



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

St. Johns River State College volleyball coach Matt Cohen, seen during practice last season, has brought in 11 new recruits for next season, three of which he signed after the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the school.

Hustling to Get New Recruits

SJR State volleyball coach brings in 11 new players, 3 he signed after pandemic shut down school

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Some college programs got taken down completely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Games stopped. So did on-the-road, face-to-face recruiting. Then again, there's St. Johns River State College volleyball coach Matt Cohen. "I'm always an optimistic person," he

said Wednesday.

Cohen had reason to be optimistic. While the pandemic has shut down many a college athletic program, his work that started before the pandemic hit fully has come to fruition. He was able to sign two players, even though neither truly got to see the campus while it was open, and has a third player he said he is going to get a signature to come to the Division II junior college program shortly.

"I honestly didn't know what to expect," Cohen said when asked if he was stunned or

not by getting players after the campus shut down in mid-March. "With all college programs in a quiet period, I wasn't sure, but I was fortunate we were able to get the three players after getting shut down."

The two young ladies he was able to get were Emily Evans, an outside hitter from Orlando Dr. Phillips High School, and Sammi Beas, another outside hitter from West Palm Beach Forest Hill High.

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That added to the other nine players he recruited before the pandemic shut college institutions down, one of those recruits being *Daily News* two-time volleyball player of the year Kirby Mason from Interlachen, who will play an outside hitter spot.

Cohen did not believe he was going to have to recruit 13 players total (one scholarship spot is still available, he said), but that's what it turned out to be when of the seven freshmen that were supposed to return from a 22-9 season that saw the Vikings come within a Sun-Lakes Conference tournament championship win from the NJCAA Division II championship in West Virginia,

five of them transferred.

That left just Dariana Luna, an effective libero from Davie Western High and Ricki Sheets, a Lakeland Lake Gibson High grad, coming back as a defensive specialist.

"Every one of them had some reason to go somewhere else," Cohen said. "Sometimes, you go out there to recruit two-year kids and you wind up keeping them for one. It happens."

Unless the last player Cohen recruits is not from Florida, only one out-of-state player will be part of the team next year – Gwendolyn Souther from Conroe Oak Ridge High in Texas, an outside hitter.

Others already signed and ready to come aboard include a pair of Middleburg High players, Mone Gordon, a setter and Laney Miller, a defensive player, Creekside High's Jadin Serrato, a middle blocker, Madison Hilde, a

Clermont East Ridge outside hitter/middle blocker, Kendall Hatchett of Blountstown, another outside hitter, and Cohen's first "sister" player, Tara English, a defensive specialist from Winter Garden West Orange, whose older sibling, Tori, played for Cohen during his first run as head coach between 2013-15.

"With 11-12 freshmen coming in, it presents a challenge," said Cohen, whose seven freshmen saw quite a bit of action a year ago. "But last year, we lost most of our passers and 80% of our offense and we made it to the (Sun-Lakes) championship. This year, we've lost most of our passers and about 80% of our offense, so who knows if we can do it again. With one and a half starters returning, we'll no doubt be the youngest team in the conference. But if we have a nice preseason, we'll have an idea of where

we are."

But, of course, a lot of that is dependent on when the OK is given to come back and have a preseason ... or even a summer camp. Cohen once again was to run the Vikings Volleyball Camp for youngsters, but with the college closed, that's on hold.

"It's tentatively set for July," he said. "We're just waiting on updates from Gov. DeSantis."

For now, Cohen is at home with his wife and kids, fixing up a new house they just bought in St. Augustine.

"We just moved in here in February, so it couldn't have been a more perfect time to work on projects around the house," Cohen said. "Meanwhile, I'm being super aggressive talking with our players coming back and coming in, getting them ready for when we are able to start practicing."