

Gladiator News

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New Gladiators won't let local talent 'go to waste'

BY ALAN DELL CORRESPONDENT

BRADENTON -- Manatee County's newest football team, the Bradenton Gladiators, will open its inaugural season in the Southern States Football League Jan. 22, 2005.

The Gladiators will play in the American Conference West Division, which includes the St. Petersburg Sharks, the four-time defending league champs.

Edrick Sweeting, Gladiators founder and president, expects to put a strong product on the field because of all the talent around Manatee County. But he says the team was created to do more than just win football games.

"We are looking to give kids around here an opportunity to showcase their football skills and get a scholarship to college," said Sweeting, a 1992 Southeast High graduate.

The Gladiators debut on the road against the Venice Vikings. The 16-team league season runs through the end of March and then has a four-week playoff.

The Gladiators will work in conjunction with the Manatee County Police Athletic League and play their games at the PAL Sports Complex at First Street and 13th Avenues.

"We are establishing a scholarship program and our focus is to get young adults back into school," said Sweeting. "There is a lot of talent in this area, and I hate to see it go to waste.

"There are kids who didn't get that look you need by colleges or others who decided not to go to college for various reasons."

Ed Starling, who works for the Manatee County Sheriff's Office and is an assistant football coach at Southeast High, will be the Gladiators head coach. His staff is expected to include, Joe Hammond, defensive coordinator at Southeast High, and Robert "Pig" Goff, who played with the NFL's Tampa Bucs and Tampa Bay

Storm, of the Arena Football League. Robby Stevenson, a former kicker for Manatee High and the University of Florida, is also expected to coach.

The Gladiators will hold a combine and tryouts on Oct. 16 at Southeast High from 9 a.m. to noon. It is open to anyone, who has used up their high school eligibility. Sweeting notes that the SSFL is a minor league, not semi-pro, which means none of the players get paid and therefore retain their college eligibility. Each player will pay a fee of about \$200 to \$250, which will help defray operating costs he estimates to be around \$25,000 to \$35,000.

"We hope to generate money through sponsors, donations and concessions," Sweeting said. "We have some verbal commitments and are definitely up and running."

The 29-year-old Sweeting quarterbacked the former Manasota Stars of the United Football League, but doesn't know if his duties will allow him to play.

All of the SSFL teams are based in Florida. Included in the league are teams from St. Petersburg, Miami, Orlando, Tampa, West Palm Beach and two from Jacksonville.

The Gladiators will play their second game on the road against the Cape Coral Fear on Jan. 29. The team's first home game is Feb. 5 against the St. Petersburg Sharks. Tickets will be priced at \$7, \$5 in advance.

Bradenton will play in the same division with St. Petersburg, Venice and Cape Coral.