

SPORTS

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Vikings down defending champ, downed by heir apparent

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The St. Johns River State College baseball team took down the reigning Mid-Florida Conference champion on the road Saturday.

The heir apparent was a different story on Monday.

The Vikings gutted out a 3-2 victory over Santa Fe in Gainesville Saturday, only to go down 9-5 to first-place Central Florida in Ocala on Monday. It

was the first of a three-game series with the Patriots for St. Johns (21-12, 6-6), which will try to gain ground on Central Florida (30-5, 9-4) Wednesday at Tindall Field.

Santa Fe has won the last three conference championships, SJR State the three before that, but Central Florida has worked its way to the top midway through 2019 largely on a .338-hitting offense that produced a home run, a tri-

ple and two doubles on Monday.

"From an offensive standpoint, they were really good a year ago. This team reminds me a lot of (national champion) Chipola from two years ago," said St. Johns coach Ross Jones.

So it didn't help that SJR State starter Anthony Simonelli struggled, giving way to Darin Kilfoyl in the third inning. Activated Monday after missing the season to date with an injury, Kilfoyl got the

Vikings to the fifth, but the Patriots chased their third pitcher, Garrett Blaylock (0-1) in the sixth and pulled away with a four-run seventh. It was also the first mound duty of the season for Blaylock, an infielder.

"Simonelli was not sharp at all. Kilfoyl came in and was sharp, but we've been having trouble getting through the fifth

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and sixth trying to get to (top relievers) Stephen Halstead and Connor Centalla," Jones said. "Blaylock's been pitching well in the bullpen - and he's going to pitch some more - but today he walked his first guy, then gave up a hit and a double. They put it away in the seventh."

It was a 3-3 game before Central Florida followed its two-run sixth inning with four runs in the seventh.

Nick Romano was 2-5 with a home run in the Vikings' 10-hit offense. Langston Provitt, Ray Gonzalez and A.J. Mathis were all 2-3. Chase Malloy and Michael Rosario had one hit apiece.

Mathis' booming shot to straightaway center in the ninth got St. Johns past Santa Fe on Saturday. A great catch denied the speedy Mathis an inside-the-park home run, but could not stop Francis Villaman from scoring the go-ahead run, Villaman having tripled to right center with one out in the inning.

Centalla took it from there, surviving a two-out single in the bottom of the ninth to post his fourth save. Starter Jordan Dubberly (4-1) got the win, allowing two earned run on six hits with seven strikeouts and no walks over eight innings.

"Right now, he's really, really good," said Jones of Dubberly. "He's been our best guy in conference play. He has command of all three pitches. He's pitching his tail off."

Jorge Ramirez' home run and Villaman's triple were the big blows for SJR State. Provitt was 3-5. Romano, Rosario and Mathis all singled.