

Up and Over



Daily News file photo

Rickie Sheets (right) is one of only two players returning from 2019 for SJR State.

A Shift in Seasons

COVID-19 concerns push SJR State volleyball, other NJCAA sports, to spring

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The road back from the greatest season in school history has gotten longer, but that could turn out to be a good thing for the St. Johns River State College volleyball team.

The National Junior College Athletic Association has pushed all fall and winter sports, including volleyball, to the spring season because of concerns raised by COVID-19. That means the Vikings, who went 22-9 and tied for first in the NJCAA Division II Sun-Lakes Conference in 2019, won't play again until 2021. Ordinarily, the season would begin this month.

"No competition until January. We start (the next season) a little before baseball," said SJR State coach Matt Cohen, whose 13 scholarship players will take most of their fall classes online, as will other students. Even though they won't be on campus for classes, they'll be there for fall practice while living near the school.

"The NJCAA has given us 60 days to train, similar to baseball and softball. We'll condition, work on skills and lift weights," Cohen said.

He figures they can use the extra practice.

The Vikings return only two players from last season, libero Dariana Luna and outside hitter Rickie Sheets. Other freshmen from the 2019 team did not return for a variety of reasons, including one of the two international players who did not come back because of the pandemic. In no case did

a player depart because of academic or disciplinary issues, Cohen said.

News the season would be moved to the spring came in mid-July along with initial disappointment, but perspective as well.

"I know for the returners, their hope was to have a season. And looking at all the data, it's likely a fall season would have started, but not finished," Cohen said. "When that reality set in, they realized a spring season was better than no season. The freshmen missed out on club season with (the virus) hit.

"Hopefully, the world will be in a better place in 2021 and we'll have the resources to keep everybody safe."

Among SJR State's incoming freshmen is projected outside hitter Kirby Mason, a two-time *Daily News* Putnam County Player of the Year out of Interlachen High School. Four other recruits come from the college's tri-county area: middle blocker Jadin Cerrato of St. Johns Creekside, libero Laney Miller and setter Mone Gordon of Middleburg and middle blocker Devinn Nickson of Orange Park Ridgeview.

Despite the team's youth, Cohen does not rule out another successful season.

"I'm hoping it's about culture, not personnel. We lost a lot two years ago and we were a better team the next year," he said. "I hope were reloading and not rebuilding.

"I guess the spring (season) could be a good thing because of that extra training. But the reality is when we play that first match, only two girls will have played college volleyball before."