

## Pitching and defense key

BY KEVIN SHIELDS • Sports Writer • March 22, 2010

### Deep rotation, slick gloves give Little Giants hope

FREMONT -- Pitching and defense can go a long way in high school baseball.

Fremont Ross coach Mark King hopes both components can lead his Little Giants to a Greater Buckeye Conference title in 2010.

After finishing second in the GBC standings, with identical records of 12-13 and 6-4 in King's first two years as skipper, Ross may finally be built for a title run in year three. And it could start with its arms, instead of its bats.

Graduation took some pop out of the Little Giants batting order, as the offense will have some early season question marks. But King's defense should be a strong point -- mainly due to the return of his entire starting rotation on the hill.

"We don't have a guy that's going to throw 90 miles per hour and blow away a lineup, but what we have is depth," King said. "If we have a guy that's off, we can just run another guy out."

Heading King's rotation is senior Dexter Foos. However, Cameron Hord is just as capable of owning the Little Giant's role of ace, and could take it away.

"Dexter is a little more of a power pitcher," King said. "Then Hord has a nice breaking pitch, a nice

change-up and gets the ball down. I'm not sure yet who is No. 1 and who is No. 2, it's a right-handed and left-handed look though."

Either way, the duo, plus senior Cory Rohrbacher and junior Allen Lewis, make up, arguably, the GBC's top staff.

Foos (5-4, 3.75 ERA), who had 41 strikeouts a year ago, was named to both the second team all-GBC squad and the second team all-district club. Hord had a strong start and finish last season, but was hampered by an injury to his planting foot.

King says Hord has looked good off the mound from a good off-season workout regime. The same can be said about Rohrbacher, slated to be the third guy in the Little Giant rotation.

"We got some quality innings from Cory last season," King said. "He's been looking really good so far this season off the mound."

Whoever is on the Ross hill, will be backed up by a solid bullpen. Jesse Blue, Brian Mitten and T.J. Harkness are some of the names that could enter in relief.

"We can jog out a lot of people," King said.

Harkness, a sophomore that will also start at either shortstop or center field, will be the guy King counts on to close it out in the final inning.

"He's probably got the livest-arm of all our pitchers," he said.

But other than just shutting the door on the opposing team's batters, King thinks Harkness is the real deal in every component of the game.

"T.J. has a chance to be a very gifted baseball player," King said. "I think he's the whole package. He can run, hit for average and I think he has the potential to drive the ball as well."

Last season as a freshman, Harkness hit out of the nine-hole in the Little Giants lineup. He got penciled into the leadoff spot this summer on King's legion squad, but should be Ross's No. 2 or No. 3 hitter this time around.

Other returnees in the middle of the lineup will include first baseman Derek Waggoner, who will probably be the clean-up hitter, and left fielder Brandon Graeter.

"Brandon is just absolutely swinging the bat right now," King said. "He came out of his shell for us last season and he's in the top three for us right now in swinging the bats."

Expected to be at third base is freshman Tyler Wolf, while second team all-GBC selection Jake Hiestand (.333, 22 singles, 13 RBI and 13 balls on base) will be at second base. Another possibility at short is Derek Aldrich (.298, four doubles, 11 RBI), who may also be in the mix elsewhere. Sophomore Trent Stout is in the mix for playing time in the outfield as well.

"Technique-wise, I think everyone in this lineup can hit," King said. "But right now, four or five of the kids starting are going to be unproven at the varsity

level."

One thing Ross will have, though, is the ability to run and make things happen on the bases. With power spots lacking in the order as well, it could lead to the Little Giants playing some small ball.

"I think we've got more speed than we've ever had," King said. "We've been known as being a team that was challenged on the bases the last couple of years."

In total, nine lettermen return for the Little Giants who lost the services of Brad Woleslagel (catcher), Kodie Stout (outfield), Josh Mendoza (third base, playing at Bluffton University) and Tyler Hasselbach (designated hitter). Replacing Woleslagel behind the plate is Jordan Garcia, an athletic kid named the JV team's Most Outstanding Player in 2009.

"I actually think our talent is young based," King said. "But we've got an interesting mix of young and old. And it's still early, but based on the way we're hitting the ball and fielding it, I think we're way ahead of where we were last year. Offense is the big question mark for us."

King likes Ross's chances with most of the teams, including GBC champion Sandusky, losing a lot of bats in their lineups.

"I think going in, it's anyone's for the taking," King said of the GBC. "But I definitely like our chances this time."



Cameron Hord pitches during a game last season. The lefty will be counted on as one of the anchors to the Ross pitching staff. (News-Messenger file photo)