

SPORTS

Vikings fall to Gulf Coast, but they're a win from sharing conference title

Last-place Gateway last foe in their way; championship would be first for any St. Johns women's team

Palatka Daily News

St. Johns River State College put down 45 kills. Visiting Gulf Coast State had 48 kills. Both teams handed out 43 assists. St. Johns came up with one more dig (54-53). Gulf Coast had one more service ace (5-4) than the Vikings.

The only thing that was lopsided about Saturday's big Sun-Lakes Conference showdown at Tuten Gymnasium was the margin of victory – three sets to none.

The Commodores beat the Vikings in

three tight matches, 27-25, 25-22, 25-23, handing the Vikings their second conference loss of the season, just a day after the Commodores lost their second match of the season in conference to Lake-Sumter.

"It's easy to say no one left disappointed," Vikings coach Matt Cohen said after his team slipped to 18-7 for the season and 7-2 in the conference. "We lost those games by two, three and two points. It came down to the fact (Gulf Coast) got the breaks. One point they won came when their setter chased a ball as far as she can, put it back in play and it clipped the net and fell over on our side. In the second set, we had an eight-point lead and they rallied to win. It was just one of those matches.

"This came the day after they had lost

in three sets (25-23, 25-17, 25-19) to Lake-Sumter. But that's the story of our conference this year – if you don't show up to play, you'll lose. That happened to us (on Oct. 4) when we went down to South Florida and got beat."

The Commodores improved to 17-5 overall and 6-2 in the conference. They still have two conference matches, both at home on back-to-back nights, the first against Pasco-Hernando on Friday and South Florida on Saturday. The Vikings will travel to Lake City on Wednesday to face off with Florida Gateway (7-22, 0-8), which the Vikings swept at home on Sept. 30.

If the Vikings beat Florida Gateway, they will have clinched a share of the conference championship. That will make history for Cohen and his team for

it would be the first time any St. Johns River women's team will have won or shared any title in school history.

Then the pressure is on Gulf Coast to win out in their final two conference matchups. If the Commodores do win out to share the conference title at 8-2, they would get the top seed for the Sun-Lakes Conference Tournament over the Vikings because they won a set against the Vikings on Sept. 25 in a 28-26, 23-25, 25-16, 25-22 match in Panama City.

"If we get the second seed, that still means we get a (first-round) bye in the (six-team) tournament," Cohen said. "So that's OK."

Three players had a big role in the win for the Commodores. Up front, Rachel Passarello had 15 kills, three assists and

an ace, while Cassidi Gant had 10 kills and 13 digs. And setter Ava Shmueli handed out 38 assists, had four digs and a block.

For the Vikings, Louisa Marunde nailed 14 kills and added 11 digs, while Kendal Hoges had eight kills and a dig and Lucy Herter added seven kills and nine digs. Dariana Luna had 11 digs and six assists and Jordyn Pruski handed out 31 assists. Now the team turns its focus after a tough-luck loss toward making history on Wednesday.

"The girls understand they are going after something that has never been done before," Cohen said. "Worst-case scenario is we split the conference title if we win. After Wednesday, I hope we will have taken care of that (winning a share of the title)."