

# SPORTS

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B SECTION

## SJR STATE VOLLEYBALL



Photo courtesy of SJR State

Viking sophomore Juli Hicks goes up during practice with Madison Speyerer in the background.

# Third-Year Plan

## Committed to making state, Vikings set to open season

By **MARK BLUMENTHAL**  
*Palatka Daily News*

In his third year as head coach of the St. Johns River Community College volleyball team in 2006, the late Brian Pappas got his Vikings to the state tournament, winning a match against conference rival Florida Community College-Jacksonville while there.

In his third year as head coach of the St. Johns River Community College volleyball team in 2010, Scott Conkling got his Vikings to the state tournament, though they would be two and done.

This year marks St. Johns River State College volleyball coach Matt Cohen's third in charge. And he believes they, too, can be state-tournament bound.

"This year, we've gotten to that point where all the athletes in the gym can contribute in many ways," Cohen said. "And as for the conference, I don't know where we fit in, but I know we're better than we've been in my three years and our athletes are balanced and unique. Our top two or three players don't fall too off down to our last two or three players."

Cohen lost a number of players, most notably the graduated Jenna Swaffer, a setter who contributed a lot to the team's 16-21 mark last year, the most wins the program had since 2006. And another key contributor, Samantha Loe, went back home to St. George, Utah, with health issues, according to Cohen.

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# Vikings

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But back this year to take on a lot of the load is returning sophomore Juli Hicks, a middle blocker from Texas, as well as Shannan Wood, another middle blocker from Crawfordville Wakulla. Another experienced player returning is outside right hitter Ashley Smith from Coral Springs Taravella.

"Juli has provided the experience along with Ashley Smith," Cohen said. "I credit our entire sophomore class in creating this family-like atmosphere we have and working with each other. But if one girl deserves credit, it's Shannan Wood because she is like the team mom out there and is very vocal as a leader. She kept everyone on the same page and is a positive voice."

Cohen has tapped into volleyball-rich Texas for some more key recruits this year. Zhartaezia Bradley, a freshman from John B. Connally High in Austin, will be one of the leaders at the middle blocker position. Jenica Ramos, a freshman from Cedar Ridge High in Round Rock who Cohen said comes from a rich family volleyball tradition, will join returnee Madison Speyerer at the setter position. And Courtney Mitchell from

**Head coach:** Matt Cohen, eighth year (third at SJRSC).

**Career record:** 154-130. Last year's record: 16-21.

**Assistant coach:** Matt Heffner.

**Roster:** Shannan Wood (sophomore middle blocker/Crawfordville Wakulla); Madison Speyerer (soph. setter/Winter Haven); Jamie Holton (soph. outside hitter/Alachua Santa Fe); Juli Hicks (soph. middle blocker/Canyon Randall, Texas); Ashley Smith (soph. outside hitter/Coral Springs Taravella); Marina Torres (soph. outside hitter/Sebring); Zhartaezia Bradley (freshman middle blocker/Austin John B. Connally, Texas); Isabella Caraballo (fr. outside hitter/Lake Placid); Tatiana Lopez (fr. outside hitter/Orange Park); Dani Jaramillo (fr. libero/Issaquah, Wash.); Courtney Mitchell (fr. outside hitter/Porter, Texas); Victoria English (fr. libero/Winter Garden Foundation Academy); Courtney Chappell (fr. outside hitter/Gainesville P.K. Yonge); Jenica Ramos (fr. setter/Round Rock Cedar Ridge, Texas).

Porter High, just outside of Houston, will bring her 6-foot frame to the outside as a hitter.

Another newcomer who can be a factor is libero Dani Jaramillo from Issaquah, Wash., just outside of Seattle.

"We have a nice balance of freshmen and sophomores, though the sophomores don't have quite the experience you'd want," Cohen said. "So in that respect, we're young. But on the junior college level, you're used to reloading every year. It'd be nice to have Samantha back or anyone else we should have back, but we have other kids coming in who can fill the role."

And in the past few years where Central Florida, Daytona State and Santa Fe, the three newest programs to the Mid-Florida Conference,

have dominated, Cohen doesn't see it like that this year, even though in the first NJCAA Division I poll Central Florida is ranked 16th and Santa Fe is 17th.

"It's interesting," Cohen started. "Last year, it was a sophomore-dominated conference and Central Florida returns one player. Daytona returns one full-time starter and FSC-J graduated its whole lineup. Santa Fe returns the most players, but lost their two outside players and libero. We had our losses, too, so I really don't know where we fit in. I guess in six weeks when the conference schedule starts we'll have a better idea, but we're going to need to play well and maybe sneak up on someone. We've transitioned away from being the weakest team in the conference and we'd like to jump over two teams in the conference."

And if the Vikings do that, it means an automatic state tournament berth, one of three to be handed out within the conference.

"I had not known the (two previous) coaches got this team to the state tournament in their third years, and that's now a challenge I look forward to taking," said Cohen, who takes his team to the Spartanburg Methodist (S.C.) Tournament this weekend to open the season. "I'm excited to get started."

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