

## St. Johns River State softball 2018



CHRIS DeVITTO / Palatka Daily News

Above, St. Johns River State College relief pitcher Brandi Polk fields comebackers from head coach Jill Semento during a recent Vikings practice.

# Up To The Challenge

Vikings coach Semento knows what's ahead, looks to fast start with team

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**W**ith three years and 54 wins under her belt at Lake-Sumter, then two more years and 55 wins at St. Johns River State College as softball coach, Jill Semento knows the drill.

Starts in the fall, heads into January preseason training, and starts for real in January with the Mid-Florida Conference schedule a month later.

After that, there could be a postseason berth. It has not happened in her two seasons thus far at SJRSC, though Semento's 55 wins are more than any St. Johns coach has ever accumulated in their

first two years.

"It's always going to be a long season," she said. "It's just hard to tell with our conference schedule because it's always tough."

This year is going to be more challenging than in years past.

A playoff system has been adopted to cut state tournament teams from 16 to eight – two from each of the four conferences. The champion automatically goes, joined by the second-, third- or fourth-place team. There's a one-game playoff between the third- and fourth-place teams, then and the winner plays a best-of-3 series against the second-place team.

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## Vikings

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After two straight fifth-place finishes, Semento would like to make this the year the team makes the state tournament for the first time on her watch and the first for the program since 2015.

And in this, her third year, all of Semento's Vikings were recruited by Semento.

"There's a lot of optimism," she said. "This is my first full team and I've got all my sophomores back, so they've gone through the whole process of what I do and what I expect. They'll know me from start to finish."

That sophomore class is led by Selena Bezares, a sophomore designated player-infielder from Plant City Durant, who got off to a red-hot start at the JUCO Kickoff Classic in Clearwater this past weekend by going 10-for-17 at the plate with three home runs and 12 RBI, earning the first state player of the week honor of the season.

"With four multi-hit games to

start the season, she sure is ahead of where she was last year," Semento said. "I told her last year she was a great swinger, but not a great hitter because she didn't have much of a pitch selection. She was still successful, but this year, she's swinging at good pitches and that's making her a tougher out. On top of that, she has her power. Teams are going to have to be careful throwing to her. I think she'll easily get past the 11 home runs she hit last year."

Center fielder Taylor Nilsson from Gainesville and shortstop Maegan Stone from Clay are back in their positions. And returning from a 13-13 freshman year is left-handed hurler Madison Roeshink from Orange City University. She will be a starting pitcher along with hard-throwing, right-handed newcomer Ariel McCullough from West Nassau. Returning from elbow surgery is Lacy McClellan, who will be the main reliever. Freshman Brandi Polk from Port Orange Spruce Creek will also relieve.

Nilsson is flanked by a pair of freshmen in the outfield with Kelsea Friend of Boca Raton

Olympic Heights in left field and Jaime Valenta of Wesley Chapel Wiregrass Ranch in right. In the infield, Stone is flanked at third base by Alyssa Rosenbaum of Middleburg, a Tallahassee Community College transfer, and at second base by returnee Marissa Huggins from Eustis. Newcomer Reganne McCarl of Tampa Chamberlain will be at first base.

Behind the plate, Semento will split time between returnee Brittany Lewis of Gainesville and newcomer Selena Nunez, a transfer from Northwest Florida State, one of three transfers on the team.

Semento has two local products. She said Interlachen standout and 2016 Putnam County player of the year Rachel Johnson is coming off a big 4-for-4 weekend in limited action in Clearwater and will be relied upon to come up in a clutch at-bat or to play the field at third base, maybe behind the plate. And Palatka's Baily Bellamy is looking at some time at third, though Semento admits this year it may be hard to penetrate this starting lineup.

While she likes what she sees of her hitting and pitching, she says

her team's fielding is a work in progress. They committed nine errors in the five games that led to a 4-1 mark in Clearwater.

"The hardest part is trying to figure out who plays the best with each other," Semento said. "The more people talk, the better your defense is going to be. I pay attention with who communicates the most ... not just talks, but communicates. I do my best to put the most positive people on the field. We could do better defensively, but I can attest to errors we made (at Clearwater) were due to rust. In some cases, we over-did things. It's a work in progress, but we didn't screw up the routine plays. Once we settle down, we'll be fine."

The challenge to make the state playoffs, according to Semento, is there for the taking.

"We're focusing on just putting the effort into winning every single game we play," the owner of a 55-53 mark in her two years at SJRSC said. "If we can prove ourselves leading up to our conference play, I think it will help us do better in conference. I've said seemingly a million times, we don't have any easy conference to play in."

### AT A GLANCE

**Head coach:** Jill Semento, third year (sixth year total).

**Career record:** 109-174.

**Last year's record:** 27-30, tied for fifth in the Mid-Florida Conference.

**Assistant coaches:** Taylor Douglass, Chandler Bridges.

**Roster:** Alexis Adams (sophomore pitcher/Yulee High); Selena Bezares (so. infielder/Plant City Durant); Marissa Huggins (so. utility/Eustis); Rachel Johnson (so. infielder-catcher/Interlachen); Brittany Lewis (so. C/Gainesville); Lacy McClellan (so. pitcher-INF/Baldwin and Darton State College); Taylor Nilsson (so. outfielder/Gainesville Buchholz); Selena Nunez (so. C/Apopka & Northwest Florida State College); Madison Roeshink (so. P/Orange City University); Alyssa Rosenbaum (so. INF/Middleburg and Tallahassee Community College); Maegan Stone (so. INF/Clay); Hattie Baldwin (freshman INF/Hilliard); Karsyn Barnes (fr. OF/Tampa Steinbrenner); Brooklynn Basile (fr. utility/Tampa Riverview); Baily Bellamy (fr. utility/Palatka); Kelsea Friend (fr. OF/Boca Raton Olympic Heights Community); Savannah Law (fr. INF/Gainesville); Reganne McCarl (fr. INF/Tampa Chamberlain); Ariel McCullough (fr. P/West Nassau); Brandi Polk (fr. P/Port Orange Spruce Creek); Morgan Scala (fr. INF/Orlando East River); Jaime Valenta (fr. OF/Wesley Chapel Wiregrass Ranch).