

SPORTS

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B SECTION



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

Vikings work through injuries, look to spring

Spring forward, fall back – or it is fall back, spring forward?

It's the former if you're talking about the time change we experienced over the weekend. It's the latter if you're talking baseball at St. Johns River State College.

The Vikings almost literally fell back with injuries throughout fall practice, but coach Ross Jones can live with that as long as they're ready to go forward in the spring.

"A lot of good things happened, but there were the injuries. We had a number, especially to positional players," he said. "It's comical when you look around and ask, 'Who's healthy today?' The good thing is everybody will be fine in January. This can't happen in February."

When it happens in October, players can heal and if they don't, sometimes they can be replaced between semesters. A case in point is righthanded pitcher Jordan Dubberly, who became a starter after transferring from Georgia last season and was rated among the state's top 10 pitchers heading into this season. He's been shut down for 2020 after Tommy John surgery – "He threw one pitch and something popped," Jones said – but St. Johns had the time

(and scholarship space) to sign another pitcher. On top of that, the Vikings welcome back Cameron Serada, who was considered the team's best pitcher in the fall of 2018 before he required the same surgery.

Middle infielders were almost an endangered species, between the various ailments befalling returnees Ryan Romano and Chase Malloy and incoming players Juan Jaime and August Haymaker.

"The outfielders have stayed healthy, but we're kind of short, especially with (Michael) Rosario pitching the way he's pitching," Jones said. "We're probably going to bring in one (between semesters)."

On balance, Jones sees no reason the Vikings cannot continue to contend in the Mid-Florida Conference. They were 37-19 overall last season, 15-9 in the league and dropped a tough best-of-three series to rival Santa Fe in the MFC tournament as the Saints went on to state along with regular-season champion Central Florida.

"We've got talent, I like the makeup, I like the character. But the injuries have kind of forced our hand," Jones said. "We've had to dial it back in the fall. I'd rather dial in back in the fall than the spring."

Even without Dubberly, SJR State can build around pitching with a staff headed by 6-foot-6 Florida commitment Franco Aleman, who has been called the No. 3 overall prospect in the nation. Between Aleman, Serada and sophomores Stephen Halstead (North Florida signee) and Jackson Spiller (Florida Atlantic), the Vikings have the makings of a formidable starting rotation.

"The front line is as good as it gets," Jones said. "The guys that are going to be falling in behind them and getting those relief innings are all healthy. The depth is what's important with our arms."

Romano, who batted .295 as a freshman, and Malloy, who came on late to finish at .250, are showing promise at the top of the order. Rosario, who hit .260 with two homers and 23 RBI as a freshman, could help St. Johns as much with his bat as his arm. Among the newcomers showing the ability to contribute offensively is catcher Charlie Welch, a transfer from Pepperdine.

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"We've got an opportunity to generate runs. We've got to cut down on strikeouts and improve our on-base percentage from the last couple of years," Jones said.

Assuming the nagging injuries cease their nagging, 2020 should be fun at Tindall Field.

"We had a good fall and I expect a lot out of this team," Jones said. "I've already had seven commit (to four-year schools), six to major programs. We have a lot of guys shining."

"We need to rest up, get strong and stay healthy."

Andy Hall is sports editor of the Palatka Daily News.