



St. Johns volleyball players huddle after practice Monday morning.

CHRIS DEVITTO / Palatka Daily News

Glass Ceiling

Vikings try to break into top three in rugged conference

BY MARK BLUMENTHAL
Palatka Daily News

Welcome to Jose Rivera's first year as head coach of St. Johns River State College's volleyball team.

He's learning his new players and the roles they can play on his team every day. He's figuring out what it's going to take to overthrow one of the three best teams in the Mid-Florida Conference and earn a postseason spot. Oh, and he just found out his right-hand man is moving on only Tuesday.

"Matt Heffner, my assistant, had the opportunity to become a fulltime employee at a four-year school in Oklahoma and took the job," Rivera said. "We wish him well. But he did quite a bit of the work in the background for me and now this has added on to the workload. It's now all on me."

But Rivera, who coached for three seasons at rival Florida State College-Jacksonville before taking this job last spring, is prepared for what lies ahead, mainly due to the young ladies he's coaching.

"What's standing out? The fact they are more like a little family," Rivera said. "They are working very hard together, pushing each other together to be better, but encouraging one another. They are really paying attention in terms of the little things, making sure they do them and holding each other accountable in a good way."

Rivera is especially appreciative of his three captains, two of which are returnees – Jenica Ramos, a sophomore setter from Round Rock, Texas, Courtney Chappell, a sophomore returnee at outside hitter from Gainesville, and freshman Sheila Engel, a take-charge freshman middle blocker from Chiefland High School.

"We will delegate some duties to them and I think they are able to handle them," Rivera said. "They'll be responsible for those things. We started that on day one with responsibilities in the gym. The best thing about those three is they are not above the work they are doing."

With All-Conference player Zhar Bradley and Courtney Mitchell opting to return home to Texas, only Chappell, Ramos, libero Dany Jaramillo and libero Victoria English return this season. There are three transfers— Briana Smith Hines played for Rivera at FSC-J last year, while Kaley Cox comes to SJRSC after one season at Webber International and Venezuela native Mariafernanda Bolivar moves in from Polk State College.

Rivera also has high hopes for the freshmen, including Engel, Clay High grads Haley Bookstore at setter and Ashley Finegan at right side, and Kaedi Gillman in the middle. For Gilman, a it is transition from her more comfortable outside hitter when she was *Daily News* Player of the Year for Interlachen High last year.

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Vikings

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Gillman is the first Putnam County player to be part of the St. Johns volleyball roster since current Palatka High coach Vicki Newton played for the Vikings in the 2006 and '07 seasons.

"We moved her to middle hitter and she still has to learn a lot of things about the position," Rivera said. "But she's very athletic, very smart and she has done a good job. She did play some middle at (Interlachen), but the college game is not the same speed as the high school game. In the college game, there could be multiple sets to the middle."

Just like he had in accumulating a 50-52 record at FSC-J, Rivera knows the beasts he has to best in the MFC.

"Central Florida is the toughest team in the conference," he said. "I don't know if anyone on the roster is from the U.S. They're all from different parts of the world. Santa Fe is always experienced and well-

coached. And Daytona State is also going to be good. You have no off-days or off-weekends in our conference matches."

The conference matches don't start until Sept. 20 at Lake-Sumter. His first match with FSC-J is Sept. 22 at home, then at FSC-J on Oct. 11. The first home match will be

Sept. 6 against Eastern Florida and the first matches that count will be in Spartanburg, S.C. next Friday and Saturday in a four-match, two-day event.

On Friday, SJRSC will host Edward Waters in a 3 p.m. pre-season match.

"The major objective is to go to the state tournament," Rivera said. "I know last year, this team accomplished a lot (when it went 25-9, its best season ever under former coach Matt Cohen), but it is a completely different group and schedule we're playing. We want to be competitive and win at least 75 percent of our matches. And I want to shoot for the top three in our conference. Things can happen. You just never know."

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AT A GLANCE

Head coach: Jose Rivera, first year at SJR State (fourth year overall).

Career record: 50-52

Last year's record: 25-9, fourth in the Mid-Florida Conference

Assistant coach: none.

Roster: Briana Smith-Hines (sophomore middle blocker/Gainesville The Rock); Dani Jaramillo (so. defense-libero/Issaquah, Wash.); Mariafernanda Bolivar (so. outside hitter/Liceo Caracas, Venezuela); Victoria English (so. defense-libero/Orlando Foundation Academy); Courtney Chappell (so. outside hitter/Gainesville P.K. Yonge); Kaley Cox (so. outside hitter/Clay); Jenica Ramos (so. setter/Round Rock Cedar Ridge, Texas); Shannon Farley (freshman outside hitter/Tarpon Springs East Lake); Sheila Engel (fr. middle blocker/Chiefland); Edmary Basco (fr. outside hitter/Ocala West Port); Olivia Brady (fr. right side); Kaedi Gillman (fr. middle hitter-outside hitter/Interlachen); Yoally Figueroa (fr. defense-libero/Orlando Lake Nona); Haley Bookstore (fr. setter/Clay); Ashley Finegan (fr. right side/Clay).