

# SPORTS

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C SECTION

## SJR State Baseball



FRAN RUCHALSKI / Palatka Daily News

Francis Villaman scores St. Johns' first run, beating the tag by Central Florida's Colton Vincent.

# Patriots' Triple Threat

Bases-loaded triple lifts Central Florida in 10 innings, sending Vikings to Seminole for playoff Friday

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**T**he game of inches Tuesday separated the Mid-Florida Conference champion from the middle of the pack.

The game of inches was the difference between second place and a conference tournament bye and fourth place and a tough road to state.

Central Florida won the game of inches, 6-3 over St. Johns River State in 10 innings, applying an exclamation point to the MFC title the Patriots (43-7, 18-6) clinched over the weekend. The Vikings (33-15, 15-9), who had rallied to tie the game in the ninth, fell from a shot at second into fourth place, sending them to third-place Seminole (35-13, 15-9) Friday for a one-and-done game that will put the winner in a beast-of-three series with Santa Fe (35-14, 16-8). Seminole claimed third by taking the season series from St.

Johns, 3-1.

It was inches away from turning out differently. James Nix drilled an inches-fair, three-run triple to right in the 10th to break a 3-3 tie, Central Florida having loaded the bases on a blooper, a soft single and a swinging bunt. This after Chase Malloy's fly to dead center in the ninth was flagged down by Carlos Salaverria, inches from eluding the outfielder and allowing Ray Gonzalez to score what would have been the winning run for the Vikings.

As it was, St. Johns forced extra innings when Riley Wash lined a two-out, two-run double down the line in left, scoring Nick Romano and pinch-runner A.J. Mathis to make it 3-3.

The Vikings never led, but never quit.

"Great college baseball game, no doubt about it," said SJR State coach Ross Jones. "Central Florida's got such a great club, but our guys really competed. I thought we were ready. It's been a long time since I thought we weren't ready."

Nix's decisive triple was one of four extra-base

hits for the Patriots on a night St. Johns pitchers combined for 13 strikeouts and only one walk. But Central Florida came up with three hits, however cheap, that set the stage for Nix in the 10th.

"They had a popup in no-man's land, a jam job and a swinging bunt – bases loaded and they've not hit a ball hard yet. Connor (Centalla) made a good pitch (to Nix), got in on him," Jones said. "Nix will probably be the conference player of the year and did a great job on it. You've got to tip your cap."

Centalla (4-4), who also allowed a run in the eighth, wound up with the loss. Anthony Simonelli opened with three perfect innings before allowing a one-out homer in the fourth. Normally a starter, Elijah Gill threw an inning and a third, allowing a run on two hits and Jackson Spiller threw two scoreless innings before Centalla took over. Luke Sutko completed the 10th.

The Vikings had six of their eight hits in the

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## Vikings

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first five innings, but all they had to show for it was a fourth-inning run on which Francis Villaman sped from first to home on Michael Rosario's double to right. They grounded into double plays the fifth and seventh innings.

After Central Florida starter Brandon Knarr (10 strikeouts) worked a 1-2-3 eighth, the ninth looked bleak for SJR State, down 3-1.

But Nick Romano poked a single past second base and Knarr walked Bubba Sangster and Gonzalez – A.J. Mathis ran for Sangster – to load the bases with nobody

out. Ryan Velasquez (3-0) came on to get Villaman on a line drive and Rosario on a fly ball too shallow to risk sending Romano. On came Wash to drill a 1-1 delivery to left, tying the game and leaving runners on second and third. But that's where they stayed when Salaverria tracked down Malloy's deep ball.

"Riley Wash got a great two-out hit. We had some opportunities with runners in scoring position early and couldn't get that two-out hit," Jones said. "Their outfield is playing Chase shallow (in the ninth). He hits one to the camera tower.

"Another six inches, game's over."

Instead, the game of inches ended in the 10th.