

Newsletter

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Passion still burns among Gladiators

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Mike Henry Commentary

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Joe Patoray teaches American history and world geography to high school students training to become college and professional athletes.

After next Saturday, The Pendleton School instructor can offer first-hand knowledge about what takes place in the sporting arena.

The 5-foot-8, 185-pound Patoray is a running back for the minor league Bradenton Gladiators of the Southern States Football League. The Gladiators begin their third season at 7:05 p.m. Jan. 13 at Southeast High against the Fort Myers Spartans.

Patoray, 25, was among a stable of backs who helped the 2006 Gladiators to a 12-2 record and a runner-up finish in the SSFL to the First Coast Generals of Jacksonville.

When he completed his senior season at Youngstown State in Ohio in 2003, the speedy but undersized Patoray knew it was time to make a living away from the gridiron. Getting a chance to keep playing provides a real-life experience he can share with his students, who are enrolled in the sports programs at IMG Academies.

"Playing for the Gladiators helps me make connections. I love sports, and my students obviously love sports, and that makes it real easy to relate to them," Patoray said before a recent practice at Southeast.

Like so many players in the 13-team SSFL, Patoray finds winter and early-spring football fills a void. Yet as adults, there is none of the pressure to justify a scholarship, few of the doubts that creep in after a lackluster performance at the high school or college level.

"When you're playing football on scholarship, you can be very critical of yourself," Patoray said.

"Last year, I knew I had nothing to lose because I was playing a game I love. I'm going to enjoy it while I can. I realize having fun is a crucial part of the game, and that helps me relax and have a good time."

Their shared passion aside, Patoray and his Gladiators teammates have unique backgrounds and professions.

Offensive lineman John Wright, 36, is a Bradenton architect. Tight end Frankie Romo, 29, is an account manager. Pulling guard James Lee - who last played for the Manasota Stars in 2001, when that team won the United Football League of Florida championship - is a 32-year-old debt consultant.

When January rolls around, it is as if they are getting a second chance. Living their own version of "It's A Wonderful Life," minus the potholes and the angst.

"I can't help but feel young with all my friends around," said 29-year-old linebacker Chris Peterson, who works in the crisis stabilization unit of Coastal Behavioral Healthcare.

"I just can't get it out of my system. When the season ends, I can't wait to get back out here. It's a family atmosphere," Peterson said.

The Gladiators, who averaged about 250 fans a game last season, will have competition in the area from the first-year Sarasota Millionaires, who will play their home games at Sarasota Booker High.

Tickets for Gladiators games are \$5 if purchased from a player or coach in advance, \$7 at the gate. Children 5-and-under are admitted free. For details, call 320-7576 or e-mail team president Edrick Sweeting at gladiators@tampabay.rr.com.

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