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SJR State Baseball 2019



Photos by FRAN RUCHALSKI / Palatka Daily News

Above, Luke Belanger gives the Vikings versatility. Below, Jorge Ramirez debuts behind the plate after missing 2018 with an injury.

Mixing Speed and Power

Vikings hope to stay healthy and make it back to the state tournament after falling short last season

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Ross Jones knows he sounds like a broken record, but the St. Johns River State College baseball coach can't help it.

"Injuries are a big part of it," said Jones, who begins his 11th season in charge Friday with a doubleheader at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton, Ga.

Injuries last year left the Vikings with one scholarship catcher, created a defensive mess on the corners, cost an outfielder 30 games and kept a starting pitcher on the shelf for a month. They managed a 32-18 record and a No. 9 state ranking in the final poll – winning the season series with Mid-Florida Conference champ Santa Fe and beating national champion Chipola on the Indians' field – yet the season was viewed as a disappointment because they finished third in the MFC and missed the state tournament for the first time since 2012.

Injuries are creeping in as 2019 unfolds. The pitcher players voted the team's best last fall is out



for the year (Cameron Serada, elbow), the same starting pitcher who missed a month last year is out until March because of an unrelated issue (Darin Kilfoyl, wrist) and freshman infielder Ryan Romano is a few weeks away.

Even so, Jones is more optimistic than he was at this time a year ago, buoyed by the depth and skill of the outfield, a vastly improved infield and quality depth behind the plate. Not only that, the team had a fall grade-point average of 3.23.

"I really like this club. This team makes it fun to

go to practice," Jones said. "We haven't had a lot of headaches. The older I get, the more I appreciate that."

He likens this outfield to that of the 2015 conference championship team, only deeper, and calls center fielder/leadoff man Langston Provitt the program's best since Myles Straw, a September 2018 call-up of the Houston Astros. A former Ohio University defensive back who gave up football, Provitt is flanked by two other transfers, A.J. Mathis (FSU) in left and Sandon Witt (UCF) in right. Jones said all three could play center field, as well as sophomore Ray Gonzalez and freshman Michael Rosario. Outfielder/first baseman Bubba Sangster, a sophomore who had his own injury issues last year, has dropped 38 pounds and gained flexibility without losing power, Jones said.

Nick Romano has grown into his role at first after being thrown into the breach there in 2018, when he hit .316 with 10 home runs and 35 RBI. Francis Villaman, the brother of former Viking All-American Omar Villaman, has taken over at third after an uneven freshman season at short.

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"The biggest transition has come from Francis Villaman. He realizes he has something to prove. He is so much better offensively and defensively," Jones said.

Vanderbilt transfer Garrett Blaylock gives SJR state unusual size (6-foot-3, 215 pounds) at shortstop and three-hole power as a lefthanded batter. Jones likens switch-hitting second baseman Chase Malloy to Shawn Sanders, a valued middle infielder on two MFC title teams. Radford (Virginia) University transfer Luke Belanger can play any infield position and stepped into an outfield role during a preseason game to which the Vikings brought just three regulars.

Riley Wash, who caught practically every game last year is back with plenty of help. Jorge Ramirez has come back strong from an elbow injury that kept him out in 2018 and Coastal Carolina transfer Garrett Shephard is believed to be the team's best "catch and throw" catcher. The three will split time

at least until the start of conference play in March.

Even without Serada and, for the time being, Kilfoyl, Jones is optimistic about the pitchers on hand.

Lefthander Elijah Gill (7-2, 4.48 earned-run average), who led the team in victories in 2018 and has signed with East Carolina, will open Friday's doubleheader at ABAC. Game two opener will be Jordan Dubberly, who transferred from Georgia between semesters. He's a righthander, as are the starters for Sunday's home doubleheader with the Stallions, Coastal Carolina transfer Anthony Simonelli and Jackson Spiller.

The 6-7, 260-pound Kilfoyl (4-4, 3.86, 47 strikeouts in 49 innings should become a factor in the rotation by mid-March.

Jones hopes the four-game series with ABAC will begin a sorting-out process in the bullpen where Luke Sutko (3-3, 4.00, eight saves) was one of the state's saves leaders last year but has struggled with consistency so far this year. Israel Cordero, Evan Waterbor and converted shortstop Stephen Halstead are in the mix either as closers or setup men.

"Our bullpen right now – I fell pretty good

about it, but I haven't had that person step up yet. Too many roles are undefined," Jones said. "I've had effective closers before, but what made them so effective was the guys in front of them."

They'll have ample opportunities to prove themselves over the next month. St. Johns will play host to three tournaments, including the Kevin Miller Classic normally held in Panama City but relocated this year while Gulf Coast State College rebuilds facilities damaged by Hurricane Michael. Among the teams due in Palatka between the three events are Chipola, Gulf Coast, Northwest Florida, Miami Dade, State College of Florida, Broward and Hillsborough. Out-of-state powers like Florence-Darlington of South Carolina are coming, too.

"It's going to be tough. But that's what I was counting on," Jones said. "We may get into conference and feel like we've stepped down."

Not so. Santa Fe looks strong again and the Vikings will open MFC competition at Tindall Field March 2 against Lake-Sumter, which finished fourth last year but not only took two of three from SJR State but run-ruled the Vikings out of the conference tournament.