

SPORTS



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

Vikings hit road in quest for trip to state

There's little that can shake Ross Jones' faith in this St. Johns River State College baseball team.

Not the reversed call that cost the Vikings a one-run game with Santa Fe.

Not the 2-1 loss to Central Florida in which they left 15 on base.

Not the other one-run loss to Santa Fe in which Jorge Ramriez' wicked two-out liner was snagged with the bases loaded.

Not Tuesday's Central Florida game, which the Vikings rallied to tie in the ninth, only to see three cheap hits set up a game-winning triple for the Patriots in the 10th.

Flip those four games and they're Mid-Florida Conference champions for the first time since 2015. Instead, they're in fourth place, 33-15 overall, 15-9 in the league and headed to third-place Seminole to open the MFC tournament this afternoon. It's a knockout game that sends the survivor to Santa Fe on Saturday to open a best-of-three series to decide the other state tournament berth from the conference.

Tough task. Yet Jones, calling the conference the most competitive he has seen it in his 11 years in charge, is confident his guys are up to it.

"I think the two hottest teams in the conference are us and Santa Fe. We've got to keep it going (today)," he said.

Even the site for today's game swung on yet another one-run contest. St. Johns trailed Seminole 4-3 at home with its two fastest runners at second and third in the bottom of the ninth when a 1-1 pitch went against the Vikings' Ryan Romano, who wound up chasing the 1-2 delivery and struck out.

"A 1-1 pitch we needed a boat paddle to hit. Do you know what the difference is between hitting 1-1 and 2-1?" Jones said. "This is not a team that has gotten a lot of breaks. But I'm a firm believer you make your own breaks."

He'll start the team's winningest pitcher, 7-1 sophomore lefthander Elijah Gill (2.83 ERA), against Seminole, which is expected to go with 6-2 Louis Davenport (2.72). Haden Erbe actually gave the Vikings more trouble during the regular season but is dealing with an injury.

Jones expects no hangover from Tuesday's tough loss to Central Florida.

"We understood that's baseball. We had practice (Wednesday) and it was great. Our guys know they're capable of walking through this thing and doing what we set out to do," he said.

"I don't think anybody would want to face our arms for a three-game series. The thing for us is going to be scoring some runs. We're going to see Seminole's No. 1 statistically and Santa Fe's 1-2-3."

Once 7-7 in the conference the Vikings closed with a flourish with major contributions from their bullpen and an uptick in offensive production. Five regulars are batting above .300, led, appropriately, by lead-off man Langston Provitt at .369. Next are Nick Romano (.351, seven home runs, 48 RBI), Ryan Romano (.315), Raymond Gonzalez (.314) and Francis Villaman (.302). Then there are Garrett Sheppard (.333) and Riley Wash (.304), who share time behind the plate.

This is only the second year for the conference tournament. Before last year, the second-place team during the regular season advanced to state along with the champion. Ironically, both Jones and Santa Fe counterpart Johnny Wiggs opposed the creation of the tournament that now gives SJR State a second chance.

Jones is keeping the faith despite the breaks that have gone against his team.

"If that makes us a better team for tournament play, I think this team can do it," he said.

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