

Sports

Gladiators Earn Rematch, Shot At Conference Championship

Bradenton scores 28 unanswered points in a 34-20 win over the visiting Miami Spartans to set up a game against the only team it's lost to this year.

By [Chad Brockhoff](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 17, 2011



The Bradenton Gladiators' drive to an elusive championship could be referred to as a redemption tour.

The Gladiators rebounded from an early 6-0 deficit by scoring 28 unanswered points and registered a 34-20 victory over the visiting Miami Spartans in Saturday night's Florida Football Alliance AFC semifinal game at the [Manatee PAL Sports Complex](#).

Having knocked off the team that ended its season last year, Bradenton is setting its sights on avenging a 31-28 loss in the regular-season finale next week in Miami against the Magic City Bulls.

"Very long, a very long two weeks," said Gladiators head coach Wendell Faison, whose team had not played since Greg Cole of the unbeaten Bulls [blocked a late field goal attempt](#) and dashed its hopes of an unbeaten season. "I guess (the Bradenton players) were really antsy because as you know last year these guys spoiled our opportunity of going to the conference championship (game). It was redemption, but tomorrow we will be back in the film room getting ready and prepared for (Magic City)."

The Spartans' offense saw the game's first drive thwarted at the Bradenton 25, but the unit was back on the field three minutes later as Joe Ray intercepted a Nicholas Kirby shovel pass. Quarterback Shawn Terry completed passes on the next three plays, including a 24-yarder to Corey Vega and an 18-yard scoring strike to Sheldon Smith.

Bradenton (10-1) took a lead it would never relinquish with 2:10 left in the first quarter as Kirby took advantage of a free play, which was generated by a yet-to-be-called offsides penalty, and found Jeff Charlton for an 18-yard touchdown. Another 18-yard touchdown pass to Frankie Romo staked the Gladiators to a 14-6 lead with 7:01 left before halftime.

Kirby threw his third touchdown pass of the night on the second half's first play from scrimmage as Bon Bean hauled in a reception and traveled 56 yards to the end zone. Former Palmetto High standout Demetrius Craddock came up with a touchdown off a 35-yard fumble return with 11:13 left in the third quarter to help Bradenton avoid a letdown similar to the one it experienced after holding 18-point lead against Magic City two weeks earlier.

A little more than two and half minutes after Miami got within 16 at 28-12 with a 9-yard touchdown pass from Terry to Jehlan Ramsey, Chauncey Jones capped a five-play, 66-yard drive by taking a Kirby screen pass for a 14-yard touchdown with 11:09 left.

Kirby finished with 191 yards, four touchdowns and one interception on 9-of-14 passing. Jones collected 54 yards on eight carries, and Dwayne Blue needed just four carries to gain 40 yards.

"It wasn't like we were just lighting them up through the air," Kirby said. "We were running the ball and running the ball, which opened up the air game. The offensive line was just phenomenal."

The Gladiators' defense registered five sacks of Terry and limited the Spartans to 187 net passing yards and 127 rushing yards. However, 168 yards of offense came in the final 18:18 of the game.

Smith capped the scoring when he threw a 39-yard touchdown pass to Vega off a play that looked to be a wide receiver sweep.

The Bulls (11-0) earned the right to host the AFC Championship Game with Saturday's 40-14 win over the visiting Palm Beach Makos. The winner of next Saturday's game between the Gladiators and Bulls will play either the Orlando Rage or the Treasure Coast Bobcats for the league championship in Daytona Beach on April 30.

"It's going to be a fight," Kirby said of the Gladiators' second showdown against the Bulls. "They're going to come to play. We have to go down there ready to go and get it done. We had a chance and we gave it away. We have to do something different this time."