

SPORTS

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Clearing fence to state

Valle homer gets Viking softball team there

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One majestic, mighty swing and the St. Johns River State College softball team was going to the state tournament for the first time since 2011.

Jen Valle, one of the Vikings' power hitters, delivered the blow, a home run to center field to lead off the sixth inning against reliever Paige Curtis, and starter Hunter Scharf got to finish what she started as the Vikings edged host Daytona State College, 3-2, on Friday to clinch fourth place in the Mid-Florida Conference and the final postseason spot from the conference at the state tournament, set to begin May 1 at the Dodgertown complex in Vero Beach.

The Vikings (33-20) are slated to play at noon against Panhandle Conference champion Chipola College (39-10).

This will be the Vikings' third appearance in the state tournament in their fastpitch history. They went 0-2 in 2011 and 0-2 in 2007 when the tournaments were held in Pensacola and Auburndale, respectively.

This also marks the second time in the last five years that two separate SJRSC programs have made it to the state tournament in the same school year as the baseball team clinched a berth earlier this week. In the 2010-11 season, the volleyball team went to the state tournament in the fall, followed by the softball going to the state tourney in coach Katie Brosky's first year in charge. Both the volleyball and softball teams went 0-2.

"We are very excited about the opportunity," Brosky said. "It has been our goal from the beginning to play there at the end of the season. Our players have worked so hard all season and I am very proud of all they have accomplished thus far. We are going to go back to work next week and find ways to win a few more games."

Scharf (15-13) allowed six hits, the only two runs scoring on a Michelle Guzinski in the fourth inning Saturday, just before the game was delayed until Friday due to "threat of weather." The left-hander walked two and struck out four, three after the game resumed on Friday.

"Hunter was great today and all season," Brosky said. "Hunter was very focused today and threw some really nice pitches. Nicole (Brock, who was 15-6) threw well all week and was ready to go if necessary, but Hunter had a determination today to get the job done."

Scharf escaped jams in each of the last three innings.

With runners on first and second and one out in the fifth inning, Scharf struck out Madi Longanecker and leadoff hitter Kaitlyn Stoltz to end the threat. In the sixth, the Falcons (20-24 overall, 9-14 in the MFC), who needed a sweep of the scheduled twinbill to overtake the Vikings, put runners on second and third with two out, but Scharf got Hailey Jackson to ground out to shortstop Brock to end it.

In the seventh, the Falcons put runners on first and second with two out, but Scharf ended it when she got Curtis (8-8), who relieved starter Kaylee Allen to start the top of the fifth, to ground out to second baseman Alexis Martinez.

Strong finished 2-for-4 with two runs scored, while Brock, Valle and Martinez added hits.

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The second game of the doubleheader was canceled after the Vikings clinched the postseason berth. Even if the Vikings, who finished 11-12 in the MFC, had won the nightcap, it would not have mattered since Florida State College-Jacksonville (12-12 in conference) beat the Vikings three out of four times this year to claim third place.