

Gladiator News

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Gladiators aiming for more magic moments

By MIKE HENRY

Since the second week of March, the Bradenton Gladiators have practiced on the dirt floor of the Manatee County Fairgrounds Mosaic Arena in Palmetto.

When you're 10-1 and playing at home in the second round of the Southern States Football League playoffs, it's easy to find the positives in any situation.

"It's secluded, so we don't have to worry about anyone kicking us off or moving us," said team president Edrick Sweeting, a 1992 Southeast High graduate who plays quarterback, receiver and defensive back. "And it's dirt, so no one can blame us for tearing up the field."

The arrangement has forced the team to virtually eliminate contact drills, which Sweeting considers a blessing in disguise.

"We didn't have any bye weeks once the season started, so it allowed a lot of people who were banged up to heal. We still condition, but we don't bump heads any more."

That will change at 7 p.m. today at Southeast High when head coach Eddie Starling, Sweeting and Co. take the field against the Magic City Bulls (9-2) in an SSFL AFC semifinal. The winner advances to next week's conference final against the winner of tonight's game between the Fort Pierce Fire and the St. Petersburg Sharks.

If the Gladiators win the next two games, they will play for the SSFL title April 29 in the sixth annual Rice Bowl at the Citrus Bowl in Orlando.

In their second season of existence as a minor league franchise, the Gladiators have practiced at Manatee Community College, the Police Athletic League, Southeast and Lincoln Park before striking a deal with the Fairgrounds.

Sweeting, an area accountant, offers only a wry grin when asked how much money he has spent on field rentals. The payback comes Saturday nights, when grown men with daytime jobs relive glory days that proved all too fleeting.

Although attendance for last week's playoff-opening victory at Southeast against the East Coast Reapers was only 300, fans will find their \$7 well spent (children 5 and under get in free) if tonight's game approaches the excitement of last month's 27-21 Gladiators victory against the Bulls.

With his team trailing 21-20 and less than a minute remaining, quarterback Sweeting spied Magic City's linebackers getting ready to blitz. So he tapped center Josh Holmes on the butt, signaling a quarterback sneak.

Thirty-three yards later, Sweeting was in the middle of a massive celebration in the Bulls' end zone.

"I think I got hit more by my own players after that touchdown than I did the whole game," Sweeting said.

Throughout his career at Southeast and Bethel College in Kansas, Sweeting had never scored a game-winning touchdown in the final minutes. The SSFL and the Gladiators filled the void.

"Even if you've been playing football since Pop Warner," Sweeting said, "a moment can happen that you've never experienced before."

Mike Henry, *sports writer*, can be reached at 745-7080, ext. 2212, or mhenry@HeraldToday.com.