

SPORTS



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

Pitching, hitting, defense

That's one pretty cool balancing act they're pulling off at St. Johns River State College.

The softball team has only one player among the state's top five in any major statistical category – Hunter Scharf, tied for third with 10 pitching victories – yet the Vikings are higher and hotter than they've ever been, at least in two decades as a fastpitch program.

They're ranked sixth in this week's Florida College System Activities Association coaches' poll, up two spots from last week. Thursday's split with Pasco-Hernando State – they lost the first game – ended their win streak at 10. That's still the longest on campus this year, two better than the pair of eight-game streaks the nationally ranked baseball team has put together.

It is a tribute to balance.

"We've been able to put it all together. We have good pitching, good defense and we score some runs. Last year, one of the pieces

always seemed to be missing," coach Katie Brosky said Thursday morning.

Not including the Pasco games, SJR State is batting .323 as a team, more than 70 points higher than their opponents. Freshman Savannah Montgomery leads the way at .459 with two home runs, seven doubles, a triple and 25 RBI. Sophomore Tikeya Strong is at .394 with a team-high 14 stolen bases. Sophomores Nicole Brock and Jennifer Valle are at .320 and .318 respectively, Valle with a team-high four home runs to go with 19 RBI. Though not an everyday player with a quarter the at-bats of Montgomery, Scharf is getting it done at the plate with a .368 batting average.

Scharf is 10-4 with a 1.96 ERA and three shutouts. Brock (8-2) has three shutouts, too, along with a 1.59 ERA and a team-high 50 strikeouts.

"We've got a great group of kids and they've got an expectation to win and they set out and do it," Brosky said. "They're excited, but they're not satisfied. They want to keep jumping in the pool. They have goals and being at the top of the (Mid-Florida) Conference is one of those goals."

It is a goal both admirable and formidable. If the Vikings' early success is a novelty – they were a mere 17-31 last season – it is old hat to conference rivals Central Florida (24-2) and Seminole State (18-2), the No. 1 and No. 3 teams in the same FCSAA polls that has the Vikings sixth. Two other Mid-Florida teams, FSC-Jacksonville and Santa Fe, are receiving votes.

Brosky isn't blinking in the face of strong opposition, though, and she wants her team to share her confidence as the conference opener approaches Tuesday at Lake-Sumter State.

"We feel we can hang in there with any team," she said. "Central Florida scores a lot of runs, but they also give up runs. Seminole doesn't give up many runs. But we can score.

"(The poll) allows them to see what other people think of them. It fires us up and makes us want to be at the top of the poll."