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Fremont Ross lets lead slip but holds on

BY JEFF ARENZ

Sports Writer

FREMONT -- For three quarters, the Fremont Ross defense was in total control.

But before the Little Giants preserved a 22-14 nonconference win over Bloomfield Hills Lahser, Ross defenders had to patch the holes the Knights created during a furious fourth-quarter rally Friday night at Don Paul Stadium.

Terrence Haynes Jr. and Nicholas Woods-Gibby ran for touchdowns of 8 and 2 yards, respectively, in the final 6 1/2 minutes and Nick Roth recovered Lahser's onside kick with 1:56 left that gave the Knights a chance to drive for the tying score.

"We have to learn how to finish a game by playing four consistent football quarters," Ross coach Derek Kidwell said. "Our defense played outstanding for three quarters, but then they went into shutdown mode in the fourth quarter. We didn't stop Lahser when we needed to stop them and we just don't have a killer instinct right now. If we don't develop a killer instinct, teams are going to hang around and one of them might bite us."

As the Knights prepared to kick the ball away while trailing 22-14, Lahser's special teams unit shifted four players to the near sideline and left Roth as the only player lined up on the far sideline. Cody Henderson kicked the ball toward the far sideline, where Roth pounced on it at the Ross 44.

With the Lahser offense back on the field for its third drive of the final period, the Little Giants moved the Knights five yards closer to the end zone after committing a penalty for illegal substitution. On first-and-5 from the Little Giants' 39, Bobby Brandon overthrew the ball down the far sideline as Jacob Hatchett was left wide open. After a run for no gain and an incomplete pass, Haynes, Lahser's starting quarterback, tried the same pass with Hatchett, who saw the ball go through his hands.

"That wasn't the way we wanted to end the game," said Ross safety Brett Mierke, who intercepted the Knights' quarterbacks three times. "I think that we thought that we had (Lahser) put away and we let them come back a little bit. That's not how we're supposed to play defense."

Lahser coach Dan Loria was proud of his team's ability to rally.

"Our kids were extremely focused and extremely confident," Loria said. "No matter what happens on the field, we expect our kids, no matter the score, to be in the lead or have a chance to come from behind. And we almost did it again."

The Little Giants took a 10-0 lead during a 10-point second quarter.

Victor Layton capped an 8-play, 59-yard Ross drive by hitting a 27-yard field goal on the first play of the second quarter. The Little Giants led 3-0 after their defense forced Lahser to punt on its first three possessions.

Mierke stopped the Knights next drive with his first interception on pass thrown by Brandon to the Ross 12. After a 14-yard return and a Lahser penalty for a late hit, the Little Giants had the ball on their own 41.

Cody Foos engineered a Ross drive that saw him convert on third-and-9 at the Little Giants' 42 with a 10-yard pass to Mikel Stanley, who made seven catches for 47 yards. But the big blow came after Lahser declined a Ross penalty for having an illegal man downfield.

Instead of pushing the Ross offense back 10 yards, the Knights forced Foos to pass on third-and-11 from the Lahser 29. His strike went to James Aaron Spencer, who hauled in a 29-yard TD pass with 4:36 left in the first half.

"It was great to get those picks because it helped the offense get some points," Mierke said.

The Little Giants, who clung to a 10-0 halftime lead, ended up scoring 19 of their 22 points off turnovers by the Knights.

In second half, the Ross defense stayed strong. When Lasher drove into the red zone for the first time during the third quarter, Travis Maynard tackled Luke Dauch, who was attempting to pass during a faked field goal.

On the Knights next drive, Mierke stepped in front of a pass from Haynes, who finished 6-of-16 for 74 yards. Lasher was all but forced to pass as the Little Giants held the Knights to 84 yards rushing while Gibby ran 22 times for 74 yards.

Spencer, who led all rushers with 119 yards on 20 carries, helped Ross turn the Lahser turnover into points. His 45-yard TD run at the 2:06 mark capped a 7-play, 69-yard drive that handed the Little Giants a 16-0 lead.

A Lahser penalty for roughing the snapper on fourth-and-9 at the Ross 32 nullified Mike Showman's 54-yard punt and allowed the Little Giants to keep their possession alive.

But Mierke wasn't done terrorizing the Knights (2-3 overall). His third interception came on Lasher's next play from scrimmage. It was the second time Mierke picked off a pass from Brandon, who was 2-of-5 for 45 yards.

Foos, who was 15-of-23 for 176 yards, gave Ross a 22-0 lead after running for a 30-yard TD on fourth-and-2 with 11:19 left. But the Little Giants' quarterback lost two fumbles and was intercepted by Nick Emery on the first Ross possession.

With 4:25 left in the first quarter, Foos tossed a 49-yard pass to Kyle Damman, who was stopped on the Lahser 19 by Roth's touchdown-saving ankle tackle. On the next play, Foos fumbled the ball away to Emery after a 9-yard run.

"We played good enough to win, but we didn't play as well as we should have played," Foos said. "I made mistakes reading the coverages and (our offense) has a lot of room for improvement. It's something we need to work on going into league play."

Damman concluded with four catches and a game-high 80 receiving yards.

Ross (4-1 overall) opens its Greater Buckeye Conference schedule Friday, when the Little Giants host Findlay.



Fremont Ross ball carrier Greg Browns is hit by Bloomfield Hills Lahser's Nick Roth during Friday night's game. (Doug Hise | News-Messenger correspondent)