

Gladiator News

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Defense, special teams lift Gladiators

BY ALAN DELL CORRESPONDENT

BRADENTON -- The Bradenton Gladiators believe teams have to excel on defense and special teams to win high-stakes games.

The Gladiators proved their point when they intercepted four passes, including two they returned for touchdowns, and got a 72-yard punt return to defeat the Fort Pierce Fire, 41-33, Saturday night at Southeast High.

The victory gives the Gladiators the Southern States Football League AFC championship and sends them to the Rice Bowl next Saturday in Orlando where they will play the NFC champion Jacksonville Generals for the league title. The kickoff is 3 p.m. in the Citrus Bowl.

The Gladiators (12-1) jumped out to a 21-3 lead in the first quarter and looked as if they were going to cruise to an easy victory over the team that eliminated them from the playoffs last year.

On Fort Pierce's second offensive play of the game, ZeZe Singleton intercepted a Jason Taylor pass and took it 40 yards for a touchdown. The Fire (7-6) were then forced to punt after Randolph Williams sacked Taylor on a third down pass attempt.

Manatee High graduate Bon Bean caught the punt on his own 28 yard line and took it 72 yards for a touchdown, weaving through frantic Fort Pierce defenders who couldn't catch the speedy return man.

After Fort Pierce scored on a 37-yard field goal, Bean caught a 20-yard touchdown pass from Edrick Sweeting that boosted the Gladiators lead to 21-3 with 3:42 remaining in the first quarter. Sweeting also connected on a 21 yard pass to Frankie Romo on the drive.

"This was the only punt I returned for a touchdown all season and it couldn't have come at a better time," Bean said. "Our defense set up a wall and I took advantage of that and was able to take it to the house. On the touchdown pass that was something we've done all year.

I ran pass the DB and catch the ball. It was a perfectly thrown pass and I have to give credit to my quarterback."

Venice High graduate Dominic Fragomeni booted field goals of 36 and 34 yards to help the Gladiators take a 27-17 lead into the final period.

Bradenton got six more points when Thomas Jefferson picked off a Taylor pass and went 73 yards for a touchdown. Demetrius Craddock gave the Gladiators the ball back when he intercepted Taylor. Four plays later Calvin Williams scored from 10 yards out to push the Gladiators lead to 41-17.

Fort Pierce took the ensuing kickoff for a touchdown and on the Gladiators' next possession, Sweeting was tackled in the end zone for a safety. The Fire got a touchdown on the final play of the game when Taylor threw a 30-yard touchdown pass.

Despite the victory, things weren't so sweet for the Gladiators. Starting offensive lineman Wade Alden was ejected in the final minute of play and thus will be ineligible to play in the championship game.

"We knew going into the game we had to win special teams and I think overall we did that," said Gladiator head coach Ed Starling. "I just hate what happened in the latter minutes of the game. Things went a little haywire and my starting left tackle was ejected and it means we have to re-group next week. Our defense was real good. We were able to put pressure on their quarterback and made him throw it up and our defensive backs responded. It feels great to win the championship. I just hate the ejections late in the game. That takes the thrill out of the victory."

Sweeting completed four of five passes for 61 yards and Bean had five receptions for 63 yards. Romo had two catches for 33 yards. Calvin Williams led the ground game with 76 yards on seven carries. Craddock had two interceptions.