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Gladiators have high expectations

After several close calls, team hungry for championship

By RYAN T. BOYD
rboyd@bradenton.com

PALMETTO — Last week was one of the coldest on record in Manatee County.

It was the kind of chill that makes you want to bundle up and stay indoors.

But not the Bradenton Gladiators.

The minor league football team was still on the field for its weekly Tuesday and Thursday night practices.

The bone-chilling temperatures could not prevent the Gladiators from preparing to open their fourth season against the Daytona Wildcats on Saturday.

"It's for the love of the game," said Gladiators defensive back Thomas Jefferson, who has played with the organization for at least six years, back when the team was the Manasota Stars. "It's fun being out here with some of my friends, people that I grew up watching play football who might be a little older than me, and guys I played with in youth league and in high school."

The Gladiators aren't just any team playing in the Florida Football Alliance's AFC West Division. This is a team that has a history of playing well.

Since the Gladiators opened play in 2006, the team has a 39-11 record, posting a 9-4 mark last season, losing to the Miami Bulls in the AFC conference semifinals.

"That loss was hard," Gladiators coach Wendell Faison said. "We came out with a nice strategy to control their running game, and we had the game close and was driving, but penalties killed us in the end."

The defeat took a toll on the team, because there were such high expectations surrounding the Gladiators.

"I felt like last year's team should have made it all the way," Jefferson said. "Last year everybody felt like we were going to go undefeated, get to the playoffs, wreck the playoffs, get into the championship game and finally win one. We've been to two (title games), but we've lost both of them. Every other year, it seems like we get to the championship. We went in 2006 and 2008, so this might be our year to get back, and hopefully win one."

Faison spoke of some new additions to the team this year, and one of those additions is defensive back Pedro Vega.

Vega, who graduated from Tampa Jefferson High in 2005, said his friend, Jeff Carlton, who plays wide receiver for the Gladiators, invited him to play.

"This is different," Vega said. "Coming from high school, you have smaller athletes, but in adult ball you have big athletes that are about as fast as you, and sometimes even stronger than you. It's been hard, but I'm getting a grip of the game. I take it one game at a time and one practice at a time."

The Gladiators put a lot of time into the community, too.

"We do a lot of things in the community with the kids," Faison said. "We do a mentoring program, and we give out backpacks during the school year, and we do a lot of stuff like a reading program at the library. This organization has really grown, and we do more things besides football."

But, still, it's evident the Gladiators truly love their time on the gridiron. Why else would they brave the bitter cold?

"I'm going to make a bold prediction," Jefferson said. "I feel like we are going to go undefeated and finally win that championship."

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