


2020


Conference Finals



EFL

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Blazing Through a Pandemic in our 14th Season!



February 21, 2021

EAST



COBB COUNTY COYOTES

33

VIRDEN VIOLATORS

34



AURORA MUSTANGS

10

BUDAPEST NORTH STARS

13

NORTH



CENTRAL



WEST



COASTAL



SOUTH



YEAH BABY!

Zane Gonzalez
Virden Violators

Zane Gonzalez watches his game-deciding kick sail toward the uprights as the clock expires in the 4th quarter. As shown by the reactions of Virden quarterback, *Patrick Mahomes* (above left) and Cobb County quarterback, *Ryan Tannehill* (below left) the kick was good, propelling the Violators into the Gale Sayers Game with a 34-33 win.



Who was slick in the Conference Finals?

“Brylcreem” THE EFL’S FIRST SPONSOR

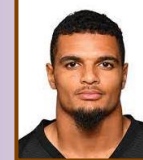
OFFENCE



Patrick Mahomes
QB
Virden Violators

22 of 33, 304 yds, 2 TDs, 28yds rushing. Led game-winning FG drive.

DEFENSE



Minkah Fitzpatrick
S
Budapest North Stars

4 T, 1 PD, 1 FF, 1 INT (0-yds). Diving red zone INT shut down Aurora drive.



33

Cobb County



GAME CENTER 2020 Pacific Conference Final



34

Virден

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Tannehill	22	34	385	4
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Mostert	12	31	2.6	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Jones	8	128	16.0	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Cobb County	13	14	0	6	-	33
Virден	7	10	7	10	-	34

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Mahomes	22	33	304	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Elliott	29	127	4.4	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Cooper	5	121	24.2	0

Play of the Game

In the 4th quarter, 1:21 left, 1st & 10 at Virден 39, Pat Mahomes connects with Amari Cooper on a cross for 28 yards, putting Virден in FG range and leading to the game-winning FG.

THRILLER IN TERRORDOME!

GONZALEZ KICK IS GOOD FROM 38 YDS TO LIFT VIRDEN TO VICTORY!

SUMMARY: The two teams with the best record in the Pacific Conference had battled down to the season's final week to determine the no. 1 overall seed, but had not faced each other this year. Fans expected a thriller and these teams did not disappoint. This game went down to the very end with Zane Gonzalez splitting the uprights from 38 yards with no time left on the clock to lift Virден to 1-point victory over the Coyotes. The outcome wound up turning on a missed extra point back in the 1st quarter that, had it been made, would have meant overtime instead of sudden death at the end of regulation. Few thought the miss significant at the time. Cobb County started strong, scoring touchdowns on four of their first six possessions, starting with a 75-yard pass from Ryan Tannehill to DeVante Parker on the game's second play from scrimmage. The Violators answered with a touchdown on their first series but fell behind again after Raheem Mostert made it 13-7 on an 8-yard check down from Tannehill. Virден capitalized on a Mostert lost fumble with a field goal, but gave that back when Tyler Ervin muffed a punt at the Virден 7, setting up a quick TD pass to Brandin Cooks for a 20-10 lead. With the Virден passing attack sputtering, Ezekiel Elliott took over with 31 hard fought yards on a penalty-assisted Virден drive, running it in from 2 yards to make it 20-17. But Tannehill countered with a 22-yard pass to Julio Jones which set up a 40-yard TD pass to Jared Cook to give the Coyotes a 27-17 lead at halftime. On the opening drive of the 3rd quarter Virден looked like they were heading in to score before Elliott was stripped of the ball at the Coyotes 11 by Tarell Basham after a 22-yard run. But the Virден defence stiffened, holding the Coyotes off the board in the 3rd quarter while Pat Mahomes got the offence 3 points closer with a 16-yard TD pass to Mohamed Sanu. An interception by Chris Harris Jr on the Coyotes' next series set up a Royce Freeman TD run to give Virден their first lead of the game. But the Coyotes eked out two 4th quarter field goal drives to regain a 33-31 advantage with 1:51 left. Facing elimination, Mahomes hit John Brown and Amari Cooper for completions of 14 and 28 yards to the Cobb County 33. Then a 14-yard run by Elliott put the Violators in better position for the FG and kicker Gonzalez made no mistake.

QUOTES: "Somebody had to win this game and somebody had to lose. Unfortunately, that happened to be us. Little things always cost in close games. The missed extra point bit us, but so did my decision to play tight coverage on their last drive." - Cobb County coach, Eron Osman "Zeke's run at the end was huge. Zane can hit it from beyond 50 yards, but with the pressure of the season weighing on it, getting it 14 yards closer sure helped me with my decision to run the clock down and kick there. Helluva game! Helluva game!" - Virден coach, Lance Barrate.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



William E Cotoye @Wile-E It's a shame after such a great season that @ryantannehill1 will be remembered for a single bad throw in the third quarter of their last game.



Marquis de Sade @mdsviolate The exhilaration of such a victory is only matched in intensity by the agony of defeat. Oh, to inflict such exquisite agony makes it all worthwhile!



Cobb County 33 Virden 34



	1	2	3	4	F
Cobb County	13	14	0	6	33
Virden	7	10	7	10	34

* Playoff * 02-28-2021 TERRORDOME Temp:70 Wind: No Line MVP:Mahomes HFA:

1	14:36	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 75 pass to Parker (McManus) (2-75-0:24)	7-0
1	9:25	Virden	TD	Mahomes 8 pass to Sanu (Badgley) (11-75-5:11)	7-7
1	2:50	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 8 pass to Mostert (no good) (10-75-6:35)	13-7
2	13:56	Virden	FG	Gonzalez 39 (5-31-1:56)	13-10
2	10:10	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 11 pass to Cooks (McManus) (3-7-0:50)	20-10
2	4:30	Virden	TD	Elliott 2 run (Badgley) (11-75-5:40)	20-17
2	2:17	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 40 pass to Cook (McManus) (6-75-2:13)	27-17
3	2:59	Virden	TD	Mahomes 16 pass to Sanu (Badgley) (10-93-5:12)	27-24
4	14:50	Virden	TD	Freeman 5 run (Badgley) (6-39-3:02)	27-31
4	8:14	Cobb County	FG	McManus 45 (11-48-6:30)	30-31
4	1:51	Cobb County	FG	McManus 37 (5-41-2:13)	33-31
4	0:00	Virden	FG	Gonzalez 38 (7-55-1:48)	33-34

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Tannehill	34	22	385	3	1	4	4	130.1
	34	22	385	3	1	4	4	130.1

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Mahomes	33	22	304	3	0	2	1	116.2
	33	22	304	3	0	2	1	116.2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Mostert	12	31	2.6	1	1	13	0
Peterson	5	16	3.2	1	1	10	0
	17	47	2.8	2	2	13	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Elliott	29	127	4.4	10	4	22	1
Mahomes	3	28	9.3	1	2	18	0
Freeman	2	11	5.5	1	0	6	1
	34	166	4.9	12	6	22	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Jones,J	8	0	12	128	16.0	8	1	32	0
Parker	6	2	12	140	23.3	5	1	75	1
Cooks	3	0	4	43	14.3	3	0	19	1
Cook	2	0	3	57	28.5	2	1	40	1
Peterson	2	0	2	9	4.5	0	0	7	0
Mostert	1	0	1	8	8.0	1	0	8	1
	22	2	34	385	17.5	19	3	75	4

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Cooper	5	0	7	121	24.2	5	2	28	0
Sanu	5	0	7	54	10.8	4	0	16	2
Brown	4	0	7	50	12.5	3	0	14	0
Elliott	4	0	5	45	11.3	1	1	26	0
Freeman	2	0	3	14	7.0	2	0	10	0
Ebron	2	1	4	20	10.0	1	0	12	0
	22	1	33	304	13.8	16	3	28	2

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Mostert	1	0	0
Hunt	0	1	0
Nassib	0	1	0
	1	2	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Elliott	1	0	0
Ervin	1	0	0
Richardson	0	1	0
	2	1	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
	0	0	0.0	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Ervin	1	7	7.0	7	0
	1	7	7.0	7	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Natson	2	0	3	1.5	2	0
	2	0	3	1.5	2	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Ervin	1	1	0	0.0	0	0
	1	1	0	0.0	0	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
McManus	2-2	45	3-4	9

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Gonzalez	2-3	39	0-0	6
Badgley	0-0	0	4-4	4

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Martin	2	92	46.0	0	2	0	53

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Mann	2	76	38.0	0	1	0	43

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Jenkins	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Martinez	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Basham	7	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Nelson	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Lawrence	6	1	0	3	0	0	0-0
White	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Chaisson	4	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Atkins	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Jones,B	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Golden	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mostert	1	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Verrett	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams,G	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Clark	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	56	1	2	3	1	2	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Bradham	8	0	1	1	0	0	0-0
Peters	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Lawrence II	5	1	0	1	1	0	0-0
Harris Jr.	5	0	0	0	0	0	1-0
Barr	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Collins Sr.	3	2	1	0	1	1	0-0
Heyward	2	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Waynes	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Dawson Jr.	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Clinton-Dix	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Trevathan	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Richardson	0	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
	41	4	2	2	3	1	1-0



Less than 2 minutes from elimination, he rallied his team into the Final.

Team Stats

	Cobb County	Virden
First Downs	22	33
Rushes	17-47	34-166
Passes	34-22-385	33-22-304
Sacked	4-18	1-11
Fumble	1	2
Penalties	8-57	3-34
Turnovers	2	2
Missed Tackles	9	5
Dropped Passes	2	1
Bad Passes	1	2
Passes 25+	3	3
Runs 10+	2	6
Blitzers	11	20
Time	26:56	33:04
Third Down	4-9	3-7
Fourth Down	0-0	0-0
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/2/1	6/4/2
Net Offense	414	459



10

Aurora



GAME CENTER
2020
Atlantic Conference Final



13

Budapest

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Ryan	16	28	153	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Singletary	9	73	8.1	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Drake	6	61	10.2	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Aurora	7	3	0	0	-	10
Budapest	3	7	3	0	-	13

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Rodgers	17	27	186	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Howard	16	96	6.0	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Kittle	5	75	15.0	1

Play of the Game

In the 3RD quarter, 8:59 on the clock, game tied at 10, Mustangs at the Budapest 21. **Matt Ryan's** pass to Adams was picked off by **Minkah Fitzpatrick** at the 3-yard line to thwart scoring chance.

KITTLE BOILS OVER IN STARS WIN!
TIGHT END SNARES LONE T.D. IN CLOSE DEFENSIVE GRIND!

SUMMARY: The three-time champion Mustangs trotted into Ferenc-Liszt International Airport Stadium with one goal in mind: Make it four! To do that they would have to first get past the North Stars; and in order to do that they would have to score more than the 7 points they mustered in a regular season loss to this same Budapest team back in Week Two. The Mustangs charged out of the gate when **Devin Singletary** ran for 20 yards on the game's first play and **Matt Ryan** finished off the drive by going 4 of 5 for 51 yards and a TD to **Julian Edelman** to give Aurora an early 7-0 lead. The North Stars replied with **Jacob Hollister** rumbling for 21 yards off a short hitch and **Jordan Howard** running for a 10-yard gain to help get into range for a **Jason Myers** field goal to make it 7-3. Having given up points on their first series, the defences on both sides tightened up. **Cameron Jordan** sacked Ryan on 3rd down to force an Aurora punt. The Mustangs did one better when **K'Waun Williams** picked off **Aaron Rodgers** on the next series to give the ball to Aurora at mid-field. Looking to strike fast, Ryan dropped back and threw a bomb right into the arms of Budapest corner **Joe Haden**, who ran it back to the North Stars 18. The Stars went on the move with two nice passes, but Aurora corner **Charvarius Ward** stripped the ball from **Stefon Diggs** to put Aurora in good position at the Budapest 38. The follies continued. **Kenyan Drake** coughed up the football on the next play, recovered by Budapest to end a four-turnover spree in a 1:08 span. The Stars went three-and-out and the Mustangs drove into position for a 35-yard field goal by **Wil Lutz** to extended the Aurora lead, 10-3. The North Stars finally got on track, driving 75 yards to tie the game on a 9-yard TD pass to **George Kittle**. Lutz then missed a field goal attempt from 55 yards to end the 1st half with the teams tied at 10. Aurora's first series of the 2nd half reached the Budapest 21, but **Minkah Fitzpatrick** saved a score with an interception at the Budapest 3. Buoyed by the turnover, the Stars drove all the way to the Aurora 5, but had to settle for the chip shot field goal to take the lead. It was all defence on both sides after that. With 1:31 left, Drake was stopped short on 4th down at his 44 and, after a 27-yard pass from Rodgers to Kittle gave them a critical 1st down, Budapest ran out the clock.

QUOTES: "Should I have gone for it on 4th down in their red zone when we kicked the field goal? I still say no. It was early and it was no sure thing we would have gone all the way in to score. They way their defence was playing at that point, I'm sure we wouldn't have." – Aurora coach, **Rich Liotta**
"This game went according to plan. Not the four turnovers in a minute part and yes, we wanted to score more. But otherwise, it went as planned, with ball control and great defence. That's our identity this year – we're defence first!" – Budapest coach, **Darrin Jones**.



HAPPY FAN



titter

ANGRY FAN



James Duthie @efljamesduthie
Those Hail Davantes @M_Ryan02
likes to throw up in the air look pretty
scary against a good defence.



Attila Hun@AttilaHunBWGoulash
@minkfitz_21 is the quiet MVP of
this defence.





Aurora 10 Budapest 13

	1	2	3	4	F
Aurora	7	3	0	0	10
Budapest	3	7	3	0	13



* Playoff * 02-28-2021 Ferenc-Liszt Intl Temp:49 Wind:0-5 None No Line MVP:Kittle

1	9:52	Aurora	TD	Ryan 14 pass to Edelman (Lutz) (9-75-5:08)	7-0
1	3:02	Budapest	FG	Myers 47 (13-46-6:46)	7-3
2	4:39	Aurora	FG	Lutz 35 (12-66-7:25)	10-3
2	1:43	Budapest	TD	Rodgers 9 pass to Kittle (Myers,J) (8-75-2:56)	10-10
3	1:15	Budapest	FG	Myers 23 (13-92-7:40)	10-13

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Ryan	28	16	153	1	2	1	1	54.6
	28	16	153	1	2	1	1	54.6

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Rodgers	27	17	186	2	1	1	0	80.2
	27	17	186	2	1	1	0	80.2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Singletary	9	73	8.1	4	3	20	0
Drake	20	72	3.6	5	2	19	0
Ryan	2	4	2.0	1	0	2	0
	31	149	4.8	10	5	20	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Howard	16	96	6.0	4	5	17	0
Williams	10	40	4.0	1	0	7	0
Rodgers	5	14	2.8	3	1	13	0
Taylor,J	2	-3	-1.5	0	0	0	0
	33	147	4.5	8	6	17	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Drake	6	0	6	61	10.2	3	1	25	0
Adams	4	1	12	47	11.8	4	0	15	0
Edelman	2	1	5	24	12.0	1	0	14	1
Goedert	2	0	2	5	2.5	0	0	4	0
Washington	1	0	2	7	7.0	0	0	7	0
Singletary	1	0	1	9	9.0	0	0	9	0
	16	2	28	153	9.6	8	1	25	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Kittle	5	1	8	75	15.0	4	1	27	1
Williams	3	0	4	10	3.3	0	0	4	0
Watkins	3	0	4	32	10.7	2	0	16	0
Hollister	2	0	4	29	14.5	1	0	21	0
Diggs,S	2	1	4	41	20.5	1	1	29	0
Johnson	1	0	2	-2	-2.0	0	0	0	0
Line	1	0	1	1	1.0	0	0	1	0
	17	2	27	186	10.9	8	2	29	1

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Goedert	1	0	0
Drake	1	0	0
Ward	0	1	0
Kelce	0	1	0
	2	2	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Rodgers	1	0	0
Diggs,S	1	0	0
Harris	0	1	0
Kittle	0	1	0
	2	2	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
	0	0	0.0	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Taylor,J	1	31	31.0	31	0
	1	31	31.0	31	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Berrios	3	0	21	7.0	11	0
	3	0	21	7.0	11	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Cooper	2	1	13	6.5	8	0
	2	1	13	6.5	8	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Lutz	1-2	35	1-1	4

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Myers	2-2	47	1-1	7

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Koch	3	154	51.3	0	1	0	57

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Sanchez	4	176	44.0	0	4	0	53

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Williams,K	7	0	0	0	0	1	1-0
Boston	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Kendricks	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Johnson	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Watt	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Reddick	4	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Ward	3	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Autry	3	0	0	2	1	0	0-0
Davenport	2	0	0	0	2	0	0-0
Harris	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Thompson,S	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Davison	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Thompson,T	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jernigan	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Onyemata	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Peterson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Moore Jr.	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	53	0	1	3	4	2	1-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
McKinney	10	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Suggs	6	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Haden	4	0	2	0	0	0	1-14
Jordan	4	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Fitzpatrick	4	0	1	0	0	1	1-0
Harris	4	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
David	4	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Hayden	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Campbell	2	0	0	0	4	0	0-0
Winovich	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Kendricks	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Woodyard	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Diggs,Q	1	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Robey-Coleman	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Davidson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Settle	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	51	1	5	1	6	2	2-14



5 catches, 75 yards, 1 TD and a key 27-yard catch to help run the clock out.

Team Stats

	Aurora	Budapest
First Downs	18	17
Rushes	31-149	33-147
Passes	28-16-153	27-17-186
Sacked	1-9	0-0
Fumble	2	2
Penalties	3-15	0-0
Turnovers	3	2
Missed Tackles	4	8
Dropped Passes	2	2
Bad Passes	3	0
Passes 25+	1	2
Runs 10+	5	6
Blitzers	14	1
Time	27:50	32:10
Third Down	8-14	6-14
Fourth Down	1-2	0-0
Red Att/Td/Fg	2/1/1	3/1/1
Net Offense	293	333



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – This Conference Finals weekend was among the best one I can remember. We have not seen a semi-final weekend quite like it since back in 2009, when the Florida Dragons advanced with a 34-27 win over Durham on a 34-yard TD pass from **Aaron Rodgers** to **Brandon Marshall** with 0:09 left and, on the West Coast, the ‘Blue Shield’ of the LA Knights shut down **Peyton Manning** and the Patriots, 14-13. The Florida game was considered the big “coming of age” for the then young Rodgers. Many Championships were expected to follow him. That was before **Chris Dickinson** acquired the team and Rodgers went into a downward spiral fueled by late night partying with the owner and his friends that featured copious drugs, alcohol and women. Two years free of the ‘Curse of the Blue Eagles’ and 11 years after that first semi-final win, Rodgers is back in the big game after riding the coattails of a dominating defensive performance by Budapest over Aurora in a close and brutal game.

In the Pacific Conference, it was a veritable clash of Titans between Virden and Cobb County, with a young burgeoning superstar prevailing by a razor’s edge over a veteran former journeyman in a game that went down, literally, to the last second. It was a breathless match from start to finish one that even a Titan of Journalism like myself will be hard-pressed to do justice to with the written word. Who could ask for more? Let’s get on with my attempt to capture the contrasting drama of two very different types of instant classics...

CAMP JONES

As pandemic restrictions and the North Stars’ success on the football field cause more Hungarians to discover American Football, Coach and GM **Darrin Jones** is acquiring the lustre of a legend as the “Father of American Football” in the Budapest Press. Eager to seize on any trick to carve out a market in the still largely football-ignorant Eastern European nation, Jones has done nothing to discourage such magnification of his significance. On the contrary, he has been taking deliberate steps to promote that image. One of those has been to study and emulate some of the innovations developed by the *real* Father of American Football, **Walter Camp**, modify them for the time and claim them, in the eyes of Hungarians, as his own.

With Camp’s legacy fading into the mists of American history, hardly known even to the modern-day pro making a living playing the game he revolutionized, few people are catching on to Jones’ subtle plagiarisms of the Camp legacy. He tacitly encouraged the increasingly prevalent, and completely absurd, idea in Budapest that prior to Jones’ arrival in the EFL, the game of football was nearly indistinguishable from rugby. He began to emulate Camp’s affinity for writing by composing a column in the *Weekly Goulash* focusing on the Hungarian American Football League (HFL), wrapping up the season with his selection of the ‘All-Hungarian Team.’ He started ‘Camp Jones,’ – a sort of Pop Warner development league for Hungarian youth – which featured the *Daily Dozen* morning exercises that “a child should do every morning before breakfast to get a running jump start for the school day.” The exercises – simply-named after body parts like “hands,” “hip,” and “head,” or actions like “wave” and “crouch” – were primitive, but easily executed by a young boy of 8-12 years of age.

To impart a certain fatherliness to his image, Jones began to retro-fit his wardrobe, gradually dialing it backwards in time until his tailor was fashioning him 1910’s era three-piece suits and knickerbockers. Topped off by a tammie, Jones bore the striking look of a wise, old gentleman from the past, attracting small children and the admiration of women of fine virtue as he wandered the streets of Budapest on various errands.

While all this theatre was doing its part to instil in Hungarian football fans a sense of pride and ownership in the game of football – after all, the Father of American Football had chosen to settle in their country – behind the scenes, Jones had been studying the ancient game that Camp had irrevocably altered in an attempt to glean lost secrets that might give his North Stars a competitive edge come playoff time. He had discovered that, while Camp’s innovations – such as the line of scrimmage, the snap back from center, the system of downs, the reduction of players on the field from 15 to 11, and the marking of measurements on the field – had done their part to bring order to the game, the fact remained that the game of Camp’s era was an incredibly violent sport. If he was the father, he had sired a very violent child. Players actually died while playing – 45 of them between the years 1900 and 1905 – prompting no less than President Teddy Roosevelt himself to call a group of football luminaries, including **Walter Camp**, together at the White House in 1905 to discuss how the sport could be made less violent in the face of nation-wide calls to ban the game.

Jones, through deep research, discovered that the sentiment among coaches and players of the late 19th and early 20th centuries tolerated a much higher level of violence than would be considered acceptable today. The game was dominated by defence,

not only because the rules favoured that side, but because a ball-carrier was often under a pile of bodies and vulnerable to tactics that would get players ejected and likely banned from football today. The difference between major and minor college teams in those days often boiled down to superior coaching in the major programs on how and where to strike an opponent in soft and vulnerable areas so as to incapacitate him, while concealing the act from officials. It was an accepted tactic amongst the most respected coaches to have their players attempt to injure the best player on the opposing team. Injuries of less severity than a broken collarbone – such as a sprained ankle – were not even considered part of the injury report after a game. Causes of death on the gridiron ranged from severe internal injuries to cerebral hemorrhages to broken backs and necks. Permanent crippling injuries were common. This was the world of football in Camp's era prior to legalization of the forward pass in 1906 and the resulting gradual spreading out of formations.

While very interesting, it was clear to Jones that he could not attempt to implement such brutal tactics in the modern game, in front of dozens of TV cameras and millions of viewers. It was also likely that most of his players would reject plans to deliberately injure **Matt Ryan**, **Davante Adams** or **Kenyan Drake** – who posed the most serious threats to his defence. Yet, there had to be a way to inject the spirit of raw brutality, that had birthed the sport, into the make-up of his players in a way that would not get anybody killed, but make them perform better. In the end, Jones decided to assemble his defensive coaches and devise a plan to “get back to the roots of real football.”

According to my sources, and snippets of leaked footage from post-season practices, Jones' plan to turn his defence into a 21st century version of the Yale defence of 1888, began development during the wildcard bye week and reached its climax immediately prior to the Conference Final. It started with the concept of the gang tackle and progressed from there. “*Every man on the man*” became the catch phrase of the North Stars' defence. When targeting a ball-carrier, the first tackler's job was to “wrap him up” and the rest of the defence's job was “to finish him off.” When couched in this way, it discouraged the first tackler from attempting to “torpedo” the ball-carrier in order to generate a stunning blow that often missed the mark. It required *real* tackling of the runner, holding him up long enough to be knocked down and buried by a swarm of converging teammates. Everyone, no matter where they were on the field, was expected to move toward the ball-carrier and get in on the tackle before the whistle blew.

Gang tackling was not new – it tended to happen naturally with good defences – but the way it had been systematically broken down and practiced as a drill by Jones and his coaching staff, with emphasis on the hard finish and holding up as soon as the whistle blew, took it to another, more disciplined, level. He also added a local twist, by incorporating elements of a native Hungarian grappling move used in wrestling competitions, which **Bernardrick McKinney** demonstrated for the cameras on Jones' weekly TV show, *Papa Football*. This was a clever marketing strategy, as it endeared the defence even more to the Hungarian fans and cemented the reputation that the North Stars' defenders were special. All this, and the psychological conditioning of the players through daily study of the historic roots of the game under the tutelage of ‘Papa Football,’ produced the perfect balance between 19th century mindset and modern, innovative tactics.

A taste of the “old” and improved Budapest defence had been on display in the Quarter Finals shutdown of Brooklin. The team had missed only two tackles and had all but shutout one of the better offences in the league. But if the Mustangs were worried about being stymied like the Hawks had been, it did not show in the demeanour of the players or their coach.

“We proved this year we can run the ball,” said Mustangs running back **Kenyan Drake** in a pre-game interview with the *TSN*. “We already know, with Davante out there, we can pass the ball. I think we're good. Actually, I know we're good!”

Coach **Rich Liotta** was a little more careful with his words, but his relaxed, almost indifferent attitude suggested that he was confident. “Every playoff game is a challenge,” he began, when asked if he expected his Mustangs to advance to an historic fifth Gale Sayers game. “And I expect this to be one of the more challenging ones. They have a great defence with a lot of talent and team spirit, as they showed when they beat us earlier this year. I expect them to come out gunning for us again. But I know Matt has been in these situations in the playoffs before and I know he can handle it. We're not changing anything in our game plan. We're going in as we always do and they'll have to stop us.”

Many of the analysts who had dismissed the Mustangs as a team on the decline had changed their tune after the Quarter Finals. Most pundits had favoured the Thunder Lizards to advance toward what would have been a grand showdown between the two best defences in the league. The Aurora victory had reminded these bandwagon jumpers that winning is a product of mindset as much as it is talent. Enough Mustangs remained from last year's championship team to maintain that winning mindset, and it had made a difference against Durham. Now, the football intelligentsia was attempting to compensate by getting in front of a possible Aurora upset of Budapest.

“*There is no substitute for a winning culture,*” wrote **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* in his column the day before the game. “*The Mustangs have that culture under Rich Liotta and they can do amazing things with it tomorrow.*”

It was a brisk, but calm and sunny day at Ferenc-Liszt International Airport Stadium as the Mustangs and North stars took the field to contest the championship of the Atlantic Conference. Despite a strengthening of pandemic restrictions across Hungary, the government had granted permission to fill the stadium to slightly less than one-quarter capacity, with accompanying strict protocols. As a result, 8,500 tickets had been put on sale and had been snapped up in record time. The North Stars, over their history in Budapest, had only sold out their full venue twice. But local TV ratings had increased during the pandemic, resulting in a wave of new fans joining hardcore *Hun-stars* and the like. Demand for tickets was high, despite fear of the virus.

The unfamiliar noise level in the stadium created a sense of exhilaration and brought back memories of the pre-pandemic world. It may also have served as a temporary distraction, as the Mustangs charged out of the gate strong on the opening drive. On the first play from scrimmage a couple of nice blocks by **Daniel Kilgore** and **Cody Whitehair** and a whiff by **Terrell Suggs** let loose **Devin Singletary** for a 20-yard run to their own 45-yard line. A 10-yard completion to **Davante Adams** got them across mid-field, from where **Matt Ryan**



The 'Father of American Football,' **Darrin Jones** (according to the Hungarian Press) poses for the *Daily Goulash* before the North Stars' Atlantic Conference Final against the Mustangs. Jones has affected many of the personal attributes of the real Father of American Football, **Walter Camp** to try to live up to the epithet.

tried his first deep shot, a high arcing pass toward the end zone that Adams raced under and...*dropped!*

"He's goes deep to Adams...and he *drops* it!" cried CBS play-by-play announcer, **Jim Dance**. "Well, how about that? You don't see that very often, Tony."

"No, that's for sure," answered colour analyst, **Tony Romo**. "He may have had one eye on safety Minkah Fitzpatrick, who was closing in fast from the side and looked ready to unload. But that's still uncharacteristic of Davante Adams!"

The setback was only temporary, however, as Ryan went right back to Adams on third down and completed the pass for 14 yards to the Budapest 31. A 13-yard screen and a 4-yard run by **Kenyan Drake** moved the Mustangs to the 14-yard line, where Ryan connected on the same fly pattern that he had used on third down, but this time to **Julian Edelman** for the game's first touchdown. It had taken Aurora 9 plays and slightly more than 5 minutes to do something that had only been done once in the past five games: Score a touchdown against the Budapest defence.

The crowd was quiet. Their expectations had been high. The sight of Aurora ripping through their prize defence on the game's first possession stunned them. But it did not stun the 'Father of American Football' – it made him angry. Jones ripped off his mask and stomped over to where his defence had congregated on the sideline. To a man they looked shaken up. The linebacker, McKinney, who had been one of the few North Star defenders to race to the ball hard every time, was attempting to rally the squad. Motivating his teammates was not something he was accustomed to doing. The group had motivated itself without much conscious

effort all season. He struggled to find the words, but made up for his lack articulation by speaking them loudly.

"Alright! We got this! We got this! You got that?" he snapped. "You know...we gonna *get* there! We gonna *get* there! We...!"

He stopped when he saw his coach come into view. **Darrin Jones** cut a surreal figure in his grey suit, knickerbockers and beaver brown tammie, as if he had just stepped through an inter-dimensional portal in time. It would have been comical, had his face not betrayed the righteous anger of the ages.

"Is that how Yale played when they beat Princeton in the 1888 Championship?" he bellowed. (**Walter Camp** had been the coach of Yale in 1888, his first championship). "You saw the film! *Was it?*"

Film from that game did not exist, but film of Princeton defeating Yale in 1903 *did* exist. Jones had reportedly shown his team the 1903 film and they had studied it in detail. He had whimsically described to his players the practically indecipherable action of that latter game as if coming from the former. The players did not know any better.

The grainy black & white film shows how the game was played before the forward pass. It bore a striking resemblance to rugby, with the exception that the teams would set in a line before collapsing in a disordered mass of falling, flailing bodies at the snap of the ball. After a tackle, they re-ordered themselves immediately without a huddle. It appeared to be strenuous and brutal work rather than a sport.

"Is that how those *men* played?" Jones continued, his voice cracking slightly on the word 'played.' "For they were *men* back then, make no mistake! What I just saw on that drive was not men's work! That was sissified posing by high school kids."

Whether it was the uncharacteristic scolding from their usually reserved coach; or the effect of his period costume that lent weight to his claim of special knowledge about how the sport was played 132 years ago; or a bit of both; the defence soon turned things around.

A prolonged drive by the offence – that started off much like a 1903 match between Yale and Princeton, with the North Stars

running the same off-tackle play to the right side four out of the first five plays and **Aaron Rodgers** sneaking it for a first down on the other – ended abruptly at the Aurora 29 after a promising start. It resulted in a consolation field goal that did not feel, at the time, to be much consolation, given how the Mustangs had charged through the Budapest defence on the opening drive. If this was to be a shootout, field goals wouldn't be enough.

The North Stars' defenders served notice on Aurora's next possession that this would be no shootout if they had a say in the matter. With the ferocity of a tiger, **Lavonte David** pounced through the line and corralled Drake 3 yards behind the line of scrimmage. The Aurora running back was immediately forced to ground by David, followed quickly by McKinney and **Shelby Harris**, who helped make sure Drake stayed down.

"And Drake is *buried* under a pile of defenders!" **Jim Dance** called the play. "What a play by David!"

"It was a great play by David," **Tony Romo** concurred. "But the Budapest defence had better be careful that they don't get flagged for unnecessary roughness. That was close to piling on there."

Two plays later, **Cameron Jordan** shunted aside guard, **Cody Whitehair** and sacked Ryan for a 9-yard loss on third down, forcing a punt from the Aurora 22-yard line. It was an impressive bounce-back series for the Budapest defence. But they did not have long to savor the accomplishment. On the second play of their subsequent possession, Rodgers was picked off by a lurking **K'Waun Williams** on a short slant pass intended for **Jacob Hollister**. The same play had been good for 21 yards on the North Stars' opening drive, but this time Williams diagnosed it and jumped the route.

The Mustangs took over at the 50-yard line and, as they are wont to do, swung for the fences on the first play. Ryan dropped back deep in the pocket and lofted a bomb for Adams. But the North Stars had seen it coming. With safety help over the top, corner **Joe Haden** was in perfect position underneath and picked off Ryan's throw, running it back 14 yards to his team's 18-yard line. Budapest had dodged another bullet, but two plays later found another gun to its head when Aurora corner, **Charvarious Ward** punched the ball loose from **Stefon Diggs** and recovered it for Aurora at the Budapest 38-yard line.

"Ward recovers the ball! And the Mustangs will take over at the 38 of Budapest. Can you believe it!?" an astonished **Jim Dance** cried as the Mustangs celebrated their second take-away.

"Both of these defences are playing aggressively, Jim," **Tony Romo** observed. "It's like we're back in the 70's or something!"

The Mustangs' celebration was short-lived, however. On the next play, Suggs, his pride still stinging from his missed tackle on the opening play of the game, drove hard through a block by Kilgore and banged violently into Drake as he reached the line of scrimmage. The force of the hit jarred the ball loose and Harris fell on it, regaining possession for Budapest.

"And the ball is loose *again*!" exclaimed Dance in utter amazement. "It looks like the North Stars might have it...the officials are pulling at the pile to make it official....and – yes! – it's Budapest ball! On my!"

"Shelby Harris was right there when the ball popped out," Romo added. "He's been pursuing hard on every play and it paid off there! But if you're either of these coaches you have to be beside yourself. Great aggression by both defences, but these are professional offences. You'd think they'd be able to take care of the ball better!"

That made four turnovers in the span of 1:17, which had to be some kind of record. It would take time to research, as it was not the kind of stat that got kept in the official game book. In the modern era, with a premium placed on ball security, this kind of madcap exchange was pretty much unheard of. But it had been familiar in the old days, when fumbles were relatively common due to the leeway given defenders and the unspoken horrors of what occurred at the bottom of a pile. Prior to video replay and additional officials, it had been often impossible to determine exactly when the ball had come out, so the player with possession when the mass of bodies had been finally lifted usually determined possession.

The Stars' offence took an overly cautious approach on their next series and ended up punting after three plays from scrimmage. The Mustangs, similarly wary, also took a conservative approach, but experienced much more success. Singletary continued his exceptionally hard running with good blocking by the Aurora offensive line, carrying the ball a total of 6 times for 44 yards on the ensuing drive and making something out of nothing with a 9-yard catch on a check down from Ryan to bring up 2nd & 1 at the Budapest 18-yard line. The Mustangs looked geared up to go in for another major while the huffing and puffing Budapest defence looked deflated enough to let them.

But then something happened. The Budapest line suddenly went taut as a steel wire holding up a suspension bridge. Drake was stopped by Suggs about a foot shy of the line of gain. Then, on 3rd & inches, Jones deployed his "heavy" package – 5 down linemen, with the linebackers and safeties close-up in the box. Ryan handed off to Drake, who followed **Alejandro Villeneuve** into the line only to be stoned cold by Harris, who hit Drake at an angle but somehow still managed to arrest his forward progress until a bunch of his teammates rallied to push him back. The Aurora running back did not look to have gained much, but the officials signalled first down. This ruling prompted a torrent of boos to rain onto the field from fans who were certain Drake had not gained an inch.

Jones agreed and threw the red flag, prompting some interesting commentary from the booth.

"It is really hard to say," **Jim Dance** said while watching the video replay. "Remember, it has to be indisputable video evidence in order to overturn the call on the field. Well, look here, **Darrin Jones** has thrown the red flag! He's going to challenge the placement of the ball."

"I don't know about this challenge, Jim," **Tony Romo** cautioned. "First of all – as you say – there has to be indisputable evidence to overturn the call; but even if they do overturn the call, you know Rich Liotta is going to go for it in on 4th down and there is a

very good chance they won't miss a second time. And you're risking a timeout that Aaron Rodgers might need later in the half."

As fate would have it, an angle surfaced that clearly showed that Drake had not gained an inch. In fact he had lost an inch, which brought up 4th & 13 inches when the ball was re-placed after the ruling on the field was overturned.

"Decision time here for Rick Liotta," Dance intoned with mock severity. Since when had the Mustangs *not* gone for it on 4th & inches with a chance to really demoralize their opponent? In fact, they might even try a pass into the end zone – that is how open the Aurora playbook was on 4th & short.

"He has a chance to maybe put the North Stars in a position they have been in just once all season – down by 11 points – if he can keep this drive alive and find the end zone," Romo said excitedly. "I can't see Rich Liotta *not* going for it here."

Less than a second after Romo uttered those words, **Wil Lutz** could be seen trotting onto the field alongside holder, **Sam Koch**. **Matt Ryan** stood on the sideline with his helmet off, his face expressionless under his COVID mask.

"And, Rich Liotta is sending out the field goal team," declared Dance with a tinge of disappointment in his voice. "Are you surprised by this decision, Tony?"

"Not really, Jim. Well I am, and I'm not," Romo replied. "I can understand it. You have a good field goal kicker in Wil Lutz and you trust your defence to continue playing at a high level. Three points makes it a touchdown advantage in a close game. But, you know, I did not expect the Aurora coach to back down like this."

Lutz kicked the field goal dead center with an almost casual indifference. His celebration was muted – a handshake for his holder, Koch, and a nod to his linemen who had kept the North Stars out of the backfield. The field goal unit left the field promptly, with little fanfare. On the other side of the field the 'Father of American Football' beamed. *We've won*, he might have been thinking to himself. Then he turned to Rodgers and the offence and motioned them to gather around him.

"Okay, gentlemen, now is the time," he said softly, but his eyes lit with fire. "They've blinked. Go out there and prove your manhood like the defence just did. **Charles O. Gill**, **Amos Alonzo Stagg** and **Pudge Heffelfinger** of that great Yale team of 1888 never backed down from a challenge. They were well-mannered, but mean as hell. I know, I was there!" This last line brought some quizzical looks from the players, but Jones felt he was a roll and continued. "Show me that you're worthy of inheriting this game those men of old built for you! Mow them Mustangs down and stomp on them like blades of grass!" Then he raised his voice and loudly bellowed in a warbly, throaty voice: "Boola, Boola, Boola, Boola!"

Whether it was a particular something he said, the oddly transfixing quality of his Camp outfit, the primal force of the 'Bools-boolas,' or a mixture of all three; Jones' rallying of Rodgers and the offence seemed to have the desired effect on their performance. **Jordan Howard** bowled into the center of the Aurora line on the first play from scrimmage and netted a modest 3 yards. But the Mustangs had been expecting him and every yard had been earned through brute force. **A.J. Johnson** finally pulled him down, but **Shaq Thompson** had taken Howard's best shot at the 1-yard mark and was so shaken up he had to leave the field. On the next play, **George Kittle** fought off a double-team to come down with a contested ball and somehow held on after sustaining a vicious shot from Williams. Toughness had been on display on the first two plays of the drive and it bolstered every player's confidence.

Two plays later, Rodgers surveyed the Aurora defence, noted the five-man front and two linebackers spread out behind them. He called an audible to **Sammy Watkins** over the vacated middle that the receiver took 16 yards for another first down. Then it was Howard's turn to bolt through the center again, but this time the play went 16 yards as the Aurora defence instinctively shrunk from meeting him head-on. The crowd was thoroughly behind the offence now, making as much noise as 8,000 Hungarian drunks can make. Another Howard run for 5 yards set up the Stars at the 23 and brought them to the two-minute warning.

Both coaches had some time to think – which can be a dangerous thing. A slightly unsettled-looking **Rich Liotta** stared off in the distance as if trying to fathom what his opponent would do next. It was not unreasonable to expect that Jones would want to run some time off the clock before attempting a push toward the goal line. It was not only his style, but it would be a logical safety net to reduce the time available to the Aurora offence in the event that his offence failed to reach the end zone. The Mustangs had turned the game around against Durham the previous week with a touchdown drive at the end of the first half. Jones undoubtedly knew that and would not want his defence to suffer the same fate; the Durham defence was arguably as good as that of Budapest. Liotta made the call: The Mustang defenders would hold their positions and key on **Jamaal Williams**, who had set up as the sole running back.

On the other side, the 'Father of American Football' looked serene. He might have been thinking that it would make sense to burn off the rest of the clock and trust his offensive line to pave a path through the Aurora defence. **Darrin Jones** would do that. What would **Walter Camp** do? The greatest football pioneer who ever lived would have opened himself to new possibilities – or so Jones imagined. Why not just go for it? His opponent was probably keyed up to stop the run game in order to set up a 3rd & long. Why wait for 3rd & long? He decided to go with the hot tandem of Kittle and Rodgers, the clock be damned!

The call worked like a charm. Kittle dashed forward five yards then abruptly stopped and turned. The ball from Rodgers was there as he did so, giving the defender no time to close the gap before the big tight end turned back again and raced up the field for a 14-yard gain to the Aurora 9. The Mustangs doubled down on their previous call, bringing the linebackers in tight, playing the run. A play fake to Williams caused both inside linebackers to bite, opening up a gap in the middle of the field that Kittle angled toward, picking up a perfectly thrown ball from Rodgers and stepping untouched into the end zone. The crowd roared in delight, pausing only briefly as **Jason Myers** came on and kicked the extra point, before resuming. The two-play sequence to tie the game had taken all of 17 seconds.

That left 1:43 for the Mustangs to make the North Stars pay a price for scoring too soon. Driving the field in under 1-minute

was a team speciality. It might take a little longer against the Budapest defence, but there was more than enough time. So much, in fact, that Coach Liotta called a sweep to Singletary on the first play and called runs to Drake every second or third play thereafter, hoping to break a big gainer or, failing that, to set up the long ball. The Mustangs forged ahead with modest success on the ground, enough to move the chains twice before having to call timeouts. In the process, they set up three deep shot attempts on the Budapest defence, including what looked like a set-up for a bomb to the post. But each time the coverage was like glue. **D.J. Hayden** almost wrestled the ball away from Adams on the second attempt, but the ball fell to the ground, incomplete. Facing 3rd & 8 at the Budapest 45, with 0:25 left and one timeout, the Mustangs ran a screen to Drake – a safe but, in Drake’s hands, potentially lethal play – that McKinney stoned at the 37-yard line. The Mustangs pushed no further. Liotta called his final timeout with 0:03 left and sent Lutz onto the field to attempt a 55-yard field goal. The snap was true and the hold secure but, in an attempt to get a little extra on the kick, Lutz hooked it as time expired in the first half. The score remained tied.

The North Stars carried the momentum into the locker room. It had been a disappointing ending to the first half for the Mustangs. But the three-time EFL Champs proved no less resilient than their Camp-inspired opponents. The Aurora defence shut down Budapest’s second half opening drive in three plays and the offence took over at their own 9-yard line with renewed élan. A 25-yard catch-and-run and a 19-yard carry around left end by Drake were two big plays in a highly efficient 70-yard drive to the Budapest 21.

“Whatever Rich Liotta said to his team during the break seems to be working,” **Jim Dance** observed as the Mustangs broke the huddle and approached the line of scrimmage.

“They’re getting off the ball quickly and executing better,” **Tony Romo** observed matter-of-factly. “This team did not win three EFL titles by accident.”

The Mustangs did, at that moment, look unstoppable. Whenever they would get into a rhythm like this there was usually only one outcome: TD. But this time they faced an excellent defence, one motivated by the strange belief that they were, in some mystical way, connected to **Walter Camp**’s Yale team of 1888. That team had gone 13-0 to win the National Championship and had outscored opponents 694-0. It was a hard act to follow, but **Minkah Fitzpatrick** was determined to try.

Brimming with confidence, Ryan faked a hand-off to Singletary that froze the Budapest front seven. They had been geared up for the run and held their gaps as Ryan faded back to pass. A window opened in coverage and Ryan fired a bullet toward Adams. But it turned out to be bait. Haden instantly closed the gap and got his hand on the pass just as it arrived. The ball twisted high in the air and fell. But before it hit the ground it was intercepted at the 3-yard line by a diving Fitzpatrick.

“And it’s *intercepted!*” Dance yelled. “Minkah Fitzpatrick with a diving interception at the Budapest 3-yard line!”

“Well, that’s just a fine play by Joe Haden and Minkah Fitzpatrick!” Romo remarked as the Budapest offence took the field. “That pass had touchdown written all over it, but extra effort by Haden to get a hand in there and Fitzpatrick’s awareness allowing him to corral the ball before it hit the ground. Just outstanding! That could be the play of the game, Jim!”

Fitzpatrick had stopped Brooklin last week with an interception in the red zone on their opening drive and the Hawks had never threatened again in the game (until the very end, when the contest was already lost). Incredibly, the Mustangs – a team with a far deeper history of success at the highest level – went on to suffer the same fate in the Conference Final. The Fitzpatrick interception appeared to have sent a shock wave through the Mustangs’ bench from which they never truly recovered. The unexpected suddenness of it, coming as it did with all the variables of the play seemingly in the Mustangs’ favour, was the most troubling thing. If it was possible to shake the confidence of the Aurora offence under **Matt Ryan**, this turn-around appeared to have done it, or at least made everyone think twice.

As often is the case with turnovers, the burst of energy that follows carried over to the offence on their next series. Starting deep in their own end, the North Stars probably hoped to merely gain some breathing room in the field position battle that this game had become. Instead, they tore up real estate with two chunk runs of 11 and 17 yards by Howard and a long completion to **Stefon Diggs**, which was good for 29 yards. They moved with alarming speed all the way to the Aurora 5-yard line, where the Mustangs’ defence finally made a stop on 3rd & 4 with excellent coverage that had forced Rodgers to throw too far away from his target Kittle. Having marched 92 yards, the ‘Father of Football’ would not come away empty-handed by doing anything stupid. In the Camp era, a field goal had been worth 4 points and a touchdown only 5 points. But even with the diminished value of a field goal in the modern era, Jones was content to take what he could get. **Jason Myers** came on and made the 23-yard chip shot to give Budapest a 13-10 lead.

Not one to shrink in the big moment or let fear govern his decisions, Liotta did an interesting thing: He immediately called another deep shot to Adams off play action. If he was playing the odds that the elite tandem of Ryan-Adams was bound to connect eventually and that, in a game like this, a connection on a bomb would have a disproportionate impact, the call made sense and was in-keeping with his M.O. The Mustangs’ dauntless play-calling had served the team well in the Liotta Era. But the Budapest defence of 2020 was not just any defence. Already the best, it was gaining in confidence as the game progressed and had now reached another level.

As on the Fitzpatrick interception, the North Stars were again caught in a run-guard posture as Ryan dropped back comfortably seven steps and Adams streaked down the left sideline, man-to-man with Haden. It was a pitch-and-catch scenario. But again, playing like a man possessed, Haden gave it that little extra just as the ball was about to reach Adams’ waiting hands and tipped it off target back towards him. For a split second it looked like both players had the ball then, in an impressive feat of dexterity and strength, Haden pulled it away, only to lose the handle as he hit the ground.

“That ball was nearly intercepted!” Dance observed, stating the obvious, but needing to say it for the sake of the record.

“That was close, Jim,” Romo added, also stating the obvious but needing to say it to make it official. “Joe Haden is playing with

a lot of energy and skill here late in the game. The Mustangs might want to think about going elsewhere on the next play.”

In defiance of the trajectory of the moment, Liotta called another pass to Adam, this time an isolate to exploit the man coverage that had woefully failed to be exploited on the previous two plays. This time the Stars were prepared and the coverage was so tight that Ryan virtually threw it away. A 1-yard check down on 3rd & 10 brought on the punting unit after the quick three-and-out. Aurora had failed to answer the Budapest score.

With a chance to extend their lead, the Stars stumbled after gaining a first down. The Aurora defenders were playing well, but the North Stars had played it conservatively, with 3 runs and two short passes. The punting duel was officially underway.

It was fitting that a game dominated by the defences and played in the brutal spirit of the Walter Camp Era would finish with a scoreless final period. The endmost drama was not played out in the end zone, but rather on the hash marks. Neither offence could break through. The 4th quarter highlights consisted of *K'Waun Williams* stripping the ball from *George Kittle* as the Budapest tight-end ran to daylight and lost track of his pursuit, but Kittle recovering almost instantly thanks to a fortunate bounce; then *Minkah Fitzpatrick* almost cementing his legend in North Stars' lore by punching the ball from *Dallas Goedert* at the Aurora 17-yard line only to have *Jason Kelce* pounce on it to keep the Mustangs' final drive alive; then *Bernardrick McKinney*'s textbook wrap-up of *Kenyan Drake* one-yard shy of the line of gain on 4th down at the Aurora 44, turning the ball over to Budapest with 1:33 left. Finally, the gutsy audible by *Aaron Rodgers* that turned into a 27-yard pass to *George Kittle* – the play that virtually sealed the win for the home team.

Jim Dance called the play-by-play: “Rodgers is changing the play...here's the snap...play fake to Howard...fires to Kittle...and it's *caught* inside the 15...brought down by Williams at the 13-yard line! That could very well be the ball game!”

And it was the ball game. 8,500 raucous, inebriated Budapestians didn't need the wisdom of **Walter Camp** to know that. They chanted and danced in the stands as if watching the *Golden Team* – the Mighty Magyars of the 1950's – win the Olympics.

Defence had conquered offence in the penultimate championship game. But in the current age of offensive excess, with the top-two offences going at each other in the Pacific Conference, nervousness pervaded the post-game commentary and analysis from the Budapest side.

“Both defences played outstanding football today,” a grim-looking **Darrin Jones** said after the game, his tammie cocked backwards to let the air hit his over-heated forehead. (His post-game speech in the locker room had apparently been very intense). “Our offence made some nice plays. But obviously we need to show more consistency in that area and we cannot afford to turn the ball over like we did today when we face Cobb County or Virden.” [Spat's note: the outcome of that game was not known at the time]

On the Aurora side, a curiously relaxed-looking **Rich Liotta** made some cryptic remarks that have observers pondering the fate of the Mustangs going forward. After lavishing compliments on the Budapest defence for once again containing his offence; and after repeatedly explaining his 2nd quarter decision to kick the field goal on 4th and inches, stating that he was not going to turn away easy points against such a tough defence, he wrapped up the session with uncharacteristic fatalism: “You know, everyone, it has been a good run. We have done some impressive things with this group, but we met our match today. I have no regrets – time to move on.”

Whether this means an imminent rebuild in Aurora, a move away from Matt Ryan, or something else completely; only time will tell. For now, the vaunted Mustangs have been put out to pasture and the North Stars return to the final for the first time in 7 years.

THE (SECOND) GREATEST GAME EVER PLAYED

Some national media pundits are calling the Pacific Conference Championship match between Cobb County and Virden, “the greatest game ever played.” Senior establishment journalists who hold the 1958 NFL Championship Game between the Baltimore Colts and the New York Giants to be *The Greatest Game Ever Played*, consider this appropriation of the title to be nothing short of blasphemous. Regardless, the game on Sunday between the Coyotes and Violators was one of the best games I have watched in the modern era. Had the contest decided the Championship, a debate would have to be opened up with regard to its status vis-à-vis that 50's classic, which gave birth to the concept of the “two-minute drill.” For now, pending further review and discussion in the off-season after this game has been further analyzed and distilled, let's refer to this game as ‘The *Second* Greatest Game Ever Played.’

Part of the reason for the ratings bonanza and feverish media reaction was due to massive build-up around a contest between two top teams that did not know each other and had not faced each other during the regular season. In the absence of a head-to-head example, analysis focused on how the teams had fared against mutual competition and speculation was rampant. This provoked hot debate and created a platform for analysts to stake their reputations on being able to divine the outcome.

The Coyotes had been transformed by new GM/Coach **Eron Osman**. They bore no resemblance on the football field to their 4-12 predecessor, the LA Knights of 2019, who had struggled offensively under the sharply contrasting styles of quarterbacks, **Ryan Tannehill** and **Lamar Jackson**. The defence, for which the Knights under **Jeff Dohrn** had been historically known, had been worse. It had been filled with promising, but underdeveloped talent that had been gradually crushed under the weight of extended action.

Heading into 2020, the future at QB seemed to lie with Jackson, the 30th overall pick of the 2018 draft. But Osman shocked the football world by trading Jackson and opting to start the journeyman, Tannehill. It was a head-scratcher at the time. However, Tannehill's record-setting season passer rating of 139.6 in 2020, besting the previous record of 137.5 set in 2012 by **Drew Brees**, was even more of a head-scratcher. Analysts were attributing the success to Osman's “system.” On the surface, that system was a relatively conservative variant of the standard ‘Pro Set’ offence, finely balanced, but characterized by a predominantly outside running game and inside passing game built on short-to-medium range crosses and slants. Tannehill had attempted just two passes of more than 20 yards in the air downfield – as astoundingly low number. Advanced analytics specialists, such as **Harry Schultz** of Football.Outriders.Org,

criticized the “system” as being “schematically too predictable.” Yet, the rest of the league had not seemed to catch on, or to figure out how to solve the problem of near-perfect execution that lay at the root of the no.1-ranked offence’s success in 2020. While hard to criticize the incredible results, there were still critics out there who could not wholly accept that the Coyotes’ offence was better than the top-scoring offence of the Violators they were about to face in the ultimate conference showdown.

Coming into 2020, the Virden offence under **Patrick Mahomes** needed no introduction. It had been dominant in 2019 and did not lack for weapons to repeat that dominance in 2020. But the defence of 2019 had left something to be desired. Its lack of impact players and general mediocrity had held the team back. For that reason, GM and Coach **Lance Barrate** focused on improving his defence. He raided division rival Charleswood for the impact defenders his team had lacked the previous year. The improved defence had been the reason the Violators had been the overwhelming pre-season favourites to represent the Pacific Conference in the Gale Sayers Game. Few predicted prior to Week One, that the Coyotes would be challenging that prevailing view.



The Violators’ mascot, ‘Hooded Hangman’ with his chopping block, sets up a cheering session on the Cobb County side of the field, prompting *Cooty the Coyote* to intervene with a salvo of disapproving yelps, howls and growls. When *Cooty* began frothing at the mouth, the Hangman returned to the Virden side of the field with his props. The Coyotes won the battle of the mascots, but ultimately lost the battle of the teams on the field.

The table was set for what many expected to be a full buffet of action. It would be attended by 4,120 fans, 10% of the seating capacity inside **TERRORDOME**, thanks to a last-minute dispensation from the Government of Manitoba. The fan demonstrations of the previous week, which promised to be bigger leading up to the Conference Final, combined with intense backroom lobbying by owner, **Vance Barrate** and the networks, had caused the Premier to finally relent. This decision had provoked the medical mafia across Canada to recoil in horror – the Premier was going against the advice of medical *experts!* – but the people of Virden and environs were ecstatic that at least some of their number would be able to witness the Violators of 2020 live, at home.

The excitement of long-suppressed Virden fans filled the bleak interior of the repurposed Victorian Era insane asylum known as **TERRORDOME** with a super-charged optimism at odds with the cacophony of the song, ‘The Violation,’ by the death metal band *Fleshgod Apocalypse*. It blared obnoxiously over the P.A., echoing off the bare brick walls thereby amplifying its turbulence. It was the Violators’ player intro song, chosen to instill fear in the opposition but succeeding more in horrifying the mainstream segment of their fan-base. Cobb County coach **Eron Osman** was not impressed, his face screwed up in revulsion as the song performed its assault on decency; while team mascot, *Cooty the Coyote*, howled at the spot where the moon would have been visible had it not been for the stadium roof.

Virden coach, **Lance Barrate** walked slowly toward his preferred position on the Virden sideline, his impassive expression belying the fever of the moment. This was, more than the Atlantic Conference Final and even the Gale Sayers Game, the match-up the EFL had been waiting for. The pressure on both coaches was intense. Yet Barrate looked as if he was going to the corner store for a liter of milk. This was not due to apathy, rather, as he had once described it himself, due to “focus.”

“A coach cannot afford the luxury of emotion while the game is being played,” Barrate had said years ago in an interview with beat writer **Marquis de Sade** of the *Virden Eviscerator*. “The players can, but the coach’s job is to focus on the technical components of the game and not get caught up in the emotion. There is always time after the game to throw a chair at a wall or hug a lineman. If you get too high or too low in the middle of a game it will affect your judgment.”

The tempo and turns of this game would severely challenge the Virden coach’s composure and restraint. Similarly, his more animated, but sophisticated opponent on the opposite sideline, **Eron Osman**, would find the impulse to curse a blue streak or howl like a barbarian in jubilation impossible to resist as the game took its course along a roller coaster of events.

If this game did not suck you in then stop watching football, because you’ll never be satisfied.

Coming on the heels of the labored, plodding defensive struggle in Budapest, the early action in Virden unfolded like a raging tempest by comparison. It swept the viewer to halftime as if riding the rapids toward a waterfall. There were no surprises, only execution overlaid with failure to execute – with each team doing its share of both.

The Coyotes got the ball first. The initial attention of the Virden defenders was on **Raheem Mostert**, as they reasonably expected their opponent to lead with the run game and draw out the opening drive. Conventional wisdom, after all, had dictated that keeping **Patrick Mahomes** off the field was the best way to defend him. But the Coyotes went on the attack straight away. On the second play of the game, **Ryan Tannehill** dropped back and slung a dart 9-yards over the middle to **DeVante Parker**, who eluded **Malik Hooker** and **Chris Harris Jr** on his way to a hair-raising 75-yard catch-and-run touchdown. This kind of splashy highlight was unexpectedly common for the Coyotes in 2020. The team had finished second in pass plays of over 25 yards, more than Virden, with most of those yards coming after the catch.

Now it was the Violators' turn. There was no sign of panic, or even mild concern on the faces of the head coach and his quarterback. Barrate said a few words to Mahomes, who nodded then jogged confidently onto the field after the touchback. The Coyote defence prepared to face its first test. Clearly, they did not intend to fail it by letting Mahomes have the benefit of play-action. Instead, they failed it by being a little too jumpy on the line in anticipation of the pass. Three offsides penalties against Cobb County put them back on their heels and the Virden offence did the rest. They covered the 75 yards in 11 plays, mixing in runs and short passes, including a short slant to **Mohamed Sanu** for the tying touchdown. Chilling, torturous screams blared from the end zone on the opposite side – an area known as 'The Pit' – where Violator fans, dressed like punks and hooligans, moshed whenever the home team scored. Virden's mascot, the **Hooded Hangman**, solemnly pulled a lever, causing a stuffed coyote with a rope around its neck fell through a tiny trap door. The crowd cheered. *Cooty the Coyote*, the domesticated live coyote mascot on the Cobb County sideline, howled and yipped in fury.

The Coyotes came back strong, pushing the ball up field without much difficulty in chunks of 8 to 15 yards in a perfectly-balanced, 10-play drive consisting of 5 runs and 5 passes. The score came on an 8-yard checkdown TD to Mostert after Tannehill had brushed off a hit from a blitzing **Jamie Collins Sr.** The Cobb County quarterback was not as fast or mobile as his opposite number, but he was surprisingly tough. **Brandon McManus** came on for the extra point, but missed. He looked down with a puzzled expression at the spot where the ball had been, as if looking for the cause of his failure. The snap and hold had been fine, and nothing stood out about his kicking form. He just flat out missed the kick. This tiny failure would have huge implications later.

Defending the lead once more, the Coyote defence reset and stymied the Violators on their next possession, forcing a rare Virden three-and-out. But the Coyotes would give the ball up suddenly two plays later when Collins Sr., flying all over the field in the early-going, separated Mostert from the football as he tried to gain the edge and **Sheldon Richardson** recovered for Virden at their 48-yard line.

Mahomes looked long on the first play after the turnover and connected with **Amari Cooper** over the middle for a 23-yard gain. The Coyote defence stiffened, however, and three plays later Virden faced 4th & 2 at the 21-yard line, prompting Coach Barrate to send out **Zane Gonzalez** for the field goal attempt. Many a Virden fan on social media disapproved of the conservative decision at the time, believing that *"field goals won't win this game."* How ironic that view would turn out to be in retrospect. Gonzalez did his part and nailed the 39-yard field goal to draw Virden to within 3, 13-10. 'The Pit' celebrated with growls, the equivalent of polite clapping for "Pitsters," reflecting their preference for TDs over field goals, but accepting the field goal nonetheless.

Cobb County seemed to have something started on their next series after back-to-back completions to Parker and **Brandon Cooks** put them across mid-field. But a drop by Parker followed by a miss by Tannehill on third down brought on the punting unit. **Sam Martin** hung a high one that **Tyler Ervin** settled under and bobbed at the 7-yard line. Bearing down at full tilt, Mostert drilled him and the ball spilled to the turf, where it was pounced on by Coyote lineman **Robert Hunt**. This evened the turnover battle at one apiece, but the Coyotes were determined to make more of it than the Violators had of theirs. After **Nigel Bradham** stuffed Mostert for a 4-yard loss, Tannehill again managed to dodge the rush and extend the play, finally finding Cooks unguarded in the right corner of the end zone for an 11-yard touchdown pass. This time McManus made the extra point and the Coyotes took a 20-10 lead.

While the Virden Fanatical (noun, not adjective) expressed their disappointment with a chorus of low groans, the Virden coach and his quarterback looked the picture of calm on the sideline as they studied a play sheet. Mahomes finally gave a curt nod, adjusted his helmet and walked briskly onto the field. Soon the Virden offence went to work, with Mahomes scrambling 10 yards for a first down on the second play of the series. This reminder of Mahomes' second dimension caused the Coyote defence to press. **Tre'Davious White** was flagged for pass interference on Sanu and Chaisson was called for encroachment to help fuel the Virden drive. With the Coyotes concerned predominantly with the pass, **Ezekiel Elliott** got his legs under him and finished off the push with 4 straight carries for 24 yards, the last a 2-yard TD run off left tackle to re-establish the 3-point deficit. There would be no quick knockout of the league's highest scoring offence.

That did not mean the Coyotes weren't going to continue trying. Virden safety, **Ha Ha Clinton-Dix** was caught interfering with **Julio Jones** – The Violator's first flag of the game – which got the drive moving. Tannehill went right back to Jones on the next play, hitting him on the numbers for a 22-yard gain. Three plays later, facing 3rd & 11, Tannehill flipped a harmless-looking short slant underneath to **Jared Cook**. The surprisingly agile and quick tight end shot through a gap to the second level, cut back and out-raced **Duke Dawson Jr** to the end zone for a 40-yard TD. This score cut like a knife through the Virden fanbase. **TERRORDOME** went eerily quiet, save for the occasional tortured shriek, as if somebody was being tortured on the rack. Cobb County was leading 27-17 with 2:08 left in the half.

The demeanour on the Virden sideline remained undisturbed. But the play selection on their subsequent possession betrayed a sense of increased urgency as they tried to make up ground in short time with a series of passes. The Cobb County defence was prepared. They saturated the secondary with defensive backs and managed to force a punt with just over one minute left – enough time to squeeze in

one last score before halftime. But the Virden defence met them with their own sea of defensive backs and, after some modest early headway, the Cobb County drive died when Collins Sr. finally got to Tannehill and dumped him for a loss to end the half.

The arrival of half time caught the fans and much of the media off guard. It had been a riveting first half. The Coyotes and Tannehill had impressed with their quick-strike ability, a feature more often attributed to Virden in mainstream analyses. The Coyote defence was also getting halftime kudos for holding the powerful Violators to “just” 17 point in the 1st half. But the question remained to be answered: Was this Cobb County’s best punch? If so, did they have another one in them?

The Violators came out of the gate in the second half with another deliberate and effective drive. The halftime message from **Lance Barrate** to his players must have been *stick to the game plan*. That plan had the Coyote defence staggering a bit as Elliott took the handoff at the Cobb County 33, gained the edge and started chugging down the sideline toward the left pylon. But as if out of nowhere, **Tarell Basham** streaked in from the blind side and stripped Elliott of the ball. **Carl Nassib** fell on it to give the Coyotes possession at their own 11. If the last Coyote score had cut like a knife, the Elliott fumble was like a punch in the gut.

Had the Coyotes been able to march the field and score a touchdown, or even kick a field goal in the wake of that demoralizing turnover, I think I would writing Virden’s epitaph today. After two first downs, however, Collins Sr came through again, sacking Tannehill for the second time and tipping away a third-down pass to force a Cobb County punt from their own 40.

Instead of setting up the critical blow, the Coyotes’ takeaway had merely delayed the inevitable. The Violators resumed their advance in the same style as their 1st half scoring drives, mixing runs and medium passes with the seemingly obligatory penalties on the Coyote defence – this time a 15-yard personal foul on **DeMarcus Lawrence** and a holding call on **Steve Nelson**. A 24-yard long slant to **Amari Cooper** put Virden at the Coyote 28-yard line and, three plays later, Mahomes chucked a ball to Sanu on a comeback route and the veteran spun around and darted into the end zone for a 16-yard score. Blood-curdling screeches emanated from ‘The Pit’ in celebration. *The Hooded Hangman* swung an axe down on the neck of a coyote effigy that had been laid out on a giant wooden block positioned provocatively near the Cobb County bench. *Cooty the Coyote* responded with a ferocious howl and his most piercing “yips.” The Virden mascot paused in his act, realizing possibly for the first time that the dog on the Cobb County sideline was actually a real coyote, frothing at the mouth. He reconsidered his position, quickly packed his props and retreated slowly in an effort to preserve what dignity remained in a man who performs mock executions of stuffed animals in front of thousands.

Trailing now 27-24, the crowd sensed that the tide was turning in their favour. But the Violators had been close to bridging the gap before, only to see the Coyotes come right back and score. Coyote coach, **Eron Osman** was animated on the sideline, exhorting his players to “go get that one back!” To back up his words, he led with his “deep play,” which was actually a medium-range cross that, if thrown to the right place at the right moment, often produced bomb-like results in the hands of **Julio Jones** or **DeVante Parker**. This was a well they had dipped into on Parker’s opening touchdown. But the Violators looked ready for it this time. They staggered their secondary in a zone and blitzed **Jamie Collins Sr**. In a second Collins flushed Tannehill from the pocket. As he fled from his linebacker nemesis, the Cobb County QB saw a window open and fired towards it, but the pass was off target and easy pickings for corner **Chris Harris Jr**. who secured the interception and went to ground at the Cobb County 39. **TERRORDOME** erupted in spine-chilling jubilation. The tide had officially turned.

Virden went to work, but after gaining a quick first down Mahomes looked to be in trouble on 2nd & 10. With his receivers covered and the pocket rapidly collapsing around him, he stepped up and ran for a first down and more, covering 18 yards to the Coyote 11-yard line. Two plays later, the Violators were in the end zone on a 5-yard dive by **Royce Freeman**. The Coyotes slumped as Freeman jumped up and spiked the ball – a conventional spike, involving no elaborate, choreographed interpretive dance with his teammates. It was too important a touchdown for that silliness. At 31-27, the Violators now led for the first time in the game.

The damn holding back the Virden offence had burst. Twitter Heads across North America and beyond were now expecting to see the Violators roll downhill the rest of the way. But, the Coyotes had different ideas. Showing true grit, Tannehill overcame a first-snap sack by **Cameron Heyward** with a perfectly placed throw to **Brandin Cooks** for a 19-yard gain. That play kick-started a smart drive into Virden territory that hit a wall at the 27, but was salvaged by McManus’ 45-yard field goal to make it a one-point game, 31-30.

The Coyotes’ defence absolutely needed to make a stop and they did, but only after the Violators hit on two big passes – 26 yards to Elliott and 27 yards to Cooper – to get close enough for a field goal attempt. Gonzalez came on looking to widen his team’s lead to 4 points. He hooked his kick, however, and as a result the Virden advantage remained at the slimmest possible margin.

Cobb County took over in excellent field position at their 40-yard line, with 3:54 left in the fourth quarter. That time was now a factor was pointed out by the FOX broadcasters, **Joe Duck** and **Troy Acheman**. It may have gone unnoticed by many fans as the back-and-forth action had made the game fly by.

“With 3:54 left, there is still plenty of time left for an exchange of scores the way these teams have been playing, Troy,” Duck stated as the Cobb County offence took the field. “But you have to think that the Coyotes need to score on this drive. They don’t want to give the ball back to Virden while trailing this late in the game.”

“Absolutely! For Ryan Tannehill and the Coyotes, this is their two-minute drill,” Acheman replied. “Ideally, they would like it to take at least three minutes, so the Violators don’t have time to come back. But they need to score one way or the other!”

The Violators set up in a standard 4-3 alignment, in zone coverage with Collins Sr. lined up directly behind Heyward and Richardson, showing blitz. At the snap of the ball he went directly for Mostert, expecting him to get the ball, and Mostert was only too happy to lock on to him as Tannehill dropped back to pass and surveyed the field. Unable to find an open man, he was forced to

run to his left as **Sheldon Richardson** shed his block and started to track him down. Suddenly, with a snap of his arm and a flick of his wrist, Tannehill lobbed a deep pass to Jones, who reached up and brought it down as Bradham decked him. The long check down covered 32 yards and it put Cobb County in field goal range for McManus at the 28-yard line.

“What a huge play by Ryan Tannehill!” blared **Joe Duck**. “He made something out of nothing there and now the Coyotes are in field goal range for Brandon McManus.”

“It was a good play, but Eron Osman is going to want more than a field goal here,” **Troy Acheman** commented. “Or at least if he kicks a field goal he wants to be closer and to take a lot more time off the clock first. He doesn’t want Patrick Mahomes to get his hands on the ball with too much time left and his team only leading by 2 points.”

Eron Osman apparently agreed. Tannehill took his time getting to the line and handed the ball off to Mostert, who got stoned for no gain by Bradham as he attempted to bounce off left tackle. On second down, with the Violators again gunning for Mostert, Tannehill connected on a short slant to Parker, who was hauled down 1-yard shy of the first down marker after a 9-yard gain. The clock ticked down to the two-minute warning with Cobb County facing 3rd & 1 at the Virden 19.

When play resumed, the Violators lined up in an ultra-heavy package, with 6 down linemen and 3 linebackers. **Marcus Peters** and **Ha Ha Clinton-Dix** were the only defenders not in the box, but stood 1-yard away from their assignments in tight coverage. This was a formation normally used at the goal line, but for the Violators this was a virtual goal line situation. If they surrendered the first down they would have to burn their timeouts to preserve the clock, with no guarantee of holding their opponent to a field goal. Tannehill surveyed the mass of tightly-packed bodies in front of him. He barked signals in an irregular cadence, hoping to draw the defence offside. Suddenly the ball was snapped and he took a short drop as Collins Sr bore down on him. The Virden linebacker was unable to get a hand on the Coyote quarterback, but the blitz affected his timing. His throw to Jones was delivered a split-second too early and flew past as the receiver was turning his head to pick up the ball. Incomplete – fourth down!

It was decision time for **Eron Osman** and he did not hesitate. He sent out the field goal unit to try to take the lead.

“Do you think about going for it here on fourth down, Troy?” Duck asked after the incomplete pass.

“I’d think about it...for about one second...then I’d send in the field goal unit,” Acheman replied. “If you go for it and miss, then you’re in the same situation, but down a point. If you make the first down – great! But that’s too big a risk with the season on the line. The Coyotes have a good defence and have made some stops in this game. They have to try the field goal here and trust that defence to come up big against the most dynamic quarterback in the game.”

McManus came onto the field and did his part with a professional coolness that belied the magnitude of the moment. He drilled the ball down the middle of the uprights and followed it up with a cursory knuckle bump with his holder, **Sam Martin**, as if he was kicking no more an extra point and not the go-ahead field goal in the Conference Championship. But it was his missed extra point earlier that caused this new lead to be 2 points instead of 3. It was a tiny difference with potentially massive implications.

The Violators took over at their 25-yard line after conceding a touchback on the kickoff. There was 1:51 left on the clock – an eternity for an offence of this calibre. The Coyotes deployed in a dime package, knowing what was coming. They played tight to the line, hoping to disrupt the receivers. This was an aggressive move in a two-minute situation, but made sense if one believed that the Violators would lead with the short stuff, thinking they had lots of time. But in this case the Violators led with the medium stuff. Mahomes connected on a slant to **John Brown** for 14 yards then followed up with a 10-yard fly to Cooper, who got behind Nelson and ran free for an extra 18 yards to the Cobb County 33. Mahomes made it look easy. The Violators had covered 42 yards in two plays and were already in field goal range, although no Virden fan would have been comfortable with Gonzalez attempting a 51-yard kick with a trip to the Gale Sayers Game on the line.

The Coyotes were now forced into clock preservation mode and called a timeout after the pass to Cooper. **Eron Osman** assessed the situation and correctly diagnosed that the Violators would not be taking big chances and, for the first time all game, he committed to stopping the run. Elliott indeed went off left tackle on the first play and Lawrence stuffed him for a 1-yard loss, bringing up 2nd & 11 and prompting the Coyotes to call their last timeout (they had burned one on defence early in the half). The Coyotes shifted their line to the right, expecting another run to the left side, as that had been the pattern of the Virden run game. Sure enough, Elliott got the handoff and swept to the left, with **Marshall Yanda** and **D.J. Humphries** pulling. It looked like the play was doomed, but the Virden guards combined to knock out the pursuing linebackers and safety **Chuck Clark** bounced off Elliott’s thigh as he cut through the crease on his way to a 14-yard gain to the 20-yard line. Horrible, blood-curdling, celebratory howls erupted from ‘The Pit,’ imparting a disturbing edge to the conventional cheering of the season-ticket holders at the 50-yard line. The Violators were in control and the fans could taste victory.

The TV cameras panned to **Zane Gonzalez** kicking into a net. Unless coach, **Lance Barrate** felt inclined to attempt a dramatic finish that featured his quarterback throwing for the winning touchdown, the game would come down to his field goal kicker. It was clear which way the media wanted things to go.

“And that is Zane Gonzalez warming up on the sideline, in case he is needed,” **Joe Duck** stated for the benefit of viewers who did not know Virden had a kicker. “But I have to think, Troy, that with Patrick Mahomes at quarterback for the Violators, they will want to try to finish in the end zone, do you agree?”

“Well, I think at this point, with Cobb County out of timeouts, you have to be smart about it,” **Troy Acheman** replied. “The Violators are well within the range of Zane Gonzalez here. It comes down to whether or not you think your kicker can make the kick

in this situation. If you think he can, then you have to play it safe. If you think he's struggling, then maybe you test the defence with your MVP quarterback. We're about to see what Coach Lance Barrate thinks about his kicker here."

The Virden coach could not have made it clearer. After a pair of token dives into the center of the Cobb County line by Elliott and Mahomes, both of which made no headway, he waited to call a timeout until there were just 3 seconds remaining on the game clock. After everything the Violators' coach had done to build up his team during the off-season in order to set up his sensational quarterback for success, his team's season would come down to a 24-year old kicker who had been a mere footnote (pun intended) in his team's fortunes this year.

"Well, it doesn't get much bigger than this!" declared **Joe Duck** as the Virden field goal unit came onto the field. "Zane Gonzalez can send his team into the Gale Sayers Game if he makes a 38-yard field goal here. What's going through the mind of a kicker in a situation like this, Troy with the season on the line?"

"I was never a kicker, Joe, so I can't tell you what's going through the mind of Zane Gonzalez right now," **Troy Acheman** replied. "It's a big moment. He wouldn't be human if he didn't have a few butterflies. But as a professional, you know, it's all about replicating what you do in practice on the football field. So, I expect Zane is going to focus on whatever ritual he uses when he's getting ready to kick. Meanwhile, all Patrick Mahomes can do now is stand on the sideline and pray like all of the Violators fans here in the stadium today."

Everyone agrees that quarterback is the most important position on the field in the game of football. And everyone agrees that a quarterback needs a strong supporting cast in order to win a championship. Few talk about the importance of the kicker. But in moments like the one that made final play of this game, it is entirely about the kicker. Everything that the quarterback and supporting cast did to set up the kick will be victoriously validated or relegated to irrelevance by the result of one individual's attempt to place his foot on the ball in such a way, and with sufficient force, to propel it past the back of the end zone through an 18'6" window. It seems incongruous, but is naturally fitting when one considers that the name of the game is "foot-ball" and that kicking is at its roots.

Zane Gonzalez marched onto the field with soft but deliberate steps, his head tilted slightly forward and his eyes gazing off into a point unknown. He looked to be in his own mind, far away from the boisterous crowd of slightly more than 4,000 fans, made more rabid than usual due to the suppression of lockdowns and the sense of an impending defining moment for their franchise. Completely unnoticed by the cameras, commentators and fans were the other two-thirds of the battery that powered success or failure in an often routine play; holder **Braden Mann** and long snapper, **Weston Richburg**. In a game dominated by brute force, raw athleticism and feral instincts, these three had to be pure technicians in the moment – separated from guttural instincts.

The members of the field goal unit took their places. The crowd quieted as focus turned toward the action. For a brief moment the players on the field looked like in a photograph, completely still. Without warning, the ball fired out from the center. It was plucked cleanly out of the air, spun and placed by the holder in one fluid motion, laces facing toward the goal line. Gonzalez stepped forward and drove his leg through the ball. It rose up high in the air, heading for the right upright then slowly curled inward, to the left and through the posts without about a foot to spare.

"And it's good!" bellowed **Joe Duck**. "The biggest kick of Zane Gonzalez's career is good, and Violators are heading to Las Vegas! Oh, what a finish!"

"That ball snuck in there at the last moment it seemed like," **Troy Acheman** remarked. "Zane had hooked the kick that he missed earlier in the game and he almost pushed this one right. But it went through. There's no bigger moment in sports than a game-winning field goal with no time left and no more helpless feeling for the quarterbacks on either side."

Indeed, the reactions of Mahomes and Tannehill were a study in contrasts. At the moment the kick went through, the young Virden star bounced on his feet and flexed his arms while bellowing in triumph. He then turned and hugged his coach, **Lance Barrate**, who allowed himself a little smile as he patted his protégé on the back. The veteran Coyote pivot dropped his head and turned away from the field, while **Eron Osman** ripped off his headset and shook his head. *Cooty the Coyote* sat silent and stalk still.

It was a game neither team deserved to lose. In the end, it came down to a kick missed and a kick made, so even was the play between the lines. The action was so captivating that the game seemed to fly by in minutes until the final three, when the gravity of the stakes magnified the seconds into minutes and minutes into hours. It was an odyssey for players and viewers alike; one that I do not wish to sully by discussing the post-game controversy over coach Osman's decision to kick a field goal on 4th & 1, or mention the death threats targeting kicker **Brandon McManus**. I will leave that for another time, so that we can reflect with admiration on the undulations of fortunes of two excellent teams when they faced each other in the (second) greatest game ever played.

GALE SAYERS FORECAST

If the Conference Championships taught us only one thing, it was that football fans are in store for a treat in the 14th Gale Sayers game. Of course, the games taught us much more than that. We know that **Patrick Mahomes** is able to succeed in the passing game against a very good defence and that **Ezekiel Elliott** will exact a price from opponents for ignoring him. The Coyotes focused their game plan solely on the quarterback, and let the running back rack up 127 yards. We know that the Budapest defence is playing at another level, higher even than during the regular season when they proved they were the best in the EFL. If any team can stunt the Violators' attack, it is the North Stars. What we do not know is whether **Aaron Rodgers** will be able to carry his offence on his back if Mahomes and **Lance Barrate** solve the puzzle of that big Budapest 'D.' I would not discount the veteran. He's aware of the criticism and will want to show the young pup on the other side that he doesn't know all of the tricks. I expect the Final to be another great game, capping off one of the more dramatic post-seasons in memory. And I expect Budapest to come out on top.

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Jimmy's CHAMPONSHIP PICK

At Assassin's Den, Las Vegas, NV

BUDAPEST @ VIRDEN (line – VIOLATORS by 4)

INJURIES: Budapest – None; Virden – None.

BACKGROUND: The two no.1 seeds in their respective conferences meet here for the first time in post-season action. In 12 seasons since the move of the old Anchorage franchise to Virden, these squads have faced each other just 6 times, all in the regular season, splitting the series 3-3. Purists will point out that, under former management in Anchorage, the Buccaneers defeated the expansion North Stars 31-26 in 2008, giving the Virden franchise a historical edge, 4-3. Regardless, a half dozen (or a baker's half dozen) games over such a long period is not enough to ingrain much hostility. The rivalry on the field will be professional rather than bitter. But recognize that each team represents a distinct "camp" in the endless debate over what wins football games: offence or defence. The North Stars, ranked no.1 overall in the league on defence in 2020, are defending the old school precept that Defence Wins Championships. The Violators, ranked second in efficiency, but no.1 overall in points scored, represent the New Age of boundless offence, winning many a shootout. There is no doubt that Virden and their flashy young quarterback look more impressive on the Red Zone channel. But so did Aurora's offence, until the moment it slammed up against the Budapest defence in the Conference Final game. Experience is on the North Stars' side, as this will be their third appearance in the Gale Sayers Game. They won it all in 2012 and lost in 2013. This will be the first appearance in the Final for the Violators.

WHEN VIRDEN HAS THE BALL: The Violators operate mostly in a pro set, with an H-back split or in I-formation to block on run plays. They will take out the H-back and add a third wide-out when they wish to accelerate the pace, but rarely deploy a fourth wide receiver. This is because depth at wide receiver drops off significantly after their top three – the 4th WR on the depth chart, KJ Hamler, caught only 7 passes during the regular season. The Virden top three are pretty good, however, and made better by their all-star quarterback. Amari Cooper has proven more of a deep threat than John Brown, but the deep ball is not as prevalent in the Virden game plan as their gaudy passing numbers would suggest. Patrick Mahomes is most effective at mid-range and, despite throwing a league high 46 TD passes, threw just 14 passes for over 25 yards in the regular season. This is primarily a passing offence by reputation and design, but it needs the run game to be effective against the better defences; of which the Budapest 'D' is one. With tight ends, Eric Ebron and TJ Hockenson playing no more than an adjunct role in the attack, maintaining the viable threat of Ezekiel Elliott is critical to producing one-on-one match-ups on the edge. Without it, it falls on Mahomes to make plays that only he can make, by moving around in the pocket and releasing the ball quickly, accurately and with power on the run. This ability to make a play "after the play" will pose an unprecedented challenge for the Budapest defence, but one they are equipped to face. The Stars play primarily a base 3-4, favouring extra coverage on 1st & 2nd down, and switch to a four-man front in nickel, giving them added strength up front. One of the hidden features of this top-ranked defence is its ability to contain the run while setting up primarily to stop the pass, allowing them to effectively have their cake and eat it too. On those occasions when it does play the run, it is effective at shutting it down. It all starts with their front three (who need no introduction), who are as adept at plugging gaps as they are at rushing the passer. At linebacker, Lavonte David is an unsung hero, being where he needs to be most of the time; while safety Minkah Fitzpatrick is a guerilla in the secondary, ambushing opposing quarterbacks. These valuable pieces cover up what is otherwise and average to above-average supporting cast and elevate the squad's overall performance to the next level. This is a confident group that will not get caught gambling often. Nor will it blitz impetuously. The Virden offence will have to earn every yard.

WHEN BUDAPEST HAS THE BALL: The Budapest offence was the focus of criticism during the regular season and Aaron Rodgers took the brunt of it. While the former championship winner failed to live up to expectations, those expectations turn questionable when

one considers the talent around him and the scheme he had to work in. The Stars deployed mostly in a two in-line tight end set during the regular season and otherwise flirted about equally with standard pro and three-wide receiver sets. So far in the playoffs they have increased the frequency of pro sets and added an old style full-house backfield, but still deploy mostly in two tight end sets. These are not formations naturally conducive to producing big numbers in the passing game, even with George Kittle as one of the tight ends. Stefon Diggs was hardly a factor in the regular season and has been a non-factor in the playoffs to date. Sammy Watkins was worse. Rodgers uses his veteran savvy and mobility to patch together what he can and keep turnovers to a minimum. This has been more valuable than most people realize. The upside of the suppressed air game is that the Budapest running-back-by-committee has been far more productive than the names that compose it would lead one to expect. The commitment to the run, almost 50% of all offensive plays, is part of a deliberate strategy to maintain ball control and keep the defence well-rested. Expect this strategy to continue against the Violators for both defence's sake, and to keep Mahomes off the field. The Virden defence will be tasked with preventing those long drives and getting the ball back into their quarterback's hands. Run defence was a weakness during the regular season, but this had more to do with the team being in the lead most days and focusing on the pass. The Violators have the talent up front in Cameron Heyward, Dexter Lawrence and Leonard Williams to contest the line of scrimmage against a Budapest offensive line that boasts a pair of studs in Ryan Ramczyk and Brandon Brooks, but also has vulnerabilities at center and right tackle. The Virden defence does not get the same attention as the offence, but the unit should not be underestimated. They play a standard four-man front in basic and nickel packages about 75% of the time and match spread sets with dime and quarter packages. They will yield yardage, but rank 4th overall in points allowed and 2nd in takeaways, with 23, showing they can make stops. They have the talent in the back end of the secondary to play man coverage, but opt to play mostly zone, which is a signature of a philosophically conservative defence. The bend-not-break style comes with a twist, however, as they are not afraid to blitz early in the downs to put their opponents in a hole. This almost always involves linebacker Jamie Collins coming off the edge and rarely anyone else. Expect nothing to change fundamentally in their overall approach against the straight-forward Budapest offence, except possibly more run calls as long as the game remains close.

THE WAY I SEE IT: Having been on the biggest stage before, the Budapest coach will have his team as ready as possible – not just to deal with the football problems posed by the Violators, but also with the intense pressure from fans and media. While the Stars hold the edge in experience, the Violators retain a slight advantage in overall talent and balance on their roster. Patrick Mahomes is arguably a better quarterback than Aaron Rodgers, while the Virden skill players are simply a cut above their Budapest counterparts. Defensively, Virden has no significant holes, while the top-ranked Budapest defence benefits from a tight coterie of four perennial all-stars – five if you count Joe Haden – and counts on the rest to elevate their games. If there is one area of significant advantage for the Stars, it is their ability to generate pressure with their down linemen, allowing linebackers to drop into coverage; but this strength loses some of its impact when facing a mobile quarterback like Mahomes. Still, do not expect flashy fireworks from the Violators' offence. This will be a close game and a tough grind on the ground for both teams. Virden will instinctively maintain its patience on the attack to avoid the unpleasantness of a turnover, while it should not surprise anyone if the North Stars' brain trust gives freer rein to the Rodgers-Kittle connection and finds a way to incorporate Stefon Diggs into the game plan to pick up the pace. In the end, it will come down to execution. The record shows that Virden has been a bit better at it throughout the season and that will show up here. **PICK: VIRDEN**



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With Professor
Sterling Smitherman

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – Looking back at the Conference Finals of 2014, we see a Pacific-Atlantic Conference (the fore-runner of the current Pacific Conference) classic that finished, as did the 2020 version, with a game-winning field goal at the gun. The 31-28 victory by the underdog Carthage Cannibals (the fore-runner to the Bruxelles Bombers) over the favoured Santa Clara Banana Sluggs (the fore-runner to the Brooklin Hawks) was deemed an instant classic by most sports pundits. It featured early dominance by the Cannibals through two-and-a-half quarters, during which time they built up a 21-7 lead,

followed by a 21-point outburst by the Sluggs that saw **RGIII** throw 3 TD pass over a 10-minute span to give his team a 28-21 lead. With Carthage back on its heels, **Philip Rivers** delivered one of the signature clutch performances of his career, leading his team to a game-tying touchdown with 4:44 left then patiently moving his offence into position, converting three consecutive 3rd down plays in the process, to set up **Steven Hauschka's** 48-yard field goal as time expired.

On the opposite side of the continent, the perfect Aurora Mustangs continued their magical season with a 26-13 rubbing out of the Durham Thunder Lizards. This was seen as a disappointing game by national sports journalists, who had almost universally expected **Nick Foles** and the Thunder Lizards to carry on where they had left off in their Quarter Finals win over Pickering and give the Mustangs juggernaut a scare, if not a defeat. Foles fell flat, while the Durham defence did an admirable job of slowing down the Aurora attack enough to keep the game within reach through three quarters. The Lizards eventually pulled Foles in favour of **Drew Brees**, who delivered a touchdown in garbage time to make the score barely respectable. On the winning side, **Matt Ryan** threw for 272 yards and 2 TDs in a mistake-free afternoon.