

Gladiator News

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Old-timers answer Gladiators' call

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County Tax Collector Ken Burton Jr. likes to remind folks he, not former Manatee High and Nebraska quarterback Tommie Frazier, was the first county player to win back-to-back national championships.

It's been 20 years since the Palmetto High product punted for the 1983-84 NAIA kingpin Carson-Newman (Tenn.) College, but his visions of bright lights and cheering crowds haven't dimmed.

Three months ago, when his wife, Shelly, read about the formation of a minor league football team in Bradenton, she urged Burton to get some kicks.

So he dragged his 42-year-old bones - still strong enough from church softball and recreation-league basketball - to Southeast High last Saturday morning for the first NFL-style combine of the Bradenton Gladiators, who begin play in January in the 16-team Southern States Football League.

"I'm not getting any younger, but I think I can still do it," said Burton, who looks to 42-year-old Rams punter Sean Landeta and 45-year-old Tennessee Titans kicker Gary Anderson for inspiration.

"It's the physical challenge of doing something to make myself better, and I know what I have to do to get to the end result. But when I was running the 40-yard dash, I was just telling my hamstrings not to pop."

Burton was one of 43 would-be Gladiators at Southeast to get timed in the 40 and shuttle run and measured in the standing broad jump. Many are familiar names to area high school fans - team president Edrick Sweeting, Thomas Jefferson, Chris Peterson, Jason Hackley, Maurice Carter and Antonio Hale, who ran a 4.38 40.

"I was very pleased with what we had," said head coach Eddie Starling, the Southeast High junior varsity coach and director of football and cheerleading for the Police Athletic League.

"Some of the guys, it's quite obvious they've been keeping themselves in shape and working out on a regular basis. A few have gotten a little rusty. But most are guys who have been out of football but still have a love for the game."

Before sending everyone home for a hot shower, Starling ordered a 12-minute run around the Southeast track "to show that even if they're somewhat in shape, they're not in the best of shape."

Craig Knight, the first assistant golf professional at Bradenton Country Club, feels he passed the ordeal with flying colors. The 6-foot-4, 220-pound Knight, who is trying out for quarterback, last played organized football 21 years ago as a high schooler in Forestville, N.Y.

"I'm not looking to change careers. I'm a golf pro by trade," Knight said. "But it's never too late to try and fulfill a dream. I feel like I'm 29, not 39. I don't drink, don't smoke, don't party. I think I can run circles around most of these guys."

Well, you certainly want your QB to be confident.

Burton needn't worry about collecting tax on player salaries, since none of the SSFL's athletes are paid.

Sweeting said a second combine will be held from 9 a.m.-noon on Oct. 30 at Southeast. A practice will be held at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday at the Police Athletic League Sports Complex at 202 13th Ave. E.

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