

SPORTS



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

Women's title has been elusive for St. Johns

Maybe it's only fitting that after clinching a tie for first in the Sun-Lakes Conference Wednesday night, the St. Johns River State College volleyball team has to wait until the weekend to learn whether it gets the title.

The school has waited 60 years for a women's athletic team to win a championship. What's a few more days?

The Vikings, 19-7 overall and ranked 15th in NJCAA Division II, swept last-place Florida Gateway College in Lake City to complete conference play at 8-2. Gulf Coast State College can tie them with wins over Pasco-Hernando tonight and South Florida tomorrow, both at home in Panama City. In that case, the Commodores would be considered champions and top seeds in the conference tournament, having won four of the seven sets the teams played this season.

Even a share of first is more than the Vikings have experienced in women's athletics until this year, limited to a handful of state tournament appearances in softball and volleyball. By

contrast, the men's baseball program has nine Mid-Florida Conference championships.

And suggesting the wait has been 60 years isn't completely accurate, women's sports having been off again and on again since the college opened its doors in 1958. It was on again with volleyball and softball under Pat Wilson in the 1960s and '70s, a time when women's sports in general was not the priority it is today. (As recently as 1994, when the volleyball program was resurrected, the same person coached that sport along with softball.)

"(Money) was pretty tight. The coaching pay for women was not the same as the men. It took Billie Jean King to get us that," said Wilson, who nevertheless speaks with fondness and respect for her male colleagues at St. Johns, athletic director and coach Bill Tuten and baseball coach John Tindall. "That's not why I did it."

She did it for the same reason as most coaches, to share the lessons of sports with young people. In addition to coaching and teaching physical education classes, Wilson helped run intramurals, particularly popular with students living in dormitories across the street from the gym on Moody Road. Not only was there volleyball and softball, but archery and badminton

Wilson learned most of her volleyball from Naval personnel playing in recreation leagues. It was a different game from the one the Vikings play today.

"It was everything but catch and throw. Kick it back if you needed to," she said. "Not many coaches knew much about the game. If it weren't for the Navy guys in Jacksonville, I wouldn't know much of anything. I was living in Orange Park then and they said, 'You can come to our practices if you want to.' They taught the game the way it was supposed to be played - not backyard volleyball."

Wilson had a far more extensive background in softball, having been a part-time pitcher for the Orlando Rebels, who won multiple state championships - and fans as the titles mounted. "They turned out," she said. "Even Mickey Mouse."

Budgetary restraints and limited local knowledge of volleyball hampered the program. Even since mov-

ing from NJCAA Division I to Division II in volleyball, SJR State coach Matt Cohen has a roster of players not only from throughout Florida, but four other states as well as Germany and Venezuela. The current team opened its season with a tournament in Las Vegas, went to New York a few weeks later and tunes up for the Sun-Lakes tournament with a couple of matches in South Carolina next weekend.

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Not so in the 1970s. "They were not exposed to varsity play unless they went to Clay High School," Wilson said. "When I recruited, I really tried to get some of Peggy Morris' players. (Palatka's) Dianna Alred was from Tennessee, where they were exposed to competition."

Wilson identified Alred as one of her favorite athletes, along with Nancy Brooks of Jacksonville and Hazel Fuller, who transitioned from slow-pitch softball at St. Johns to fastpitch at the University of Florida.

Wilson, 87, has lived in Interlachen the last 15 years. "I bought the property because I had a horse and I needed at least five acres," she said.

She welcomes the changes that have come for teachers, specifically mentioning Gov. Ron DeSantis' proposal to up starting pay to \$47,000 annually. And she's happy to know the Vikings are doing so well.

"They weren't in contention much like they are today," Wilson said. "Not that winning is everything, but it's sure better than not winning."

Andy Hall is sports editor of the Palatka Daily News.