

Gladiator News

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Gladiators head to Rice Bowl

Bon Bean leads Bradenton with 166 all-purpose yards
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BRADENTON - In the days leading up to Saturday's Southern States Football League AFC Championship, Bradenton Gladiators coach Eddie Starling emphasized the importance of pressuring Fort Pierce Fire quarterback Jason Taylor and strong special teams play.

Starling's players were listening. They picked off four Taylor passes, bringing two back for touchdowns, and Bon Bean returned a punt 72 yards for a touchdown in a convincing 41-33 victory.

"We had some tremendous plays, especially in the first half," Starling said. "Going back to July, when we started preseason conditioning, and seeing our guys still playing in the fourth quarter a little winded but not too winded, this really means a lot."

The Gladiators (12-1) advance to Saturday's SSFL Rice Bowl Championship at 3 p.m. at the Citrus Bowl in Orlando against the First Coast Generals, who defeated the Orlando Rage for the SSFL NFC title.

"Defense is how we've been winning all year," said Gladiators linebacker ZeZe Singleton, who intercepted a tipped Taylor pass and dashed 41 yards for a touchdown and a 7-0 lead on the Fire's second play from scrimmage.

"I have to give the offense credit, too, but the defense held it together. It's real satisfying after the year we had to top it off by getting to the championship."

Thomas Jefferson had the second interception return for a score, going 74 yards with 12 minutes, 40 seconds remaining for a 34-17 lead that effectively ended the Fire's comeback hopes.

"I've been to championships before, but this is special because we went from 4-7 last season to 12-1," Jefferson said. "I felt at the beginning of the season we were going to be here, and we're peaking at the right time."

Bean, a big-play threat all season, caught five passes for 58 yards, including a 20-yard strike from team president Edrick Sweeting that made it 21-3 with 3:42 left in the first quarter.

Bean accounted for 166 all-purpose yards, but his punt return touchdown stands out on the highlight reel.

"The wall was set up well, and I did what I do," he said. "I got a few more in my bag, so watch me next week."

After falling behind 24-3, the Fire stormed back to 24-17 on a 57-yard touchdown pass from Taylor to Randall Lundy and a 54-yard fumble return by Antorry Young.

Dominic Fragomeni's 35-yard field goal late in the third quarter gave the Gladiators breathing room. Following Jefferson's touchdown, Calvin Williams swept 10 yards for the clinching score with 5:31 remaining. Williams rushed for 74 yards on 10 carries.

Fire linebacker Ronn Brown suffered an apparent neck injury late in the first half on a helmet-to-helmet collision and was taken to Manatee Memorial Hospital for observation.

Gladiators offensive lineman Wade Alden was ejected late in the game for unsportsmanlike conduct, as were Mike Savoye and Eddie Keys of the Fire.