

SPORTS



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

■ Two recent distinguished alumni of the St. Johns River State College baseball program – each out to make Opening Day rosters in the major leagues – were welcome guests at the Capital City Bank Classic two weeks ago at Tindall Field.

Myles Straw was getting ready to report to camp with the Houston Astros, who brought him up back in September after leading all of minor league baseball with 70 stolen bases between Corpus Christi (Texas League) and Fresno (Pacific Coast League) in 2018.

Nathaniel Lowe hit 27 home runs and had 102 RBI last year in a rapid climb from class A to AAA in the Tampa Bay Rays organization, which named Lowe its minor league player of the year. His progress was such that the Rays parted with last year's first baseman, C.J. Cron, despite a 30-home run season in 2018.

"They told Nate the job is his to lose in spring training," said SJR State coach Ross Jones. "(The Astros) took Myles to winter camp as an infielder. They're so deep in the outfield (where Straw played for the Vikings and in the minors) they want to make him a utility guy. He went to their instructional league and played every game at shortstop."

Impressive for a couple of guys who came to St Johns without great fanfare.

Straw made the Vikings as a walk-on out of Bradenton's Braden River High School, deep in the heart of recruiting territory for the tradition-rich State College of Florida.

"We had scouted one of his teammates the summer before and saw Myles. It always seems to work out that way," Jones said.

Lowe transferred to SJR State after a freshman season in which he had all of 11 at-bats for Mercer University.

"We were in Atlanta during the summer and a friend of mine who worked for the Pirates told me we needed to see this kid who was leaving Mercer," Jones said. "Then he comes here and he's the state player of the year and first-team All-American." Lowe went on to sign with Mississippi State, where he was all-SEC before joining the Rays.

Straw and Lowe had a strong message for the current Vikings.

"When you look at our team right now, 80 percent of our guys signed with other schools. They're all here for one reason or another. They're all second-chance kids," Jones said. "Myles and Nate told them they were in the same shoes that you are. This was the best place for us to concentrate on baseball and not get into the party scene."

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"Their message to them as that if they could do it, you can, too."

Andy Hall is sports editor of the Palatka Daily News.