

SPORTS

www.palatkadailynews.com

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2018

B SECTION

Tournament title would send Vikings to nationals

Florida Gateway first for St. Johns in Sun-Lakes weekend event

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

With the likes of Daytona State, Central Florida and Santa Fe in their old Mid-Florida Conference, the chances of the St. Johns River State College volleyball team advancing to the state tournament were slim and none and slim was slowly slinking out the side door.

So with the move from being a junior college Division I program to Division II, the opportunities have opened up for the Vikings, even if it meant some of the perks of being a Division I program went away. Only two players from last year's team that won just nine matches – front-line player Hanna Foecker and setter



SJR State's Hanna Foecker (11) goes against two Pasco-Hernando players in a September match.

Daily News file photo

Kells Crow – gutted it out and stayed with the program this year.

With those two players combining with the new players hungry to make

a name for themselves, the Vikings thrived again under Matt Cohen, their old coach back for his second turn in charge. The Vikings went 21-10 this

season and fared well in the newly formed six-team Sun-Lakes Conference, going 6-4 and finished third behind the two teams that swept the season series against them, Pasco-Hernando, which went unbeaten in the conference, and Lake-Sumter.

But the regular season is history. Now it's time to make a move toward a place the Vikings have never been – the national tournament. To get there, the Vikings need to win the championship game at 1 p.m. Sunday at the tournament host, top-seeded Pasco Hernando.

The Vikings begin the quest at 2 p.m. Saturday when they face the sixth- and last-seeded Florida Gateway, returning to volleyball this year after athletics had been shut down 11 years ago when the school was known as Lake City Community College. If the Vikings win, that will set up the fourth matchup this year

See **VIKINGS**, Page 3B

Vikings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

with the LakeHawks of Lake-Sumter, the second seed and who beat the Vikings two out of three matches this season. (The win came in a tournament and did not affect conference standings.)

"I think the growth from the start of the season to now has been tremendous," said Cohen, who recently won his 200th career match as a coach, 76 of those coming at St. Johns. "I'm really happy with how much we've grown in terms of our skill level and being able to run the system and trying to understand how it works with only two sophomores on our team."

The good news for the Vikings if they can get past Florida Gateway is they won that one match against Lake-Sumter on the same court they will play on Saturday. That was Sept. 8 in the Bobcat Invitational and the Vikings swept the LakeHawks, 25-14, 25-17, 26-24. Since then, the Vikings have lost to Lake-

SUN-LAKES CONFERENCE TOURNAMENT

Where: Pasco-Hernando State College.

Saturday's first round: 5. Gulf Coast State (6-12) vs. 4. South Florida State (8-13), noon; 6. Florida Gateway (10-16) vs. 3. St. Johns River (21-10), 2 p.m.

Saturday's semifinals: Gulf Coast-South Florida winner vs. 1. Pasco-Hernando (20-7), 4 p.m.; Florida Gateway-SJRSC winner vs. 2. Lake-Sumter (13-12), 6 p.m.

Championship: 1 p.m., Sunday.

Directions: Take SR-20 west for 25 miles to US-301. Make a left turn and travel 23 3/4 miles to NW 77th Street. Make a right turn and go almost a mile and a half. Turn right onto SR-326 and travel a mile and a quarter. Take the jughandle onto I-75 and travel 73 miles south to Exit 285 (SR-52). Merge onto SR-52 and head west for 17 miles. At Moon Lake Road, turn left and go almost five miles. Turn right onto Ridge Road and go a mile and a quarter before turning left twice. Then turn right into the parking lot.

Sumter by scores of 25-18, 25-14, 21-25, 25-23 at Lake-Sumter on Sept. 12 and 25-22, 25-21, 25-23, at Tutten Gymnasium on Oct. 2.

Cohen welcomes a rematch with the LakeHawks, knowing what's on the line.

"They're a really good team and they've played well against us," Cohen said. "It's going to be a much different feeling if we can get to that match. Now the

girls realize that if they don't win, they are done. The loser goes home. It's something my girls are excited for. They're hungry for that opportunity."

The Vikings have been led most of the season by front-line players Foecker, Lindsey Grossman and Skylar Martin, middle blocker Kendal Hoges and setters Jordyn Pruski and Crow. On Friday night, Cohen and the rest of his players find

out at the pre-tournament banquet held in New Port Richey who makes the first Sun-Lakes All-Conference team.

If the Vikings are fortunate enough to get past the LakeHawks, they most likely will be matched up with the established Bobcats of the host school, which swept the Vikings twice this year. If they could turn the tables on Pasco, the Vikings will be one of 16 teams heading to Charleston, W.Va., and to the Charleston Civic Center for the NJCAA Division II championship, which will be held Nov. 15-17.

No St. Johns team has played in a national tournament since the men's basketball team in 1967.

"Everyone is on the same page that if we don't play well, the season's over," Cohen said. "I think the girls realize of the position they've put themselves in to start off with, playing the weakest team in our conference first and being away from the top seed of the tournament. I think the girls are ready. We've been telling them we've been preparing for November and in a blink of an eye, it's here. It's crazy how quick it goes."