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Ross falls in girls' season opener

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OREGON -- When a program is struggling to find positives, anything can help, especially in the first game of the season.

The Fremont Ross girls basketball team dropped its season opener 54-26 at Clay on Saturday night, but even in defeat there were positives.

After falling behind 26-5 at halftime, the Little Giants (1-20 a year ago) could have let the Eagles run them out of the gym. Instead, they fought back and were only out-scored seven points in the third quarter, and Ross hung with Clay point-for-point in the fourth quarter.

"I like the way we responded in the second half," Ross coach Juan Vela said. "We started to be aggressive and were making plays on the ball, and we were looking to attack offensively."

Nicole Steinmetz led all scorers with 13 points for Clay. Meghan Scharer added 11 points and grabbed five rebounds. The Eagles held the Little Giants to 9-for-43 (21 percent) shooting. Clay was 20-for-47 (43 percent).

Despite the struggles from the field, the Little Giants' defense was the key in the second half. Ross shot 5-for-25 (20 percent) in the final 16 minutes, but forced Clay (10-for-23 in the second half) into 13 turnovers, as the Eagles had trouble with their transition game. Clay had jumped out to a big first-half lead in large part because of rebounding and pushing the ball up the court.

"In the second half, defensively, we were in the passing lanes and all five of our girls were ready to get a steal and were ready to play defense," Vela said. "In the first half, we were just intimidated, like it was a big championship game and we were just scared out of our pants."

"But I told the girls that it's just a high school basketball game and you're going to come out and do what we taught you to do, and they did that."

Senior guard Morgan Welty scored nine points in the final 16 minutes for the Little Giants, to finish with a team-high 12 points, including seven in the final quarter. Junior Kayleigh Baker added six points for Ross, while junior post player Casey Clark finished with a team-high eight rebounds.

The first half was a different story. While Ross came out flat and couldn't relax at either end of the floor, the Eagles controlled play and executed their offense.

"I like that we came out right away and got after it," Clay coach Roger Achter said. "We dictated the tempo, which I thought was really important to do, and we should've controlled it. I have three seniors that started and they know what we expect, and they set the tempo, and we executed and finished early."

Steinmetz had seven first-quarter points and teammate Tori Harper had six, as the Eagles had a 5-0 and 11-0 run in the quarter to lead 16-3 after eight minutes of play.

Clay scored 18 of its 26 first-half points in the paint, as it collected six rebounds on the offensive end to four for Ross. The Eagles out-rebounded the Little Giants 17-15 and forced Ross to turn the ball

over 32 during the game.

"We weren't being aggressive at all," Vela said. "I was really disappointed in the way we played that whole half."

But the Little Giants had no quit in them.

"(Ross) played hard the whole game," Achter said. "I give them a lot of credit because they never gave up. We jumped on them early and they kept playing hard and they kept trying to execute, which they deserve credit for."

Vela wasn't shy to acknowledge that Welty and Clark -- the two of his five returners who have the most varsity experience -- were big factors in the Little Giants battling back.

"Those two girls played pretty well for us," said Vela. "Morgan (Welty) didn't shoot the ball particularly well, but she was taking shots and being aggressive on the ball defensively. Then Casey (Clark) was being aggressive on the boards, and we hope their play rubs off on these other young girls."

Clay out-boarded Ross 37-34 and was 11-for-25 at the foul line, while the Little Giants were 6-for-18. The Little Giants were 2-for-9 from three-point range with the Eagles going 3-for-8.

"We can't beat ourselves up for losing the first game," said Vela. "Was I pleased with our performance? No. But I got to be patient, and we have to be patient. It wasn't a league game, and we have to get back to the drawing board and get ready for Tiffin Columbian on Tuesday."



Fremont Ross' Alyssa Palmer drives the lane against Oregon Clay's Megan Agoston during a game Saturday. (Lee Welch | News-Messenger correspondent)