

SPORTS

Viking Softball Heading Upward



MARK BLUMENTHAL / Palatka Daily News

Though her team's record was still under .500 this year at 9-15, second-year St. Johns River State College softball coach Marti Littlefield felt much better about her team's overall performance.

Making Improvement

SJR State softball coach feeling better with her program's future a year later

BY MARK BLUMENTHAL

Palatka Daily News

mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com

The end result may not have been what second-year coach Marti Littlefield had in mind, but believe it or not, she looked at this sophomore season as improvement over the year before.

"We had a team full of youngsters on it and fortunately, they had the talent and athleticism," Littlefield said. "We didn't get long enough into the season, though, to get them a little more (college) softball experience. We were finally starting to push up toward the surface and I was excited."

For the record, the last games the Vikings played on March 12 were two shutout losses against 7-14 Tallahassee Community College on the road, 3-0 and 8-0.

But they did win their share of games, even if the 9-15 record at the end of the season said otherwise. Truth was Littlefield had to reshape her team by bringing 18 new players this spring, most of them freshmen, so before they were to take on the Mid-Florida Conference schedule, they were having to take their lumps in non-conference games.

But just the fact Littlefield was willing to change the culture from the 2019 season gave her hope on the recruiting trail. And she said she is ahead of the path she set a year ago when she was reshaping her team and well ahead of where she was taking over two years ago when she took over for Jill Semento as head coach.

"It does get easier by the year," she said. "We're getting more kids who are interested in our program. There's a lot more talk and I'm getting more and more interest in our camp. Last year, we got 54 kids for our fall camp. We were supposed to have one this spring, but of course that's canceled."

Like a lot of events at SJR State and around the country for that matter. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down sports in general. And after junior college sports shut down for good in late March, it allowed Littlefield to start planning ahead.

She's got commitments, but no signatures. Those letters of intent go out into the mail next week, she said. As far as who returns next year, Littlefield said that will depend on the virtual interviews she will conduct with her players.

"These interviews are where we will discuss grades and their plans moving forward and whether they are coming back or not as we go over the past year," Littlefield said.

As for her feelings on this year's team, Littlefield was enthused with the work her players were doing.

"I do feel good with this group," she said. "They are on the same page with me, both academically and athletically. They're coachable and respectful. That culture started to create itself here and, unfortunately, it got cut short for this season. But we're on the right track."