

PUTTING DOWN THE BUNT



CHRIS DeVITTO / Palatka Daily News

Myles Straw, shown putting down a bunt against Broward in a game on Feb. 13, 2015, at St. Johns River State College, is one of eight former Vikings baseball players who are playing professionally.

The Next Level

8 former SJRSC baseball players have moved on to pro level

BY MARK BLUMENTHAL
Palatka Daily News

St. Johns River State College baseball coach and athletic director Ross Jones was on vacation with wife Tish in North Carolina, following their son Hunter, who is pitching for his summer-league team before he goes back to Valdosta State this fall.

While on the road trip, he started getting text messages from two of his former Vikings players.

He suddenly realized what was going on between Myles Straw and Reid Love.

"The two of them were having dinner last night," he said. "They were telling war stories about coach Jones and they started texting me and giving me a hard time (in kidding). It's when

I find out they were playing each other."

As a matter of fact, Jones said Love, who pitches for the Class A Advanced Frederick (Md.) Keys, will get the start on Saturday against the Buies Creek (N.C.) Astros, where Straw is the team's left fielder. The 25-year-old Love was drafted by the Baltimore Orioles in the 2015 Baseball Amateur draft in the 10th round, while the 22-year-old Straw was drafted in the 12th round of that same draft by the Astros.

Jones has spent this summer talking with most of his players through text and on the phone. Currently seven of Jones' former SJRSC Vikings are playing minor league ball throughout the country. And players like outfielder Nate Lowe and pitcher Patrick Duester are on their second teams this year within the organization.

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"I went through moving around several times in my career," said Jones, a former baseball star himself who played for the Texas Rangers and Montreal Expos minor league organizations, getting as high as Double-A Jacksonville in 1988. "It's not that big a deal about going from team to team. You know everyone through spring training and winter ball, so you know who your manager is through the spring training. The most stressful part about it is the moving because all your clothes might be five hours away and you get a phone call at 1 a.m. from the manager that you're flying out to somewhere like Tulsa. That's the tough part."

Jones said he will not be sticking around North Carolina long to catch the Love vs. Straw matchup in person on Saturday. But he's grateful to have many of his former players playing ball throughout.

The following is a list of Jones' players in the minor leagues currently.

MYLES STRAW

Team: Buies Creek (N.C.) Astros (Class A Advanced Carolina League).

Drafted: Houston Astros, 12th round, 2015.

Straw is hitting .318 with 59 runs scored, 13 doubles, six triples, one home run and 30 RBI while he has 25 stolen bases in 33 attempts and a .409 slugging percentage. Straw was named a mid-season All-Star with Buies Creek, a year after he was named a Class A All-Star with Quad Cities. In June, Straw was named Carolina League Player of the Month.

NATHANIEL LOWE

Team: Charlotte Rays (Class A Advanced Florida State League).

Drafted: Tampa Bay Rays, 13th

round, 2016.

Lowe just moved up from Bowling Green in the Midwest League, where he was an All-Star this year. In 10 games, he's hitting .250 with an RBI, two doubles and five runs scored. At Bowling Green, Lowe hit .293 with five home runs and 10 hits. At his previous stop, Great Lakes, he was 2-0 with a save in two opportunities, allowing 10 earned runs in 18 2/3 innings, giving up 15 hits, seven walks and 19 strikeouts.

PATRICK DUESTER

Team: Ogden Raptors (Pioneer League Rookie Ball).

Drafted: Undrafted. Signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers out of Tulane.

Duester has had a short time with Ogden where the reliever has a 0-1 record and 2.89 earned-run average with a save in two save opportunities. In 9 1/3 innings, he's walked two and struck out nine, given up three earned runs and 10 hits. At his previous stop, Great Lakes, he was 2-0 with a save in two opportunities, allowing 10 earned runs in 18 2/3 innings, giving up 15 hits, seven walks and 19 strikeouts.

REID LOVE

Team: Frederick (Md.) Keys (Class A Advanced Carolina League).

Drafted: Baltimore Orioles, 10th round, 2015.

Love, who gets that start against Straw's Buies Creek team on Saturday, is 1-3 so far with a 4.10 ERA in 48 1/3 innings, walking 11 batters, but striking out 42.

C.J. ROBINSON

Team: Batavia (N.Y.) Muckdogs (Class A Short Season New York-Penn League).

Drafted: Miami Marlins, 12th round, 2013.

Robinson, according to Jones, has been struggling with elbow issues and his numbers have suffered because of it. Moved down from Jupiter in the Florida State League, Robinson was 0-1 with a 1.79 ERA in three games, giving up one earned run in 5 1/3 innings, but allowing seven hits and six walks with four strikeouts in that time period.

PEARSON MCMAHAN

Team: Boise Hawks (Class A Short Season Northwest League).

Drafted: Colorado Rockies, fourth round, 2017.

McMahan, a major part of the success of this past season's Vikings, made his professional debut on Monday against the Vancouver Canadians. In three innings, he threw hitless shutout ball, striking out a batter.

JUSTIN SMITH

Team: Danville (Va.) Braves (Rookie Ball Appalachian League).

Drafted: Atlanta Braves, 20th round, 2017.

Smith, like McMahan, just started playing professionally and has so far had an interesting debut – he's hitting .321 with three RBI and three runs scored in his first 10 games. While he has nine hits, including a double, in his first 28 at-bats, he also has 15 strikeouts. It's seemingly hit or miss for the 21-year-old Smith.

HOWIE KENDRICK

Team: Philadelphia Phillies.

Drafted: Los Angeles Angels at Anaheim, 10th round, 2002.

Plagued most of his Major League career by injuries, Kendrick, who was the Mid-Florida Conference player of the year in his one year playing for coach Sam Rick with the Vikings in 2002, is hitting .349 with two home runs and 14 RBI with 15 runs scored in 33 games. But Kendrick, who turned 34 on Wednesday, has been on the disabled list twice this season, his second stint starting on June 28 with a left hamstring strain. He is doing minor league work now, and it has been reported he could be back with the Phillies by July 19, though one source has reported the Phillies may be shopping him around for a possible deal at the July 31 deadline.