

PALATKA DAILY NEWS SPORTS

A Viking Connection



Photos by FRAN RUCHALSKI / Palatka Daily News

Above, St. Johns River State College's Francis Villaman delivers a third-inning RBI single against Daytona State. Below, St. Johns River's Anthony Simonelli throws a pitch en route to his victory.

Bouncing Back

Simonelli finds his form in 7-inning outing as SJRSC nips Daytona State

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When this week began, the St. Johns River State College baseball team found itself in a place it does not normally find itself - in the basement of the Mid-Florida Conference.

But after one-sixth of the conference schedule was done, neither coach Ross Jones nor his team were panicking for one moment. On Monday, the Vikings scored late to break a 3-3 tie and salvage the final game of a three-game set with Seminole State, 5-3. And the Vikings picked up where they left off on Wednesday.

Hard-throwing right-hander Anthony Simonelli gave Jones and his teammates seven strong innings and Connor Centala came in to throw one-hit scoreless relief the final two innings for his third save of the season as the Vikings edged Daytona State, 4-3, in the opener of a three-game Mid-Florida Conference set at Tindall Field that took a tidy two hours and 13 minutes on a sunny but windy day.

"I couldn't just let the past few outings get ahead of me," said Simonelli, now 3-2 and who had two previously rough outings, including an 11-2 loss to Seminole on Friday. "I had to re-think and do the things I had done the four starts prior to that and just trust my defense."

As for what he threw on the day, Simonelli was able to mix in his slider and changeup with his heat that was touching the high 80s to 90 mph consistently.

"I changed a little in getting a little extra warm-up and stretching out a little more, just trying to refocus and keep to the same game plan and go right after the guys," Simonelli said. "I still have to change a little bit. I gave up three runs, but it's getting closer to what it was."

"When you play 56 games, you're going to have



peaks and valleys," said Jones, whose team improved to 18-9 overall and 3-3 in the conference. "We got caught in a time where we weren't playing really well. It's just the timing of it. I would have liked to have done it differently. We didn't

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pitch well in a couple of games we were hitting. You have to fight your way through it. What you need is a couple of great pitching performances. It put us back in a position to win some close games."

Wednesday's performance by Simonelli and Centala followed what Jordan Duberly, Stephen Halstead and Centala gave Jones collectively in Monday's win.

"Anthony had a couple of rough starts," Jones said. "The start against Lake-Sumter (a 12-4 loss on March 2) wasn't just him. We made four errors behind him, including three in one inning. The amount of pitches and extra pitches he threw ... I don't care who you are with that extra amount of pitches. We can't make mistakes in that one. Those were routine balls."

Simonelli (3-2) struck out eight and did not walk a batter. After the Vikings took the lead with two runs in the bottom of the sixth, Simonelli had to battle when shortstop Francis Villaman made a throwing error in trying to make a spectacular spinning play of a groundball up the middle that turned into an infield hit by Lawson Schumacher. Simonelli struck out the next hitter, Bobby Sparling, then got Chandler Pethel on a groundout to Villaman, which moved Schumacher to third, then got Brandon Stone to hit a weak line drive to Villaman to end the threat.

"I thought Anthony was at his best in the seventh," Jones said. "With a (4-3) lead, runner on second base and nobody out. He gets the next two batters, then on a 2-2 count (to Stone) we don't get the call. We go fastball in, he paints it ... we don't get the call. He shows no emotion. He steps right back up on the mound and gets (the lineout). That's a sign of maturity on his part. He showed no emotion and stepped right back on the rubber and got the last out."

Centala allowed an eighth-inning single to Jack Nagy, but Nagy was promptly thrown out at second trying to steal by catcher Jorge Ramirez, who caught just that one inning. Centala's only strikeout came when he fanned Schumacher to end the game.

The Vikings took the lead in the bottom of the sixth when Garrett Blaylock walked against Falcons lefty starter Austin Dreher (2-2), moved to third on a single by Ryan Romano, who was 2-for-4 with two runs scored, and came home on a single by leadoff man Langston Provitt, who also was 2-for-4. Ray Gonzalez delivered a sacrifice fly that left fielder Schumacher made a diving catch on, bringing in Romano. Though Gonzalez went hitless, he drove in two runs.

Trent Taylor singled home Stone with third-inning run against Simonelli to make it 1-0, but the Vikings tied it in the bottom of the third when Villaman singled home Gonzalez, who reached on a double error by shortstop Chad Pike and moved to third on a Bubba Sangster sacrifice bunt.

The Falcons (14-11, 3-4) took the lead back at 2-1 in the fourth when Simonelli made his one bad pitch in Wednesday's outing, a home run over the left field fence by clean-up hitter Keiji Parkhurst. But the Vikings responded again against Dreher when Gonzalez grounded out to shortstop Pike, allowing Romano to score after he reached on a single and had moved up on a couple of sacrifice bunts.

Daytona took its last lead at 3-2 in the sixth when Pethal singled, advanced to second on a groundout by Stone and scored on a Pike single to right as he barely beat the throw home from right fielder Sandon Witt.

Jones said that pitcher Elijah Gill will be handed the ball Friday when the Vikings travel to Daytona Beach for the second game of the three-game set at 3 p.m. Other Vikings with hits were Nick Romano and Garrett Sheppard.