

Gladiator News

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Gladiators ready for playoff opener

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Three weeks have passed since the Bradenton Gladiators capped a 10-0 regular season with a 51-0 victory against the Fort Myers Spartans, clinching the No. 1 seed for the Florida Football Alliance playoffs.

While the FFA postseason began last week, Bradenton was idle because No. 8 seed Daytona Beach was kicked out for disciplinary reasons. But Gladiators head coach Wendell Faison doesn't expect inactivity to be an issue when he leads his team against the Florida Falcons (9-2) of Orange Park at 7 p.m. tonight at Palmetto High in an FFA semifinal.

"We had a real up-tempo practice (Thursday), and everybody is eager and ready to hit the field," Faison said. "We'd been going at it 10 straight weeks during the season and had some guys who were bruised and nicked up, so the three weeks off really did us some good."

"This team is focused and determined to bring a championship to Manatee County, and I think you're going to see a lot of guys flying to the football a lot quicker than they did during the season."

Tickets are \$7 at the gate, \$5 if purchased in advance from a Gladiators coach, player or official. Children 5-and-under get in free.

The other FFA semifinal pits the 11-0 Duval Panthers against the 11-0 Magic City Bulls in Miami. Today's winners meet in the inaugural Alliance Bowl title game May 3 at Daytona Beach Municipal Stadium.

The Falcons advanced with a 21-14 victory against the West Coast Bears of Hernando County. The Panthers beat the Broward County Bears 40-21 and Magic City beat the East Coast Reapers 28-6.

Bradenton has dominated its competition this season, outscoring opponents by a 372-55 margin, including a 2-0 forfeit against the Polk County War Eagles.

The addition this season of mobile quarterback Millard Dawson, a former minor-league outfielder, has made a huge difference in the Gladiators' fortunes. He has thrown for 1,835 yards and 23 touchdowns, hooking up with Jeff Charlton and Bon Bean for a combined 54 receptions for 1,323 yards and 16 touchdowns.

Bradenton also has a dangerous rushing game, led by Glenn Woods and Bobby Dawes. Linebackers Chris Peterson and Darian Platt, defensive end Mike Mills and safety Thomas Jefferson spearhead a fast, aggressive defense.

The minor-league Gladiators competed their first three seasons in the Southern States Football League, losing against the First Coast Generals of Jacksonville in the 2006 SSFL Rice Bowl Championship. The players are using that close call and their disappointing playoff loss against Sarasota last year as motivation.

"For a lot of guys like myself and some of the older guys, we're not looking to go to the next level," said team president, safety and defensive end Edrick Sweeting. "After last season, guys realized we let one slip away by not doing the things we knew we were capable of doing."

"When you've been playing a long time, you have to push yourself a little more. Physically you still may be able to do it, but if your mind isn't there and your heart isn't there, you might as well hang up your cleats," Sweeting said.