

Safe at Home



Photos by ANDY HALL / Palatka Daily News

SJR State's Garrett Blaylock beats the throw to Gordon State catcher Brian Davis to score on a bunt by Ray Gonzalez (below).

Simple Plan: Pitching, Defense

Two more victories for Vikings, who have allowed as many as three runs only once during 6-0 start

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Pitching and defense are getting it done for the St. Johns River State College baseball team in a 6-0 start.

There have been a couple of run-rule victories and a three-run, walk-off homer was the difference on Friday night, but the Vikings have yet to allow more than three runs and have given up as many as three only once.

It was more of the same over the weekend as the Kevin Miller Classic wrapped up despite iffy weather at Tindall Field. St. Johns took down a couple of Georgia schools, Andrew College 6-2 on Saturday and Gordon State 3-2 on Sunday.

The Vikings got by Gordon with just four hits, all singles, getting three freshmen to combine for 10 strikeouts in a six-hitter, facing the minimum over the last four innings with a one-run lead.

Gordon State is 4-2, the only losses a pair of 3-2 Classic contests with the Vikings.

"Pitching and defense again. We ran three



freshmen arms out there and they competed real well," said SJR State coach Ross Jones. "We made one defensive error the tournament (four games) – a pick in the rain. We've got to find ways to scratch out more runs, but the pitching we saw was outstanding."

The single error came after Gordon leadoff man Jesse Sherrill rolled a single into right to start Sunday's game. He raced to third on Jackson Spiller's wide pickoff throw, but Spiller almost escaped before Sam Kuchinski's two-out bloop single allowed Sherrill to score.

The Vikings were hitless until the fourth, when Michael Rosario's single up the middle sent Garrett Blaylock to third, Blaylock having walked and taken second on a bunt by Francis Villaman. Blaylock beat the tag at the plate after a bunt by Ray Gonzalez and it was 1-1.

The Highlanders regained the lead on a single and three walks in the fifth – all with two out – before Stephen Halstead, on for starter Jackson Spiller, served up a ground ball that produced the third out.

Back came the Vikings in the home half. Aboard on a fielder's choice, Langston Provitt stole second and scored when Nick Romano blooped a single into left center and the throw to get Provitt at third sailed into the visitors' dugout. Romano wound up at second and came home with the go-ahead run on Blaylock's single.

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SJR State had only one hit after that – Jorge Ramirez' single in the eighth – but its 3-2 lead was safe with Halstead and Evan Waterbor.

Halstead (1-0) got out of the fifth and worked a 1-2-3 sixth for his first collegiate win. Waterbor earned the save with six strikeouts without a walk over the last three innings; he gave up one hit, but Ramirez fired to shortstop Blaylock to catch Sherrill stealing to end the seventh.

"The pitchers have a lot of confidence knowing they don't have to make perfect

itches. Our defense was outstanding," Jones said.

Romano's two-run homer in the first put SJR State ahead to stay in Saturday's game with Andrew College.

A 2-1 lead grew to 6-1 in the fourth on an RBI double by Riley Wash, singles by Villaman, Luke Belanger and A.J. Mathis, a sacrifice bunt by Gonzalez and an error. A double play kept the Vikings out of an even bigger inning.

"We cost ourselves 5-6 runs (for the tournament) with baserunning mistakes. We could have stayed out of that double play. That'll cost us in conference," Jones said.

Starter Jordan Dubberly (2-0) struck out six, walked two and allowed two hits over five innings for the win.

Rosario and Austin Elliott got the Vikings to the ninth, when Luke Sutko came on with no one out and runners at first and second to get the save.

Normally hosted by Gulf Coast State College in Panama City, the Kevin Miller Classic was moved to Tindall Field this year while Gulf Coast continues to recover from damage inflicted last fall by Hurricane Michael.

The Vikings are home tonight to play 5-2 Polk State, then host the Capital City Bank Classic starting Thursday. They'll have games with Northwest Florida State, Broward, Miami Dade and South Carolina's Florence-Darlington Tech.