

# SPORTS

## FCSAA BASEBALL TOURNAMENT



Daily News file photos

Above, SJR State's Omar Villaman is fourth in the state with a .412 batting average. Below, 9-1 Andy Toelken will start Sunday's game.

# Target Left Behind

## Vikings test their luck in Lakeland without conference title and No. 1 ranking

BY ANDY HALL  
Palatka Daily News

**T**here was one less item among the baggage Friday when the St. Johns River State College baseball team embarked for Lakeland and its fourth consecutive state tournament.

The target.

Certainly the 40-12 Vikings will be targeted by 35-18 Northwest Florida State, their first-round opponent Sunday at 1 p.m. at Henley Field, but they're coming to town as Mid-Florida Conference runnerup and ranked sixth in the state. A year ago, St. Johns arrived as MFC champ, No. 1 in the state and No. 2 in the nation.

Indeed, the Vikings were conference champions the last three years and the dubious luck of the draw sent them against the state's pitcher of the year each time.

"It's the hand we were dealt," said SJR State coach Ross Jones. "I think we're loose, if anything, because we're not going down as conference champion."

The Vikings' draw this year? Merely the defending national champion.

Panhandle Conference runnerup in 2015,



Northwest Florida State got on a huge post-season roll, eliminating St. Johns in a semifinal at state and riding the momentum to the NJCAA championship. NWF isn't the same team this year – the Raiders were only 8-12 in their conference and had to beat State College of Florida in a play-in game just to return to Lakeland – but as it showed in the 9-6 win over State College, it has power to spare.

"They're a lot like us. They hit a lot of home runs. They like power hitters and power arms.

They're not going to play a lot of small ball," Jones said.

The Raiders lead the state with 67 home runs, topped by the colorfully named Handsome Monica with 13. The Vikings have hit 54, led by Hunter Alexander with 12.

"We've got to get off to a good start and not play with our backs against the wall," Jones said. "We've got to take it to Northwest Florida. I think we can."

Among other things, that means Alexander must continue a last-season surge that has seen his batting average rise 20 points after having dipped under .240.

"One thing that makes me feel good is how Hunter Alexander is swinging the bat. He's at his best when we need him to be his best," Jones said.

Second baseman Omar Villaman is hitting a .412 at the top of a lineup that is batting .321. Left fielder Alec Dowell is next at .359, followed by DH-first baseman Nick Koslowski at .353. Alexander, Dowell, right fielder Wes Weeks, center fielder Matthew Rhodes and catcher-DH Andrew Williamson all have at least six home runs.

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## Vikings

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Jones is trusting his ace, Andy Toelken (9-1, 3.94 earned-run average) to deal with the Raiders on Sunday with help from an able bullpen headed by closer Tyler Carr (9-1, 3.29, 13 saves). Working almost exclusively out of the pen, Pearson McMahan is 6-1 with a 2.61 ERA.

From that point forward, pitching will be handled by committee.

Toelken will make a second conventional start of the Vikings get far enough but otherwise, Jones is spreading mound time around in an effort to keep arms fresh for a deep run.

"After Game 1, I'm going to evaluate where we are. We've got to piece it together and not burn any one guy," he said. "The only way to do this is split everybody and pitch it in groups. That's the only way I see anybody being successful. We're going to have to use all 11 pitchers. If I start our No. 11 on day 5 and tell him we've got to get

seven innings, what are the chances of that happening?"

"The SEC tournament is eight teams in five days. This is (10 teams in) seven days."

With two little-used players suspended for disciplinary reasons, defensive depth becomes a concern in the event of injuries. But Toelken can play first or DH when not pitching, Collin Morrill offers versatility and there are three able catchers in Williamson, Harlan Harris and Jimbo Reemsnyder.

Though troubled with inconsistency down the stretch, the

Vikings posted confidence-building wins at home against MFC champion Santa Fe and on the road against Panhandle powers Chipola and Gulf Coast.

"I don't feel any different today than I did a year ago," Jones said. "We're one of 10 (teams) and we all have the same chance."

Held for years at Lakeland's Joker Marchant Stadium, the spring home of the Detroit Tigers, the tournament was moved to nearby Henley Field this year due to long-planned renovations at Joker Marchant.