

VIKING VOLLEYBALL

Old coach back for new opportunity

By **MARK BLUMENTHAL**
Palatka Daily News
mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com

The 2018 St. Johns River State College volleyball team marks a year of change on two fronts.

The first is that former coach Matt Cohen, who in the 2015 season navigated the Vikings to their best record ever at 25-9, has returned. The second is the Vikings are entering a whole new level of volleyball.

No longer are the Vikings in the junior college Division I land where playing powers like Miami-Dade, Central Florida and Daytona State are impossible. Instead, athletic director Ross Jones and school president Joe Pickens made the decision during the last offseason to move the Vikings to Division II, where the program will no longer be on the hook to pay for everything a student-athlete at the Division I level gets, but will stay on scholarship when it comes to the school-related essentials.



Cohen

“First year back and I’m super excited to be back here in (Tuten) gym and at St. Johns,” Cohen said. “I’m not treating this any different than before. We’ve had a couple of preseason tournaments to see what we look like before the real competition begins. We drove to Babson Park to Weber International for a tournament, then we hosted Edward Waters in a match that all 13 of our girls got action. I’ve been really pleased with what we saw. We’re getting better and better and if we continue to improve in the next couple of months, we can make some noise at the conference tournament.”

The new conference the Vikings will play in is the Sun Lake Conference, all featuring Division II state schools. This includes the Vikings, Pasco-Hernando, Lake-Sumter, South Florida State, Gulf Coast State and Florida Gateway, which returns to the athletics this year after 11 years away when it was known as Lake City Community College.

“All six teams will be in the conference tournament and the winner goes to the nationals,” Cohen said.

With the shift from Division I to Division II, so, too, was the shift in the roster. Only two players made the commitment to stay with the Vikings even though some of the amenities a Division I recruit were gone by dropping to Division II. German native Hannah Foecker is back as an outside hitter and Kelsi Crow, one of the bright players last year at setter, is back as well.

“We’re pretty excited that they returned,” Cohen said. “They were willing to come back with the change in the scholarship situation, which limited what they can have now.”

This includes players who came from out of state as well – one being middle blocker Kendel Hoges from West Orange, N.J., and two players who made an immediate impact in the Vikings’ first

See **VIKINGS**, Page 8A

Vikings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7A

regular-season tournament at Spartanburg Methodist College in South Carolina, outside hitter Lindsey Grossman, an outside hitter from Albany, Ore., who led the team in both kills and digs, and setter Jordyn Pruski from San Antonio, Texas, who led the Vikings in assists and tied for service aces.

“We’re trying to push the tempo to go fast here,” Cohen said. “We’re trying to speed up what our outside hitters and setters can do. The middle is fast and outsides are a little slower, but we’re trying to push that tempo to go faster and trying to play to our strengths. Once you see this team and how fast we go and how comfortable they are, they’ll be really good.”

Head coach: Matt Cohen, ninth year (fourth at SJRSC).
Career record: 179-139 (55-51 at SJRSC).
Last year’s record: 8-21.
Assistant coaches: Lindsay Laakso.
Roster: Kelsi Crow (so. setter/Harmony); Hannah Foecker (so. outside hitter/Sudlohn Gymnasium Remigianum, Germany); Abigail Barnhard (so. outside hitter/Ponte Vedra); Eden Beato (so. middle blocker/Menendez); Jordan Taylor (freshman defense/St. Augustine); Eden Edgell (fr. middle blocker/Menendez); Bianka Solorzano (so. defense/Miami St. Brendan’s); Arena Acree (fr. setter/Williston); Jordyn Pruski (fr. setter/San Antonio Smithson Valley (Texas)); Lindsey Grossman (fr. outside hitter/Albany Sprague, Ore.); Skyler Martin (fr. outside hitter/Leesburg First Academy); Selena Kriston (fr. defense/New Port Richey Mitchell); Kendal Hoges (fr. middle blocker/West Orange, N.J.)

The first home match is not until Sept. 19 against Pasco-Hernando. Until then, the Vikings will be logging a lot of miles and preparing for what is an adjustment season in a far more competitive conference for them. It has been eight years since the Vikings went to the state tournament on the Division I level – before Santa Fe, Central Florida and Daytona

State came in to start getting quality recruits and dominating the Mid-Florida Conference.

“It took the foresight of coach Jones and President Pickens by making this move that allowed us to compete against teams we feel we can go against and possibly go for the national championship,” Cohen said. “We still have some Division I programs on our schedule like East Florida, State College of Florida and Indian River, but we’re primarily playing against Division II schools now.”

As for the near future, Cohen spelled it out. “There’s 14 matches in which we’re going to do 31 hours of traveling and log 2,300 miles in the next three weeks,” he said. “I’m hoping that after those 14 matches and our 15th being the first conference match (Sept. 12 at Lake-Sumter) I really understand my team and just become more aware of our strengths and weaknesses and where we can just be better. I’m using this time to figure them out and they’ll use this time to figure me out.”