

# SPORTS



## SIDELINES

MARK BLUMENTHAL

### Combined perfection for the Vikings

**The date:** Monday, March 24, 2014.  
**The place:** Tindall Field.

**The event:** Lake-Sumter at St. Johns River State baseball

**R**oss Jones, a pitching aficionado himself as a former high school, college and minor league pitcher as well as pitching coach at the University of Florida, can tell you how great a pitcher threw for his St. Johns River State College baseball team the last 12 seasons he's coached them.

And when remembering Trae Ratliff's six innings of work against Lake-Sumter Community College six years ago today, Jones had one thing to say about the performance.

"Ratliff was unbelievable," Jones said.

And this was after Ratliff was coming off being shut down for a significant amount of time due to elbow troubles. So when it was Ratliff's time to pitch again, Jones and athletic trainer J.D. Douglas were monitoring him closely.

Seventy pitches was all Ratliff would get on this day.

"We had shut him down for a couple of weeks," Jones said. "This was his first week back with us and we had him on that pitch count. Then watching him throw, we felt like we were in command, and after the sixth inning, I took him out of the game. We were not going to deviate from the plan we had. We were looking for more from Trae beside just one or two games."

And what did Ratliff do in those six innings he pitched? In 66 pitches, Ratliff bedazzled the LakeHawks by striking out 10 of the 18 batters in the game, only getting beyond one ball in pitching counts the entire time. That was to the last hitter he faced, center-fielder Austin Simmons, who he fell behind 3-0, but came back to strike out to put the finishing touches on six innings of perfection.

"His fastball and slider were just really good," Jones remembered of the Brooksville Hernando High graduate. "His command was fabulous – he was ahead in counts all day. There really weren't any stressful pitches he made."

The Vikings had gotten Ratliff run support throughout his time on the hill. In the first inning, Tyler Humphreys doubled home Will Mackenzie, who had been hit by a pitch with two outs and then went to third base on an errant pickoff attempt. Humphreys would finish the afternoon 3-fof-4 with two RBI. Tomas Rivera and Omar Villaman added an RBI each, as did freshman center fielder Myles Straw, who was 3-for-4 with a run and an RBI.

With the 5-0 lead, Jones handed the ball to Brad Torres, and according to Jones six years ago, nobody was about to tell Torres what was happening.

"Everybody knew what going on," Jones said. "Nobody said a word (in the dugout). We worked on winning the game."

And so Torres had an uneventful 1-2-3 seventh inning. Then in the eighth inning, Torres got the first out, but had to face third baseman Jack Curtis. Curtis got good aluminum on the ball and sliced a ball diving for center field. But Straw came to the rescue with a diving catch to keep the perfection alive.

"Myles did that so much it became routine," said Jones of Straw, who has

ended up on the Houston Astros roster for the 2020 season. Jones said he honestly didn't remember that diving catch. "If the ball was hit to center field, you weren't sweating it because he was out there."

Torres would get to one three-ball count in his three innings. He put the exclamation point on his three innings of perfection by striking out Tanner Long to end it.

The Vikings had a combined perfect game between Ratliff and Torres, the first Mid-Florida Conference perfect game by a Vikings pitcher since

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John Mansfield did it in 1966 against Daytona Beach. But the fact it was a combined perfect game is even more incredible – no Major League Baseball team has ever thrown a combined perfect game, though the Tampa Bay Rays came close in the 2019 season.

Last season, Jones watched Anthony Simonelli throw a perfect game against South Georgia. Before that in 2013 he watched pitchers Matt Pennington, Reid Love and C.J. Robinson hold Lake-Sumter and Daytona State down to six hits total in a 23-inning period as the Vikings locked down their first conference title since 1977.

But between 2013-15 when the Vikings were at their absolute best and went to the state tournament each year, pitching was the trademark.

"We were, I believe, Top 5 in the country (among junior colleges) in team ERA (earned run average)," said Jones, who mentioned Ratliff would sign with the University of South Florida before developing more arm trouble and that Torres went on to Florida Southern in Lakeland to pitch two more years there. Jones said he lives in Lake Wales. "In that 2014 season, I believe we were No. 2 in the nation in ERA. We had some great arms."

Like the ones Lake-Sumter saw that Monday afternoon six years ago.

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