

SPORTS

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Unlikely comeback keeps Vikings in conference hunt

Frustrated early, SJR State takes down Santa Fe, 7-4

BY ANDY HALL
Palatka Daily News
ahall@palatkadailynews.com

The way Michael Paul was going, a one-run lead looked pretty good for Santa Fe.

A three-run lead, all but insurmountable.

And when the Saints' lead reached four runs in the sixth inning, it was as if St. Johns River State College was in jail at

its own Tindall Field.

But the Vikings kept picking away at the lock, staging an eighth-inning jailbreak for an improbable 7-4 victory that kept alive faint Mid-Florida Conference title hopes and enhanced their status for a more likely playoff for the second MFC state tournament berth.

Paul had a one-hit shutout in the works and had faced one over the minimum before St. Johns scratched out two runs in the bottom of the sixth and got him out of there. Then the Vikings pounced on relievers Conner Churchill and Garrett Mathes for five runs on six hits in the eighth and leaned on its own bullpen to close the door.

"This gives us a chance. We've got to beat Central Florida (Friday) and Jacksonville (FSC-Jacksonville) Monday," said SJR State coach Ross Jones, whose team improved the 32-14 overall and 14-8 in the conference, a half-game ahead of Santa Fe (32-14, 13-7) for third place, a game behind second-place Seminole and two behind Central Florida, which pulled off a 16-15 walk-off win over Lake-Sumter on Wednesday. The second-, third- and fourth-place teams head for a tournament that will punch the other ticket to state.

"Hats off to Santa Fe and (coach) Johnny Wiggs. They've got speed, they

fight and they're going to compete. Hats off to our guys, too. They really competed."

That they did.

As well as Paul was pitching, the Vikings struck out just once through six innings. They got on the board in the sixth after No. 9 batter Chase Malloy drew a one-out walk, went to second on Langston Provitt's single and came around on a pair of wild pitches. Provitt went to third in the process, Paul departed after walking Ryan Romano and Nick Romano's sacrifice fly got Provitt home to make it 4-2.

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Vikings

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Churchill (6-4) surrendered a leadoff single to Ray Gonzalez in the seventh, but nothing came of it after a strikeout and a double play.

But St. Johns kept picking and by then, its bullpen was in lockdown mode. On for shaky staff ace Elijah Gill, Jackson Spiller (2-1) retired the four Saints he faced and Connor Centalla worked a 1-2-3 ninth for his

sixth save.

"Their starter, both times we faced him this year, they've been great games," Jones said. "I felt like if we could get into their bullpen - when I saw Churchill, he's been a starter for them, I saw what Johnny was trying to do. (Starting and relieving) are different."

As the Saints were reminded in the eighth.

The rally began when pinch-hitter A.J. Mathis singled sharply to right. Malloy followed with a single and Provitt bunted them into scoring position. Ryan

Romano and Nick Romano followed with RBI singles that tied the game.

Ryan Romano moved up 90 feet on Garrett Blaylock's fly ball and scored the go-ahead run when Gonzalez dropped a single a foot or so shy of left fielder Jarrod Cande. On came Michael Rosario, whose infield hit caromed off diving second baseman Jonathan Logsdon and turned into a two-run single and a 7-4 cushion.

"We're lucky when he dove for the ball, it kicked away and with Ray's speed, he's going to score

(from second)," Jones said.

Centalla served up a couple of slickly fielded ground balls - neither team committed an error - then closed the door with a strikeout.

"Our bullpen is such a strength. Jackson Spiller had grown up so much and Connor Centalla was locked in," Jones said. "Elijah didn't have his best stuff, but he kept his composure."

Santa Fe left nine on base, St. Johns just two.

Jordan Dubberly (4-1) is scheduled to start at home Friday against Central Florida.