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Hall of Fame welcomes Class of 2009

BY JEFF ARENZ
Sports writer

FREMONT — Throughout his entire life, Dan H. Lease represented Fremont Ross High School in every way that he possibly could.

On Saturday at Ole Zim's Wagon Shed, the Fremont Ross Hall of Fame inducted Lease posthumously during its 20th anniversary ceremony, which celebrated the Class of 2009.

Other inductees included Robert "Bob" Atkins, Dr. Katie (Marritt) Lusvardi, Jodi Kusmer, David E. Liggins and the 1994 Little Giants' cross country team (Jake Smith, Jeremiah Smith, Doug Jibilian, Jeremiah Wagner, Dane Synder, Kurt Snyder, Eric Gabel, Clint Hill, Kevin Alexander and coach John Elder).

Lease was memorialized by his sons, Charlie and Dan, who said their father was a "yes-man" for academics and athletics at Ross.

"He was a yes-man because he always said yes whenever Fremont needed him," Charlie Lease said. "He loved giving back to Fremont, the school and the sports. He gave up his time willingly and he was always there."

Lease, who died in September 2008 at age 82, earned a letter in swimming and two more in football as a Ross athlete from 1941-1944. He served as a swimming official during Little Giants' meets for 50 years, including the 1998-1999 season, when Lease earned the Wirthwein Award, the honor bestowed upon Ohio's top swim official.

In addition to being a member of the Fremont Schools District Board of Education, Lease gave financial support to several Ross programs. He was an avid sports fan who appreciated all kinds of athletic events while being a historian who compiled "100 Years of Fremont Football" and "The History of Fremont Ross Swimming."

Robert "Bob" Atkins

In 1960, Atkins graduated from Ross with seven letters — four in track and field, two in cross country and one in basketball.

During his induction speech, Atkins expressed his wish that more African-American athletes be inducted into the Fremont Ross Hall of Fame.

"It's a slap in the face because Fremont has spawned many tremendous black athletes," Atkins said. "I thank you for those who voted for me. And for those he didn't vote for me, I deserve to be here."

A two-time state qualifier in track and field, Atkins graduated from Ross as the school's recordholder in the 220- and 440-yard dashes.

In 1959, he was the 220 champion at the Buckeye Conference Meet, the 220 runner-up at the Northwest Ohio District Meet and finished sixth in the 220 at the state meet. In 1960, Atkins was the

100 and 220 Buckeye Conference champion and ended up second in the 440.

At the 1960 Northwest Ohio District Meet, he qualified for the 100, 220 and 440 finals, but pulled a groin muscle during the event. With second-place finishes in the district finals, Atkins qualified for the state meet, but the injury kept him from qualifying for the state finals.

Katie (Marritt) Lusvardi

Lusvardi achieved nine letters in four different Ross sports — three in tennis and basketball, two in track and field and one in softball.

A two-time sectional singles champion and two-time district runner-up in tennis, Lusvardi, a 1984 Ross graduate, still has the desire to compete on the court.

“I used to be the 20-something tennis player who was beating all of the older women,” Lusvardi said. “I’m still scrappy out there and competing.”

In basketball, Lusvardi was the starting point guard for three seasons (1981-1984) under coach Sue Wolf. During the 1982-1983 campaign, Lusvardi averaged 12 points a game. The Little Giants had three winning seasons with her at the point.

But she recalled a blooper during her time as a high school hardwood player.

“I scored two points for Clyde, but we still won that game,” Lusvardi said.

In track and field, Lusvardi competed in the 400 dash and the 800 run. She played second base for the Little Giants’ softball team.

Jodi Kusmer

Softball has always been Jodi Kusmer’s sport of choice.

“I tried playing soccer, softball and other sports until fifth grade,” Kusmer said. “I just can’t ever remember not playing softball.”

During her three-year Little Giants’ pitching career, Kusmer compiled a 40-7 record with a 0.73 earned run average. She threw three no-hitters, 17 shutouts and won 10 one-run decisions.

In 1997, Kusmer went 14-3 and was named on the Northwest District’s first team. In the Great Lakes League, she was picked as the conference’s Player of the Year.

Upon graduation in 1998, Kusmer held five Ross records — lowest ERA in a season (0.53), fewest walks in a season (16), most shutouts in a season (8), most no-hitters in a season (2) and most strikeouts in a season (113).

David E. Liggins

Liggins, a 1976 graduate of Ross, earned three letters in track and field and two in football.

On the gridiron, he was the Little Giants’ top defensive player in 1974 and 1975. Liggins was Ross’s leader in interceptions and achieved All-Buckeye Conference first team status both seasons.

As a senior, he was named to the All-Northwest Ohio and All-Ohio teams. Liggins was a co-captain for the North squad in the Ohio High School Coaches Association All-Star Game at Ohio Stadium and was selected for the 1976 Big Ten High School Dream Team.

In track and field, Liggins was the Little Giants' captain in 1976. He cleared 13-feet, 6-inches in his best effort in the pole vault.

During his speech, Liggins pointed out a few influential people in his life.

"I have to thank God for this opportunity and thank my mother for her encouragement, support and love," Liggins said. "And I wish my father was here today to see this. He would have loved it."

After earning a football letter at the University of Cincinnati, he transferred to the University of Arizona, where he landed on the All-Pac 10 defensive team three times. When the Wildcats played in the 1980 Fiesta Bowl, Liggins was Arizona's MVP, making seven tackles, intercepting two passes and deflection another throw.

Liggins reflected upon some praise he received from another player during college playing days.

"One of the things I will never forget is, when I was in college, future NFL Hall of Fame defensive back Ronnie Lott told me that I was the best defensive player he's ever seen," Liggins said.

1994 Little Giants cross country team

Ross finished second in Ohio behind Cleveland St. Ignatius in the Little Giants' first appearance at the state meet.

Elder said he was proud to coach a team with the work ethic put forth by Jake Smith, Jeremiah Smith, Jibilian, Wagner, Dane Synder, Kurt Snyder, Gabel, Hill and Alexander.

"These guys wanted to run all of the time," Elder said. "They were running 6-10 miles per day during two-a-day practices. And not one of them ever missed a practice."

Elder said his team made of habit of starting its day with a 6:30 a.m. run before school. After showering and eating a light breakfast of toast, the Little Giants went to class before running some more after school.

"Our success didn't happen over night," Elder said. Every year, I took these guys to watch the state meet. We stood close to the course and saw the spirit of the competing teams. I think our success grew from that because our runners experienced it."

Jeremiah Wagner, speaking for the entire team, said there were two reasons Ross was able to accomplish its feat.

"Why did we have success?" Wagner asked. "We had success because we had a coach who motivated us very well and was a great leader and because of the close bond that we had ... and still have ... as teammates."

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Rick Boggs welcomes the crowd at the Fremont Ross Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony on Saturday at Ole Zim's Wagon Shed. (Vince Guerrieri | News-Messenger)