

SJR STATE BASEBALL 2017



Photos by CHRIS DEVITTO / Palatka Daily News

Above, Justin Smith bunts in the batting cage. Below, head coach Ross Jones works with lefthanded pitcher Scott Kobos.

Lots to Replace

But there's a good mix of returnees, transfer, freshmen

By **ANDY HALL**
Palatka Daily News

It isn't that St. Johns River State College did not return quality players from its fourth straight tournament baseball team, but numbers were an issue after the Vikings left Lakeland last year.

Sophomores returning from the 2016 Mid-Florida Conference club accounted for:

- 16 out of 58 home runs
- 15 out of 59 stolen bases
- 7 out of 42 pitching victories
- 1 out of 16 saves

There was work to do on the recruiting trail and it could not be limited to high schools.

"We still want to build with freshmen, but going in I knew we'd have to replace some guys with transfers to level the playing field and we did — three positional, three on the mound," said SJR State coach Ross Jones, whose ninth season in charge begins with a Friday doubleheader at Abraham Baldwin College in Tifton, Ga.

The mix seems to be ideal.

"I love this team. They work hard to do the right things. Truly a low-maintenance group," Jones said. "Top to bottom, this is the best I've had from a student standpoint and a talent standpoint."

The returning players, though few, are accepting the challenge of leadership, starting with righthander Pearson McMahan at the top of rotation. He was 6-1 with one save as a freshman, primarily as a middle reliever. Another sophomore, Trevin Eubanks, is challenging for a starting role



after limited work out of the bullpen. Transfers Clay Helvey (College of Charleston) and lefthander Scott Kobos (North Carolina-Asheville) are the other projected starting pitchers.

"The way the schedule sets up, we're probably going to go with four-man (rotation) a lot in conference," said Jones, who traditionally has preferred three for MFC play.

He compares the staff of four lefthanders and seven righthanders favorably with 2013, when the Vikings won the first of three straight conference championships. There's a lefthanded closer in sophomore Andrew Vaccacio and a righthander in NC-Asheville transfer Zach Greene.

See **VIKINGS**, Page 8A

Vikings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7A

"Is there a clear-cut guy? No, it will be matchups. That's the beauty of having lefthanders and righthanders in short relief," Jones said. "(Two-year closer) Tyler Carr won 17 games and saved 27. You're not going to replace that with one guy, but I think we have with two."

In middle relief, freshman Jagger McCoy has won praise for his changeup. Jaison Heard and David Litchfield could get some starts in February. Zach Blankenship and David Pattinson will get their share

of innings.

Offensive support shouldn't be an issue.

Sophomore shortstop Nick Owens leads off, having had a five-hit game in the state tournament last May on the way to all-tournament honors. Next is the leading hitter from fall practice (.445), freshman left fielder Kerry Carpenter.

The No. 3-6 spots are yet to be settled with third baseman Michael Koenig (South Florida transfer), right fielder Justin Smith (Miami transfer), sophomore first baseman Cole Perry and sophomore DH Nick Koslowski in the mix. Koslowski was a second-team, all-MFC pick in 2016.

The 7-9 holes will be filled by sec-

ond baseman Brian Moore (Georgia Tech transfer), center fielder Josh Broughton and one of two sophomore catchers, Jimbo Reemsnyder or Andrew Williamson.

There is sure to be some juggling before SJR State embarks on conference play in March.

"You start the season one way and something always happens," Jones said. "Someone gets hurt, someone's having a bad year, someone's hot."

Reemsnyder appears to be the No. 1 catcher, coming on strong late last season and having turned the corner this year, according to Jones. Williamson had six home runs in 90 at-bats as a freshman in 2016. Palatka freshman Clellan Barnes has

been adjusting to college pitching and has impressed with his bat since practice resumed this month, Jones said.

There's a comfort level not only with the starting infield — Perry, Moore, Owens and Keonig — but with freshman first baseman Jimmy Goldsmith and freshman middle infielder Pablo Cedeno, who missed most of fall practice with a wrist injury.

"We have the ability to make moves because of depth," Jones said. "I like the flexibility. Michael Koenig can play anywhere."

There's flexibility in center field, too, where Broughton starts but Kobos, primarily a center fielder for NC-Asheville, could be used against

certain pitchers. Carpenter and Smith look set in left and right with utility man Gabriel Coburn providing depth.

For all the talent Jones believes he has, there are concerns. The first is health on a team that had its share of injury issues during fall practice. The second is developing a killer instinct.

"We've got to learn how to win games. We've got to beat teams into submission," Jones said. "We can't have one- and two-run games against teams we're supposed to beat. If we play the way we're capable of playing, we can win."

"Do I expect us to be back in Lakeland? Yes. Do I expect us to make a deep run? Yes."