

SPORTS



SIDELINES

MARK BLUMENTHAL

Three Vikings in bigs, three in postseason

About 20-25 years ago, the prospect of having a St. Johns River Community College baseball team player in Major League Baseball was no bigger than winning the lottery.

But as baseball plays out the 2019 divisional series, there are not one, not two, but three former Vikings on rosters. Not bad for a college that famed baseball scout Tom Kotchman once was quoted about one player, "I couldn't believe there weren't other scouts there. And other JCs cut this guy? What were they thinking?"

The player Kotchman was talking about was Howie Kendrick, who played for former coach Sam Rick in 2002 after no one else even turned an eye at the West Nassau High School standout. All Kendrick did was earn Mid-Florida Conference player of the year honors and earn a 10th-round pick by Kotchman's team at the time, the Anaheim Angels.

This week, Kendrick, now 36, is in Los Angeles, his old stomping rounds with the Angels and then Dodgers, as a member of the Washington Nationals. Meanwhile, two recent Vikings, both a part of a memorable 2015 team that made it to the state tournament Final Four at Joker Marchant Stadium in Lakeland, are in opposite dugouts. Myles Straw has played outfield and shortstop in his short time with arguably the best team in the league, the Houston Astros, while Nathaniel Lowe has been a designated hitter and first baseman with the Tampa Bay Rays.

And current coach Ross Jones, who has been in charge of the program since 2009, sounded very much the role of proud father.

"Both those guys are still rookies," Jones said. "Myles Straw is one of 15 position players on the roster on one of the best teams in Major League Baseball if not the best team, especially how powerfully built that team is. To be a part of that group of guys is pretty special. And it isn't that long ago when those two guys were playing in Lakeland for a state championship.

"Now they're playing for me."

Believe Jones. It's a big deal when three former players from your program are a part of postseason rosters. Both Kendrick and Lowe got to experience winning a wild card game earlier this week as Kendrick's Nationals rallied to beat the Milwaukee Brewers and Lowe's Rays held off the Oakland Athletics.

For Kendrick, this is old hat. This is the 10th time in his 14-year career he's played in the postseason, though never getting to a World Series, the closest being 10 years ago as the Angels' second baseman against the eventual champion New York Yankees in the American League Championship Series.

And like Kendrick, Straw's story is similar, according to Jones.

"He was a walk-on with our team (in 2015) and he couldn't have weighed more than 150 pounds," Jones started. "The first day of practice, he couldn't hit the ball out of the infield, but he kept lifting in the weight room and he got bigger and stronger and eventually developed into a strong player.

By the end of the year, the Astros – a team building toward postseason success – picked Straw in the 12th round of the amateur draft. In 108 official at-bats, Straw hit .269 with 27 runs scored and seven RBI, stealing eight bases in nine attempts.

With Lowe, he would move on after his one year with the Vikings in '15 to play at Mississippi State. After a solid season with the Bulldogs, Lowe would be drafted by the Rays in the 13th round. This season, Lowe spent time going up and down between the Rays and Durham. But when he got the opportunity, he shined, hitting 263 with seven home runs and 19 RBI, no home run more memorable than the walkoff on Sept. 21 against the Boston Red Sox in the 11th inning of a 5-4 victory.

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ANDY HALL

Sports Editor 312-5239

AHall@Palatkadailynews.com

Blumenthal

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Both Lowe and Straw are on their teams' playoff rosters, but they have not gotten in just yet. By Game 3 of the ALDS Monday in St. Petersburg, both might get in. If they do, they will do so in front of their former head coach from '15, who said he will be at the game to watch his former stars.

Jones points to his two former players as well as Kendrick for his current crop of Vikings players to aspire to be. Hard work and determination, Jones will say, do go a long way.

"The guys all watched Howie last night and we practiced early (Friday), but they are following what's going on," Jones said. "Our (current) guys know it's something internal with us and the baseball program."

And from where the program was a generation ago to where it is now, Jones is proud to see how it's grown. The affirmation is three players who have put their footprints into the big leagues from a small school in tiny Palatka, Florida.

Jones makes no bones about it.

"To us, it's a very big deal."