

Gladiator News

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Gladiators forming a league of their own

Bradenton minor league football team joining 11 others in new FFA

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When he formed the Bradenton Gladiators three years ago, Southeast High graduate Edrick Sweeting vowed the minor-league football team would reach out to underprivileged and at-risk youth in the community.

Sweeting and the Gladiators have fulfilled their mission by establishing a college scholarship fund, donating educational supplies and conducting youth camps and mentor programs. Now, they're taking steps to spread that philosophy throughout Florida.

Sweeting and fellow owners Terrence Page Sr. of the Miami Magic City Bulls and Chris McIntosh of the East Coast (Delray Beach) Reapers recently announced the formation of the 12-team Florida Football Alliance, which will begin its inaugural season Jan. 19.

The Gladiators, Bulls and Reapers were among eight teams to pull out from the established Southern States Football League (the North Florida Rams and the First Coast Generals of Jacksonville have merged into the Duval Panthers). They will be joined by five first-year franchises.

The creation of a new league leaves the SSFL with five teams, including the Sarasota Millionaires. Miami won the 2007 SSFL title. The FFA intends to operate as a non-profit organization, with Page as president and Sweeting (who plays safety on defense) as chairman of the board.

Sweeting said the FFA was formed to give team owners more input into regulations and procedures. The SSFL operates under the direction of Commissioner Dave Rice.

"The way we have it set up, we think the teams will take a little more pride in what they do from an organizational standpoint," Sweeting said. "We wanted to basically

create a league that is for the teams, and each team will have a vote when rules get changed and decisions are made.

"This is something we had talked about before but never pursued. It got to the point where the interest was there, and we decided we could do it, so we filed the entity papers to get the league and the teams to hit the ground running."

The Gladiators, who defeated the West Coast (Hernando County) Bears and the Polk County War Eagles in a jamboree last week in Fort Myers, are also moving their home games from Southeast to Palmetto High. The Gladiators, who open at the West Coast Bears, play their first home game at 7:05 p.m. on Jan. 26 against the War Eagles.

Former defensive coordinator Wendell Faison will replace Eddie Starling as the Gladiators head coach. Starling, the head junior varsity coach at Southeast and director of the Police Athletic League youth football program, will serve as a team vice president and president of the FFA's coaches association.

"We have a lot of respect for the SSFL," Starling said. "We chose to go to the FFA for management and organizational reasons."

One drawback to the move is that the Gladiators-Millionaires rivalry has been put on hold. The teams met three times last year, with the Gladiators winning both regular-season games before the Millionaires eked out an 8-6 victory in the playoffs.

For details, visit www.ffafotball.com.