

SPORTS

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FCSAA/NJCAA REGION 8 BASEBALL TOURNAMENT



TOM HAGERTY / Special To The Daily News

Alec Dowell (20) is greeted at home plate by teammates Hunter Alexander (23) and Wes Weeks after drilling a first-inning grand slam on Tuesday against Northwest Florida State.

Slammin' Forward

Dowell's 2 HRs, 6 RBI help Vikings eliminate champions

BY ANDY HALL
Palatka Daily News

LAKELAND

The report was on the nose. The plan held together, barely.

Nothing like one guy's six-RBI game to make sure everything worked.

That guy was Alec Dowell, who hit two home runs, including a first-inning grand slam, as St. Johns River State College held on for a 9-7 victory over Northwest Florida State College, eliminating the defending national champion Raiders from the FCSAA baseball state tournament on a muggy Tuesday morning at Henley Field.

Wes Weeks also homered and all but one St. Johns starter had a hit, but the Vikings were made to sweat after having led 4-0, 6-1 and 8-4. Northwest Florida closed to within 8-7 before

Weeks homered with two out in the seventh.

A day after getting tagged with the loss in a 4-3, 10-inning contest with Polk State, closer Tyler Carr got his 14th save in his longest relief stint of the year. He got the last two outs of the sixth to leave the bases loaded – Northwest Florida (36-20) stranded 13, compared to four for St. Johns – and followed with three scoreless innings.

A rematch that briefly looked like it might be as easy as Sunday's 11-1 rout of the Raiders turned out to be a three-hour grind.

"It was. It was," said SJR State coach Ross Jones after his team improved to 42-13. "We expected it to be a grind."

But the Vikings stuck with their plan and followed the scouting report on NWF starter Cameron Sanders (4-1) to a T.

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Vikings

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"The report we had was that he was erratic and you had to get him early," Jones said. "We wanted him to work deep in counts and not give away outs."

Sure enough, Sanders walked Omar Villaman, Nick Owens and Hunter Alexander to start the game before Dowell drove a 1-1 offering out to left center. Sanders left two batters later, having recorded just one out.

Reliever Eric Orze allowed five runs, all earned, but got his team to the eighth within striking distance. The Vikings' first three pitchers – Hunter Jones, Rhys Pollock and Trevin Eubanks – got them through the fifth with an 8-7 lead. Eubanks left after a one-out single in the sixth and after NWF loaded the bases with a single and hit batsman from Jordan Kennedy, on came Carr.

A freshman from Niceville, where NWF is based, Eubanks (1-1) pitched two innings for the win in just his eighth appearance of the year.

"The goal for those first guys was to get us to the sixth or seventh," said coach Jones, who entered the tournament planning to piece pitching together when ace Andy Toelken was not the starter. "We'll have (Ryan) Ross, (Andrew) Vaccacio, (Pearson) McMahan and Harrison Hyatt ready for (today)."

That group will face a formidable foe today at 3 p.m. – the loser of Tuesday's later game between Panhandle Conference champion Chipola, which the Vikings beat twice during the regular season, and Santa Fe, which took three of four from SJR State en route to the Mid-Florida Conference championship. That game was postponed Tuesday night due to the monsoon-like storms that hit Lakeland. That game will be picked up at 9 a.m. with the loser having to face the Vikings at 3 p.m.

"They're teams we're familiar with," Jones

said. "This game is big for me. This group of sophomores has won 89 games – 89. Ninety would sound good."

He's not ruling anything out.

"We lost a heartbreaker Monday," he said, the Vikings having led Polk 3-2 in the ninth before it got away. "That's baseball. We've had our backs to the wall before."

St. Johns lost its first game in the 2015 state tournament before winning the next three to reach the Final 4 before being eliminated by the Raiders on their title run.

Dowell, whose second home run came in the fourth, finished 2-for-5. Villaman was 2-for-4 with a triple. The other hits were Weeks' homer, Matthew Rhodes' double and singles by Owens, Nick Koslowski, Harlan Harris and Cole Perry.

The two Viking runs not generated by homers came in the third. Koslowski got an infield hit with one out and scored on a double to by Rhodes, who came around on Perry's two-out single.