

Gladiator News

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Gladiators will try to humble Millionaires again

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Former Southeast High running back Calvin Williams was a vital part of the Bradenton Gladiators' push last year to the championship game of the Southern States Football League.

But when the Venice Vikings folded after the 2006 season, Williams pounced on an opening to bring a new minor league team to the Sarasota-Manatee area - even though it meant leaving one of the preseason favorites for the 2007 title.

"Sarasota is my hometown, I was aware of all the talent in the area, and it seemed like an ideal time with Venice shutting down," said Williams, who invested about \$50,000 to help form the Sarasota Millionaires. "But the main reason the team is here is that some people who have the love for the game never really let it go."

Judging from the Gladiators' 13-12 and 30-10 regular-season victories, the Millionaires (4-5-1) still have some things to learn from their third-year SSFL opponents. Williams and Co. will attempt to speed their progress at 7:05 p.m. today at Southeast High in the quarterfinal round of the league playoffs.

The winner advances to an April 21 SSFL semifinal game.

"They always say it is hard to beat the same team three games in a row," said Gladiators coach Eddie Starling. "But I don't have too many concerns as long as we play disciplined, sound football."

The Gladiators (7-3) have won three straight and posted back-to-back shutouts, but the Millionaires have been gaining momentum. They recorded consecutive shutouts before a 23-14 loss against the powerful Magic City Bulls of Miami to conclude the regular season.

"We don't fear the Gladiators. We can beat them, but we have to go out (tonight) and prove it," said Williams, who played on Southeast High's 1993 state championship team. "It's something exciting for both communities."

The Gladiators last played March 24, followed by a regular-season bye week and a first-round playoff bye (the Millionaires advanced when the Fort Myers Spartans forfeited last week's scheduled playoff opener).

Stuck in neutral around midseason, the Gladiators' offense has thrived in recent weeks behind the quarterback tandem of pocket passer Nelson Barros and pass-run threat Torry Johnson. Glenn Woods is the lightning and Joe Patoray the thunder in the rushing attack, and wide receivers Jeff Charlton and Bon Bean are game-breaking threats.

The team's strength, though, is on defense, especially since the entire unit is healthy for the first time since the start of the season.

"The defense is eating real good right now," said Gladiators linebacker Chris Peterson. "I think it's good for Sarasota to have a team because it creates that rivalry, but it isn't going to go too much longer after (tonight)."

If you go

Who: Sarasota Millionaires (4-5-1) vs. Bradenton Gladiators (7-3).

What: Southern States Football League AFC West Division Championship.

Where: Southeast High.

When: 7:05 p.m. today.

Tickets: \$5 in advance, \$7 at the gate; children 5-and-under free; \$2 parking.