

SPORTS

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FCSAA/NJCAA REGION 8 BASEBALL TOURNAMENT



TOM HAGERTY / Special To The Daily News

St. Johns River State College runner Cole Perry slides into home plate safely in front of Polk State catcher Isaiah Cullum as he tries to put a quick tag on him without the ball for a ninth-inning run Monday in the second round of the state junior college tournament.

A Heartbreaking Loss

Polk ties it in 9th, scores winning run in 10th to send SJRSC to losers bracket

BY ANDY HALL
Palatka Daily News

LAKELAND

The piecemeal pitching plan of St. Johns River State College was three outs from coming together.

But Cole Warcken kept fighting off 0-2 pitches.

He won that battle from SJR State closer Tyler Carr, chopping a double into left. Polk State College went on to tie the game, then capitalized on a two-base throwing error for the decisive run in the 10th inning of a 4-3

contest on the second day of the NJCAA Region 8/FCSAA tournament on a warm Monday at Henley Field.

Planned in advance to keep arms fresh for the grind of what could be a weeklong tournament, St. Johns used four pitchers to get to the ninth, allowing two runs on four hits. The Vikings were poised to continue in the winners bracket when Cole Perry rolled a single past first base to lead off the ninth, took second on Collin Morrill's groundout and scored on a close play following Matthew Rhodes' third hit of the day, a single to left center.

With SJR State up 3-2, on came Carr (9-2),

the school's career saves leader, in the bottom of the ninth. Warcken battled his way for a double, took third on a wild pitch and with the infield up, Skylar Frey grounded up the middle and shortstop Nick Owens had no choice but to settle for the out at first. Warcken scored and it was 3-3.

Sidearm reliever Justin Tworek (6-1) worked a 1-2-3 10th for Polk and in the bottom half, leadoff man Joe Strzelecki grounded sharply to third. Alexander fired high to Perry first, Strzelecki sped to third and scored the

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SJRSC

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winning run when Carr's 1-2 delivery skipped away from catcher Jimbo Reemsnyder.

The defeat dropped the Vikings (41-13) into a 10 a.m. losers bracket contest today with Northwest Florida State College, which eliminated Broward, 7-5, in the losers bracket on Monday. Polk improved to 36-15.

"Just like last year, it's a long way (to go)," said St. Johns coach

Ross Jones, whose 2015 club rebounded from a first-day loss to reach the state semifinals. "We knew the day was going to be tough. We played the Suncoast Conference champions, played them tooth and nail."

He wasn't about to blame two of his most reliable performers, Carr and Alexander.

"High chopper to lead off the ninth (leading to the tying run). Hunter made a great play (in the 10th), a hustle play. He took his shot (at first). It happens," Jones said.

It was a scoreless game until the

fifth behind SJR State starter Daniel Williams and lefty reliever Andrew Vaccacio. Vaccacio hit Warken with one out and with two down, reliever Pearson McMahan walked Frey. Cody Burgess blistered a two-run double down the line in right and the Eagles led 2-0.

"You look back – in the fifth inning, a walk and an HBP scored," Jones said. "That's all they got until the ninth. Other than that, we pitched well."

St. Johns pulled even in the sixth. No. 9 batter Harlan Harris beat out an infield hit with one out and the Vikings came up with

three straight two-out hits – Owens, Alexander and Alec Dowell, whose single to right scored pinch-runner Jordan Kennedy and Owens.

It was 2-2 and that's where it stood until the ninth.

The fourth and most effective of the Vikings' five pitchers, lefthander Ryan Ross pitched two and a third, striking out three and surviving a leadoff double in the seventh. He was in line for the win until the ninth.

SJR State outhit Polk 10-6. Rhodes was 3-for-4, Dowell 2-for-4.

Toelken goes distance in Vikings victory in opener

BY ANDY HALL
Palatka Daily News

LAKELAND – It registered on every level – pitching, hitting, defense and payback.

Andy Toelken pitched his first complete game of the season, Nick Owens was 5-for-5, Hunter Alexander had five RBI, and the glove work was sparkling Sunday as St. Johns River State College smoked defending national champion Northwest Florida State College, 11-1, in eight innings on a sunny Sunday afternoon at Henley Field.

It was only the second time in program history St. Johns won its state tournament opener, the first since defeating Brevard (now Eastern Florida State) in 1970.

Alexander's three-run homer in the eighth halted the game on the 10-run rule as the Vikings gained a measure of revenge on the club that ended its season in the 2015 state Final Four in Lakeland.

"We defended the field so well, we pitched, we

swung the bats – everything clicked," said SJR State coach Ross Jones. "We had so many guys who were here a year ago and (felt) the pain of giving up a six-spot in the ninth. Getting them in the first round of the tournament was something we wanted."

A freshman, Owens wasn't one of those guys who experienced last year's 6-3 loss to Northwest Florida, but obviously he'd heard the stories.

The first of his five singles plated Omar Villaman with the game's first run. Owens finished with three runs and two RBI, started a double play and made a handful of other sharp plays at shortstop.

"He's the best shortstop in the state of Florida," said Jones as his team cleared the home dugout. "You know what type of guy he is? The starters are letting the non-starters clean up. He's in there picking up cups. That's the kind of leader he is."

Third in the batting order Sunday after having

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TOM HAGERTY / Special To The Daily News
St. Johns River State College pitcher Andy Toelken throws a pitch during his complete-game win Sunday.

Victory

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been as low as seventh as his average dipped below .240, Alexander continued his late-season surge, going 3-for-4 with a pair of doubles to go with his clinching home run.

"He's hot just at the right time," Jones said.

The 13-hit offense was more than enough for Toelken (10-1), who was never in trouble. The only runner he allowed past second was Matt Hathcock, who homered to lead off the sixth.

Toelken struck out five, walked one and scattered four hits. Handsome Monica, the .353-hitting Raiders catcher who entered the game second in the state with 13 home runs, was a quiet 1-for-3.

It was an ideal performance from Toelken, who would have gotten the ball had the game gotten to the ninth.

"He threw 92 pitches," Jones said. "He's won 19 games in two years. He's a winner."

St. Johns took a 2-0 lead into the fifth, then got three straight two-out hits – singles by Owens and Alec Dowell and a double by Alexander to go up 4-0. The Vikings respond-

ed to the Hathcock homer in the top of the sixth with four runs in the home half. At second after a walk and a stolen base, Wes Weeks wormed his way through a rundown to get to third as Matthew Rhodes, who had grounded to short, sped to second. Villaman blistered a two-out, two-run double down the line in right and Owens and Alexander followed with run-scoring hits.

Villaman and Owens were aboard when Alexander pounded a 3-1 pitch out to left center in the eighth.

Villaman and Dowell were both 2-for-4. Weeks had an RBI double.