

SPORTS

St. Johns softball drama

There will be drama involving St. Johns River State College softball Sunday afternoon in Gainesville.

That's where the Vikings have a high-stakes game with Santa Fe.

"I think we're more excited than anything else," first-year head coach Jill Semento said Friday. "We're just ready to figure out what our future holds."

Mother Nature produced this last-day epic when the host Saints called hours early Thursday to say the "threat of weather" was putting the game on hold for three days.

The scenarios are plentiful for Sunday.

The Vikings and Saints, who split a doubleheader on March 24 at SJRSC, will be playing the same time Florida State College-Jacksonville will be facing off with Seminole in Sanford. FSC-J is 8-14 and currently sitting in the fourth spot in the Mid-Florida Conference, the last spot for an MFC club to qualify for the state tournament. Both Santa Fe and SJRSC are 7-15, one game behind. Seminole swept FSC-J in a doubleheader in Jacksonville on that same March 24.

A Vikings sweep and a doubleheader loss by FSC-J would leapfrog SJRSC into the fourth and final postseason spot from the conference. If it's a Santa Fe sweep, then the Saints get the final spot.

But if the Saints and Vikings split and FSC-J gets swept again by Seminole, then the final playoff spot is occupied by three teams at 8-16, meaning a headache-inducing tiebreaker in which the three schools will be seeded first through third. The third and second seeds would play on Tuesday at a neutral site and the winner faces the top seed at Wednesday in yet another neutral site.

Semento would prefer a doubleheader sweep and hope for a Seminole sweep. And if the Vikings pull off the sweep, it will be right place, right time – the Vikings have not had one MFC sweep all season.

"It's frustrating because we've had every chance to get at least one sweep in our conference," Semento said. "But there's always a time for that to change and that could be Sunday."

Semento said she will start former Clay High standout pitcher Shelby Griffis (7-10) in the first game. As for the second game, Semento said she will either go with Chris Marasa (10-10) or sometimes-starter Skye Davenport (5-2), who has done well in spot starting.

"Santa Fe hasn't seen Skye pitch and when she's going well, she's tough to hit," Semento said. "We can pump Shelby up before the first game instead of having her wait until the second game to pitch. She's better mentally in that case."

If the Vikings do sweep the Saints and FSC-J does split the doubleheader with Seminole, a one-game playoff will be held on Tuesday at a neutral site field, most likely Santa Fe. It will mark the third time in the last 10 seasons the Vikings needed to win a tiebreaker to make the state tournament.

■ In 2007, the Vikings rode a combined two-hit shutout by Mariann McCall and Roxzanne Rawls and Katie Shannon's two-run single added the insurance in SJRSC's 3-0 win at Santa Fe against Lake City Community College to make the state tournament for the first time in program history.

■ In 2012, SJRSC faced Central Florida for the final MFC postseason spot on that same Santa Fe field. Central Florida's Tori Stamper and SJRSC's Amanda Smith engaged in a pitcher's duel. With the game tied at 1-all in the bottom of the seventh, though, Central Florida put runners on first and third with one out. Kayla Carroll hit a comebacker to Smith, who snagged the ball. But Smith inexplicably threw the ball to first for the out, forgetting to look or chase pinch-runner Gagby Valentin back to third.

See **BLUMENTHAL**, Page 9A

Blumenthal

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8A

Valentin easily scampered home with the winning run and Central Florida's berth to the postseason.

Semento remembers that brain-lock moment all too well – it was her one and only year as an assistant coach to former head coach Katie Brosky.

"I put that memory and season behind me because I had gotten the job as a coach at an Indiana boarding school and I was practically on my way there," Semento remembered. "A month later, though, I got the call asking if I wanted to be the head coach at Lake-Sumter, which I had applied for the previous year. I took it and returned to Florida."

Semento took the 2014 Lake-Sumter softball team to the state tournament and the program not only recorded its best record ever at 26-35, but also won a pair of state tournament games in Pensacola.

Now she'd like to do it again with her new team, though it won't be easy.

"When I went that first time with Lake-Sumter, it was special," she said. "We knocked off Miami-Dade, then beat Seminole. Now I have the chance to go back with this team. This team is pretty much different than the one I had at Lake-Sumter. But either way, I'm just excited to have the chance to go back to the state tournament."

May the players take the stage.

Mark Blumenthal is a writer for the Palatka Daily News. You can reach him at mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com or on Twitter @diabolicalmarky.