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Marti Littlefield

Vikings expand horizons

Recommended by UF's Walton, Marti Littlefield looks to broaden softball recruiting territory

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Two things appealed to St. Johns River State College athletic director/baseball coach Ross Jones when he sought out Marti Littlefield as his next softball coach.

"The first time I talked to her, I could hear her enthusiasm," Jones said. "I loved that energy and how much she loves softball."

The other thing? "She's a winner," he said. "Anywhere she's gone, she's won. That's the kind of thing that sticks out with me. She was an All-American in softball at Valdosta State and is one of four softball players inducted into the Gulf South Conference Hall of Fame. That tells you the kind of player she was and everywhere she's coached, she's a winner."

Jones is banking on Littlefield making the Vikings' softball program into a winner starting next season. The Nashville, Ga., native was hired to take over the program recently.

There was something else that also appealed to Jones when he chatted with Littlefield.

"That first conversation she was out on a recruiting trip in Louisiana," Jones said. "I feel like it's so important for us to spread our wings in the softball world from a recruiting standpoint. We have not dipped outside of Northeastern Florida nearly enough. We've recruited from I-4 to I-75 and to I-10, but she has recruited in Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama and South Carolina and that was an important thing for me."

"I do have a connection to softball in all those states," Littlefield said. "So the Southeast I've got pretty covered. I know he did like that a lot."

Littlefield takes over for Jill Semento, who resigned after the Vikings struggled to a 5-19 mark in the challenging Mid-Florida Conference after the best start in program history at 22-7. The 27-26 final record included a last-place finish in the MFC. Semento left with an 82-81 mark in her three years.

Littlefield is St. Johns' fourth head coach in the last 16 years with no previous head coaching experience, following Toni Willis (2003-08), Becky Bennett (2009-10) and Katie Brosky (2011-15). Semento coached three seasons at Lake-Sumter before Jones brought her to Palatka in the summer of 2015.

A four-year starting third baseman and shortstop at Berrien (Ga.) High, Littlefield took her talents to Valdosta State, where she began her career as a left fielder before she moved on to shortstop. She was part of a Valdosta State team that went to the NCAA Division II championship game in 2010, where she was teammates with former Palatka High School two-time All-State pitching standout Margaret Carter, then was part of the Valdosta State

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team that won the Division II national championship in her senior season in 2012 with a 58-5 record. She hit .323 with nine home runs and drove in 55 runs.

Littlefield continued at Valdosta State as a graduate assistant for two seasons. She moved on to Young Harris to work as an assistant coach for a short time before coming to Florida to work at Northwest

Florida in Niceville for coach Jack Byerly. In her three years at Northwest Florida, the Raiders went 121-47-1 with two trips to the state tournament in Vero Beach.

"I am looking forward to mainly being able to lead my own program," said Littlefield, who turned 28 on Saturday. "It gives me an awesome feeling I can give back to the kids who are coming back and into the program and provide them opportunities. I'm excited to learn from them and for them to learn from me."

The first person to give Jones the

chance to talk with his new coach was University of Florida softball coach Tim Walton.

"Coaches rely on one another for advice," Jones said. "We rely so much on other people's recommendations. You don't want to make a mistake and the first person I talked to was Tim Walton. He said, 'You need to call Marti Littlefield. She's working hard and knows what she's doing.' From there, it led to me talking to Valdosta State about her, then to talking to Northwest Florida. I even talked to the baseball coaches

there about what they knew and they had nothing but positives."

Both Jones and Littlefield said it would take a little time before having players from outside of Florida buy into the Vikings program.

"I make no promises, but I would definitely not be surprised if we have more (outside) players on the team in a few years," Littlefield said. "I love my Georgia players. They can play some ball. I have a recruiting trip to South Carolina at the end of this month. So I'll be recruiting and looking at a lot of players."