

# SPORTS



## SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

### Former Vikings end up again in the playoffs

**R**oss Jones hasn't spoken to two of his prize pupils lately. Playoffs, you know. Instead, the St. Johns River State College baseball coach has seen Nate Lowe and Myles Straw from the same perspective as all but a few family members – on television.



Lowe



Straw

This is the second straight fall ex-Vikings have been involved in the post-season, though neither will match the glory achieved in 2019 by former St. Johns second baseman Howie Kendrick, MVP of the National League Championship Series and who hit the game-winning home run for the Washington Nationals in game 7.

They're younger players who have had lesser roles this week. A second baseman who can also play any outfield position, Straw was twice inserted as the Houston Astros' potential tying run in

the first two games of the ALCS, but they couldn't get him home. Lowe, a first baseman, was on the Tampa Bay Rays' roster for their wild-card sweep of the Toronto Blue Jays but has since given way to Ji Man Choi.

Jones is OK with that. "Just watching the games (on TV)," he said. "I've texted with Nate a couple of times. I haven't talked to him since the playoffs started. I'm not going to bother them this time of year."

Both had limited time in a season limited by the COVID-19 pandemic. Straw batted .207 with eight RBI in 2020, Lowe .224 with four home runs and 11 RBI.

Neither arrived at St. Johns amid great fanfare – Straw as a walk-on from Braden River High School in Bradenton, where State College of Florida has its pick of juco prospects, Lowe as a transfer from Mercer University in Macon, Ga., where things hadn't gone well.

"Myles was a little tiny thing, so we took the chance," Jones said. "We knew he was a plus runner and a plus fielder. He developed as a hitter."

That he did, hitting in the .300 range in 2014 and winning the state's batting title at .424 a year later – when his teammate, the power-hitting Lowe, edged him out for the state's juco player of the year.

"The biggest thing about (Straw) is he got so much stronger," Jones said. "He developed physically, got into the weight room and just killed it."

"Nate was driven. He just didn't feel like he was given a fair shot out of Mercer. Everybody was talking about Josh (Lowe's brother and a 2016 Rays draftee). Nate just knew he could do it, too."

Jones hasn't seen much change in their playing style.

"They're very, very much the same," he said. "They're so much better physically and mentally. They're 25-year-old men. But I watch them bat, defend and run – it's all the same."

"You couldn't pull for two better kids. They're far from just good baseball players. They're fantastic people."

■ Jones is taking next year's SJR State club through the paces this fall with a new assistant coach.

Morgan Depew has come on board from Jacksonville University, where he coached infielders and hitters the last two years. He'll play the same role for the Vikings, as well as serving as batting coordinator. He played at St. Joseph's College in Indiana and worked at Lee University in Tennessee and St. Leo University near Tampa before moving on to JU. Depew replaces Cory Elaski, who left during the 2020 season to join in a position with the San Francisco Giants.

"He's a very high-energy young man," Jones said. "He reminds me of (former assistant) Will Coggin in that way. He'll do a fantastic job."

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