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Ross exhausted all options in playoff fight

Little Giants coach, administrators went to bat for gridiron squad

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FREMONT -- There are many factors that contributed to the Fremont Ross Little Giants narrowly missing the OHSAA Division I, Region 2 football playoffs in 2008.

For instance, the Ross offense was unable to score against Cleveland Benedictine after averaging 38 points per game through the first three weeks of this season. Another factor was the Little Giants' failure to tackle Findlay returner Mandela Sheaffer, who ran back the second-half kickoff for a touchdown. Both contests were the only defeats for Ross -- 12-0 to the Bengals and 37-34 to the Trojans -- in 2008.

However, a decision by Toledo Public Schools superintendent John Foley, along with Toledo Rogers principal Kelly Welch and Toledo City League commissioner Ed Scrutchins, to saddle Rogers with a forfeit loss for its players' involvement in an Oct. 3 fight with Toledo Central Catholic had a ripple effect on playoff scenarios in northwest Ohio.

The decision gave an Oct. 10 victory to Toledo Whitmer, the Week 2 opponent of the Little Giants. But because the Toledo City League game between Rogers and Whitmer was not played, and not rescheduled at any point, the OHSAA ruled it a no contest, which meant none of the Panthers' opponents received any computer points from it.

And because Ross did not have the opportunity to gain these computer points, it allowed Massillon Washington to narrowly overtake the Little Giants in the Division I, Region 2 standings after the Tigers defeated arch-rival Canton McKinley 17-0 on Saturday.

"I got together with (Ross football coach) Derek (Kidwell) and (Ross superintendent Dr.) Traci (McCaudy) on Monday morning and we contacted (OHSAA assistant commissioner) Hank Zaborniak Jr. in Columbus," Little Giants athletic director Art Bucci said. "We talked about the forfeit/no contest bylaws. (Hank) gave us the interpretation, which is that 'if no game partakes, there is no score and it never starts, it's no contest.'"

Zaborniak is the OHSAA administrator who is in charge of football computer rankings.

The Little Giants, who ranked ninth in the final regional standings with 21.4180 points and missed a playoff spot by 0.073 points, were one of 14 teams in Ohio to win eight or more games while failing to accumulate enough computer points to get into the playoffs.

"Hank asked us if it was fair and was it equitable," Bucci said of the OHSAA interpretation. "He said, 'It's not fair to Ross because you're not in the playoffs, but it is equitable because everybody has to be treated equally.'"

"Dr. McCaudy and Mr. Bucci worked extremely hard Sunday and Monday to pursue this," Kidwell said. "It's a technicality of what's written because a forfeit is a competition that is started and can not be finished, according to the state's bylaws. Any competition that is not started by two teams is called a no contest. And when's there is a no contest, nobody is rewarded points for that."

Football is the only OHSAA-sanctioned sport that limits the number of playoff teams. It's also the only high school sport in the state that has a graduated points scale to determine playoff seeding based on regular season results. In all other sports, every school qualifies automatically for postseason play.

Bucci said the OHSAA had no involvement into the Toledo Public School's decision to sanction Rogers.

"Toledo Rogers made the decision to correct their children, and I commend them for that," Bucci said. "But I think they should have taken a good, hard look at the actual ramifications that it caused for a lot of other schools."

In addition to the Little Giants failure to qualify for the playoffs, Kidwell said Rogers' decision impacts Saturday's Division III playoff game between Bellevue and Tiffin Columbian.

"(The Rogers decision) cost Columbian a (first-round) home game," Kidwell said. For the second straight week, the Tornadoes will play at Northern Ohio League rival Bellevue. Columbian, which topped the Redmen 26-14 on Friday, is fifth-seeded (20.6667 points), while Bellevue is fourth-seeded (20.8000) for Saturday's first-round postseason battle.

Bucci and Kidwell believe everything that could be done to explore this decision was done.

"We thought this was a fair thing to do because we wanted to fight for our kids," Kidwell said. "(Attorney) Dan Brudzinski volunteered to write a letter to our school attorney in Columbus for examination. It came back with the outlook that the state didn't violate any bylaws or anything they have written in their books. They were just not proactive."

Kidwell said Brudzinski is also drafting a letter that will be sent to the OHSAA for it to examine the policy of not awarding points for games that are ruled as no contests.

"For us, there is no closure to the season," Kidwell said. "After Massillon beat McKinley on Saturday, I started getting text messages from players who were asking if we were out of the playoffs. I said, 'It looks that way, but I didn't know for sure.'

"That's when we started to do our homework (with Bucci and McCaudy) and started to pursue everything. It never got to an official appeal to the state because our attorney didn't think we had any grounds to win," Kidwell said.

"I had another team meeting on Monday to explain to our team that as a head coach and as school administrators, we did everything we could for them because that's what we thought was right," Kidwell said. "At that time, it was in the hands of the attorney, and that we would hear back from him by Tuesday. When heard around 10:30-11 a.m. Tuesday that we didn't have a case."

In the last three seasons under Kidwell, Ross has posted a 25-6 overall record. Yet, the Little Giants have only one playoff appearance in 2006 to show for it.

Bucci said there are two changes to the Ross football schedule in 2009. The Little Giants will begin the season by hosting Toledo Start at Don Paul Stadium. In Week 5, a new opponent is needed to replace Lorain Southview, which decided to look at playing a school closer to northeast Ohio.

Currently, Ross has five home games (Toledo Start, Tiffin Columbian, Cleveland Benedictine, Findlay and Napoleon) and four road games (Toledo Whitmer, Lima Senior, Marion Harding and Sandusky) scheduled for 2009.

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