

SJR State Softball



Photos by FRAN RUCHALSKI / Palatka Daily News

Above, Sophomore Cardaejia Talley handles a play at third base during practice on Monday afternoon. Below, First-year head coach Marti Littlefield gives her team direction.

Feeling-Out Process

Season-opening tournament will tell new coach a lot about 2019 Vikings

BY MARK BLUMENTHAL
Palatka Daily News
mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com

New St. Johns River State College softball coach Marti Littlefield said she feels comfortable with her team going into the season. As far as how good the team will be, she's not willing to say just yet.

"I can have more words on them after our first tournament," said Littlefield, who will take the Vikings to the JUCO Kickoff Classic in Clearwater where they play five games over the three days. "As far as predictions go, I need to see the other teams in our (Mid-Florida) conference and if I get the time, I can do so this weekend."

Of course, that was the biggest obstacle for the Vikings a year ago. The Vikings got off to their best start in fastpitch history at 22-7 before having the conference schedule crash upon them to the tune of 5-19 to end up in last place and barely over .500 for the season at 27-26.

Unhappy with how the season ended, Jill Semento, who coached the Vikings for three seasons and finished with an 82-81 record, resigned, opening the door for Nashville, Ga. native Littlefield to take over. The 28-year-old Littlefield is the fourth Vikings 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). But the three postseason trips the program has made in this century came under two of those coaches: Willis in 2007 and Brosky in 2011 and '15.

But though she has no head coaching experience, there's plenty on her resume. As an assistant, she worked at Northwest Florida, Young Harris College in northeastern Georgia and was a volunteer assistant at her alma mater, Valdosta State, where she was the shortstop on the Division II national championship team in 2012, her senior year, hitting .323 with nine home runs and 55 RBI.

See **VIKINGS**, Page 9A

Vikings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8A

So in all of her years involved in softball, Littlefield said she knows what to expect with her any team she comes across.

"So far, I'm most impressed with how close they've gotten and how strong the bond of their relationships have become," Littlefield said. "I can tell in the beginning a couple of different groups formed, which is typical when you put 20 females together. But they've surprised me on how they've gotten away from that and are doing a lot more as a team off the field.

"In my past experience, the most suc-

Head coach: Marti Littlefield, first year. (Career record: 0-0)
Last year's record: 27-26, last in the Mid-Florida Conference.
Assistant coaches: Mike Sokol, Alissa Smith, Sabrina Hartsel.
Roster: Karsyn Barnes (sophomore outfielder/Tampa Steinbrenner); Brooklyn Basile (so. utility/Tampa Riverview); Baily Bellamy (so. utility/Palatka); Kelseia Friendly (so. OF/Boca Raton Olympic Heights Community); Abby Ferlin (so. catcher/Sharon Sharpville Area, Pa.); Lauryn Markis (so.

infielder/Jacksonville Mandarin); Savannah Law (so. INF/Gainesville); Reganne McCarl (so. INF/Tampa Chamberlian); Brandi Polk (so. P/Port Orange Spruce Creek); Cardaejia Talley (so. P-INF/Tarpon Springs); Jaime Valenta (so. OF/Wesley Chapel Winegrass Ranch); Hari Phillips (fr. OF/Starke Bradford); Bri Clapper (fr. INF/Orlando East River); Amanda Jessel (fr. P-INF/Deltona); JesseAnne Ackerman (fr. C/Gibson East Bay); Kendall Moody (fr. OF/Palatka); Maddie Thomas (fr. P/Tampa Sickles); Taylor Finney (fr. INF/Dover Strawberry Crest).

cessful teams are the ones who are the closest. I'm very happy and pleased with how our fall season went and how we're going into the spring season. I am optimistic."

It helps that seven sophomores return to the fold, including Kelseia Friendly, who will be back in center field to anchor the outfield, Reganne McCarl,

who delivered numerous hits last year, utility players Brooklynne Basile and Baily Bellamy, a Palatka High graduate, who had their moments as well, and pitcher Brandi Polk, the lone returning hurler back after a 1-1 season (16-game winner Ariel McCullough opted not to return for her sophomore year).

"The best part of having that many

sophomores back is a few of them have key leadership skills," Littlefield said. "They've been getting everyone else on board and I have much appreciation to those leaders who have stepped up."

As far as pitching goes, Littlefield said she will play it game by game with who she will use, saying she's very comfortable with having a four-pitcher staff, which is all right-handers – Polk, freshman Amanda Jessel, freshman Maddie Tomas and sophomore newcomer Cardaejia Talley.

Kendell Moody, who played center field for Palatka High, will join Bellamy as the lone Putnam County representatives on the team.

Though she may not have a realistic look into this season's schedule and where she thinks her team is going to

finish, especially in the meat-grinder MFC that includes the likes of Seminole State, Central Florida and Daytona State, Littlefield has first-year goals with her club.

"I would definitely like for us to compete better in the conference," Littlefield said. "One of our bigger goals for the next couple of years is to boost us up to be able to be near the top of the conference. For this year, I just want us to be able to compete better. I want to develop a level playing field for the teams we play in the conference."

"So far, from chit-chatting with the other girls on the team, everyone seems to be on board with everything and with our coaching and our styles in coaching," Littlefield said. "I'm looking forward to this (first) season."