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New faces, same goal for Gladiators

Minor league team hopes to reach title game

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Some faces are new, but the goal remains the same.

That goal is to get to Daytona Beach on April 30.

Reaching the destination means the Bradenton Gladiators are playing for the Florida Football Alliance's championship -- something the minor league football team has never won in its history.

"The ultimate goal is to get to Daytona April 30th, and I think we have a real good chance of getting there," Wendell Faison said.

Faison is returning for his third year as the Gladiators' head coach.

And this year's crop features five or six younger guys, Faison said.

Craig Carnes, the former Manatee High running back, is a new addition.

Like most players taking a shot at minor league football, the Bradenton organization is a stepping stone for what Carnes said he hopes can get him to the next level -- whether that is college or a pro career down the road.

"I'm a small person, so I think if I play with them and get highlights and all that," Carnes said, "then I can show (colleges) how I did."

Carnes involvement offers the Gladiators a two-headed backfield attack.

Faison said Chauncey Jones brings a punishing ground game with Carnes supplementing the bruiser with his speed.

"Carnes gives you a different dimension of a running back," Faison said. "... Craig is an elusive running back. He can hit a hole, and get from here-to-here in three seconds. And before you know it, he's out of there. He's going to give us a different shift of a gear, because he's going to really make those linebackers work."

Wide receiver Rudy Murrell joins Carnes as a fresh face on the offense.

President and assistant coach Edrick Sweeting said they need big seasons from both players.

Having younger players is a bonus that could pay dividends during the long season, which has begun with practices.

Those players provide the necessary depth for the long haul that starts with the regular season opener Jan. 22.

"A lot of our guys that we have right now, have been playing for six, seven or eight years or what have you," Faison said.

"Some of them have gotten a step or two slower, and I think the youth is going to get us where we need to be."

But before the regular season starts, Bradenton has a preseason game against the Palm Beach Mariners on Sunday.

"This Sunday's preseason game is going to evaluate myself as to where everybody needs to be," Faison said. "I told the guys on Tuesday night that this preseason game, we're going to see a lot of guys being rotated in-and-out, and we're going to look at a lot of things. Because this year we're going to have a lot of different packages for our different things that we're going to be doing this year."

The team isn't just about football, though, as the organization has been active within the community throughout the years.

And 2011 is no different as Sweeting said the Gladiators Care Program is a new way for them to help out.

“It’s somewhat similar to Adopt a Family,” Sweeting said. “Basically what we do is identify those individuals who need assistance during the holiday time and any other time.”

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