

SPORTS

SJR State Softball



Ashley Kirkbride digs in at the plate for St. Johns against ABAC Feb. 5.

PAULA HARRIS / SJR State

Streaking Vikings

Inexperienced team running hot and cold as Littlefield's second season unfolds

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So far in her second season as St. Johns River State College softball coach, Marti Littlefield has seen her team start with three losses, then accumulate five straight wins, and then lose four straight.

That is your direct definition of a young, inexperienced team trying to find its way. So where does

Littlefield believe her team is so far?

"I think we are right where we need to be," she said. "We have a lot of young girls, so athletically, they're on the right track. We're just focusing more on the mental part of it. They're still very young and that comes with being so young."

And that comes when you practically turn your entire team over. The purge of the 2019 Vikings that finished 15-33 overall and 4-20 in the



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Amanda Jessel delivers for St. Johns against Abraham Baldwin.

Softball

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always-competitive Mid-Florida Conference was complete by the summer. Only three players survived it: pitcher Amanda Jessel, infield Bri Clapper and former Palatka High standout Kendall Moody, who will see some time on the mound.

The rest? Welcome to the 2020 Vikings!

"We brought 19 players in (originally)," Littlefield said. When asked if she's ever been involved in a full-scale transformation, she said she never had. "The closest I've ever been through this was my freshman year in college (at Valdosta State) where we had two upperclassmen that played on the field with the other seven freshmen," she said. "That's the closest I've ever come to it. It's crazy how things work because I'm able to take my experiences from that and transform that and give the girls some guidance."

Being young, Littlefield said, has its advantages. "We knew as a coaching staff (assistants Alissa Smith and Sabrina Hartsell included) that we were going to have the energy, but it was just going to take a little more for them to realize they can relax. Game days are fun and stress-free, where you put all the hard work and stress comes in practices. And, of course, what plays hand in hand with that, is bringing in 19 new kids in with three kids who got experience from the way things were last year. It helps having them beside us, guiding us. They knew the culture we're trying to turn into. The challenge is getting 19 brand new girls to figure out that it doesn't take just athletic talent. You have to be smart upstairs as well."

Jessel is joined in the pitching staff regularly by newcomers Kathleen Ingram from Centennial (Col.) Eaglecrest, who is 3-4 so far, and Palm Harbor University High grad Savannah LePain. And now finding her spot in the regular rotation is Syhia Marks, a River Rouge (Mich.) High graduate.

Offensively, the pop has come from three key contributors, all newcomers – Breanna Cefaliello, a Groveland South Lake graduate, Ashley Kirkbride, who played at Tarpon Springs East Lake, and St. Petersburg Northeast graduate Madison Houtz.

Most everyone else is finding their place on this team, and a 5-7 start before hitting conference foes like Central Florida, Seminole, Daytona Beach, and

AT A GLANCE

Head coach: Marti Littlefield, 2nd year. (Career record: 15-33).

Last year's record: 15-33 overall, 4-20 in Mid-Florida Conference.

Assistant coaches: Alissa Smith, Sabrina Hartsell.

Roster: Brianna Clapper (sophomore IF/O Orlando East River HS); Amanda Jessel (so. P/Deltona HS); Kendall Moody (so. P/Palatka HS); Morgan Adamek (freshman OF/The Woodlands Starke HS, Texas); Kaylee Anthony (fr. OF/Orlando Timber Creek HS); Breanna Cefaliello (fr. utility/Groveland South Lake HS); Kimberly Cheung (fr. OF/Wesley Chapel Wiregrass Ranch HS); Soraya Hernandez (fr. utility/Jacksonville Mandarin HS); Brealyn Holley (fr. IF/Hillard HS); Madison Houtz (fr. C-utility/St. Petersburg Northeast HS); Kathleen Ingram (fr. P/Centennial Eaglecrest HS, Colo.); Ashley Kirkbride (fr. IF/Tarpon Springs East Lake HS); Savannah LePain (fr. P/Palm Harbor University HS); Cali Madonna (fr. OF/Rockledge HS); Syhia Marks (fr. P/River Rouge HS, Mich.); Madison McAllister (fr. IF/Melbourne HS); Janelle Pagan (fr. OF/Orlando University HS); Delaina Perrotte (fr. IF/Melbourne Eau Gallie HS); Emma Shiskin (fr. IF/Alachua Santa Fe HS); Taylor Shelley (fr. C-utility/Boca Raton Spanish River); Araya Williams (fr. C-utility/Spring Klein Collins HS, Texas).

Santa Fe gives Littlefield belief this season is going to be much better than her inaugural campaign.

"In the moments, it drives me crazy," said of the streaks to start the season. "But then I take a step back and I have to realize it's going to take time. They're young. It's normal and it's expected we're going to go up and down, up and down. I'm not saying we won't have a couple of more rollercoaster rides like this, but as long as we learn from it, and we grow as a team, it'd be great."

"We told our kids this year, we're going to win or we're going to learn," Littlefield said. "And as long as we're winning or learning, then we're going to be good. One or the other. As long as we see and grow from those situation, we'll keep going forward."