

SPORTS

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PAGE 6A

Intensity evident as Vikings prepare for conference tournament

Title, national berth would be first for a St. Johns women's team

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The intensity of St. Johns River State College intersquad volleyball match was apparent – each point contested, each player needing rest before the next point.

That alone would make you think the Vikings would be the odds-on favorite to do something no women's team has done in school history – win a region tournament championship and advance to the NJCAA Division II championship in Charleston, W.Va.

But the Vikings won't even be the top seeds of this weekend's Sun-Lakes Conference Tournament at South Florida State College in Avon Park. That honor goes to Gulf Coast State of Panama City, which shared the regular-season conference championship with the Vikings at 8-2, but got the top seed

because the Commodores won four sets, compared to three for the Vikings in the two matches they split this year.

And for Vikings coach Matt Cohen, that's more than all right.

"For sure," he said. "We'll get the winner of the Lake-Sumter and Florida Gateway (first-round) match and we've beaten both teams (twice) this year. Gulf Coast may have to play (tournament host) South Florida and that can be tough. So in that sense, I don't know if (Gulf Coast) got the better end of the draw."

A year ago, the Vikings won a first-round match as a third seed, then took a 2-0 lead in sets against Lake-Sumter before the LakeHawks scrambled back to take the final three sets and win the match and ultimately beat top-seeded and host Pasco-Hernando to capture the championship and go to the national tournament.

There is a strong chance the LakeHawks and Vikings will meet again in the semifinal. The Vikings have won



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See **VIKINGS**, Page 7A

Kendal Hoges gets the ball over in practice Tuesday at SJR State.

Vikings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6A

both meetings with Lake-Sumter in three-set shutouts and though last year's heartbreaking loss may still be on some of the sophomore players' minds, Cohen said he warned his players all the teams in the tournament have motivation.

"They understand everyone is 0-0 and that all six teams at the tournament have one goal and on Saturday, four teams are going home," Cohen said. "The two that remain play Sunday (at 1 p.m.) for the chance to go to nationals. We want to work hard to get to Sunday. A championship is less about winning matches and more about self-belief and attitude. Those were intangibles we showed this weekend."

That was in straight-set wins over South Carolina-Salkehatchie and Surry of North Carolina. That improved the Vikings' record to 21-8.

And the good feeling has carried Vikings into this week and the intense practices.

"Our practices have been fantastic," Cohen said. "And we are as healthy as we've been all season. We lost Jordan Taylor (a defensive specialist) with a foot injury, but she's been out for a couple of weeks now. As far as our point-scoring players go, we are at full strength. It's the right time of the year for this to happen."

Among the second-year players on the roster, New Jersey native Kendal Hoges has 206 kills and six blocks, while setter Jordyn Pruski from Texas has 858 assists in 28 matches, while collecting 227 digs and 57 service aces. Eden Edgell of St. Augustine has 92 kills, six assists, three service aces and 32 digs along with two blocks.

The freshmen have played a huge part in the team's success, too, most notably up front where German native Louisa Marunde has 211 kills, 131 digs and two blocks, while Brooklyn McLeod of Tallahassee has 190 kills, 27 service aces and 53 digs. Lacey Redinger of Colorado has added 171 kills, 123 assists and 180 digs.

The freshmen play has given Cohen good thoughts of what can happen beyond this year. But it's one year at a time and at 7 p.m. Saturday, a chance to go to the 1 p.m. Sunday final awaits the Vikings.

And it all starts this week on the Tuten Gymnasium floor where the team is leaving it all on the floor in practice.

"They're going two hours per practice all out, leaving everything physically and mentally on that floor," he said. "But hopefully, they are just as hungry as we get to this weekend."

SUN-LAKES CONFERENCE TOURNAMENT

Where: South Florida State College, Avon Park.
Saturday's first-round schedule: 5. Pasco-Hernando vs. 4. South Florida, 11:30 a.m.; 6. Florida Gateway vs. 3. Lake-Sumter, 2 p.m.

Saturday's semifinals: Pasco-Hernando-South Florida winner vs. 1. Gulf Coast State, 4:30 p.m.; Florida Gateway-Lake-Sumter winner vs. 2. St. Johns River State, 7 p.m.

Championship: 1 p.m., Sunday.

Defending champion: Lake-Sumter.

Winner goes: NJCAA Division II Tournament at Charleston, W.Va., Nov. 21.

Directions: Take SR-19 south for 53 miles into Umatilla. Turn left onto CR-42 and go 3 1/2 miles. Turn right onto CR-439 and go 7 3/4 miles. Turn right onto SR-44 and go three-quarters of a mile. Turn left onto Britt Road and go 2 1/2 miles. Turn left onto Wolf Branch Road and go a mile. Turn right onto Round Lake Road and go a mile. At SR-46, make a left and go a quarter of a mile. Use the right lane to take the ramp onto SR-453 (toll road). Take that road for almost 2 1/2 miles. Exit onto SR-429 (toll road) and go 21 1/4 miles south. Merge onto I-4 heading west for just over five miles. At Exit 55 (US-27), exit off and travel south on US-27 for the next 47 3/4 miles. You arrive in Avon Park and at W. College Drive. Turn left and go a quarter of a mile into the parking lot. The gymnasium is in the back.