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Big Sun Challenge gets into full swing

BY RICHARD BURTON

Special to the Star-Banner

Ocala - Over the past 16 years, Ed McPadden has made sure his teams have stayed with as much of a normal routine as possible during Spring Break.

For nine years, McPadden held the Spring Fling Baseball Tournament, before heading over to Vanguard, which will be the site of the Seventh Annual Big Sun Challenge starting today and running through Thursday.

The tournament showcases four local teams and four out-of-town squads in a two four-team pools, with the winner of each pool meeting for the tournament title on Thursday night at 7.

Vanguard currently has a 9-5 record and is looking to win its first title in the seven-year event.

Last season, the Knights lost in the finals 11-7 to Springfield Rutherford, but with a talented squad returning, they hope to compete for the tournament crown against a talented field.

"I'm excited about it every year," said McPadden, whose team faces Treasure Coast tonight at 7. "Everyone comes in with a winning record. Flagler Palm Coast is one of the better 6A teams in our area and has a couple of top-notch pitchers.

"The two teams from Port St. Lucie are pretty good and with Belleview and Forest you've got some local flavor and Dunnellon has (Jesse) Ginley back healthy and with him on the mound they can beat anyone."

While some teams take it easy over spring break, McPadden makes sure that his team takes advantage of the time to get better.

"I think with the level of skill needed in baseball you have to get as many reps as you can," McPadden said. "You need to take groundballs and you need to see live pitching.

"This tournament is a great training tool for us and it prepares us for the rest of the season heading into districts."

Cost for an all-day tournament pass is \$6. Monday will also feature a chicken dinner sale, with the cost of each dinner being \$6.

Forest and Dunnellon open the action today at 10 a.m.

BIG SUN CHALLENGE

Here's a look at some of the participants:

Vanguard: The Knights come in with a 9-5 record. J.R. Rekully (7-0 record) and Karl VonRodenstein (2-4 record) lead Vanguard on the hill, while Matt Wright and Eric Grabe are the top hitters.

Dunnellon: The Tigers, led by first-year coach Tommy Boss, a former University of Florida star and Dunnellon alumnus, come in with an 8-6 mark.

Bellevue: The Rattlers come in with 9-5 record. Frank Dejiulio (3.33 ERA) and Nick Radmoski (3.68 ERA) pace Bellevue on the mound while Mike Phipps (.563) and Chris King (.483) are the top hitters.

Bozeman: The Class 2A squad from Bay County comes in at 8-4 overall. Dustin Duncan (3-1, 2.33 ERA), Ronnie Smith (1-2, 3.58 ERA) and Will Humphreys (2-0, 2.65 ERA) led the pitching staff. Duncan (.543, 20 RBI), Ronnie Smith (.421, 3 HR, 12 RBI) and Nick Peterson (.438, 2 HR) lead Bozeman at the plate.

Flagler Palm Coast: The Bulldogs come in at 12-2 and are ranked No. 10 in Class 6A. David Robinson (.491) and Erik Silvola (.421) pace FPC at the plate. Sean Medlin (4-0 record, 1.20 ERA) and Joey Vitello (5-1 record, 1.28 ERA) are the pitchers for the Bulldogs.

Forest: The Wildcats come in at 8-6 and are led on the hill by Blake Spires (3-1) and Tres Ramirez (1-1 record). B.J. Robinson (.525) and Gary Merians (.390) are Forest's top hitters.