

SPORTS

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Pasco leans on experience to sweep SJR State

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Matt Cohen did not take long to answer the question about the difference between his St. Johns River State College volleyball team and nationally ranked JUCO Division II Pasco-Hernando.

"I look on our side of the court and I see five freshmen starting. When I look over at their side, I see five sophomores on the court," he said. "We're still trying to figure ourselves out at this point."

Still, at 11-6 at the midway point of the season, Cohen has liked what he's seen, even after a 25-23, 25-21, 25-18 Division II Sun-Lakes Conference setback to Pasco-Hernando State College Wednesday night at Tuten



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Pasco-Hernando's Camden Bitter goes to the net against Abigail Barnhard (22) and Eden Beato of SJR State.

Gymnasium, dropping the Vikings to 1-2 in the conference.

"I know this is all still a work in progress," said Cohen, who coached the

Vikings from 2013-15 as a Division I program before moving back to Arizona, then coming back this year. Even with the loss, the 11 wins are more wins than the Vikings had last year (nine) and as many as they had in 2016.

"I feel good with the progress we have made. Believe me, if we were 6-11 and not 11-6, I'd be a lot more concerned. We just played a nationally ranked team (Pasco-Hernando, 11-3, is No. 6) that finished sixth at the national tournament last year. Right now, both Pasco-Hernando and Lake-Sumter (which beat SJRSC last week) have established themselves as the teams to beat in this new conference."

According to freshman starter Lindsey Grossman, a native of Albany, Ore., the difference Wednesday was the energy level.

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"I think we're just as good if not a little better than (Pasco-Hernando)," said Grossman, who finished the night with 12 kills, a team high, and seven digs. "We've still got to work out some kinks. (Pasco-Hernando) played a much faster offense and they seem to have a lot more chemistry."

And that pushed the Bobcats past the Vikings in those first two sets. The Vikings held a 23-22 lead in the opening set, but a kill by Camden Bitter, who had a team-high 13 kills for the match, tied it at 23-all. An unforced error – one of 20 committed by the Vikings in the three games – gave Pasco the one-point lead, then another kill, this one by Tori Thomopolos, gave the Bobcats, now 3-0 in conference play, the first game.

"When that got to 20-20, it became bad volleyball for us," Cohen said. "It's not uncommon for a young team to do that. We're simply working to be better."

Down 22-18 in the second set, the Vikings ran off three straight points, the last one coming on a Grossman kill. But another timely kill, this one by Caslin Layer (seven kills) put the Bobcats back up 23-21. Another Vikings unforced error was followed by an ace from Natasha Bannister (seven kills, two aces) to put the Bobcats up 2-0 in the match.

In the third set, the Bobcats



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SJR State players cheer a point during Wednesday's home opener.

built a 16-8 lead and never let the Vikings get any closer than five points the rest of the way.

Four Bobcats – Bitter, Bannister, Layer and Abby Epstein – had seven or more kills. The Bobcats recorded 42 kills compared to 35 for the Vikings, who will host Eastern Florida at 6 p.m. Friday, then host a tri-match Saturday with Andrew (Ga.) and Trinity of New Port Richey, starting with

the Vikings playing Trinity at 2 p.m.

When asked about the starting lineup for the next time his team faces Pasco-Hernando Oct. 10 in New Port Richey, Cohen said he would not be surprised if it was a bit different.

"We got some girls coming off the bench who are figuring things out," Cohen said. "Kendal Hoges (a New Jersey native who had six kills coming off the

bench) did a nice job. Before long, she could be our most dominating player.

"Right now, we're 11-6 with another half the season to go," Cohen continued. "If we go 11-6 again in the second half of the year, that's 22-12 and that's 10 games over .500 with a young team. I know we have six more weeks together to learn about each other and get more mature. That's what it's all about with us."