FCSAA-NJCAA Region 8 Baseball Tournament

Photos by TOM HAGERTY / Special To The Daily News

Above, Myles Straw (12) is greeted by his St. Johns River State College baseball teammates after scoring the go-ahead run in the top of the 17th inning on a Wes Weeks single. Below, SJRSC reliever Dalton Whitaker throws a pitch to the plate in the bottom of the 17th inning.

On The Edge of Seventeen

Vikings outlast Gulf Coast in 5-hour, 1-minute marathon to stay alive in event

By Andy Hall
Palatka Daily News

LAKELAND

Not having worked more than three innings all season, St. Johns River State College baseball closer Tyler Carr fairly insisted on going nine-plus on a hot spring afternoon, the season on the line.

He more than passed the test of endurance.

Taking over in the seventh inning of a game that once seemed secure, Carr pitched into the 16th. Little-used Dalton Whitaker struck out two with the winning run at second, then the Vikings unloaded for seven runs in the 17th inning for a 16-9 defeat of dogged Gulf Coast State in an FCSAA/NJCAA Region 8 elimination game that consumed five hours and one minute.

Consumed is the key word.

"That game was just grueling. Both these teams were exhausted after the ninth inning," said SJR State coach Ross Jones, whose club coughed up a 9-2 lead, but then turned the Commodores (36-21) away after they had placed the go-ahead run in scoring position five times from the seventh inning on.

St. Johns, too, had its chances as the day wore on before Wes Weeks' RBI single broke a 9-9 tie in the 17th. Nick Agosto's three-run double helped leave the Vikings with a huge cushion. The inning also included the fifth hit of the day from Matthew Rhodes, who did his best to keep it a nine-inning game, but had Trevor Davis' three-run homer glance off his glove back in the sixth.

The win moved the Vikings (47-9)

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SJRSC wins 1st state games in 38 years

By Andy Hall
Palatka Daily News

LAKELAND – The St. Johns River State College wasted no time in ending a 38-year state tournament dryspell over the weekend.

It didn't waste any arms, either.

Andy Toelken went 8 2/3 innings in Saturday's icebreaker, a 5-2 victory over Hillsborough Community College, and Daniel Williams pitched his first complete game of the year Sunday to beat Broward College, 6-1.

The Vikings weren't in big trouble in either game, leading 5-0 before Hillsborough put up single runs in the seventh and ninth innings. Hunter Alexander's grand slam staked them to a 4-0 lead in the third inning against Broward. Alexander also came up big on Saturday, delivering a two-run double in the first inning.

SJR State had not won at state since 1977 and was coming off a gut-wrenching loss to State College of Florida when it beat Hillsborough. Toelken (8-1) held the Hawks to four hits, striking out two and walking none. The next day, Williams (5-0) struck out four, walked three and scattered eight hits.

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into a 4 p.m. game today against Northwest Florida.

"What an incredible experience as a coach. You hope and dream they'll give that type of effort when it's all on the line. My team gave it to me today," Jones said.

Pretty much all the Vikings gave something.

Every position player got in the game. They used four pitchers and Jones credited Saturday and Sunday starters Andy Toelken and Daniel Williams with keeping the relievers fresh for Monday. Carr threw two pitches for the save against Hillsborough on Saturday and that was all St. Johns needed from its bullpen in either game.

Carr threw 123 on Monday, 74 for strikes. He struck out six, walked three and allowed three hits over 9 1/3 innings. Whitaker (2-0) struck out three of the five batters he faced.

"For Dalton Whitaker to do what he did and strike out two (with a runner at second in the bottom of the 16th) was huge," Jones said. "(Carr) kept getting better. His command and his location got better as he tired. He came into the dugout and said, 'Coach, you're not taking me out of this game.' He didn't have a drop left when I took him out."

Austin Bizzle, the fifth of seven Gulf Coast pitchers, went nine innings himself, striking out seven, walking two and holding the Vikings to three hits in a game that was 9-9 from the seventh until the 17th.

"Bizzle pitched his tail off," Jones said.

There was little to suggest the dam was about to burst in the top of the 17th even after Myles Straw – making his 10th plate appearance – greeted the Commodores' Austin Howze (4-3) with a double, hustling his way into scoring position after center fielder Woody Harris bobbled the ball. Kyle Hann bunted him to third and the dangerous Nathaniel Lowe was given an intentional pass, setting up a potential double play that would have sent the game into the 18th.

But no.

Hunter Alexander walked, loading the bases for Weeks, 0-for-6 to that point. Weeks lofted Howze's next pitch to left center for a single, scoring Straw and leaving the bases loaded. Rhodes followed with an RBI single and then Agosto drove a bases-clearing double into the corner in right. That did it for Howze, but Collin Morrill doubled home pinch-runner Nico Torino to make it 16-9 before C.J. Butts could stop the bleeding.

Walks and errors helped stake SJR State to its huge early lead, but starter Trae Ratliff developed control problems and the Commodores collected 10 hits off Kyle Kalbaugh, who took over in the third and worked into the seventh. Carr completed the inning, but not before two errors helped tie the game. The Vikings also failed to turn a relatively easy double play just before Davis' two-out homer in the sixth.

"We got sloppy in the middle on defense with a big lead, but then we made the plays we needed to make," Jones said.

Three stood out.

With a runner on third in the eighth, shortstop Hann fired home after a ground ball, starting a rundown that also included catcher Harlan Harris, third baseman Alexander and Carr. In the 11th, Carr, Lowe and Hann combined on a pickoff. And in the 13th, when, with Davis on first and nobody out, Alexander fielded a sacrifice bunt, fired to Lowe at first and ran back to third in time to tag Davis – who did not break stride after rounding second – for a 5-3-5 double play.

Rhodes' 5-for-9 performance led a 13-hit offense. Straw and Lowe had two hits apiece. Agosto, Alexander, Weeks and Morrill had one each.

Hunter Jones (5-1), the coach's son, will start today against Northwest Florida State. Jones is one of two St. Johns pitcher who has yet to appear in the tournament.

"We're going to get these guys back to the hotel, get them hydrated and get them rested," coach Jones said. "We're going to give it the best we can."

SJRSC

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Their effectiveness and endurance would loom large on Monday, when the Vikings went through four pitchers in a 16-9, 17-inning win over Gulf Coast.

"Those two kids – two freshmen – have really grown up this season," St. Johns coach Ross Jones said. "They're premium strike throwers. We won the turnover battles (by avoiding walks and errors) in those games."

Alexander helped put both pitchers in a comfort zone. His double to left scored Myles Straw and Kyle Hann as SJR State broke on top Saturday. The Vikings doubled the lead on Nathaniel Lowe's long home run to right center, a two-run shot with two out in the fourth.

Cletis Avery drew a leadoff walk in the sixth, moved up on Harlan Harris[' bunt and scored when Straw singled to right.

When the Hawks edged within 5-2 on Brenden Overton's two-out, RBI double in the ninth, Jones summoned Tyler Carr, who extended his school saves record to 13 by getting Derek King on a comebacker.

Straw was 3-for-4 on Saturday. Hann and Wes Weeks had two hits apiece.

Alexander's 2-for-4 Sunday included the third-inning slam to the berm in left field at Joker Marchant Stadium. Straw, Hann and Lowe had walked in front of him. Alec Dowell followed with a single off pitcher Tony Massaro and would go on to score on a wild pitch.

Lowe, who went 2-3, scored after a single in the ninth. Alexander and Dowell both walked, then Weeks hit a sacrifice fly.

The Seahawks got their only run in the fifth.