

DELIVERY



ANDY HALL / Palatka Daily News

Clay Helvey pitched into the seventh for St. Johns en route to his fifth win of the season.

Job One Done

Vikings notch fifth straight state tournament berth

BY ANDY HALL
Palatka Daily News

Job One is done. The St. Johns River State College baseball team can take a giant step toward Job Two on Friday.

The Vikings clinched their fifth consecutive state tournament berth on Wednesday, riding solid pitching and clutch hitting to a 4-1 victory over Lake-Sumter State College at Tindall Field. Clay Helvey and Zach Greene combined on a six-hitter and Michael Koenig hit a two-run homer and scored an insurance run in the eighth as St. Johns improved to 33-15 overall and 16-4 in the Mid-Florida Conference.

With four games to go in the regular season, the Vikings can finish no lower than second in the MFC.

They want first, and not just for the pride of accomplishment.

When they get to Lakeland, the difference between having finished first or second is the difference between a first-round bye and a Saturday, May 6 opener against the second- or third-place team from another conference and a Friday morning first-rounder almost certainly against the No. 1 team in the country, Chipola College.

"We're back in Lakeland. That's goal No. 1," said SJR State coach Ross Jones. "Right now, we're 0-0 again and going to Santa Fe Friday. That game is crucial to (state tournament) seeding. We'll go back to work Thursday and try to get

better hitting."

Santa Fe (31-11, 14-5), which had Wednesday off, leads the season series with St. Johns 2-1 and while a Vikings victory in Gainesville Friday wouldn't clinch the conference, a loss would give the Saints the tiebreaker when the dust settles on the regular season next week.

Two days after beating Seminole 8-5 on six hits, the Vikings got by with seven hits Wednesday against the last-place LakeHawks (13-28, 4-15).

But they were well timed.

In the first inning, Nick Koslowski began his 2-4 game with a one-out single that scored Kerry Carpenter, who reached on a fielder's choice and went to second when Justin Smith was hit by a pitch. In Koslowski's next plate appearance, he drove Matt Weidenbach's first pitch to left for a one-out double. On came Keonig, who would line a 3-2 delivery out to left for a home run and a 3-0 lead.

That's where it stood until the fifth, when Jason Baita's two-out single scored Aaron Simple, who had been hit by a pitch to start the inning.

Helvey got the Vikings to the seventh before giving way to Greene after a two-out walk.

"Helvey was really good at times and not really good at times," Jones said. "He'd hit a leadoff batter or give up a two-out walk — it's a focus thing — but he pitched out of some things. Zach Greene was real good tonight."

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Helvey (5-3) allowed one run on three hits over seven and two-third innings, striking out three and walking five. Greene gave up three hits but struck out five on the way to his second save, pitching a perfect ninth.

Greene was given a little breathing room in the eighth when Koenig reached on a fielder's choice, took second on a wild pitch and scored when Josh Broughton drilled a single up the middle.

Broughton joined Koslowski in going 2-4. The Vikings' other hits were Koenig's home run and singles by Cole Perry and Scott Kobos.

A lefthander, Kobos (5-2, 1.70 ERA) will start at Santa Fe on Friday.