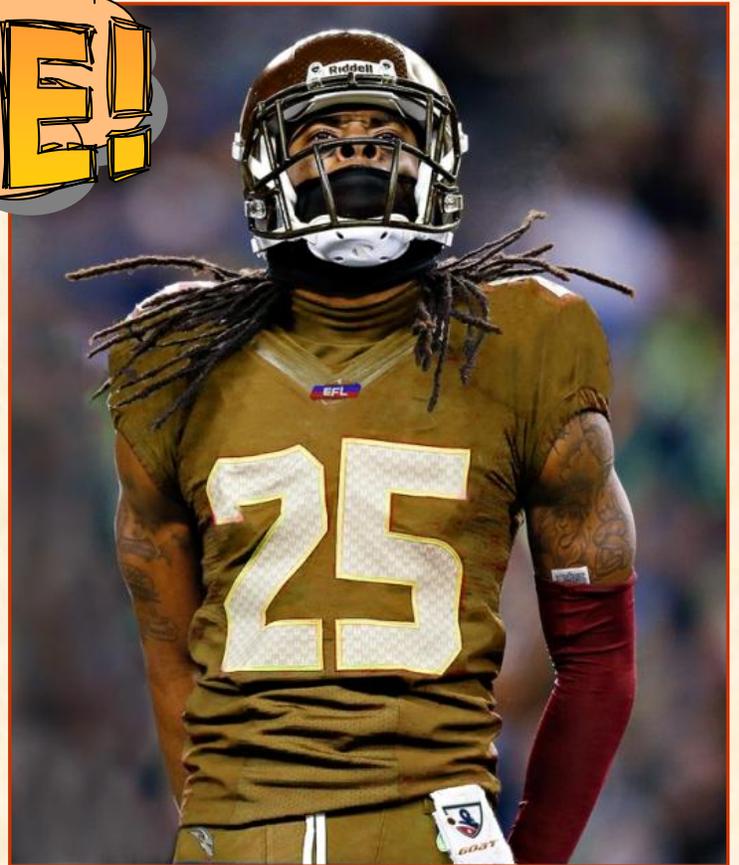


PREVIEW 2014

SHOCK! & AWE! DOMINATION!

The EFL Superpowers are building up to impose their will. But when the weak have all fallen to their shock and awe, which one of the titans will remain standing? *Philip Rivers* (below) of the Cannibals is on the hunt for Dinosaur meat but *Richard Sherman* (right) of the Thunder Lizards has a trap set for him.



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IT'S WAR!

CANTON (AP) – Welcome to the Apocalypse! Or a new ‘Age of Empires’ not seen since the Spartans overthrew the Dragons’ rule in 2010. Lesser powers take shelter, pray for success against the other also-rans, and plan for 2015. Analysts across the continent, and far off in the Pacific, are virtually united in the view that a mere handful of superpowers have the arsenals to survive a shooting war this year in the EFL. The true battles will be few and far between but they will be titanic.

The main contenders for the EFL crown will come from all four corners of the league this year. But shockingly, the defending Champions will not be among them.

Unbeknownst at the time to all but a select few in the Patriots’ front office, the Pats’ 41-24 Championship win over Markham would be the climax of **Peyton Manning’s** ‘Farewell to Charleswood’ tour. Revisiting an old EFL tradition, the team that won the Gale Sayers Game immediately cast adrift the quarterback that had led it to victory.

But Peyton is no ordinary quarterback. Drafted first overall by the Pats in the inaugural EFL draft he has been the face of the franchise and, to some, the face of the EFL ever since. After sitting out the worst season in Patriots’ history in 2012, his return in 2013 was messianic for Charleswood fans; his Championship performance miraculous; his subsequent trade to Pickering not merely shocking, but outrageous.

‘Loss of Innocence’ read the headline atop **Charlie Wood’s** column the day after the now infamous trade was announced. *“Just in case the magic of this Patriots’ season had you believing in Santa Claus again, Jason the Grinch Findlay reminded you that football is a business – a brutal business,”* read the opening sentence.

In the only public comment on the trade from **Jason Findlay**, the veteran owner proclaimed, “Everyone in this organization knows I greatly admire Peyton as a player and as a person. This is a football move, pure and simple.”

But what kind of football move is it to rid your team

of arguably the best quarterback in the history of the EFL?

That is the question outspoken ESPN commentator, **Will Simons** is asking. *“Some football move! If that’s a football move, then Findlay’s franchise just got stuffed for a loss,”* he proclaimed in between vulgar invective directed at the decision that finally landed him a two-week suspension from ESPN.

Public and media reaction to the deal was highly emotional in Charleswood, where the normally staid fan base was moved to protest in uncanny ways. Disapproving tweets, concerned letters to the editor and testy phone calls to radio talk shows were over-shadowed by an actual placard-waving crowd of angry Patriots season ticket holders who laid siege to the head office at Patriot Place for several hours, leaving behind an authentic signed petition calling for a public apology from Findlay and a reduction in season ticket prices for the 2014 season.

A tiny few saw the wisdom of the move from a



Peyton Manning takes it all in after leading the Patriots to a convincing 41-24 mauling of Markham in the 2013 EFL Championship Game. One week later, Manning would be traded in the most shocking “football move” in history.

football standpoint. *Scouts Ltd.* analyst **Lazor Ponk**, described it as *“an incredibly bold maneuver that will pay off in the long run. Peyton is a consummate professional, but physically he is at that point in his career where he needs a lot of support on both sides of the ball to perform at the top level. I think Findlay correctly figured that support was lacking moving forward.”*

But the overwhelming view of fans, media, and football industry professionals was that ‘The Trade’ was, at best, a significant setback with long term risks and, at worst, the beginning of the end of football in Charleswood.

“I can’t see the fans recovering from this for a long time,” opined **Kris Hortenson** on ESPN’s Sports Central. “But at least they still have Adrian Peterson.”

As if on cue, **Adrian Peterson**, the 2013 EFL Offensive MVP and rushing leader was dealt the next day to Chino, along with tackle **Doug Free**, receiver **Brian Hartline** and defensive tackle **Kevin Williams**, in exchange for some bit players and the Convicts’ 1st and 2nd round picks in 2015. With the AP trade, any faint hope that ‘The Trade’ had been the first move in a complex flanking maneuver designed to take the league by surprise in 2014 was snuffed out. Anger turned to depression then apathy in the once football-frenzied community of Charleswood.

In Pickering, the atmosphere was different. If Peyton was feeling the sting of being cut loose after winning the Pats a championship, the ‘Spartan World Conquest Parade’ held in his honour upon his arrival in Pickering could only have soothed his wounded pride. But it also sent a loud and clear message that he had been hired for one reason only; to bring a championship back to Pickering, *now*. Spartans’ owner **Gus Konstantakos**, being, in the words of syndicate columnist **Spats McChad**; *“one part Railroad Robber Baron and the other part psychotic warlord, by nature,”* has shown in the past that he is not afraid to make bold and cold moves to seize EFL power. He traded **Eli Manning** for **Carson Palmer** then promptly cut Palmer to sign SFL star **Brett Favre** to slay the mighty Dragons and deny **Jim Heaton** his three-peat dream in 2010. With a stable of top-flight talent on the edges at wide receiver led by **Pierre Garçon**, a solid tackle to protect his blindside in **Joe Staley**, and one of the finest up-and-coming tight ends in the game today in **Jordan Cameron**, Manning has a legitimate shot at being the first QB in history to win back-to-back championships with different teams.

Critics, however, doubt Manning will get the same run support this year that he did in 2013, with veteran **Chris Johnson** and rookie **Terrence West** carrying the load in place of AP. *“CJ has lost a step since he starred for this team back in 2010,”* writes **Skopec Boylezz** on ESPN.com. *“The Mad Greek is desperately looking for that lost formula for instant success and he is hoping a nod to the past will ignite the fire; but there is more than one tough defence to challenge him this*



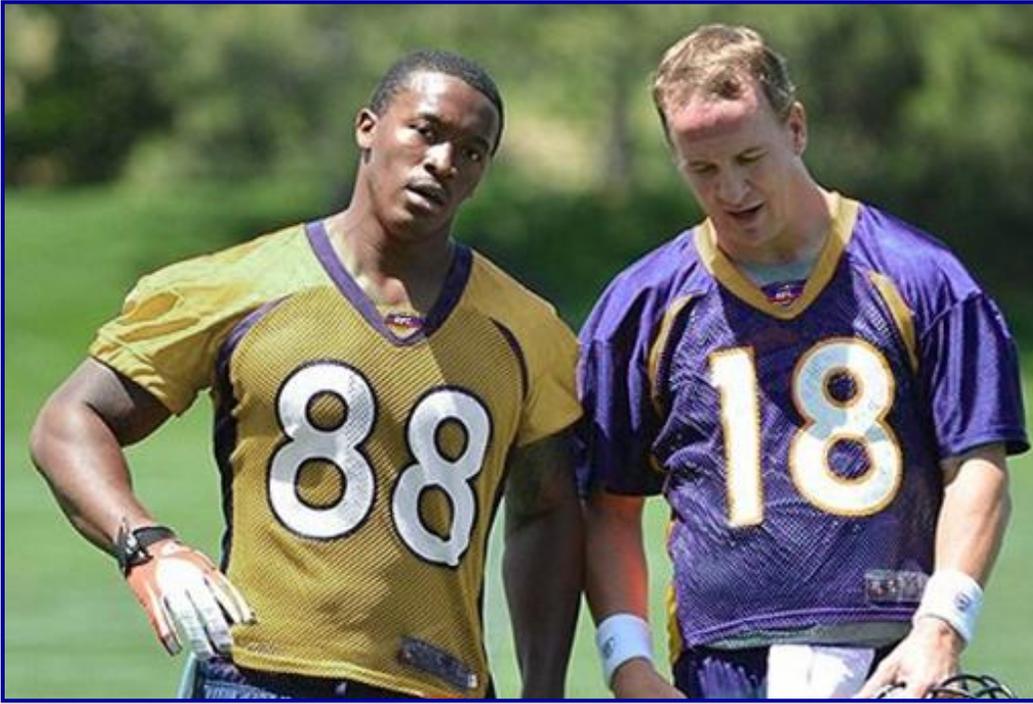
Pickering owner **Gus Komstantakos** rallies his troops during training camp. “The road to ultimate victory and eternal honour begins here!” he bellowed, in an address to the troops that Pickering Post writer, **Aristede Kalogiannis** described as “stirring, inspiring and truly frightening!”

year, while the Spartans’ defence is just average. Can they win it all? Sure they can! But are they the favourite because Peyton is calling the shots? I don’t think so. They probably won’t win their own Division.”

So if the Spartans won’t win the North, who will?

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist, but it might take a football stats analyst to tell you that this is a passing league,” writes **Football Outriders.Org** stats guru, **Harry Schultz**. *“Our projections show one team controlling both sides of the passing game at a league-leading level. That team is Durham. We expect them to sweep their division fairly easily.”*

If history and the pre-season



New teammates **Demaryius Thomas** (left) and **Peyton Manning** (right) work to get on the same page in training camp. Manning will have a fine group of receivers to target and he will need them if he intends to lead the Spartans past the Aurora Mustangs and Durham Thunder Lizards in the Can-Am Conference playoffs.

are any indication, the Thunder Lizards will dominate the airways in 2014. **Drew Brees** has averaged 35 TD passes per season since the EFL's inception and has thrown for more majors (245) than anyone else, Peyton (171) included. Some consider Brees the best quarterback in the league despite having no championship ring in his personal trophy case. That is something Drew boldly predicts will change this year.

"I think this is might be the best team I've played for, and I have played with some great squads," Brees said after a pre-season cameo appearance against the Gladiators in which he threw one pass for 73 yards and a TD to **Calvin Johnson**. "I

can't wait to get out there and take a run at my record; that might sound crazy, but with this group of receivers it's possible."

Brees doesn't have anything to prove, but he may find himself challenged by his understudy, **Nick Foles**, if he runs into interception trouble as he did in a few games last season. Foles has been turning heads while getting the lion's share of action in the pre-season. His passing numbers have been impressive – 32 of 36 for 374 yards and 4 TDs – but the stat line that has drawn the most notable comment from Coach **George Kaldis** is the goose egg under the INT column. Not only has Foles not thrown a pick in a pre-season game, he is interception-free throughout training camp. "If it's not there he doesn't go there," said Kaldis in his final pre-season presser in which he stressed that ball control will be the focus of the offence.

Of course, "ball control" – Durham style, means distributing the ball through the air to one of five viable receiving threats in any given formation, on any given play. Everybody in the offence, from running back to wide-out, has the hands and the moves to get open and gash the defence, making the blitz a do-or-die proposition and sitting back equally risky with Brees at the controls.

While opposing defensive coordinators puzzle out Durham's five-sided offensive rubik's cube, opposing offensive coordinators will be equally aerially challenged against the Dinosaurs' secondary. With **Richard Sherman** shutting down one half of the field and **Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie** guarding the other, safeties **Devin McCourty** and **Cam Chancellor** can be creative in finding ways to make the lives of opposing quarterbacks, and running backs, miserable. And in nickel packages, it gets worse, with second year standout **Tyrann Mathieu** tearing through the secondary much like a cross between a raptor and a kangaroo. With Swiss geneticist, Doctor **Upz Lutvativdun** still on Thunder Lizards' owner **Celine Dion's** payroll, it is certainly possible that Mathieu has been the recipient of DNA enhancements. Rumours of genetic tampering with the Durham secondary have been swirling ever since 'Deathspun' columnist **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** published papers from an anonymous source purporting to show a genetic blueprint for what independent experts think might be a hybrid human. The prototype looks remarkably similar to **Richard Sherman**, but with more hair, longer arms, and very large feet. Puzzling those experts are DNA sequences that are virtually unknown to modern scientific community.

"The basic blueprint is human, no question, but interwoven are strands of unknown DNA," says **Dr. Ricky Smith** of ScienceforDummies.com. "To put it in layman's terms: it appears as though elements of reptile, ape, and plant DNA have

been added in very small, but significant enough quantities to cause physical changes to appearance and performance.”

Currently the league has no test for performance-enhancing genetics and no plans to institute one in the near future. “We are not aware of any teams commissioning or conducting genetic engineering experiments on their players,” said **Member No. 4** of the EFL Executive Committee, the shadowy, secretive body that governs the league. “We have received no complaints and we do not intend to speculate based solely on media reports.”

The subject of ‘football eugenics’ is gaining traction on the Internet and through social media. Some conspiracy theorists are convinced that the battle for the Can-Am Conference Crown, and ultimately the Gale Sayers Trophy, will come down to which team has better eugenics. If that is the case, it would be hard for any team to compete with a team like Durham; one that boasts an impressive track record in that department with its dinosaur theme park and frightening genetically engineered mascot, Raptorius Blaster. But these same theorists think there is a strong contender equipped to tackle the apparent technological superiority of Durham.

In Aurora, the new home of the Mustangs, an abnormally large and vigorous titan who makes his teammates look like children in practice and somehow gets the job done against routine double and triple teams in live league games is generating as much controversy as he is acclaim. That titan is **J.J. Watt**, who leads an Aurora defence that is predicted to dominate again in 2014.

The second installment of Deathspun’s series of investigative articles on eugenics quotes unnamed sources in Garland who claim that the real reason **Doug Shirley** abruptly left football was because he opposed the plans of owner **Haus Beauregard** to bring a team of genetic scientists from the obscure Texas research firm, *Project Adam*, into the team’s training facility to conduct research on the players. Even the move to Aurora is being viewed skeptically as a move to divert attention away from *Project Adam*. Remotely located in a picturesque summer retreat area in Ontario’s greenbelt, Aurora is close enough to Toronto to provide ready access to specialized equipment and materials, but removed enough to make it difficult for journalists to observe what is really going on in the forests and hills.

His choice of head coach is equally revealing according to Deathspun: “**Rich Liotta** is the former offensive coordinator for the Toronto Boatmen of the CFL and spent the last 3 years as head coach of the SFL’s Torrance Tigers. He is best known for being that guy who looks the part, says all the right things, defends management decisions, and smiles at the media,” writes Smith-Abdullah. “He surrounds himself with a good coaching staff and often defers to them when answering questions. If he has any ideas of his own, he conceals them well, raising inevitable aspersions that he is a ‘yes man.’ After the stubborn Shirley and the mentally unstable Ricky Main, Liotta is a safe choice for Beauregard; especially if he intends to create a team of supermen by splicing DNA from the skeletons of ancient giants and, reportedly, a captured sasquatch.”

Whether his team is a product of drugs and nature or drugs and genetic engineering, Liotta’s Mustangs are without doubt one of the top contenders to win it all



Is **J.J. Watt** human? Some people are seriously asking. We know he bleeds, as evidenced by this photo taken during the Can-Am Conference Final in 2013. But so do giant apes and rhinoceroses.

this year. The upheaval of last season – Shirley’s abrupt resignation followed by damaged former Headball star Ricky Main’s sporadic attendance and crazy sideline antics – has been replaced by a stable routine and a fresh environment. The players appear to be responding well.

“I think all of us feel the same way,” explains quarterback **Matt Ryan**. “We missed an opportunity last year and we are not going to let that happen again. We feel this is our year. Coach Liotta has assembled a great team of coaches and trainers and we are supported by the best medical team I’ve ever seen. They test us almost daily and give us shots for everything. I’m feeling at the top of my game like never before.”

The core of the offence is back and expects to improve over their 11th place ranking in 2013. Chronic underperformers in the past, they will get a boost under the direction of Liotta, who is known for picking good offensive coordinators suggested by the GM. **Anquan Boldin** is the rock of the receiving corps, while **Julian Edelman** is the security blanket. **Riley Cooper** is a deceptive playmaker while **Matt Forte** is the league’s top dual threat running back. A trade at the tail end of the post-season that brought tight end **Heath Miller** over from Markham was desperately needed after it became obvious that **Joel Dreessen** could not carry the load in the passing game. But if Miller goes down, watch out – there is nobody behind him.

On defence, in addition to Watt almost being a line on his own, the middle of the second and third levels are stacked with talent. Twin middle linebackers **Karlos Dansby** and **NaVorro Bowman** can stuff the run and bring blitz pressure up the middle while safeties **Earl Thomas** and **Eric Weddle** are the league’s best duo at that position. **Patrick Peterson** takes away the opposition’s top wide receiver while **Brandon Boykin** looks ready to be a workhorse on the other side. This is one of the top two defences in the league; if it behaves like it, the Mustangs will gallop to an appearance in the final.

But if Liotta’s thoroughbreds come up lame, they could face a stiff challenge from a crimson-coloured dark horse. **Hal Corson** believes this could be a breakthrough year for his South Carolina Regulators. After two years of rebuilding the ragged remnants of the Kutztown Golden Bears, the Regulators broke through the 500 barrier last year with a 9-7 record, narrowly missing the playoffs. This year, with the South Division looking shakier than ever and North Division power concentrated in two teams, a playoff berth not only looks possible, but probable.

“Most people tend to overlook Tony Romo in the great quarterback discussion,” observed **Kris Hortenson** of ESPN. “Many are surprised to hear he is 4th in the EFL in career TD passes behind Brees, Peyton and Brady. That’s pretty impressive on its own, but even more so when you realize how bad some of his teams have been.”

This year’s edition of the Regulators looks to be a significant improvement over the one that played well over its head last season. The offensive line needed to get better and it did. Center, **Jason Kelce** had a fantastic pre-season and appears to be an improvement over veteran, **Will Montgomery**, their most reliable lineman last year. Left guard, **Brandon Brooks** blossomed out of nowhere and is playing at a pro bowl level. Left tackle **Orlando Franklin** has been entrusted with protecting Romo’s blind side and is proving effective in pass protection. **A.J. Green**, **Keenan Allen** and **Greg Jennings** are a standout trio of wide receivers while running back **Frank Gore** seems to have another good year left in him.

Luke Kuechly is the anchor of the defence and this year he won’t be entirely by himself. Fierce competitor **Brandon Spikes** will stand next to him to firm up the center behind nose tackle **Star Lotulelei** in their 3-4 alignment, freeing up **Tambi Hali** to pressure the quarterback; if he gets the green light, that is. Hali’s numbers have been disenchanting to say the least – averaging 3 sacks per season since coming to South Carolina. But according to **Severin Handfottner Jr.** of ‘Coaches Call,’ Hali cannot be blamed for the underwhelming performance:

“Corson is one of most conservative coaches in the league when it comes to the blitz. Last year he blitzed 9% of the time, which was more than the 4% of two years ago and the 2 % of the year before that, but still well below the league average. Think of Hali as a powerful chess piece that almost never gets moved. They sent him after the quarterback on only 8% of his snaps last year. A player like that has to be unleashed more often to be effective. And the Regulators need him to sack the quarterback because they don’t really have anyone on the line to bring pressure consistently.”

The secondary continues to be a source of concern, but this year it is not as suspect as it has been in the past. The acquisition of free agent safety, **Mike Mitchell**, the progressive development of **Sam Shields** at cornerback, and the drafting of Oklahoma State prospect **Justin Gilbert** all point to measurable improvement in 2014, although not the kind likely to withstand the aerial onslaught of high-powered passing attacks such as Durham’s or Pickering’s.

Over in the Pacific-Atlantic Conference, the off-season continued to be really weird long after **Jason Findlay** poured gasoline on his own Patriots and lit them up. The outlandish accusation, first leveled years ago by **Spats McChad**,

that Undertakers' owner **Chris Worthley** was in fact an evil warlock in league with the devil lost traction years ago after Worthley stopped wearing all black and started donating to youth charities. For three years the Death Valley Undertakers v.2.0 prospered as much as can be expected for a team based in a blasted land twisted by supernatural and malignant forces. The team even gained a national following after appearing in the Final two years ago. Football's first (and probably last) Goth subculture was formed and Hell, Michigan began to prosper for the first time in its sad history.

But, awkwardly for the Undertakers' sponsors and tragically for the community, there was more to the evil-warlock-in-league-with-the-devil thing than anyone was prepared to believe. Increased Satan sightings, Worthley dematerializing and rematerializing during practices, flying players, and hooded horsemen chasing wraiths outside the Graveyard are just a few of the bizarre documented phenomena that caused the F.B.I. to intervene and shut down the entire area. The human population of Hell is reported to be under quarantine miles away. Reports of massive explosions coming from the restricted zone suggest the Undead population is being given a second chance to get it right.

In the middle of all this, a really good football team was trying to get ready for a run at the title in 2014.

"You try to be professional, you know, but I never dealt with this kind of stuff before. Sure, the park is always been kinda freaky and all, but when the ground opens up next to you in the middle of a scrimmage and fire shoots out, enough is enough," star defensive tackle **Gerald McCoy** told a CBS reporter covering the breaking story.



Gerald McCoy of the Death Valley Undertakers in happier times. When the ground started to shift beneath his feet and flames singed his facemask he and his teammates knew it was time to leave Hell, MI and head for the West Coast.

"I knew something wasn't right with Coach Worthley when he started to vanish during a quarterback meeting," explained Undertakers' pivot **RGIII**. "We could actually see through his body to the other side of the wall and this strange music started playing from nowhere. He kept talking but you could hardly hear him then suddenly he'd be back with you like nothing was going on and the music would stop. I thought at first I was going crazy, but Matt saw the same thing."

As part of the Government intervention, the Undertakers were relocated on an emergency basis to Santa Clara, CA, leaving all of their equipment and records behind as a precaution. Worthley and his entire coaching staff did not accompany them and their fate is unknown. With one week left before the start of the season, the Government requisitioned uniforms from the University of California at Santa Cruz and filed team papers with the EFL league office under the name Santa Clara Banana Sluggs, adding a "g" in a feeble attempt to avoid copyright infringement.

Major Cooper Gerow of U.S. Joint Special Operations Command has been appointed "interim coach" and a team composed of signals operators from the Special Collection Service and Special Forces trainers have been appointed to the coaching staff. Very little is known about Major Gerow, apart from the fact that he played football at the New Mexico Military Institute and is a "huge" Undertakers fan. How he plans to move forward without a playbook is well

worth watching, but he can hardly miss making a mark in the West Division with the treasure trove of talent at his disposal.

The big changes for the erstwhile Undertakers – apart from the physical upheaval of their franchise and the nuclear strike on their home park – have come on defence. Always an Achilles heel for Worthley squads, the defence was the focus of major off-season deals that brought shutdown corner *Darelle Revis* and deep cover specialist *Antrel Rolle* from Scarborough; sack master *Robert Mathis* from Gwinnett; and ball-hawking *Jairus Byrd* from Markham. They join a core group of home grown studs that include nose tackle *Gerald McCoy*, linebackers *Vontaze Burfict* and *Clay Matthews*, and pass rush specialist *Charles Johnson*.

“It may be the best defence of all time!” brayed **Russ Flont** on ESPN’s Tuesday night edition of Sunday Countdown. “Expect them put up plenty of shutouts. And with that offence, the running game they’ve installed there, they have a shot at a perfect season. Yep, mark my words....P-E-R-F-E-C-T.”

The overheated Flont is not alone in predicting great things for the Banana Sluggs. **Cowan Bullherd**, host of Morning Bull, had lionized the team that Worthley built long before the great turbulence in Hell had taken hold, but did so in his own obnoxious way. “My grandmother could run behind that offensive line!” proclaimed Bullherd. “*Evan Mathis* – what a steal that was! Like buying Manhattan for \$24 worth of beads. *Alshon Jeffery*, *AJ*, *DeAndre Hopkins*, God! If *RGIII* can’t get it done this year then he should be packed off to the Tex-Mex League. I love RGIII, but if he delivers less than a Conference Championship with this team then there’s no winning with him.”

While it looks like the Sluggs have the Conference wrapped up before a regular season snap has been taken, there is at least one team that might stand in their way; and nobody would have guessed it before the pre-season.

There is a feeling in Samoa that the Carthage Cannibals could be more than a mere annoyance for their opponents this year. Locals, both fans and media, are excited about *Philip Rivers* and his potential to be a great equalizer against better



Auditions for the ‘Sassy Samoans’ cheerleaders squad brought the flower of Samoan womanhood to Carthage from across the islands and atolls of the South Pacific. With increasing media attention on his team, **Ken Main** saw a need to move away from psychotic cannibal-warrior theme sideshows and toward more appealing and conventional attractions.

built teams such as the Banana Sluggs. While most mainstream analysts and columnists shy away from predicting great things for the top underperforming quarterback in EFL history, nobody can ignore the strength of Rivers' pre-season performance; and at least one prominent analyst believes it will translate into regular season success.

*"Philip Rivers has always been an accurate passer," writes **Arpin Plunderflunder** in his column 'Fantasy Freakz.' "His fantasy value is stable because he can put up valuable numbers. The knock on him comes when he loses a fumble or throws an interception at a key point in the game. But the acquisition of **LeGarrette Blount** as a complement to workhorse **Eddie Lacy** gives him back the play action pass that did not work so well in Durham in the later years. With **Josh Gordon** as his prime target, the Cannibals should be able to strike from any area of the field and this puts a lot of pressure on defences. Watch for Rivers to have a breakout year and carry Carthage to the top of the East Division."*

The Cannibals are certainly a team to watch this year. In addition to Rivers and Gordon, they have a pair of impact players on the backside capable of raising the play of an otherwise average defence. Defensive end **Greg Hardy** is healthy and tearing up opposing left tackles; while outside linebacker **Lavonte David**, in the opinion of **Kokopali Crimpton** of the *Carthage Carving*, is "playing at a Luke Kuechly level – maybe better." The secondary lacks a true star, but safety **Donte Whitner** is a solid player and there is plenty of depth around him to make dime and quarter packages effective.

The Cannibals and Sluggs will certainly be in the post-season mix, but there are no clear favourites to join them. Opinion is divided on the strength of the Twin Cities Triumph and the Chino Convicts and, depending on what you are reading or watching, the Virden Violators and the Iowa City Cubs are going to either collapse or rise to the top of their Divisions.

Harry Schultz of Outriders summarizes it succinctly: *"After the top 6 teams you have a real drop off in what I like to call 'Impact Factor.' Not that the majority of teams are bad, but they are all very similar in capacity. The Cubs jump out at first, with **Russell Wilson** behind center and all sorts of weapons; but the defence has looked sluggish in pre-season and the secondary has not looked good at all. The data projections show Scarborough can mount a challenge in the South, but the data says that every year and the track record is not good. Virden is similar; plenty of good indicators but a question mark hanging over **Matt Stafford**. Some stats people like the Triumph, because they performed well against tough competition in the North last year; but our projections show them going down in flames because they have no running game. **Adrian Peterson** can only make **Cam Newton** that much better. We like the Convicts to make the cut."*

For the rest of the league *not* armed to the teeth, quarterback play will be the deciding factor. The focus in Virden is on **Matt Stafford** and who he really is: the runner-up MVP of 2012, or the big game bust of 2013. If he returns to 2012 form, the Violators will challenge and possibly surpass the Cannibals for dominion in the East. Their defence, led by safety **Eric Berry**, has the pedigree to get them even further, provided Stafford doesn't melt down under pressure.

In Chino, **Cam Newton** is hoping to build on a breakthrough season in 2013. He could not have asked for better run support than last year's offensive MVP, **Adrian Peterson**; the pair could easily combine for over 2,000 yards rushing this year, opening up room for a merely average group of wide receivers. On defence, a pair of ageing stars, **Julius Peppers** and **DeMarcus Ware**, will try to keep the pass rush alive and force bad throws into the hands of elite corner **Alterraun Verner**; while second year stud **Kiko Alonso** will slide smoothly into the role of captain of the Lockdown Crew.

"I like where we're at, people!" crows '**Left Coast**' **Larry Lummo**x of JAIL-870 Radio in Chino. "Dudes don't see us coming and they're going take a shank. This team is all about surprises! So hang on and enjoy the crazy ride!"

In Twin Cities, fans cannot decide if they love **Jay Cutler** or hate him. **Guy Williams** has put his faith in the moody maverick with the golden arm and is stacking the deck in his favour by sparing no expense to acquire for him top-grade targets. He paid an astonishing \$16 million to land premier free agent wide receiver **Antonio Brown** and packaged off the brittle **Pierre Garçon** in a deal to land dynamic deep threat **Vincent Jackson** from the Spartans – a move that sparked much controversy in Pickering. Add in the Triumph's 2nd round pick from 2012, **Kendall Wright**, and Cutler has one of the top three wide receiver trios in the league. With **Louis Vasquez** watching his back at left tackle, Cutler could generate some eye-popping numbers through the air in 2014. But concerns about **Doug Martin** fester after he fell awkwardly on his final carry of the pre-season and limped off the field. He is listed as 'probable' for week one, but did not practice during the week. If Martin isn't able to carry the load, there is only rookie **Tre Mason** and journeyman **Tashard Choice** behind him; a fact that makes Vegas odds-makers nervous.

"People want to bet Twin Cities but there are too many questions," explained **Jimmy the Geek** in his weekly appearance on the Nevada Cable show '*Odds and Suds*,' in which bettors discuss strategy with Jimmy at a Vegas pub. "They have some pretty attractive players on both platoons, so you look at 20-1 and you think that's great value. But

take a guy like Martin out of the mix, or imagine an injury to Vasquez, and you see there is nobody to replace those guys. <POW!> suddenly they are a huge long shot.”

It is much the same in Iowa City, where the cream of two draft years is developing at an uneven pace and creating uncertainty. **Deron Redding** has kept a low profile this off-season, making just one major trade, bringing **C.J. Spiller** over from Scarborough. Fans in the state are restless and conservative pundits, such as **Archibald Thacker** of the *Des Moines Register*, are becoming openly critical of Redding’s youth movement.

“*These boys have nobody to look up to, nobody to teach them, nobody to mentor them,*” wrote Thacker in his editorial. “*Coach Redding has a keen eye for talent, but there doesn’t seem to be a plan for it. No fewer than 8 running backs fill the depth chart waiting for their chance to carry the ball, 4 quarterbacks share limited reps, and Colin Kaepernick is still not traded while an unimpressive gaggle of defensive backs embarrass themselves in inter-squad games.*”

In Scarborough, where owner **Chris Dickinson** has to dress up like a woman and switch cars to move safely around town, the proposed new stadium was put on hold when City Council saw **Darrelle Revis**, **Wes Welker**, **C.J. Spiller** and **Antrel Rolle** shown the door in an early post-season purge of high-priced talent. Coming on the heels of the worst year in franchise history, it looked like the start of a long rebuilding process. The spendthrift Scarborough Council was not impressed; nor was free agent defensive tackle **Ndamukong Suh**, who refused to sign with the club and entered the free agent market, only to be reeled back when Dickinson matched an \$8 million offer from Durham. In addition to voting down a funding proposal for a new park, Council passed a motion requiring Dickinson to pay for the installation of new seats behind the breakwater at Bluff’s Stadium and for a safety inspection. If not, in the words of one councillor, “the Blue Eagles

will be playing at Birchmount Park Collegiate” (a local high school).

Despite what one local pundit characterized as “the worst off-season in the club’s history,” the Blue Eagles still have their backers. **Benny Clamp** of ABC’s weekly TV magazine ‘Crush’ points to the Scarborough offensive line as its secret weapon: “After Death Valley, this is the best front five in football! Don’t underestimate what it can do to make up for the losses, especially with **Aaron Rodgers** operating behind it.”

In York, where the mere presence of **Tom Brady** usually provokes discussion about the post-season, the mood is subdued. The move to the North Division has put them in the middle of a race they are unlikely to win and that awareness may have limited the off-season moves to a few very strategic ones. Paying a \$5 million bonus to **Marshawn Lynch** was a small price to pay to bring needed stability to the running game. Drafting **Kelvin Benjamin** and **Darqueze Dennard** showed foresight and an eye for talent. But these three players are unlikely to change the overall picture. The Swords can still make the playoffs if they take care of the Markhams, the Cowtowns, the Gwinnetts and manage to knock off a South Carolina or a Scarborough. But then what?

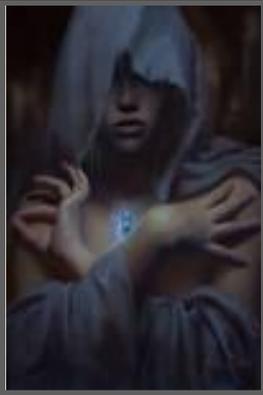
As for the rest of the teams in the league; there may be some little battles they can win, but the War, for them, is already lost. In Mohave, **Andrew Luck** will continue to labour behind a ramshackle offensive line



Triumph wide receiver **Kendall Wright** is a prime target of **Jay Cutler** heading into the 2014 season.

without a running game to support him; in Markham, *Alex Smith* will keep the North Stars' offence mistake-free and not much more; in Gwinnett, *LeSean McCoy* and *Big Ben* will join forces to ambush the occasional giant but the Glads will be hard pressed to finish above 500; in Sebastian, #1 overall pick *Jadeveon Clowney* will draw a few much needed fans to the Fish Tank; in Cowtown, *Joe Flacco* will be running for his life following the trade of *Jordan Gross* and departure of *Maurkice Pouncey*; in Mission Viejo, success will be defined by how well they play against LA; and in LA, success will be defined by how well they play against Mission Viejo.

Does this signify the end of the much-coveted 'parity' that defined the EFL in 2013? Not necessarily, according to respected *North America Today* columnist **Peter Prince**: "*This is not the end of parity as some are predicting. What we are seeing are two levels of parity in the league. The top teams – and there are indisputably five in that category – are all very close to each other. The battle at the top will be fantastic. The majority of the remainder, all but a handful, are in that 'middle' category. Any one of those could surprise or disappoint, depending on how the games play out. I think we will see surprises this year; we always see surprises. So keep your eyes glued to the action, football fans!*"



It is written

The fate of your team is written. Look, if you dare, at the future. . .

BROUGHT TO YOU FROM THE OTHER SIDE BY *-Jimmy the Geek*

I see flesh...human flesh...roasting at the east side of the river. It is horrible! But the scowling one survived to triumph another day. Ooohh, what are those things? Yellow, slimy tree bugs are everywhere....gross! The woodland animals are driven from the forests while the prisoners cut down trees to build a shelter and escape the law. Once again the dinosaurs roam the earth. Why always the dinosaurs? Aren't they extinct? The bronze warriors fight valiantly but are overwhelmed by a cavalry charge in the final battle under the crimson sunset. I hope this helps! - The Football Oracle

CANTON, OH - On the western outskirts of Canton there is a wooded hill overlooking a small creek that runs through a farmer's field. At the top of the hill is a tiny burrow from where, on windless nights, a raspy moan or a shrill howl once emanated, punctuating the steady sound of the burbling brook and the chirring of crickets. It was the sound of a soul simultaneously wracked by torment and illuminated with the transcendence of her visions. But this sound is no longer heard on a still night, or any other night for that matter. The Football Oracle is gone from this place.

This former fan of the Green Bay Packers, who famously foretold of the demise of the old NFL (and, some say, was driven mad by the vision), had been taken and imprisoned in an institution, for her own safety and for the peace of mind of others. That was last year. Apparently she is better now. And by "better" I mean she has been deemed fit enough to take her complex regimen of medications on her own, with minimal to no supervision, at a halfway house near Canton, Ohio. Due to privacy concerns, I am not permitted to say exactly where the Football Oracle is staying, or anything more about her condition, except to point out that she is somewhat *sedate* these days and, if nothing else, certainly no danger to anyone or anything. So sedate, in fact, that communication was difficult, which is nothing new in itself but much different when the words take literally hours to issue forth. A week after I dropped in, I think I got it right. So, here it is....*the future!*

PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



12-4

#2 SEED

CARTHAGE CANNIBALS

COACH: Ken Main

MVP: Philip Rivers

OFFENCE: A

DEFENCE: B

SPECIAL TEAMS: B

Like a *Bounty* mutineer **Philip Rivers** has found a home in the South Pacific. He has a running game behind him and an explosive playmaker in **Josh Gordon** to keep the keep opposing safeties out of the box. All that is missing is a top grade tackle to hold the pocket against a stiff pass rush. **Lavonte David** is a player to watch – the defensive MVP candidate will combine with **Greg Hardy** to make everyone around them better. **Steven Hauschka** is money in the bank in the kicking game. **Donte Moncrief** is in over his head as the punt returner.



10-6

#3 SEED

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

COACH: Guy Williams

MVP: Jay Cutler

OFFENCE: B+

DEFENCE: B-

SPECIAL TEAMS: A-

Jay Cutler will get a lot of action if a suspect running game fails to deliver. Fortunately he has three pro bowl calibre targets on the edges to help compensate. Acquiring **Vincent Jackson** may have set up **Kendall Wright** and **Antonio Brown** to be the first 100+ catch duo in history. **T.J. Ward** and **Jurrell Casey** are defensive standouts but will not raise the play of their teammates enough to avoid surrendering big yardage. The long leg of **Stephen Gostkowski** and versatility of **Ted Ginn Jr** round out a nice special teams unit.



9-7

VIRDEN VIOLATORS

COACH: Lance Barrate

MVP: Jamaal Charles

OFFENCE: A-

DEFENCE: B+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B-

It makes no sense that a team with this much talent will finish out of the playoffs, but confidence in **Matt Stafford** is low after last season. The top 3 WRs are impressive but there is no depth behind them. Ball control was an issue in the pre-season. **Jared Odrick** and **Brandon Mebane** will make running difficult for opponents and a fine secondary should keep the passing game in check, but the defence could burn out if forced to deal with turnovers by the offence. **Marcus Sherels** has nifty moves, but is a fumble risk returning punts.



7-9

MOHAVE HELLFIRE

COACH: Bobby Elder

MVP: Andrew Luck

OFFENCE: B

DEFENCE: C

SPECIAL TEAMS: A+

Andrew Luck has an opportunity to prove something this year, but if he doesn't, nobody will blame him. The Hellfire are similar to last season but a little better for the experience. There is still no #1 running back but the run game should improve anyway with **Mike Tolbert** at FB. The pass rush retains some sting with **Justin Houston** and **Cameron Wake** applying pressure, but not enough to compensate for a fragile, talentless secondary. **Matt Prater** rules, while **Cordarelle Patterson** and **Tandon Doss** are deadly returning kicks.



2-14

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

COACH: Jason Findlay

MVP: Nate Solder

OFFENCE: C-

DEFENCE: C-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B

A two-win projection is two more wins than this team deserves, but strange things happen in games and no team can be counted out – especially when Mission Viejo is on the schedule. **Blake Bortles** and **Sammy Watkins** will go the school of hard knocks in their first season, despite **Nate Solder** guarding the blind side. A modestly respectable defence featuring a decent secondary will exhaust itself defending half fields after turnovers by the offence. Punter **Kevin Huber** and kick return specialist **Keshawn Martin** will be busy.

PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

WEST DIVISION



14-2

#2 SEED

SANTA CLARA BANANA SLUGGS

COACH: **Cooper Gerow**

MVP: **Robert Griffin III**

OFFENCE: **A**

DEFENCE: **A+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

The team with the best shot at a perfect season has few weaknesses and impressive strengths. **RGIII** will get maximum protection to target 3 great wide receivers and the running backs will find gaping holes behind All Pro guard **Evan Mathis**. The defence is star-studded, with **Gerald McCoy** anchoring the middle, and features a five-star pass rush led by **Robert Mathis** that will be the terror of the league. The kicking game is nothing special, but it doesn't need to be. **Trindon Holliday** is exciting and nerve-racking in the return game.



9-7

#4 SEED

CHINO CONVICTS

COACH: **Rob Nazar**

MVP: **Alterraun Verner**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A**

The attention and hopes in Chino have shifted to the offence with the acquisition of **Adrian Peterson** and the coming of age of **Cam Newton** in 2013. It is a solid unit, with a high capacity for ball control, but do not expect it to move quickly. The defence is missing its former big names but will perform above expectations with new leaders emerging in linebacker **Kiko Alonso** and underrated corner **Alterraun Verner**. Rookie running back **Drki Archer** is a find in the return game while kickers **Dan Bailey** and **Shane Lechler** are steady.



8-8

IOWA CITY CUBS

COACH: **Deron Redding**

MVP: **Russell Wilson**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

Russell Wilson is great but he needs more run support than scat-backs **CJ Spiller** and **Darren Sproles** can provide. **Trent Richardson** cannot be relied on to gain the tough yards, so setting the edges may be enough to shut down the Cubs' running game. **Mike Wallace** looks a step slower this year and **Steve Smith** is showing his age. **Mario Williams** has been dominating pre-season – he will need a career year to bolster the play of a confused-looking secondary. The kicking game is average but **Dexter McCluster** is lethal returning punts.



2-14

MISSION VIEJO MONARCHS

COACH: **Chris Ferraro**

MVP: **DeMarco Murray**

OFFENCE: **D+**

DEFENCE: **C**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

Ryan Tannehill is feeling the heat, but until he gets some reliable targets in the passing game evaluating his progress will be futile. **DeMarco Murray** is the only dangerous weapon in the Monarchs' arsenal, making him vulnerable to keys and double-teams. The offensive line is solid, but can only protect for so long. The defence has improved, with **Cameron Jordan** and **Olivier Vernon** forming a sharp one-two punch in the pass rush, but not enough to turn around the team's fortunes. **Brandon Tate** is an above average returner.



2-14

LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

COACH: **Jeff Dohrn**

MVP: **Robert Quinn**

OFFENCE: **D**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

The Knights, as usual, are suspect on offence and solid on defence, but this year their offence is terrible and their defence is just not good enough. **Mike Glennon** has potential, but he is in a bad situation with rookie **Brandin Cooks** as his go-to guy at WR and the league's least impressive line to protect him. Defensive end **Robert Quinn** is a potential All Pro at defensive end and the linebackers are solid in all phases; but they will see the field a lot and will tire as the season progresses. Punter **Steve Weatherford** will see a lot of action.

CAN-AM CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



14-2

#1 SEED

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

COACH: **George Kaldis**

MVP: **Drew Brees**

OFFENCE: **A+**

DEFENCE: **A-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

Drew Brees has a shot at piloting another 600-point offence if everything goes his way. But if he falls short, the Lizards should still lead the league in scoring with **Megatron**, **TY Hilton** and **Antonio Gates** dominating the score sheet. **Fred Jackson** brings toughness to the running game and **Jordan Gross** solidifies the line. Defensively, linebackers **Thomas Davis** and **Elvis Dumervil** bolster the front seven while shutdown corner **Richard Sherman** stars in the secondary. **Devin Hester** is fun to watch, but is a risk to fumble on the return.



11-5

#3 SEED

PICKERING SPARTANS

COACH: **Gus Konstantakos**

MVP: **Peyton Manning**

OFFENCE: **A**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

Peyton Manning will find the competition a little stiffer this year, but should still find success with an elite group of receivers. While opponents try to contain **Demaryius Thomas** and **Pierre Garçon**, rising star **Jordan Cameron** will find many opportunities. The defence, led by **Joe Haden**, is built to take the ball away and score with it, but unless opponents run directly into **Dontari Poe** they will be vulnerable to the run. The kicking game is good enough while the return game is in good hands with **Jordan Todman** and **Golden Tate**.



8-8

YORK EXCALIBURS

COACH: **Jay Hammond**

MVP: **Alfred Morris**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **C+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A**

There is always hope for a **Tom Brady** team. Add the beast, **Marshawn Lynch** and a healthy **Jason Peters** at left tackle and you have a promising start. But even Brady needs multiple targets. After starters **Victor Cruz** and **Kelvin Benjamin** there is nobody. On the defensive side, last year's stars, **Geno Atkins** and **Von Miller**, appear hobbled by nagging training camp injuries. **William Gay** brings stability to a traditionally weak secondary, but he has little support. **DeAnthony Thomas** and **Micah Hyde** are a dangerous return duo.



7-9

MARKHAM NORTH STARS

COACH: **Darrin Jones**

MVP: **Alex Smith**

OFFENCE: **C+**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-**

The offensive line was decimated during the off-season which will make everything more difficult for **Alex Smith** and his supporting cast of skill players. The Stars can strike quickly with the electric **Andre Ellington** and **Jordy Nelson** but they will struggle to sustain long drives. **Calais Campbell** and **Trent Cole** spearhead a defence that has some talent, but not enough to turn a game around against a good opponent. Punter **Matt Boshier** will get many opportunities to show off his leg. **Jacoby Jones** will bring the fans to their feet.



6-10

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

COACH: **Jim Coghlin**

MVP: **Joe Flacco**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **B-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+**

Ryan Clady and **Andy Levitre** are the only returning starters and this instability on the line will be felt by **Joe Flacco** in the pocket. **Alfred Morris** can make things happen in the ground game and take some heat off the passer, while multiple targets at wide receiver and tight end will yield some production. There are impact players at each level of the defence, but a lack of depth at linebacker will force rookie **Marcus Smith** to start. **Johnny Hekker** is a skilled punter, **Nick Novak** is solid, but the return game is as vanilla as it gets.

CAN-AM CONFERENCE

SOUTH DIVISION



13-3

#2 SEED

AURORA MUSTANGS

COACH: **Rich Liotta**

MVP: **Matt Ryan**

OFFENCE: **A-**

DEFENCE: **A+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

Matt Ryan gets another shot at glory with a strong supporting cast of skill players and an offensive line capable of buying time in the pocket. **Matt Forte** does it all from the halfback position and **Anquan Boldin** is dependable in the clutch. Lack of depth at tight end could create problems if injuries hit. On defence, **JJ Watt** will not be flying solo as **NaVorro Bowman**, **Eric Weddle** and **Patrick Peterson** star behind him on a potentially dominating defence. **Julian Edelman** is a slippery punt returner and **Felix Jones** is reliable returning kicks.



10-6

#4 SEED

SOUTH CAROLINA REGULATORS

COACH: **Hal Corson**

MVP: **Tony Romo**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **B-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

The skill pieces are in place for **Tony Romo** to break the Regulators' playoff drought, but Romo alone is still the key to success. If he can get the ball to **AJ Green** and **Keenan Allen** often, the Regs should score enough to keep a FG per game ahead of their defence. **Luke Kuechly** is the best middle linebacker in the game and **Tamba Hali** a potential game-breaker if used properly, but the secondary can still cause fans to have fits. **Justin Tucker** can hit from afar and **Mike Koenen** puts air under his punts, but the return game is unimpressive.



8-8

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

COACH: **Chris Dickinson**

MVP: **DeSean Jackson**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

Surprisingly, there is still a competitive core remaining on the Blue Eagles, starting with a strong offensive line led by **Ryan Kalil** and **Logan Mankins**. **Ray Rice** no longer commands respect, but **Aaron Rodgers** has a prime deep threat in **DeSean Jackson** and tall red zone target in **Brandon Marshall** to keep the offence going. **Ndamukong Suh** is the centerpiece of an impressive front seven, but the corners will struggle in man coverage against the better teams. **Jay Feely** is a little tired. **LaMichael James** has big return potential.



6-10

GWINNETT GLADIATORS

COACH: **Dave Birdsall**

MVP: **LeSean McCoy**

OFFENCE: **C**

DEFENCE: **D**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

How a team with **LeSean McCoy** at running back, **Big Ben** at quarterback, and **Joe Thomas** at left tackle will struggle to move the ball is a puzzle easily solved. **Reggie Wayne** and **Dallas Clark** are looking their age and the other receivers are rookies and journeymen. The defence is potentially horrendous starting with the defensive line and ending with the safeties, who are without **Troy Polamalu** for the first time. The best punter in the game, **Andy Lee**, will earn his modest pay cheque. **Leodis McKelvin** is a liability returning punts.



2-14

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

COACH: **Russ Lemmon**

MVP: **Alex Mack**

OFFENCE: **C-**

DEFENCE: **C-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

The Swordfish are taking the scenic route on their rebuild, starting with the basics. **Alex Mack** and **Zach Strief** anchor a better than average offensive line and **Jadeveon Clowney** looks to be a difference maker on defence for years to come. But in the meantime **Andy Dalton** has few tools to keep the offence moving and that means the young studs on defence will tire out and break down as the season grows old. **Dwayne Harris** will offer some excitement in the kick return game, but it will still be another long year for Swordfish fans.

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JIMMY'S WEEK ONE PICKS

VIRDEN @ CHARLESWOOD (line – VIOLATORS by 8)

For the first time in franchise history the Patriots home opener is not sold out, meaning a local blackout will be in effect. Fans are not complaining – they seem more interested in the Winnipeg Jets. This is a sorry state of affairs and sends a signal that the fans do not have the stomach for another 1-15 season after winning it all last year. Who can blame them? The Violators aren't complaining – they are content to start the season with a soft touch. Who can blame *them*? The players of course, will have something to prove. Blake Bortles and Sammy Watkins are both making pro debuts in starting roles and Chris Ivory will be looking to prove he can be an every down back in this league. On the Virden side, Matt Stafford will want to send a message to his team and the league that he is back – although the message loses volume when it comes against the feeble Pats. You can expect a workmanlike outing from Stafford and a lot of running out the clock from back-ups Ben Tate and Mark Ingram. **PICK: VIRDEN**

TWIN CITIES @ MOHAVE (line – TRIUMPH by 2)

Twin Cities is the new kid on the block in the East Division so they are looking to make a grand entrance. Fortunately, they happen to be well-matched against the Hellfire – a team with issues in the secondary. Chris Houston is a decent starting corner, but expecting him to cover Antonio Brown one-on-one may be asking too much. He will need safety help, but so will Aaron Williams, who is facing Kendall Wright on the other side. We haven't even discussed Vincent Jackson yet and the situation already looks dire for Mohave. On the bright side, the defence can focus on stopping the pass because the Triumph running game has a short shelf life. When Mohave has the ball Andrew Luck will be taking charge and aiming to keep pace with Jay Cutler through the air. Don't expect to see much of Montee Ball or Doug Martin in this match-up – it will be a quarterback duel. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

CARTHAGE @ LOS ANGELES (line – CANNIBALS by 10)

This is a big line for a season opener. It is the by-product of the pre-season hype of Philip Rivers and the commonly held belief that the Knights always have bad offences. Count me in as one who believes in Philip Rivers, but who also believes in the Knights' ability to be competitive against the odds in a big game such as their season opener. Last year they shocked Death Valley in Week One and nearly forced a panicking Chris Worthley to scrap his team right then. Jeff Dohm's teams always start strong and I expect them to charge out of the gate in this one. Sam Bradford is no Sammy Baugh, but he has enough experience to sneak some big plays in when the Cannibals are focusing attention on Ryan Mathews. I think the Cannibals win the game, but it will be much closer than most analysts expect and within the generous spread. **PICK: LOS ANGELES**

IOWA CITY @ CHINO (line – CONVICTS by 1)

It is only the first week, but the playoff race is already at full speed for both these teams. That is because both are likely to be competing against each other directly for that last ticket to the post-season. Convicts fans are confident that their running game will be unstoppable and therefore their offence will improve its no. 3 overall ranking from last year. While that hope may be overly ambitious, it says how highly esteemed Adrian Peterson is after his remarkable 2013 season. That means that the Cubs will have to pay attention to him, opening up passing opportunities against the weak point of the Cubs' defence – the secondary. On the Cubs' side, quarterback Russell Wilson can make something out of nothing, but he needs to keep an eye on Alterraun Verner or else his miraculous improvisation could easily turn to devastation. This game is too close to call, but because I have to call it I am going to take my usual course and go with the better quarterback when all other things are equal. **PICK: IOWA CITY**

MISSION VIEJO @ SANTA CLARA (line – BANANA SLUGGS by 9)

The Banana Sluggs open their season 8 days after they were evacuated in a military-style operation from their cursed home park with little more than the clothes on their backs. This has to be a major emotional distraction for them, in addition to the technical problems associated with scrapping the playbook they spent all summer committing to memory. For these reasons a generous 15-point opening spread has gradually shrunk to 9 points as bettors go with the highly motivated Monarchs to keep it within double digits. If rookie coach Cooper Gerow was facing a middling team, I would agree with this logic. But he will be going up against a team that will be lucky to win four games this year, with one of the best assemblages of talent on defence that the league has ever seen. The Monarchs could have a great day and still lose by 15 points. **PICK: SANTA CLARA**

DURHAM @ MARKHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 4)

Another whacky opening day line! I live in Vegas and I cannot understand how my buddies in the industry came up with this one or how people have not jumped all over it. All I can figure is that the Average Joe is still entranced by two seasons of over-achieving by the North Stars and figure that the intrepid Darrin Jones has enough 'It' factor to keep the impossible dream alive. Another explanation is that people haven't been paying attention to scattershot Markham moves this off-season and are not aware that they are in semi-rebuilding mode – "semi" because Jones cannot abide a team that *totally* sucks. This one will be over quickly. And if it's not, Drew Brees should take a seat on the bench and let Nick Foles call the shots. **PICK: DURHAM**

PICKERING @ COWTOWN (line – SPARTANS by 6)

The Spartan debut of Peyton Manning comes against a traditional rival that, like Markham, is in semi-rebuilding mode – "semi" because Jim Coughlin, like Jones, cannot abide a team that *totally* sucks. Unfortunately for Cowtown fans, this year's edition of the golden niblets appears to be very close to totally sucking. The offensive line is in disarray and Joe Flacco struggled with quick decisions in the pre-season. Alfred Morris will have to run away from Dontari Poe to be successful. When Pickering has the ball, Manning will face a moderate challenge from a balanced, if unspectacular defence. It will not be an easy ride, but if Peyton is on his game and the running backs pitch in, the Spartans should easily cover the spread. **PICK: PICKERING**

YORK @ SEBASTIAN (line – EXCALIBURS by 7)

The Fish Tank is sold out for the Swordfish season opener and this means that fans want to see no.1 overall pick Jadeveon Clowney in action. The Swordfish plan to line up Clowney on the right side, meaning he will be attacking Jason Peters' side on the blitz. If Clowney runs into Peters, don't expect a spectacular debut for the stud from South Carolina. Tom Brady has an opportunity to exploit a weak Sebastian pass defence to stake his team to an early lead. Marshawn Lynch can keep the game under control by grinding it out on the ground with Delanie Walker leading the way. The Swordfish need a solid outing from Andy Dalton to stay in this one. Dalton will be looking for Nate Washington to spring past aged corner Ike Taylor and for Zac Stacy to take the Excaliburs by surprise to steal a first down or two on the ground. I like to enhance the home field advantage when considering home openers, but in the case of Sebastian and their fishy fans I will make an exception. **PICK: YORK**

AURORA @ SOUTH CAROLINA (line – MUSTANGS by 3)

If one quarterback can embarrass the best defence in the conference it is Tony Romo. And if one quarterback can totally implode against such a defence it is, again, Tony Romo. Yes, I think Tony Romo is the key to this game, as I will for many games to come in 2014. The Mustangs' defence wants to set the tone early in the season, so expect them to go after the Regulators' quarterback aggressively from the start. On the other side, expect Hal Corson to try and take Matt Forte out of the game and force Matt Ryan to throw down field, something he has not been able to do well consistently over the years. I think a week one upset is very possible, but I can't find a reason for it other than the "Tony Romo" thing; and that's not good enough for my money when facing a team with JJ Watt. **PICK: AURORA**

SCARBOROUGH @ GWINNETT (line – GLADIATORS by 3)

Respect for the Blue Eagles has plummeted to such a degree that the cracked shell of a mediocre Gladiators squad from last year is actually favoured to *win* by 3. While I have the utmost respect for LeSean McCoy, Ben Roethlisberger and the Glads' offensive line, I think the capabilities of those players have no bearing on the incapacity of their defence or the lack of playmakers at wide receiver, all of which can be exploited by their opponent. Aaron Rodgers takes the field looking to prove something and he has a lot of support in a fine offensive line and serious threats at wide receiver. McCoy or Big Ben will have to take full control to steal a victory for Gwinnett here and don't expect Ndamukong Suh to let them. **PICK: SCARBOROUGH**