0 Saturday, Ross became the outright champ.

0

ROSS PLAYERS, from left, T.J. Hammer, Mike Price, Luke Lyle, Gabe Sanchez, Bo Martin, Terrence Jones, Lee Root, Bryan Root and Luke McElfresh celebrate the school's first Great Lakes League boys basketball championship Saturday at the Purple Pit. Above, Bryan Root revels in a positive play during the game.

Little Giants end 47-year title drought by clinching GLL crown

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

There was an eerie tinge to the way Fremont Ross clinched the Great Lakes League championship Saturday night.

It almost seemed too easy.

As the Little Giants put the finishing touches on a 72-57 victory over Toledo Whitmer with an 11-0 run late in the fourth quarter, the crowd started a steady chant of "GLL, GLL."

If you didn't know better, you'd think this kind of thing regularly occurred at the Purple Pit. Ross was about to maintain its three-game lead with only two to play.

Do 47 years of futility melt away so smoothly?

Well, yes. But as the celebration erupted with the Ross play-

ers spilling onto the court, there was no mistaking the relief and utter ecstasy that accompanied the school's first boys basketball title since the 1953-54 team won the Buckeye League crown.



Saturday

Ross72

Whitmer57

Friday

Admiral King

at Ross

6 p.m.

To the strains of Queen blasting over the public-address system, the Little Giants donned their commemorative T-shirts, cut down the net at the east end of the gymnasium and indulged in what looked like a team line dance — only hipper — to the final bars of "Another One Bites the Dust."

There to enjoy it with them were hundreds of fans and the stars of the

recent Ross boys resurgence. Joell Heidelberg, Reggie Jones, Steve Dagg and Juan Vela were all under the basket as the Little

Giants and coach Mark Gedeon enjoyed their moment.

"I was pretty surprised," senior center Bryan Root said. "I didn't know all those people were going to stay. It was exciting."

Said senior guard T.J. Hammer, "There were a lot of people that stuck around. We want to thank the fans. They're a big part of it."

The Little Giants (14-4, 11-1 GLL) didn't flinch at the edge of the championship. They jumped out to a 7-0 lead Saturday and never trailed.

Whitmer (8-9, 6-6 GLL), behind GLL Player of the Year candidate Dave Veres, got as close as four points at 54-50 in the opening moments of the fourth quarter. But Ross responded by scoring 17 of the next 19 points to ease to its fifth straight win.

"We knew they were going to want to come out and beat us be-

Inside: Heidelberg, Jones play at Owens. **Page B3**

cause we beat them at their home," Ross sophomore Terrence Jones said. "They were ripping down our (GLL championship) signs down there. That just fired us up even more."

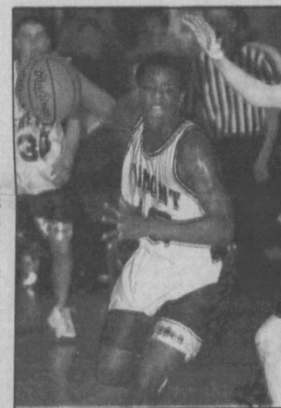
Jones led the Little Giants with 21 points. Root added 12 points and seven rebounds, and Alfonso Vann came off the bench to provide 12 points.

Veres overcame foul trouble to score 20 points. Gerald Fletcher poured in 10.

Whitmer coach Bruce Smith declined comment after the game. He muttered a rebuff without breaking stride on his way to the team bus.

It was fitting response, especially from the coach whose

See ROSS, B4



ALFONZO VANN of Ross circles toward the basket during Saturday's 72-57 victory over Toledo Whitmer.



News-Messenger/Ben French

ROSS COACH Mark Gedeon triumphantly holds a piece of the net following Ross's 72-57 Great Lakes League-clinching win over Toledo Whitmer on Saturday night at the Purple Pit.

Ross beats Whitmer to win title

Continued From B1

team many picked to win the league because of the experience it had back from last year.

Ross has confounded GLL opponents all season with its dearth of standout players and abundance of team play.

"I don't know if there was a magical point," Gedeon said when asked when his team realized it could break the title jinx. "You go back to last spring, and our seniors thought we could do this. ... They'd been successful all the way through. They've all been in support roles on the last few teams and had varsity experience. I think it says something special about the seniors. They're flat-out winners."

The Little Giants led by as many as 14 points in the second quarter, but the Panthers stormed back behind Veres. The senior forward scored 10 straight points over a span of six possessions to pull Whitmer to within 37-31 with 2.8 seconds remaining in the first half.

Then Jones made what may have been the biggest single play of the game. He took a half-court pass, lost the ball momentarily, then launched a one-handed 45-footer that swished through at the buzzer. Ross led 40-31 at the intermission.

"I think that was huge," Gedeon said. "For him to nail that shot to get us back to that nine-point lead, our kids came into the locker room fired up, instead of thinking, 'Oh no, here they come.'"

Ross girls fall in OT to Mansfield Tygers

News-Messenger reports

MANSFIELD — The Fremont Ross girls missed three shots in the waning seconds of overtime and dropped a 62-61 decision to Mansfield Senior on Saturday afternoon.

"It wouldn't fall and they wouldn't call a foul," Ross coach Sue Wolf said. "It was a tough game. After playing five games in 11 days, it's hard on the girls. That showed a bit at the end. We played hard; we just had that disadvantage."

Alison Decker matched a career-high with 25 points on 12 field goals and a free throw to lead Ross (15-4). Sashay Price added 13 points, while Laura Wilson and Fallon Bailey scored seven apiece.

Tyanda Hammock and Canea Williams scored 19 points apiece for the Tygers (15-3).

Ross is at Whitmer on Thursday.

— Michael Pidanick

Jones scored buckets on consecutive feeds from Root and Bo Martin to open the second half, and the Little Giants regained a comfortable margin at 44-31.

But a five-point possession and a couple of Veres 3-pointers closed the gap to 51-48 with 1:30 left in the third quarter. A Lee Root trey gave Ross some breathing room entering the final period.

Unfortunately, the Little Giants missed their first six free

throws of the fourth quarter. But they held Whitmer without a field goal for almost six minutes, enabling Ross to go on the 17-2 run. Bryan Root scored half of his points during the streak.

"When we know we have to get something done, we do it," he said.

For his part, Jones enjoyed his most productive weekend of the season, scored 43 total points in victories over Clay and Whitmer. Could he be a consistent source for points down the stretch?

"Everybody has stepped up at different times," Jones said. "I'm just glad I'm being consistent. My shots are falling, but I'm not depending on that."

Said Gedeon, "People hit the shots when the scoring opportunities present themselves. All five players start with the opportunity to score. Terrence does have some special abilities, but so do Bryan and Alfonso and the list goes on and on."

NOTE: The Ross team was informed Saturday that the items stolen from its locker room during Friday's game at Clay have been returned. Clay athletic director Dave Scharer said the items — a compact disc player, several discs, a pair of pants and a small amount of cash — were returned to the locker room during a school dance after the game. The players were to get their belongings back today. Gedeon and Ross athletic director Art Bucci said they appreciated Scharer's concern about the incident and his efforts to return the items.

Ross 72, Toledo Whitmer 57

WHITMER — Gerald Fletcher 3-2-10, Ted Waka 2-4-8, Dave Veres 7-4-20, Ta'reio Morgan 0-0-0, Dylan Sabin 3-0-6, Kevin Alexander 2-1-5, Tyler Waite 3-2-8, Irshad Bannister 0-0-0, Eric Wasielewski 0-0-0, Matt Marsh 0-0-0. Totals 20-13-57.

ROSS — Mike Price 4-0-9, Terrence Jones 8-2-21, T.J. Hammer 3-2-8, Bo Martin 1-0-2, Bryan Root 4-4-12, Lee Root 1-0-3, Gabe Sanchez 0-0-0, Luke Lyle 0-1-1, Jarred Stull 1-2-4, Alfonzo Vann 3-6-12. Totals 25-17-72.

Whitmer 9 22 17 9 — 57

Ross 20 20 14 18 — 72

3-point goals: Whitmer 4-14 (Fletcher 2-4, Waka 0-1, Veres 2-5, Morgan 0-1, Alexander 0-1, Marsh 0-2). Ross 5-15 (Price 1-2, Jones 3-6, Hammer 0-3, L. Root 1-4).

Turnovers: Whitmer 19, Ross 14. Rebounds: Whitmer 31 (Waite 7), Ross 29 (B. Root 7).

Records: Whitmer 8-9 (6-6 GLL), Ross 14-4 (11-1 GLL).

JV score: Ross 58-54.

JV leading scorers: Ross — Gabe Sanchez 19, Luke Lyle 16, Luke McElfresh 10.

Former Giants enjoy first GLL crown

By TIMOTHY R. WOLFRUM
Sports editor

With two minutes left in what turned out to be the Great Lakes League title clincher for Fremont Ross on Saturday, former Little Giant Steve Dagg could contain himself no longer.

He began hopping nervously on the bleachers at the Purple Pit, holding a sign that read "GLL ... is in the house" high above his head.

At the end of the 72-57 Ross victory over Toledo Whitmer, Dagg

Past two Ross teams just missed making history

sprinted out to center court to join in the revelry of Ross's first boys basketball league title in 47 years.

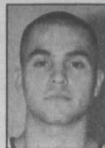
"I was so happy for 'em," Dagg said. "I was out there thinking it was me."

Dagg represents a whole generation of Fremont players and fans who have been waiting for a league championship since 1954, when the Little Giants claimed the Buckeye League.

But the longing may have been



DAGG



VELA

making history themselves on two agonizing occasions.

Dagg, Reggie Jones and Juan Vela — they were all on hand for Saturday's clincher — starred on Ross teams that were expected to end the title drought in each of the past two seasons. Another Little Giant great who turned out Saturday, Joell Heidelberg, led the 1998-99 team.

The 1998-99 and 1999-2000 Ross squads went a combined 35-10 but

finished a game behind Sandusky each season in the GLL. The 2000 campaign ended with a 76-63 loss at Sandusky in the league title game.

The former players said they take pride in what their younger teammates have accomplished. This year's Little Giants, who entered the seasons mostly as unknowns, wrapped up the crown with two league games remaining. "I'm not jealous at all. I'm happy for them," said Vela, who is

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Ex-Giants excited by GLL crown

Continued From B1

playing for Defiance College. "We're still a part of the Little Giant program."

"I'm a little jealous," a smiling Jones said after playing for his Cincinnati State junior college team at Owens Community College on Saturday. "We should have won it."

Of course, the past two Ross teams had their share of success. Each team won a sectional title and came within a whisker of more tournament glory by falling to Mansfield Senior in overtime district semifinal games.

"We've cut down our nets, too, with those guys," sixth-year Ross coach Mark Gedeon said. "Each team is built in a special way, in terms of the chemistry. I've been very fortunate."

The current players say they owe their predecessors a debt of gratitude for showing them the way to win.

"We know they were a game away from it," senior guard T.J. Hammer said. "We wanted to get it for them. When we were coming up in JV, that's who beat us up. They beat us up and made us better."

Earlier in the season, Hammer credited Vela with teaching him how to be a leader. Although far from his team's leading scorer, Hammer has emerged as the emotional center of the Ross squad.

"I always told him not to go off on a player," Vela said. "You have to lead by example. Make sure you're doing your job first."

But the past players are careful not to take credit for what these Little Giants have done.

"We still keep in touch," Heidelberg said. "I'm going to give it all to them."

"I'm happy for them. I'm happy for coach Gedeon, too."

It could be argued, although none of the "old-timers" brought it up, that this year's group of Little Giants benefitted from a weak league. The graduation last year of the GLL's top players in Sandusky's El Da'Sheon Nix, Jahn Farris and Brock Alexander; Findlay's Ben Roethlisberger and Mike Iriti; Whitmer's B.J. Barre; and Clay's Derek Besgrove left a vacuum.

One indicator of the relative strength of the GLL is out-of-conference record of the teams. The 2000-01 league teams are 22-22 against non-league foes, compared to 29-22 last season and 34-17 in the 1998-99 campaign.

But the resurgence of Fostoria under first-year coach Keith Diebler presented a challenge for this year's Little Giants unknown to past teams. In fact, the Redmen handed Ross its only league loss on Jan. 19.

Ultimately, though, the past players say the combination of Gedeon's system and team play has propelled the Little Giants to their current heights.

"I'm not really surprised. Coach Gedeon is always going to put a good team together," Vela said. "But they have a lot of confidence and they believe. When you have that, things come out OK."

Said Dagg, "For the most part, they're pretty unselfish. They have their moments, but they usually pass the ball pretty well as a team. They've really been executing the offense well."