

## Speaking His Mind



Daily News file photo

St. Johns River State College baseball head coach Ross Jones has kept busy through the pandemic.

# Keeping Up With Jones

Transfer portal has helped SJR State baseball coach with recruiting for '21

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Without his team's baseball field seeing any action since March 11, St. Johns River State College baseball coach Ross Jones said he's never seen his field look quite as good as it now does.

"I still work on the field and it's not looked as good as it has at this time any year," Jones joked. "It's not beaten up."

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the 2020 college baseball season on March 13, it ended with the Vikings at 15-15 (18-12 on the field, but the Vikings had to forfeit three games due to an ineligible player), but playing their best ball since the start of the year.

"In a 56-game schedule, you will go through peri-

ods of ups and downs," Jones said. "We were playing really, really well at the start, then we weren't playing well, then we got hit with injuries, but then as we got everyone healthy again, we weren't playing because everyone had to get back into a groove again. I think three or four days before the season stopped, we were right there. But that's why it's called a 'season' and why it's so long. You don't judge a season by just 10 games."

So now, Jones, also the school's athletic director, begins to look at 2021. And don't be surprised if his team takes more of an NCAA Division I look next year. He's already picked up Kyle Smith, a catcher at the University of North Carolina, Harrison Thiel, a shortstop who was at Georgia Tech, J.J. Gonzalez, a shortstop from the University of Central Florida and Dalton Reese, an outfielder from the University of Tennessee.

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These were players, Jones said, who he found before the pandemic hit hard via the transfer portal that was established last year. What it does is put young men and women into a group who were on the Division I level, but for some reason did not want to stay, but are interested in playing somewhere else.

"I think it's a great tool, especially for this situation," Jones said. "We hit that transfer portal really hard. We had signed eight

high school guys already and as soon as (the pandemic) happened, we hit that portal. We found those four guys and now we're down to signing one more catcher and focus on arms, maybe five, six tops."

While Ryan Romano, a top hitter who was a redshirt sophomore, is moving on to Florida State, Jones said he found out that Chase Malloy, the team's leadoff batter who had committed to Florida Atlantic University, took himself off and returned to St. Johns when the NCAA and NJCAA both ruled those who were four-year seniors or two-year sophomores could red-shirt and have those final years again.

"Another versatile guy we had, Andre James, decided to return. And Jason Gonzalez, a pitcher everyone was looking at from Miami to FAU to UNF – there were seven or eight schools total – he came back. Granting that extra year of eligibility has really changed the entire complexion of sports."

And thus the transfer portal became a friend to Jones.

"It certainly helped us," Jones said. "Every morning, I still go to my office and when I get on the computer, the first thing I do is go to the portal part of the NCAA website and there are 28 new names with phone numbers and emails there for contact. It's a

good thing, especially this time where there's nothing happening. It's worth making a few phone calls."

Now because of that tool he hadn't really used in the first year it was available, Jones said, "We have done in April what we typically try to finish up in May or June."

Jones said he will most likely lose half his team for one reason or another. But that's usually normal for him.

"We'll get the rest of the recruits signed once this (pandemic ban) gets lifted," he said. "Otherwise, it's still business as usual. It's just a different time of year for all this happening."