

Gladiator News

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New Team

MIKE HENRY
Herald Staff Writer

Southeast High graduate Edrick Sweeting's vision for the minor league Bradenton Gladiators extends beyond the playing field.

The Gladiators are the newest entry in the Southern States Football League, a 16-team circuit based entirely in Florida that begins its fifth season Jan. 22, 2005.

None of the league's players are paid. Bradenton is a member of the SSFL's AFC West Division, which includes the four-time league champion St. Petersburg Sharks, the Venice Vikings and the Cape Coral Fear.

Sweeting, a 29-year-old accountant with FCCI Insurance Group in Sarasota, spearheaded the effort to bring a team to the area. He serves as president of the not-for-profit organization, but the former Bethel (Kan.) College receiver plans to participate in the team's combine and tryouts Oct. 16 at Southeast.

"I still can play. There's no doubt about that one," Sweeting said.

Three years ago, the 6-foot, 185-pound speedster led the semi-pro Manasota Stars to the championship of the United Football League of Florida.

More than being a vehicle for former high school and college players to relive past glories and get physical, Sweeting believes the Gladiators can make a positive impact in the community.

"I see this as an opportunity for people to bridge the gap between youth and young adult and help them do something with their lives," Sweeting said.

The SSFL season runs from late January through the end of April, giving quality players a second chance to be noticed by college or junior college recruiters whose seasons are finished. Sweeting said that will motivate some to further their education or take the necessary steps toward eligibility.

Sweeting also foresees the Gladiators reaching out to the next generation.

"The whole thing is not just to play quality football, but showing a commitment to developing the community. We plan to have mentor programs for at-risk youth, host service activities such as adopt-a-highway and registering people to vote, and form a scholarship program for anyone seeking a college degree," he said.

Sweeting, the primary financial investor to date, has formed a board of trustees consisting of himself; vice president and head coach Eddie Starling, a veteran of the Manatee County Sheriff's Office; and secretary-treasurer Patricia Johnson.

Southeast defensive coordinator Joe Hammond, former Tampa Bay Buccaneer Pig Goff and former Manatee High and Florida kicker Robby Stevenson are expected to be on Starling's staff.

"They definitely have the kind of internal support you need to be competitive," SSFL Commissioner Dave Rice said. "I've met the staff, and they're fired up, and that area is a hotbed of football talent."

The Gladiators will play their home games at the Police Athletic League Sports Complex at 202 13th Ave. E. Bradenton's first scheduled home contest is Feb. 5 against the Sharks.

Pre-registration for the Oct. 16 combine is from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. on Aug. 7 at the PAL Sports Complex. For details, call 320-7576 or visit mhenry@bradentonherald.com www.bradentongladiators.com on the Internet.

Mike Henry

Football is coming to Bradenton

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