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SJR State players pile up at the pitcher's mound while celebrating their championship.

Champs Again

Vikings match 1966-68 teams with third straight title

BY ANDY HALL
Palatka Daily News

A big mistake opened the door, but make no mistake – a three-peat is not the byproduct of luck.

A bases-loaded pickoff throw to an uncovered first base allowed the tiebreaking runs to score and the St. Johns River State College baseball team eased home for a 10-6 victory over Seminole State, locking up its third straight Mid-Florida Conference championship Saturday at Tindall Field.

Second-place Santa Fe having lost earlier in the day to Central Florida, the Vikings needed only to defeat Seminole to clinch. The Raiders didn't go quietly, knotting the game with a three-run homer in the second inning and taking the lead on a two-run shot that followed a two-out error in the fifth. But the ill-advised pickoff throw and a wild pitch accounted for three runs in the Vikings' decisive four-run sixth.

Ranked first in the state and second in the nation

for weeks, SJR State is 44-8 overall and 19-4 in the conference. Santa Fe, which chased the Vikings as relentlessly as Central Florida and Seminole had in the previous two title seasons, fell to 30-10 and 17-6 with its 10-4 loss at Central Florida. The Saints and Vikings were to have completed last Monday's rain-out on Sunday, but the game was cancelled.

The three-peat is the second in St. Johns history, duplicating the achievement of the 1966-68 teams.

"You can't say enough about these guys," said SJR State coach Ross Jones, who is taking the Vikings to their fourth state tournament in six years, having qualified as conference runnerup in 2010. "We're 44-8 but it's never been real easy. We've had so many close games.

"Santa Fe just didn't want to go away. You go back and it was that 6-5 win (on March 30) on two errors in the bottom of the ninth that decided it."

Seminole made two errors on Saturday. The first was a whopper.

The Raiders led 6-5 when Wes Weeks led off the

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St. Johns sixth with a single to left. Walks to Harlan Harris and Myles Straw loaded the bases for Kyle Hann, who chopped a single down the third-base line, scoring Weeks to make it 6-6 and keeping the bases loaded.

On came Nathaniel Lowe, a .374 batter with a team-high 16 home runs and 50 RBI. The bases were empty and the Vikings had a three-run lead by the time he was finished at the plate.

Even though he struck out.

But first, Seminole reliever Mitch McCarthy fired a pickoff throw to an uncovered first base, allowing Harris and Straw to score and sending Hann to third. Hann came home on a wild pitch and it was 9-6.

That was more than enough cushion for Kyle Kalbaugh, the remarkable St. Johns reliever who notched his 10th win of the season – tied with five others for first in the nation – all but

one of his wins out of the bullpen. He also has two saves and a 1.60 earned-run average.

“If he’s not conference pitcher of the year, I don’t know who is,” Jones said.

Kalbaugh centered in the sixth on Saturday, allowing three hits but no walks and one strike-out over four scoreless innings. Center fielder Straw saved a run in the eighth with a running, snow-cone catch after a two-out error.

“That’s a pretty good outfield, isn’t it? They made some big-time plays,” Jones said.

St. Johns broke on top with a three-run first featuring consecutive two-out, RBI singles from Alec Dowell, Matthew Rhodes and Cletis Avery. The Raiders’ Malcolm Smith tied it in the second with a three-run homer off Andy Toelken, but the Vikings regained the lead in the home half when Hunter Alexander drew a bases-loaded walk, scoring Harris, who had singled, and Straw came in on a wild pitch.

Seminole got one run back in the third and took its only lead on Mitch Reeves’ two-run homer in the fifth. But the 6-5 edge lasted only until the sixth.

St. Johns padded its lead in the eighth when

Alexander doubled, scoring Lowe.

Reeves was 4-for-4 when he came to the plate with two out in the ninth, only to ground into a fielder’s choice that forced Luke Suchon at second and touched off a celebration at the mound.

SJR State president Joe Pickens posed for postgame photos with the team. Jones considered it most appropriate.

“I’ve said it a million times – this isn’t a one-man show,” the coach said. “Without Joe Pickens, without his support and the investment he made in this program, this isn’t possible.”

The Vikings have played their last home game of the season, but Tindall Field will be the site of a state tournament play-in game at 4 p.m. Tuesday between Gulf Coast and Eastern Florida, the third-place teams of the Panhandle and Southern Conferences, respectively.

St. Johns will open state tournament play at 10 a.m. Friday, May 8, against Suncoast Conference runnerup State College of Florida/Sarasota-Manatee at Joker Marchant Stadium in Lakeland.