

SPORTS

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B SECTION

Vikings fall in classic, in rankings

Big-hitting freshman lost for year, but Jones remains confident in club

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Just as a celebratory banquet was not planned for the rise of the St. Johns River State College baseball team to No. 2 in the state rankings, there are no plans for a funeral upon its fall to No. 8 this week after four losses in its own Capital City Bank Classic.

Thursday and Friday defeats were followed by two more on Saturday, 8-6 to Florida SouthWestern and 5-0 to Gulf Coast State. The Vikings blew a three-run lead against SouthWestern and couldn't get anything going offensively against Gulf Coast, but SJR State coach Ross Jones is not ready to sound the alarm two weeks before the start of Mid-Florida Conference play.

"I think we're still in good shape, believe it or not," said Jones, whose team takes an 11-6 record to Polk State today. "I know the character of this group. I know the work ethic of this group.

"We're seeing and learning a lot. I'm going to try to get answers."

The only significant negative from the weekend for St. Johns was the loss of J.J. Sousa, a .406-hitting freshman outfielder whose knee buckled while chasing what turned out to be an inside-the-park home run in the first inning of the Gulf Coast game. He suffered a torn ACL and is out for the year.

The home run followed two errors and keyed a four-run first for the Commodores, who blanked the Vikings for the second time in two weeks. Eli Ellington and Parker Dean combined on a six-hitter, striking out 15 and walking three for Gulf Coast.

Franco Aleman and Jackson Hodnick were almost as good for the Vikings, striking out 15 and walking one while

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giving up six hits, but Aleman (2-1) absorbed four unearned runs in the fateful first.

St. Johns left the bases loaded in the seventh inning.

Andre James doubled twice in four at-bats for the Vikings. Ryan Romano doubled and Chase Malloy, Ben Spittler and Gerardo Rodriguez all singled in the Gulf Coast game.

With Sousa going down and Juan Jaime pushing for playing time, one of the moves Jones is considering would move James from third base to the outfield with Jaime going to third alongside Romano at shortstop.

Jones praised the work of freshman catcher Gerardo Rodriguez and Sean McArdle in a backup role after having been

critical of the freshmen during Thursday's 9-1 loss to Northwest Florida.

The biggest positive St. Johns took from Saturday's first game was the performance of starting pitcher Michael Rosario, who struck out four, walked two and allowed two runs on three hits over five innings, leaving with a 5-2 lead. The biggest negative was the struggle endured by closer Stephen Halstead (1-1).

He got off to an ominous start in the sixth – a fly ball misjudged for a double, a blooper that dropped for another hit and a blistering grounder off the first baseman's glove for a third hit. Florida SouthWestern wound up sending 10 to the plate in the sixth, turning its three-run deficit into a 7-5 lead. The Bucs got an insurance run off Halstead before he left with one out in the seventh and last inning.

"Mike Rosario – one good

thing was this is by far the best he's thrown," Jones said. "I've got to get Stephen Halstead more work. I had kind of made up my mind he was going to get two innings."

Halstead left with one out in the seventh and Caleb Dix pitched the last two outs for the Vikings.

Romano was 3-3, Sousa 2-2 with two RBI in an eight-hit offense. Rosario, Spittler and Nick Tripp all singled.

This weekend brings another showcase to Palatka, the John Tindall Classic, named in honor of the coach who led the program to multiple conference championships and playoff appearances from 1964-93. St. Johns plays Florence-Darlington Tech of South Carolina on Thursday, State College of Florida on Friday, Hillsborough on Saturday and East Georgia State on Sunday.