

SPORTS



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

Vikings retool for another run at state tourney

The 2018 St. Johns River State College baseball team isn't going to be long on returning players.

It will be long on almost everything else – literally and figuratively, in the case of the pitchers.

Six-foot-seven, 275-pound Darin Kilfoyl is the longest of the Vikings' long arms, part of a pitching staff so deep that coach Ross Jones is considering going with 12 pitchers on the final 26-man roster instead of his customary 11.

"Our 12th pitcher is good enough to pitch significant innings," said Jones, who wrapped up the fall season at the end of October and has the players working in the weight room and in small group activities. "Our pitching is stronger than I thought I would be. We've got several freshman arms that have stepped up."

Just three pitchers return from a 37-18 squad that made its fifth straight state tournament appearance last spring, and each should contribute.

All-purpose reliever Jagger McCoy could be used in an Andrew Miller-type role. "Whenever we need a stop. It could be the fourth or fifth inning or the eighth or ninth," Jones said. "Jagger has picked up where he left off." Zach Blankenship is back at full strength after shoulder trou-

ble forced him from the rotation late last season. Jaison Heard has been called the biggest surprise of the fall after a relatively small role last season, when control was an issue.

Kilfoyl had a "great fall," according to Jones, also citing freshmen Elijah Gill, a lefthander, and Luke Sutko.

A potential closer, "Sutko can come over the top or from down under. He's the first guy I've had in a while that changes arm slots a lot," Jones said.

SJR State has also added a couple of impressive transfer pitchers, 6-5 Matt Marini (California-Irvine) and most recently Rian Haire (South Carolina), who will join the team in January.

"I'm going to have a staff of six righthanders and six lefthanders. I'm very pleased with where we're at from a pitching standpoint," Jones said.

Defensive support won't be lacking.

The veteran in the outfield is sophomore Kerry Carpenter, a solid hitter who moved from left field to right. Center fielder Justin Farmer played on the USA Junior National team last year and originally signed with Florida before he was steered toward St. Johns by none other than UF coach Kevin O'Sullivan. "Florida won the national championship and they've got their outfield back. Kevin and I spoke and he thought it would be best to spend a year or two somewhere else," Jones said.

There are three intriguing possibilities in left. Potential leadoff man Ray Gonzalez is the fastest player on the team. Bubba Sangster and Liberty University transfer Livingston Morris are sluggers whose power is compared favorably with Jake Schrader, the Vikings' single-season home run record holder, and Tampa Bay Rays signee Nate Lowe. Sangster or Morris could also play first or fill in the DH role.

The infield defense appears significantly improved with freshman shortstop Francis Villaman, the brother of former St. Johns all-state second baseman Omar Villaman – and, like Farmer, a former USA Junior National player. "Good arm strength, good range. He'll be really fun to watch," Jones said.

Sophomore Pablo Cedeno and Brian Moore are battling for the top job at second base. Third baseman Nick Romano could bat in the four or five hole with skills far beyond that of most freshmen, and Jose Varela offers quality depth on the left side of the infield.

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Behind the plate are freshmen Riley Wash, "a really good catch-and-throw guy," according to Jones, and Jorge Ramirez. Palatka's Clellan Barnes, who hit a couple of home runs in limited time as a freshman in 2017, had off-season

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shoulder surgery and is no long with the program.

The dust hasn't settled yet on the 2018 roster.

"We're in on a couple of potential transfer guys," Jones said. "Our emphasis is staying healthy. With a 26-man roster, that's always a concern. And we're young. Developing some chemistry is a concern."

Mid-Florida Conference runnerup the last two years, the Vikings won the title from 2013-15 and would like to reach those heights again, not only for pride but to avoid a newly instituted conference playoff that will decide the second state tournament representative.

Andy Hall is sports editor of the Palatka Daily News.