

Coach Chad Long helps Ross find silver lining during pandemic

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With all the drawbacks and difficult circumstances, it was difficult to take advantage of the coronavirus.

Fremont Ross coach Chad Long did. The Little Giants found a silver lining, during a pandemic, to earn Long status as News-Messenger coach of the year.

The program used unlimited coaching starting in June to help it win five of 11 games. It won once in 2019.

Coronavirus protocols allowed small groups to develop an advanced grasp of the offense.

"We were allowed as much time as we want, with X amount of kids," Long said. "So we got a head start on the offensive game plan with the skill guys in June and July to prepare for the season. It helped coaches and players fully understand what we were trying to do offensively.

"It was a blessing. It allowed us to put in a whole new offense at that time."



The first phase of team interaction included one kid for nine players.

"It was (quarterback coach) Jalen Slick and the offensive guys," Long said.

"They ran through everything. (Offensive coordinator) Eddie Baptista had a group and ran through everything. The offensive line was elsewhere.

"We got the verbiage down, more than anything. We went off signals. Everything was left to right. In the first phase, we told them we'll tell you the play and signal it in. Do that more, kids pick it up and it makes it easy to go quick in the game and wear a defense down."

Baptista and Slick each helped boost the offense with their return. Baptista wasn't the coordinator last season, but he was on the staff.

Slick spent one year as Willard offensive coordinator.

"Slick is an unbelievable young coach on the rise," Long said. "He's very technical and he's good coaching quarterbacks, with a good offensive mind. He sees things that develop that we can run. Eddie is the real deal.

"When he had Hayden Lehmann, we threw up big numbers then. He was coordinator for two years. He's been with me since Day 1. We want to accomplish something here at Fremont. He knows what's needed and he's invested.

"He moved to Fremont invested in the community and the football team, same as I. He's a winner. We're winners, from tough programs."

Long was talking about Bellevue and Clyde, respectively.



Slick and offensive line coach Mike Rankin spent games above the sideline.

"We look at how many (players) are in the box," Long said. "It's a chess match. It was hard to pick up tendencies off signals. Are they trying to stop the run? Please do. We'll pass all over you. Do you want us to pass with no guys in the secondary?"

"Please do. The kids performed off what the defense was trying to do."

Ross used many of the same formations as previous seasons, but the actual plays were vastly different in the pass and run game.

"It was easier for Kaden to understand where the ball was going and his reads," Long said.



Holmes established a single-season school record with 33 touchdown passes in his second year as the starter. He passed for 2,575 yards and added nine scores rushing.

He rushed for 174 yards in a narrow setback to Toledo St. John's.

"Consistency on his part," Long said. "Knowing when to run the ball. After St. John's, he stopped running the ball. He needs to understand he's a dual-threat quarterback. He can run and throw, which is a nightmare for a defense.

"Knowing when to run and pass. His strength is dispersing the ball to everybody. As a defensive coordinator, he doesn't have a favorite target. He's not locked on to one."

Ross lost four games by eight or fewer points.

"He has the intangibles," Long said of Holmes. "He needs to find ways to win games. That's what we're missing as a team. Kaden can make those plays. The next step is finding way to win. It's taking it to the next level of what winning quarterbacks do."

The Little Giants beat Toledo Whitmer by two and Anthony Wayne by six. They shut out Normandy 71-0 for the second postseason victory in program history, which was paramount on the players' list of goals.

"It's been a while since we beat Whitmer and Anthony Wayne is a traditional power," Long said. "It showed our kids we could compete against top programs."

Receivers Bryson Hammer and Anthony Vann set school records as Holmes' classmates. Hammer had 775 yards on 64 catches and Vann added 12 touchdown receptions.

"As freshmen, they prepared for this year," Long said. "They knew what to expect. They weren't blindsided. They started because we prepared them for the years to come. We can demand more. Last year, you had to tell them route adjustments.

"This year, they knew when to break it off. We didn't coach them differently, we could be hard on them because they're experienced starters. A young team isn't an excuse, we have experience. Last year helped a lot for this year."

Two-way junior first-team all-Three Rivers Athletic Conference lineman Ethan Green and classmate London Johnson return as sizable blockers. Junior linebacker Labronze Barnett played a key role at running back.

Spencer Price is a senior receiver and Ethan Druckenmiller a classmate lineman.

"We'll be very good next year," Long said. "Probably the best in the tenure I've been here. Most of the kids we'll have for two more years."

Linebacker Carson Clark and safety Dion Bradley graduate on defense. Cornerbacks Kalijah Alejandro and Elijah Simms, and safety Hammer return on defense.

Long needs the unit to step up to take pressure off the offense next season. It can only benefit from practicing against Baptista's offense.

A few more stops, particularly of the timely variety late might have resulted in a few more wins this season. Ross needs to play complementary football to truly emerge from underdog status.

"Mason Villarreal will have to fill big shoes," Long said. "He's an inside linebacker. He played outside as a sophomore this year. Carson was the glue to the defense. We did a good job with turnovers early and then not so many.

"We'd bend but not break. Let's get three-and-out and get the offense the ball back. Next year, we're not going to bend, we're going to be a wall."

Ross' game against St. John's was pushed back one day because of the coronavirus and the Little Giants had a scare of its own that removed players from another game.

"Getting these kids to win games and showcase their talents," Long said.

"Being able to play football and allow the seniors to play."

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