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Season of hope for Ross

BY JEFF ARENZ
Sports writer

Little Giants making smart decisions early on softball diamond

FREMONT -- Varsity softball coach Mike Gilbert has been impressed with the decision-making ability of his 2009 Fremont Ross Little Giants.

"It has been nice to know that we're making plays that I didn't have to tell them to make," said Gilbert, who guided Ross to records of 9-16 overall and 4-6 in the Greater Buckeye Conference in 2008. "In the past, if I had to tell them to make a play, that play was already over."

The Little Giants have gone through some lean times (35-64) since 2005. Entering his 11th season with a 150-104 mark, Gilbert believes Ross has improved, but is cautious to gage how much.

"On paper, I think this is the best team that we've had in five years," Gilbert said. "This team has a good blend of experienced and young kids, who have played a lot of softball."

"There is no drama with these girls," he continued. "I want them to perform better, and we'll see if that translates into more victories."

The Ross foundation begins with junior pitcher Jordyn Gallagher and sophomore catcher Casey Clark, who spent the entire 2008 season working together on the varsity level.

"It's really nice to have the two people, who touch the ball on every play, work as hard as they do," Gilbert said of Gallagher and Clark. "They all get along well and they want to win."

Gallagher, who hit .295 in 2008 and Clark, who added a .370 batting average to the Little Giants last season, are penciled into the third and fourth slots in the Ross batting order.

"For a power hitter, Casey makes contact all the time," Gilbert said. "Very rarely does she strike out."

Switch-hitting freshman McKenzie Schneider brings speed to the lead-off spot and to her position in center field.

"It's been a long since I've had what I consider to be the prototype lead-off hitter," Gilbert said. "McKenzie can bat from either side of the plate and she's extremely fast."

Schneider takes over for multiple All-GBC selection Britta Barron, who graduated in 2008.

Senior Katelyn Ruiz, who hit .330 one year ago, has the ability to make good contact in the No. 2 spot and can play in a variety of places, including designated player.

Junior Tayler Redinger (shortstop) and sophomore Christy Meggitt (second base) respectively supplant Ross graduates Suzanne Chudzinski and Stephanie Stout at the middle infield positions. Chudzinski and Stout left with seven seasons of combined varsity experience.

Redinger and Meggitt can add support in the Little Giants' lineup by hitting in the Nos. 5 and 6 slots.

Senior Ashley Saionz is back at her third base position and penciled into the No. 7 spot in the Ross batting order. Junior Alexis Schneider, the older sister of McKenzie, is expected to hit in the No. 8 slot and to spend time in right field. Senior Tashia Novitski adds another year of experience at first base and can hit in the No. 9 spot.

Junior Courtney Gabel is expected to patrol left field for the Little Giants, who have utility players in senior Missy Lewis and freshman Sarah Gowitzka.

"I want to be more aggressive, and I think we have the kids with experience who can be more aggressive," Gilbert said. "I also want them to realize that they can be aggressive without making stupid mistakes. I want them to be aggressive and not be afraid to make mistakes."

During Ross's scrimmage against St. Joseph Central Catholic on Tuesday, the Little Giants got defensive.

"I was pleasantly surprised to see the defense on the infield," Gilbert said. "I'm hoping that continues as we get closer the the season."

After going 30-0 in the league since 2006, Napoleon (26-4, 10-0) is the the GBC favorite in 2009. Marion Harding (19-9, 7-2) ended up in second place, followed by Sandusky (10-12, 4-5). Ross and Findlay (11-14, 4-6) tied for fourth, while Lima Senior (1-21, 0-10) finished last.

The Little Giants host non-conference rival Bowling Green in their season opener at 4:45 p.m. Monday.



Fremont Ross catcher Casey Clark prepares to throw during a non-conference doubleheader against Ashland last season at Alumni Fields. (News-Messenger file photo)