

SPORTS

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HIGHSCHOOL BASEBALL

Indians ready for another run at states

By **SCOTT LOCKWOOD**
 SPORTS EDITOR

An upset loss in last year's Class 7A state title game erased what was shaping up to be a historic run for the Venice High School baseball team, which had won three titles in the past four years.

That stunning 2-1 loss to Tampa Gaither on a blistering hot May afternoon at JetBlue Park in Ft. Myers has Craig Faulkner's Indians ready to get back to the finals, a place they've been every year since winning the school's second state title in 2012.

"There's no doubt that it's made us stronger," Faulkner said. "It's motivated us in a lot of different ways, like getting into stronger mental shape and better physical shape if we get back to that game."

Despite losing a strong group of players to graduation, Venice returns a solid, seasoned group of players that will make sure the Indians stick to the level of excellence that they've become accustomed to over the past several years.

"We have a good pitching staff coming back and a really solid defense," Faulkner said. "We'll see what kind of bats we have when we get into some real games, but we're hoping our bats will come through too."

Senior Caleb Williams returns as the top pitcher on what is expected to be a deep rotation. Williams, whose first career start came in the 2015 Class 6A state title game, threw a no-hitter last year and

has become the Indians go-to pitcher in big games.

Williams said has picked up some velocity on his pitches and his trademark breaking ball is sharper as he heads into his senior year.

"We've got a lot of great guys, and I'm really looking forward to seeing how our pitching staff does this year," Williams said. "It's going to be a great year."

Bradford Jones, junior Brant Brown, Danny Rodriguez, Clayton Callan and a few other players are all expected to see some time on the mound. Filling the spot behind the dish vacated by Jake Grubbs is up to either freshman Matt Gusetti — who has already committed to the University of Florida — or junior Ramon Codero.

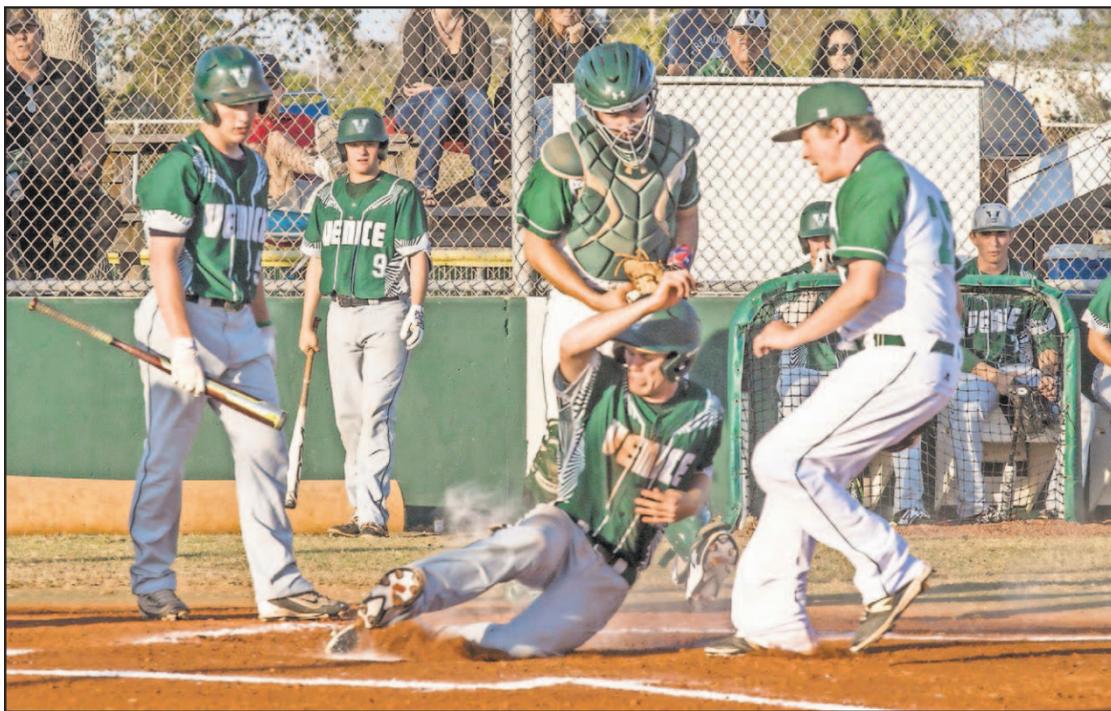
The left side of the infield remains intact with senior third baseman Mitch Donofrio and senior shortstop and Florida commit Shane Shifflett.

"Mitch and I have been together for three years and we know each other so well," Shifflett said. "We communicate real well and that's just what we do. I feel like defense is going to be our main thing this year and we've got some pitchers that are going to dominate."

Joe Kinker is likely to play at first base while several players, including Kevin Dubrule, are battling for the second base job.

"We've got a lot of strong possibilities," Faulkner said of his infield.

Venice's outfield will



SUN PHOTOS BY JEFFERY SCOTT FRAYER

Shane Shifflett slides into home ahead of a tag during a recent Green and White game. Shifflett, who is expected to be the Indians' lead-off hitter, is one of the state's top shortstops and is committed to the University of Florida.

have a new look this season after the graduation of several top players, including Tyler Gardner and Brent Killam and his area-leading .442 batting average. Kyle Bachle, Rodriguez, Kyle Stark, Callans and several others will be vying for time in one of the three spots.

"Whoever hits will be playing in the outfield," Faulkner said. "We're feeling our way through who is going to get all the playing time — and it could be a lot of different people getting playing time," Faulkner said. "It's going to be a fun year."

Faulkner said the Indians will be playing the toughest schedule they've ever played during his tenure as head coach. Venice will have an early-season matchup against Stoneman Douglas — the nation's no. 1 team — in Boca Raton on the way down to play Key West. The team also plays nationally ranked Parkview (Georgia), state finalist West Orange, two meetings against Bishop Verot, Tampa Jesuit and Lakewood Ranch.

"Some of the teams may not look that tough, but they've got a pitcher that's going to a big school or getting

drafted," Faulkner said. "We could be the best .500 team that gets to the playoffs."

Should Venice find its way back to the state finals again, it'd be the first public school to get to the state finals six years in a row for the first time in over 70 years.

"We're shooting as high as we can go but we know there's a lot of steps in between that," Faulkner said. "We don't look that far in advance. We're going to see what we can do in our district first, but if we could get to state again, it'd be a pretty neat thing for Venice High School."

Venice will open the season with a pre-season classic game against Miami Slam on Friday and top-ranked Canterbury on Saturday afternoon. They will open the regular season on Wednesday at Palmetto.

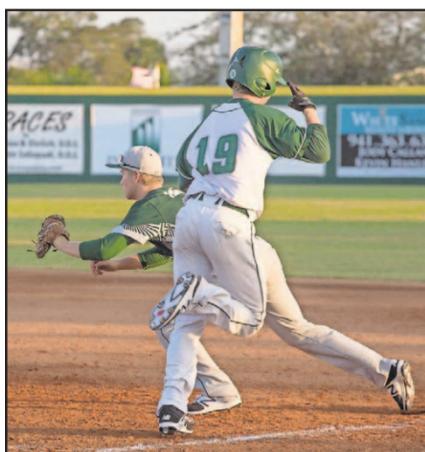
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Venice baseball players take in the action during a recent Green and White game at Venice High School. The Indians are seeking their sixth straight appearance in the state finals and are nationally ranked in some of the national preseason prep polls.



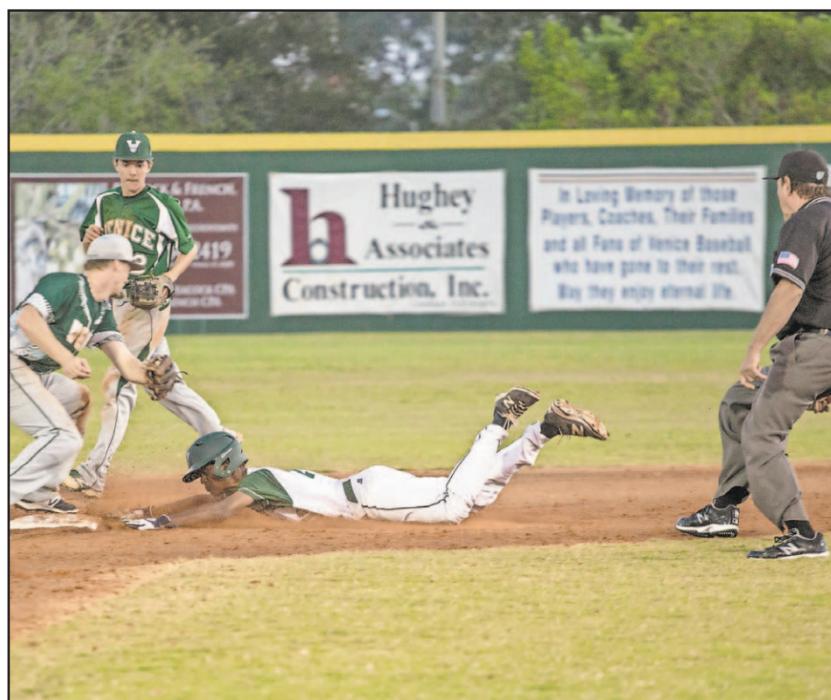
Clayton Callan fires a pitch during a recent Green and White game at Venice High School.



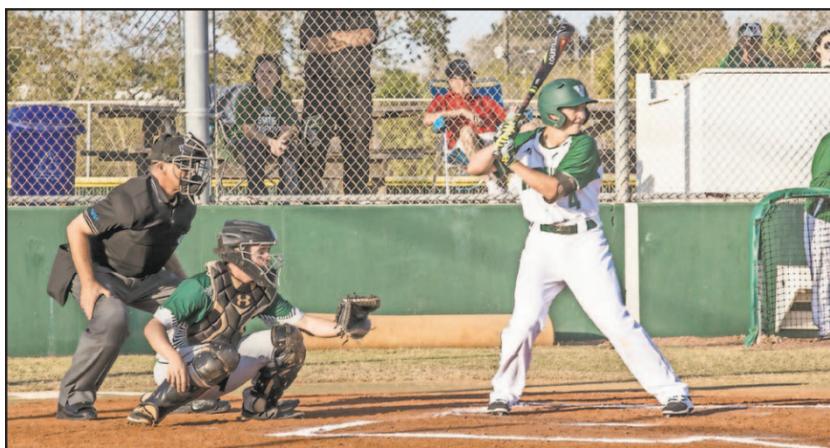
Indians players work on beating out a throw during a recent scrimmage at Venice High School.



Venice senior Caleb Williams enters the season as the Indians' no. 1 starter in a deep rotation.



Danny Rodriguez slides safely into second base during a recent Green and White game. Rodriguez is one of the Indians' fastest players and will likely see time in center field in addition to his pitching duties.



Venice baseball players prepare for the season with a recent Green and White intrasquad scrimmage at Venice High School. The Indians "Green" team won the game, 8-1.

February 15th, 2017



Lauren Stone
Venice Wrestling



CONGRATULATES
ATHLETE OF THE WEEK

Venice freshman wrestler Lauren Stone won the state championship in the 106-pound class at the Florida Girls High School Wrestling State Tournament last weekend.

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