

SPORTS

Safe at Second



CHRIS DEVITTO / Palatka Daily News

SJR State's Marissa Huggins steals second, beating the throw to Indian River shortstop Crystal Grimaldo.

Conference Confidence

Seventh-ranked Vikings take 22-7 record into MFC play after Indian River split

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The long, drawn-out non-conference schedule is over at last for the St. Johns River State College softball team.

Bring on the Mid-Florida Conference opponents.

The seventh-ranked Vikings split with No. 5 Indian River State at home on Thursday in the final non-conference matchup before opening up MFC play on the road Saturday against College of Central Florida, ranked fourth in the state.

The Vikings beat the Pioneers in the opener, 4-2, behind the pitching Ariel McCullough, then got hammered for 11 runs on 13 hits in the nightcap, falling, 11-2, in five innings.

"I'm ready for conference play to begin," third-year coach Jill Semento said as her team moved to 22-7, still the best start in the program's history and two-thirds of the way to the all-time best win total of 33 in the 2015 season. "I don't even know how to explain it – we've played so many games and now we get to confer-

ence and we're ready to play games that determine our postseason."

McCullough (13-3), who Semento said she will start in the first game against coach Kevin Fagan's Patriots on Saturday, went the distance on a seven-hitter, walking two and striking out seven. She got out of a bases-loaded jam in the fifth inning when shortstop Maegan Stone snagged a line drive, then threw to first baseman Selena Bezares for the double play.

Down 2-0 in the fourth inning, Bezares and Selena Nunez hit doubles for the first run. An error tied the game and then another error off a popup by Taylor Nilsson brought home Brooklynn Basile and Jaime Valenta with the go-ahead runs.

Nilsson, Valenta, Bezares, Nunez, Stone and Kelsey Friend all had one hit for the Vikings.

In the second game, Taylor Strickland went 3-for-3 with three RBI, including a two-run home run, one of three hit by the Pioneers (24-10). Kelsey Friend went 2-for-2 and Basile had a two-run home run to provide the only scoring for the Vikings.