

SPORTS

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B SECTION



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

Big one, but just one of 24

Today begins a three-game series that not only will tell much about Mid-Florida Conference baseball, but has the potential to shake up state rankings.

Three-time defending MFC champion St. Johns River State College is in Gainesville for a 3 o'clock game with Santa Fe. The three-time defending conference champion, SJR State is 30-5 overall, 11-1 in the league. Santa Fe is 27-4 and 8-1. The Vikings are ranked third in the FCSAA coaches' poll. The Saints are No. 1.

Big game.

But only one game. One out of 24 conference games.

It is with that in mind that St. Johns coach Ross Jones is turning to Andrew Vaccacio, a lefthander who has made a single start and pitched in six games this season – none of them conference games – to start today.

A few reasons.

Most important, Jones wants his starting pitchers operating on a full five days' rest. Ace Andy Toelken (6-0, 4.04 ERA and 56 strikeouts to just four walks in 55 and two-thirds innings) had his last start pushed from Saturday to Sunday because of threatening weather and Jones wants to be sure Toelken is at his best when he sees Santa Fe on Saturday at Tindall Field.

"An extra day allows that," Jones said. "It wasn't a consideration just for Andy. It would mean all three starters (Toelken, Daniel Williams and Hunter Jones) coming back on four complete days of rest. I just know Andy is better on five days. So is Daniel. Hunter has never started on less than five days.

"Basically, I'm going to mix and match (pitchers). Trevin Eubanks will follow (Vaccacio) and Rhys Pollock, Jordan Kennedy and Ryan Ross."

Eubanks has made only four appearances – as with Vaccacio, no conference games – but Jones likes how both have thrown in practice.

Sending them against Santa Fe achieves another aim: The experience they'll get in a pressure situation could pay big dividends in May if the Vikings make another deep run in the state tournament. They finished third in Lakeland a year ago, but found their pitching resources exhausted in an elimination loss to the ultimate national champion, Northwest Florida State. Having gone with closer Tyler Carr for nine riveting innings in a 17-inning victory over Gulf Coast the day before, SJR State was reduced to pitching position players when other relievers struggled against Northwest Florida State.

Finally, today is only one game.

If the Vikings take two of three in this series – not to suggest today's "Johnny Wholestaff" approach is destined to fail – they're still in good shape in their bid for an unprecedented fourth straight conference championship. (Coincidentally, St. Johns' previous three-peat under John Tindall began 50 years ago this spring.)

"It's just one game – one out of 24 and one out of four against Santa Fe," Jones said. "I tell our guys every day – worry about the name on the front of our chest. Who we play is not a factor."

Once the Santa Fe series wraps up with a Monday trip back to Gainesville, the Vikings take a three-game break from conference action – a home-and-home series against Pasco-Hernando and a single game with the Rollins College junior varsity.

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It was during the same period last year that Jones tweaked the lineup both for the conference stretch run and the state tournament. Hunter Alexander became the everyday third baseman, Matthew Rhodes moved to the outfield, Nick Agosto became an extra lefthanded bat in the order and Williams joined the starting rotation.

"This is experimentation time again," Jones said. "We've been staying late after practice."

He's optimistic that Alexander, who is third in the state with eight home runs but batting only .239, is about to emerge from his slump. As it is, the Vikings are batting a robust .324, led by Omar Villaman (.408, two home runs, 36 RBI), Alec Dowell (.393, five home runs, 38 RBI), Nick Koslowski (.347), Harlan Harris (.333) and Rhodes (.333).

Come what may this weekend, Jones is upbeat.

"I have confidence in our guys. I love our maturity. I'm sure we'll be fine," he said.

Andy Hall is sports editor of the Palatka Daily News.