

Gladiator News

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Young players hope Gladiators won't be their last football stop

Trio of recent high school graduates wants to use minors as a springboard to college

By MIKE HENRY

BRADENTON - As a first-year center with the minor-league Bradenton Gladiators, Southeast High senior Chris Kloth learned what he was getting into before the team's season-opening, 31-13 victory against Fort Myers.

Butting heads in practice against the likes of linebacker Chris Peterson - a 1995 Southeast graduate who played on back-to-back state championship teams - is its own form of education.

"He's a beast," said Kloth, using football terminology for a player whose motor never slows and whose passion for contact never wanes.

"I've had to work a lot harder here than I did in high school, because it's a lot faster and the hits are a lot harder. And you have to be more prepared for different defensive schemes because the players are a lot smarter at this level," Kloth said.

"The first time (Fort Myers) blitzed up the middle, it came a lot quicker than any middle linebacker in high school. But I got used to it by going up against (Peterson) at practice."

The 6-foot, 270-pound Kloth, a reserve lineman last fall for the 5-5 Seminoles, is one of three peach-fuzzed, teenage additions to the Gladiators, who finished last season as Southern States Football League runners-up.

The Gladiators travel to Sarasota Booker High for tonight's 7:05 game against the Sarasota Millionaires, a first-year team in the SSFL. Both are 1-0.

The team's youngsters - Kloth; receiver Jeff Charlton, a 2005 Manatee High graduate; and strong safety Chris Kastor, a 2006 Southeast graduate - hope to increase their chances for a college scholarship by playing with the Gladiators this winter.

Because the players are not paid, competing in the SSFL does not affect their college eligibility.

"It gives them an opportunity to get on the field and take another crack at it, with the hope we get some scouts to come and take another look at them," said Gladiators head coach Eddie Starling, who knew Kloth and Kastor through his position as Southeast's head junior varsity coach.

"The biggest adjustment Chris Kloth has had to make is with the mental aspect of the game, lining up against guys like 'Pete' and (linebacker) ZeZe Singleton, who have been playing the game for years. It has taken his respect for the game to another level, and Chris has done a good job for us," Starling said.

Starling said tutoring will be available if Kloth struggles with balancing school, football and his job. "The most important thing in life is education," Starling said.

Kloth, who works part-time at Burger King, said his mother Katrina had reservations at first.

"She was worried I might get hurt," he said. But he thinks attending last week's game at Southeast convinced her it is a healthy, worthwhile pursuit.

"She was proud that I played well," he said.

Charlton hopes to get back on some school's radar after playing a season of junior college football in 2005 at College of the Desert in Palm Desert, Calif., where he caught 43 passes for 800 yards. Charlton caught two touchdown passes from quarterback Edrick Sweeting in last week's victory.

"I'm going to stick with this until I get another opportunity with some school," said Charlton, who works for Lowe's Home Improvement. He left College of the Desert because he was uncomfortable in California.

"Football is in my blood. These guys call me a rookie, but I'm no rookie to the game.

"I have my (academic) units, so I just need to get some film and find a school and transfer. But this is fun. I honestly don't know where I'd go if the Gladiators weren't here," Charlton said.

Kastor is working as a detailer for Cox Chevrolet and taking classes at Manatee Community College while playing with the Gladiators. The defender said there is a chance he will sign with Guilford College, a Division III school in Greensboro, N.C., for the 2007 season.

"Chris Kastor has turned some heads, even of guys like Pete and ZeZe," Starling said. "Physically, he can go."

"I want to get used to the speed, because I know that's what college is like," Kastor said. "I was more nervous last week than for the first game of my senior year. Getting back into the game is great. This is a very good experience."