

2021

Wildcard



EFL

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE



Shooting for the Stars in our 15th Season!



February 6, 2022

EAST



CHINO	24
VIRDEN	30



SEBASTIAN	25
PICKERING	22

NORTH



CENTRAL



COASTAL



WEST



SOUTH



CATCH ME IF U CAN!



TY Hilton Sebastian Swordfish

Sebastian WR, **TY Hilton**, cuts across the open field after snaring a short pass from **Kirk Cousin**, side-stepping the tackle and shaking off **Karl Joseph** for a big gainer of 57 yards as the final minute of the 4th quarter ticks away. The huge play set up the eventual game-winning field goal to allow Sebastian to upset Pickering (See Spats McChad inside).



Who was slick
in Wildcard
Weekend?

“Brylcreem” THE
EFL’S FIRST SPONSOR



Patrick Mahomes
QB
Virden
Violators

28 of 44, 305 yards, 2 TDs, 0 INTs. Led game-winning drive in OT vs Convicts.



Za'Darius Smith
DE-OLB
Chino
Convicts

4 T, 2 SK, 2 QB Pressures. Kept the pressure on Virden QB in losing cause.



24

Chino



30

Virden

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Prescott	21	30	183	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Jones II	18	92	5.1	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Gallup	6	74	12.3	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Chino	0	3	7	14	0	24
Virden	3	14	0	7	6	30

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Mahomes	28	44	305	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Mahomes	5	37	7.4	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Elliott	7	40	5.7	0

Play of the Game
 In the first possession of OT, facing 2nd & goal at the 4-yard line, Virden picked up the Chino blitz and **Patrick Mahomes** threaded the needle to **John Brown** for the game-winning TD.

VIOLATORS ADVANCE IN SUDDEN WIN! MAHOMES' TD PASS IN O.T. SENDS CHINO PACKING AS PRESCOTT WATCHES!

SUMMARY: Virden took the opening possession at their 25 and drove to the Chino 7, where they elected to kick a field goal on 4th & 1 to take the early lead. The Convicts responded with a prolonged 18-play, 70-yard drive that ground to a halt at the Virden 10 after 10:46 off the clock. **Harrison Butker** nailed the 28-yard field goal to tie the game. Virden QB, **Patrick Mahomes** quickly made up for his time on the bench by guiding a 9-play, 75-yard drive, highlighted by a 36-yard fly to **AJ Green** to set up a 4-yard TD run by **Ezekiel Elliott**. After forcing a Chino three-and-out, the Violators extended their lead further with a 9-yard TD pass to **TJ Hockenson**. The score capped off an 89-yard drive, kept alive by a 22-yard scramble by Mahomes on 3rd & 10, that consumed all but 0:13 of the 1st half. The Violators entered the locker room at half time appearing to be in control, 17-3. The Convicts got the ball to start the 2nd half and drove the field with purpose, finishing off their series dramatically with a 45-yard deep shot from **Dak Prescott** to **Michael Gallup** for a TD. Down now 17-10, the Convicts' D stopped the Violators at mid-field. The offence got the ball back at their 16 after a punt then drove to their 46, where they went for it on 4th & 4. Virden's **Leonard Williams** came up big, with a 14-yard sack of Prescott that gave Virden the ball at the Chino 32 and set up a 3-yard TD run by Elliott to make it 24-10, Violators, to start the 4th. It looked like Chino was done on their next series when they set up to punt on 4th & 19. But Virden returner **Pharoh Cooper** gave them new life by muffing the fair catch attempt. Chino recovered at the Virden 19 and scored 6 plays later on a desperate 4-yard scramble by Prescott on 4th & goal. Virden went three-and-out and Chino took over at their own 28 with 7:13 left. On the ensuing drive, the Convicts moved the chains with check downs and well-timed runs until Virden's **Marcus Peters** was flagged for unnecessary roughness to put them in the red zone. **Ronald Jones II** ran it in from 6 yards and the extra point tied the game at 24. With both teams unable to score again in regulation the game went to overtime. The Violators got the ball first and never gave it back. Mahomes won it on a 4-yard TD pass to **John Brown** after an 11-play, 75-yard penalty-assisted drive, as Prescott watched from the sideline.

QUOTES: "I thought we executed our game plan well. Obviously, the turnover wasn't part of the plan. It gave them some momentum and they tied it up. But Patrick and the offence really stepped up in overtime – he really showed why we rely on him so much." – Virden coach, **Lance Barrate**.
 "I'm not going to second-guess that call on fourth down, sorry. You guys can talk about it all you want, from now to next season. I stand by it. This wasn't a field position type of game. Disappointing end. It really came down to a coin flip going against us." – Chino coach, **Rob Nazar**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



Quentin San Pedro @QSP
 Like the decision by @WardenRob to go for it on fourth down. Did not like the play call. Estoy molesto!



Marquis de Sade @mdsviolate
 Exquisitely-inflicted agony. Tease them back in the game then go in the for kill while their QB watches helplessly. Well-done!



Chino 24 Virden 30

	1	2	3	4	5	F
Chino	0	3	7	14	0	24
Virden	3	14	0	7	6	30



* Playoff * 02-06-2022 TERRORDOME Temp:53 Wind:Calm None No Line MVP:Mahomes HFA:

1	9:59	Virden	FG	Badgley 25 (11-68-4:56)	0-3
2	14:09	Chino	FG	Butker 28 (18-70-10:46)	3-3
2	8:20	Virden	TD	Elliott 4 run (Badgley) (9-75-5:49)	3-10
2	0:13	Virden	TD	Mahomes 9 pass to Hockenson (Badgley) (11-89-4:53)	3-17
3	10:37	Chino	TD	Prescott 45 pass to Gallup (Butker) (6-78-4:11)	10-17
4	14:04	Virden	TD	Elliott 3 run (Badgley) (7-32-4:09)	10-24
4	8:08	Chino	TD	Prescott 4 run (Butker) (6-19-2:41)	17-24
4	0:57	Chino	TD	Jones II 6 run (Butker) (13-72-6:16)	24-24
5	5:40	Virden	TD	Mahomes 4 pass to Brown	24-30

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Prescott	30	21	183	1	0	1	3	96.9
	30	21	183	1	0	1	3	96.9

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Mahomes	44	28	305	1	0	2	3	99.1
	44	28	305	1	0	2	3	99.1

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Jones II	18	92	5.1	5	3	12	1
McCaffrey	5	17	3.4	1	0	7	0
Prescott	6	16	2.7	2	0	6	1
	29	125	4.3	8	3	12	2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Mahomes	5	37	7.4	2	2	22	0
Elliott	7	33	4.7	6	0	9	2
	12	70	5.8	8	2	22	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Gallup	6	1	9	74	12.3	2	1	45	1
McCaffrey	6	0	6	33	5.5	1	0	15	0
Patrick	4	0	7	47	11.8	4	0	15	0
Jones II	2	0	2	-1	-0.5	1	0	2	0
Hurst	2	0	2	18	9.0	2	0	13	0
Byrd	1	0	1	12	12.0	1	0	12	0
Jones Jr.	0	0	3	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	21	1	30	183	8.7	11	1	45	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Elliott	7	2	9	40	5.7	2	0	11	0
Hockenson	6	1	12	78	13.0	5	0	17	1
Chase	6	0	10	70	11.7	3	0	18	0
Green	4	0	7	74	18.5	4	1	36	0
Davis	3	0	4	29	9.7	1	0	17	0
Brown	2	0	2	14	7.0	2	0	10	1
	28	3	44	305	10.9	17	1	36	2

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Mason	0	1	0
	0	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Mahomes	1	1	0
Cooper	1	0	0
	2	1	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Abdullah	1	23	23.0	23	0
	1	23	23.0	23	0

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

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Grant	1	0	3	3.0	3	0
	1	0	3	3.0	3	0

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

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Butker	1-1	28	3-3	6

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Badgley	1-1	25	3-3	6

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Way	2	102	51.0	0	2	0	55

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Lee	3	131	43.7	0	1	0	48

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Terrell	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Maye	6	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Smith	4	2	0	0	2	0	0-0
Bowser	4	0	0	1	0	1	0-0
Bouye	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Bostic	3	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Purcell	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Moore	2	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
White	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jarrett	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Young	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Robinson II	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	41	3	1	1	3	2	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Trevathan	11	0	0	2	0	0	0-0
Ximines	6	1	0	0	2	0	0-0
Oliver	5	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Peters	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Hooker	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Adderley	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Lawson	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Bryant	3	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Shelton	3	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Nnadi	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams	1	1	0	0	2	0	0-0
Thomas	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hennessy	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hockenson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Penny	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Moehrig	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	54	3	3	2	5	0	0-0

	Chino	Virden
First Downs	20	27
Rushes	29-125	12-70
Passes	30-21-183	44-28-305
Sacked	3-30	3-17
Fumble	0	2
Penalties	4-27	3-30
Turnovers	0	1
Missed Tackles	3	5
Dropped Passes	1	3
Bad Passes	0	0
Passes 25+	1	1
Runs 10+	3	2
Blitzers	22	1
Time	34:48	29:32
Third Down	5-13	8-12
Fourth Down	4-5	0-0
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/2/1	6/4/1
Net Offense	278	358



PATRICK MAHOMES
VIRDEN

305 yards passing and 2 TD passes, including walk-off TD to Brown in OT.



25

Sebastian



22

Pickering

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Cousins	21	28	294	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Taylor	25	101	4.0	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Beckham	9	135	15.0	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Sebastian	0	9	7	9	-	25
Pickering	7	0	7	8	-	22

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Rivers	15	23	154	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Swift	10	63	6.3	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Sanders	5	48	9.6	1

Play of the Game

In the 4th quarter, 0:49 remaining, Swordfish WR, **TY Hilton** caught a short pass from **Kirk Cousins**, broke two tackles and ran 57 yards to the Pickering 18, to set up the game-winning FG.

SWORDFISH ADVANCE TO FACE BUDAPEST! COUSINS, TAYLOR, DEFENCE COMBINE TO TAKE DOWN SPARTANS!

SUMMARY: The Swordfish challenged the Spartans' defence on their very first series by taking a chance on 4th & 2 at mid-field. They turned the ball over on downs and Pickering seized the opportunity, opening the scoring with a 2-yard run by Miles Sanders. Sebastian came back and rolled the dice again on 4th & 2 at their own 47. This time Kirk Cousins cashed in with a 32-yard pass to Odell Beckham Jr., setting up a 3-yard TD pass to Beckham 4 plays later, but Jonathan Taylor was stoned for no gain on the 2-point conversion attempt to keep the score, 7-6. The Spartans punted on their next series, giving the ball to Sebastian at their 20 after a touchback. A 28-yard pass to Beckham helped spur a 53-yard drive that ended with a 45-yard FG by Daniel Carlson to make it 9-7. The Spartans countered with a strong 14-play, 83-yard push to the Sebastian 10. On 4th & 1, with 0:18 left in the 1st half, the Spartans attempted to take the lead on a field goal, but Greg Zuerlein missed the kick, preserving the Swordfish lead. Sebastian got the ball to start the 2nd half and marched 75 yards down the field in 12 plays, finishing with a 9-yard TD pass to Terrace Marshall Jr to make the score 16-7. The Spartans stalled at mid-field and had to punt the ball down to the Sebastian 12. Three plays later, the Fish faced 4th & 2 at their own 20-yard line. Instead of punting, incredibly, they went for it and instantly regretted the decision as Taylor was topped short. Pickering took advantage with a 17-yard pass to D'Andre Swift and a 4-yard check down TD to Sanders put them back within a FG, trailing 16-14. Unabashed, Sebastian rallied with a drive from their own 38 and extended their lead on a 6-yard TD run by Taylor. The two-point conversion was missed, keeping it a one-score upper hand for the visitors. After another Pickering punt, the Swordfish took over at their 5 and proceeded up the field to their own 48, where they faced a 4th & 4. Again, they went for it and were stopped, handing the ball over with 4:35 left. This set up another short field for Pickering and a drive that ended with a 1-yard TD pass from Philip Rivers to Sterling Shepard. The two-point convert tied at 22. With 0:49 left TY Hilton pulled off the play of the game; a 57-yard catch-and-run to the Pickering 18, which set up Carlson's game-winning 34-yard FG with 0:18 left.

QUOTES: "Aaaawwwrrrgghhhh!" – Pickering coach, Gus Konstantakos

"They tested our defence on fourth down and our defence was up to the task. They gave us plenty of chances to take the game back but we fell short. Their defence played us well, credit to them, but we could have done better." – Spartans' QB, Philip Rivers.

"We won, and that's always a good thing. Whether we deserved to or not is up to you to decide." – Sebastian coach, Russ Lemmon.



HAPPY FAN



titter

ANGRY FAN



Jean Boisvert @JB-SwamplandP @KirkCousins8 was the unsung hero again. Thanks Kirk. But those fourth down follies will not fly next week against Budapest.



Aristedes @AristedesKalogiannis Alas, it was only when our foe let his guard down that we won on the attack. Sadly, such is the way of Sparta!



Sebastian 25 Pickering 22



	1	2	3	4	F
Sebastian	0	9	7	9	25
Pickering	7	0	7	8	22

* Playoff * 02-06-2022 Thermopylae Stadium Temp:28 Wind:0-5 None No Line MVP:Cousins

1	5:58	Pickering	TD	Sanders 2 run (Zuerlein) (7-51-4:04)	0-7
2	14:56	Sebastian	TD	Cousins 3 pass to Beckham Jr. (2 - failed) (10-75-6:02)	6-7
2	6:33	Sebastian	FG	Carlson 45 (8-53-4:55)	9-7
3	8:47	Sebastian	TD	Cousins 9 pass to Marshall Jr. (Carlson) (12-75-6:13)	16-7
3	1:36	Pickering	TD	Rivers 4 pass to Sanders (Zuerlein) (2-21-0:49)	16-14
4	10:56	Sebastian	TD	Taylor 6 run (2 - failed) (8-62-5:31)	22-14
4	0:49	Pickering	TD	Rivers 1 pass to Shepard (2 - Freiermuth) (10-49-3:46)	22-22
4	0:18	Sebastian	FG	Carlson 34 (5-59-0:27)	25-22

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Cousins	28	21	294	3	0	2	0	132.1
	28	21	294	3	0	2	0	132.1

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Rivers	23	15	154	0	0	2	0	113.3
	23	15	154	0	0	2	0	113.3

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Taylor	25	101	4.0	5	3	14	1
Cousins	3	17	5.7	1	1	10	0
Richard	2	11	5.5	1	0	7	0
	30	129	4.3	7	4	14	1

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Swift	10	63	6.3	5	3	16	0
Sanders	16	58	3.6	4	2	13	1
Sermon	2	16	8.0	1	1	14	0
Shepard	1	1	1.0	0	0	1	0
	29	138	4.8	10	6	16	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Beckham Jr.	9	0	13	135	15.0	6	2	32	1
Ebron	4	0	6	40	10.0	1	0	16	0
Marshall Jr	2	0	2	20	10.0	1	0	11	1
Taylor	2	0	2	14	7.0	1	0	8	0
Hilton	2	0	3	68	34.0	2	1	57	0
Richard	1	0	1	7	7.0	0	0	7	0
Reagor	1	0	1	10	10.0	0	0	10	0
	21	0	28	294	14.0	11	3	57	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Sanders	5	0	6	48	9.6	4	0	14	1
Swift	4	0	5	50	12.5	3	0	17	0
Brown	3	0	5	37	12.3	2	0	16	0
Shepard	2	0	4	16	8.0	2	0	16	1
Mooney	1	0	2	3	3.0	0	0	3	0
Smith	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	15	0	23	154	10.3	11	0	17	2

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Ballentine	0	1	0
	0	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Brown	1	0	0
	1	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Ballentine	1	36	36.0	36	0
	1	36	36.0	36	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Barner	4	51	12.8	20	0
Smith	2	19	9.5	17	0
	6	70	11.7	20	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Peoples-Jon	1	0	-1	-1.0	0	0
	1	0	-1	-1.0	0	0

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

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Carlson	2-2	45	1-1	7

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Zuerlein	0-1	0	2-2	2

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
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Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Fox	4	197	49.3	1	2	0	55

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Clowney	9	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wallace	7	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Dunlap II	6	0	0	1	3	0	0-0
Ragland	5	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Wilkins	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Takitaki	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Gholston	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Shelley	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson III	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Viadom	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Tuttle	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jenkins	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Baker	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ballentine	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Cashman	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	47	0	0	3	3	1	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Klein	11	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ward	7	0	3	0	0	0	0-0
Stephen	7	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Hyde	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Schobert	5	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Okwara	4	0	0	2	1	0	0-0
Howard	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Dennard	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Davison	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Bethel	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Joseph	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wilson,D	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Heath	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Roby	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wolfe	0	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
	53	0	3	3	4	0	0-0



21 of 28, 294 yards, 2 TDs. Precision passing kept the offence rolling.

	Sebastian	Pickering
First Downs	21	22
Rushes	30-129	29-138
Passes	28-21-294	23-15-154
Sacked	0-0	0-0
Fumble	0	1
Penalties	3-20	3-47
Turnovers	0	1
Missed Tackles	12	7
Dropped Passes	0	0
Bad Passes	1	1
Passes 25+	3	0
Runs 10+	4	6
Blitzers	6	2
Time	32:35	27:25
Third Down	3-9	3-9
Fourth Down	1-4	1-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	4/3/1	4/3/0
Net Offense	423	292



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – Setting aside my well-worn complaints about the wildcard weekend format and focusing strictly on the character of the two wildcard contests, my journalistic integrity compels me to acknowledge that we witnessed two very entertaining games this weekend. I will go further and assert (again, turning a blind eye to the destiny of victimhood in store for the winners) that these were intriguing match-ups on paper, even before the action confirmed that analysis. This was not just a cerebral assessment made in the days leading up to the games on my part. My gut said the same thing. As I saddled myself to a bar stool facing a wall of liquor bottles and a panel of HD screens at Blondies Sports on W 79th Street in Manhattan, I felt a fine roll of senses-sharpening adrenaline rise up from the center of my frame as the iconic *EFL* on *FOX* intro music blared majestically from hidden speakers throughout the bar. Football music is the best sports music. Nobody can convince me otherwise.

I felt engaged, whether I wanted to be or not, as the view from the *Brylcreem Blimp* high above *TERRORDOME* quickly dissolved into a panorama of the field. Virden has no discernible skyline. From the air it looks like a flat, dingy suburb. The *FOX* producer quickly appraised that there was nothing to see from the air and cut to the inside of the “dome,” where the visual atmosphere was a different kind of gloomy. But at least it was active.

So much media and fan attention has focused recently on the aggressive bad boy images of the Convicts and Assassins that the portentously horrifying public face of the Violators, evocative of the Dark Ages and a rare type of sci-fi horror simultaneously, has been overlooked and neglected by comparison. That is possibly because it is hard for regular folks to grasp the origin of the green-skinned, skull-capped pirate slasher, that fans have nicknamed “Vlad,” adorning the players helmets. Nor do they gravitate naturally to a team mascot named Hooded Hangman, who spends most of his time performing mock executions on game day. Then there is the puzzling and disturbing reality that a Gothic punk sub-set of disenfranchised prairie youth and Native street gang members have come to adopt the team as their own. This bizarre constituency revels freakishly in the discord of mosh pits in the end zone sections while thrash metal music blares over the PA to celebrate Virden touchdowns. Toss into the mix a beat reporter with a *nom de plume* of an infamous French nobleman and pervert, a “stadium” constructed on the remnants of a Victorian-era insane asylum, dungeonsque lighting prior to kickoff, the creepiest, most aggressive soundtrack in sports on game day, and you have an unsettling puzzle of weirdness better left unsolved. The intimidating images of felons and paid killers are much simpler to grasp.

Yet the Violators, over the pass three years at least, since the arrival of *Patrick Mahomes*, have been a good football team, providing on-field reasons for more well-adjusted football fans to admire them. This and the miracle of professional TV production, overrode the spirit of desolation permeating *TERRORDOME*. At least it did for TV viewers like me.

On this day the Violators were hosting another good football team in the Convicts, led by another fine young talent in quarterback, *Dak Prescott*. Although Chino had stumbled badly in the final two weeks of the regular season, their difficulties had been blamed on back-up QB, *Teddy Bridgewater*, who had appeared in relief of an injured Prescott in Week 15 against Seattle and had promptly thrown the game away. His performance in the final week against Iowa City had been so bad that it had prompted some pundits to reflexively predict that Bridgewater was washed up as a back-up, never mind a starter.

Fortunately for Chino, the return of a purportedly healthy Prescott promised them a clean slate entering the first game of the 2021 post-season. It also put an attractive quarterback battle between him and *Patrick Mahomes* on the game-day menu. This battle was a drawing card.

The quarterback match-up between *Kirk Cousins* and *Philip Rivers* in the Atlantic Conference later that night was also intriguing, but in a subtler way. As pocket passers, both would be reliant on team execution of the strategy, and the coherence of the strategy itself, to be successful. This would make fine fodder for analysts evaluating the game plans of both coaches and the ability of both quarterbacks to execute them, not to mention contrasting those plans with any halftime adjustments. Sebastian versus Pickering promised to be a chess match. Chino versus Virden promised to be a street fight.

If this year’s entire playoff pantheon had been comprised of such half-mortal demi-gods as the Convicts, Violators, Swordfish and Spartans, the unfolding of this season’s wildcard weekend would have felt like the first thrilling chapter of an epic novel. Instead, in these two games we were treated to something more akin to a gripping mystery novelette – read from start to finish on a long car ride or a lazy Sunday afternoon at the cottage – with the mystery being which teams would survive to play another game. And with the closing of the final page that is where the mystery ends. This is because, in the next book, we know that these lesser heroes are most likely to be struck down by the thunderbolt of Zeus (Budapest) and the spear of Odin (Durham).

Nevertheless, set all of that aside for now. Let us put the slaughter to come in the Quarter Finals next week out of our minds and focus solely on these tidy little gems. For, on their own, they were quite gripping.

CLASH OF THE DEGENERATES

The identity crisis that has taken over the Convicts since the arrival of the Assassins in the West Division continues to fester at the edges of team morale. After experiencing a breakthrough in self-awareness in their signature victory over the Assassins in Week 12, accomplished by returning to the behavioural roots of their 2007 championship squad, the 2021 wannabe West Division winners, along with GM/Coach **Rob Nazar**, suffered a psychological set-back in the season's final two weeks. Far from being devil-may-care, brash, relentlessly aggressive and confident, the Convicts appeared tentative, uptight and demoralized. The implosion in Week 15 shook confidence in **Teddy Bridgewater** while the jolting rout in Week 16 suffered at the paws of the Cubs shook the confidence of everyone, especially the defence. The pirate ship was listing badly, its jolly roger flag tattered and ragged in the stormy winds of adversity.

Feeling that his team needed a spark – a cause to rally around – the combative Chino coach decided to pick a fight with the Violators and their coach, in the hope that by Sunday his players would be extraordinarily inspired and take up the cause.

“The Assassins aren't nearly as badass they think they are but at least they are in your face about trying to be badass,” Nazar remarked in an interview with **'Left Coast Larry' Lummo**x of *JAIL-870* radio in Chino at the start of the week leading up to the wildcard game. “The Violators, though, are kind of sneaky about being badass. They don't come right out and say they're trying to violate anyone. Their coach, Lance, who I respect as a coach, is no badass. Far from it! When was the last time you really noticed the guy on the sideline during the game? And his team is always injured – I mean always! It always has been. He doesn't drive them physically. They're a bunch of wusses. Violators should be injuring others, not always getting injured themselves. Those guys aren't badass, they're degenerates!”

That last line of Nazar's interview with a local Chino radio station was immediately picked up by *ESPN* and from there served up as grist for the mainstream media mill.

Virden coach, **Lance Barrate** – whose team still has a complaint pending against the Convicts franchise for the intrusive pre-game COVID-19 testing protocols Big House penitentiary staff administered to the Violators prior to their Week 12 loss in Chino last year – reacted with surprise and irritation but deftly flipped the script:

“Rob called us degenerates?” Lance answered incredulously when told the Chino coach had said. “That's rich coming from a bunch of convicts. Degenerates, eh? We weren't the ones probing guys where the sun doesn't shine for COVID trying to win a game!”

The Virden coach was, of course, referring to the four-orifice testing regimen at the Big House that had humiliated and distracted the Violators before the second of their two losses in the 2020 regular campaign. Although the aftermath from that incident had dropped from the headlines, the Chino coach's renewed goading of his opponent reopened that wound and started a war of words between the coaches, players and their respective fans. Both camps used crude rhetoric to prop themselves up as fearsome, while diminishing the other as degenerate. By game time the rivalry had become intense, attracting national media attention.

“These teams don't like each other,” declared FOX play-by-play announcer, **Joe Duck** in the minutes before the opening kickoff.

“Well, that's true enough, Joe,” replied colour commentator, **Troy Acheman** with a smirk, “But who do the Convicts actually like and who likes the Convicts? They have to be up there in terms of teams that other teams love to hate. Now, some of that is for show, of course. But you get the sense that a lot of teams and their fans won't be upset if Chino loses this game to the Violators.”

“Setting aside the...let's say...*unsavory* reputation of these two teams, it should be a good game, Troy, don't you agree?” Duck continued, turning to his booth partner for the reply.

“Absolutely! This should be a great game!” Acheman concurred. “You have two really exciting quarterbacks going against each other and two defences that are neck-and-neck in overall ranking. They aren't near the top, but both are known for stepping up and making big plays in big moments. The Violators experienced some pretty devastating 4th quarter breakdowns in three critical losses this year; to the Gladiators in Week 4, Week 9 against the Cubs, and against these same Convicts in Week 13. In those 3 games they surrendered an average of 17 points in the 4th quarter and each time the collapse cost them the game. So, they'll want to score early and often to build that buffer for the 4th quarter.”

Virden coach, **Lance Barrate** obviously didn't get the memo from the broadcast booth calling for an early offensive onslaught. His offence started with the ball and drove all the way to the Chino 7, where they faced a decision on 4th & 1. In a year of fashionable 4th and early gambles, however, the coach who had consistently shown an aggressive streak in his play-calling, having called more deep passes than any other coach in the league, backed off and settled for a **Michael Badgley** field goal to give Virden an early 3-0 lead.

“Are you surprised at all that an aggressive play-caller like Lance Barrate did not go for it there, Troy?” **Joe Duck** asked.

“Not really, Joe,” a non-plussed **Troy Acheman** replied. “Lance Barrate calls a lot of deep shots 'cause he's got a great deep throw combo in Patrick Mahomes to Ja'Marr Chase. But he's inside the red zone here. No room for a deep throw. He is also one of the most conservative coaches on 4th down this year. Only Darrin Jones of the North Stars attempted fewer 4th downs. I think he just wants to register a success on the opening drive. There is a lot of football left to play. It's the right psychological move for his players.”

The Convicts responded with a fantastically drawn out 18-play drive that took 10:46 off the clock and burned the remainder of the 1st quarter. The advance finally came to rest when Prescott was stuffed for a 2-yard loss at the Virden 10-yard line to bring up 4th & 6. **Rob Nazar**, like his counterpart, elected for a field goal try. **Harrison Butker** drilled home the routine 28-yarder to tie the game.

Virden took over for just their second possession and it was already the 2nd quarter. If the Convicts were able to continue to play keep-away effectively, the Violators would need to be all-but perfect with their offensive opportunities. The Chino coach seemed to guess

that his opponent would be in a hurry to push the ball up the field quickly to make up for lost time. The Convicts played the pass on faith for the first half of the drive. Violators meanwhile sneakily tried to set up a quick deep strike by running twice with *Ezekiel Elliott* to gain a first down then going deep to *Ja'Marr Chase*. But before Chase could get open, *Jon Bostic* came in clean on the blitz and sacked Mahomes for a 2-yard loss. Like water at a dam the Virden offence kept up the pressure and broke through five plays later with a 36-yard completion to *AJ Green* to the Chino 4-yard line. From there Elliott brought it home for the game's first major.

The abrasive dissonance of the song, *'Metal Attack'* by a band called *Toxic Holocaust* blared over the PA at *TERRORDOME* as Elliott and the offensive line celebrated in the end zone. The Hooded Hangman pulled up a dummy dressed in prison garb, flopped it down in front of him and placed its head on a large chopping block. He then lifted a giant axe above his head and, with gruesome ceremony, brought it down on the neck of the dummy, lopping its head off. The crowd cheered as the hangman's minions gathered the "head" off the ground and gave it to him. He raised it to display to the crowd. This macabre ritual was commonplace in *TERRORDOME* and did not usually get exposed like this on national TV. I cringed slightly in embarrassment as the *FOX* crew commented.

"This takes college antics to a whole new level, Troy," Duck remarked dryly, breaking up seconds of awkward silence as the darkly comedic episode played out.

"A whole new *low* level, if you ask me," Acheman replied, obviously not getting the dungeon humour. "And what's with that music? I'm not sure I'd want my family coming to the stadium to listen to this."

Players will always deny that fan and mascot shenanigans have any effect on their performance. But the cacophony of *TERRORDOME* amped up to a playoff level seemed, all the same, to have a withering effect on the Chino bench. The Convicts offence punted after running four plays, giving the ball back to Virden with 5 minutes left in the half.

Sensing the momentum was on his team's side, Coach Barrate went into full-fire mode. He opened up with all three wide receivers running deep verticals but the coverage was good and Mahomes checked down to Elliott for no gain. An incompletion brought up 3rd & 10. The Chino front four pinned their ears back while the linebackers dropped into coverage. Penetration was nearly instantaneous and Mahomes was instantly flushed from the pocket. Rather than scamper in the backfield waiting for a receiver to come open, he suddenly and smartly took off, side-stepping *Tyus Bowser*, who was spying on him, and scrambled for 22 yards and a 1st down.

The crowd went nuts, the Virden bench applauded and the Convicts slumped. From that point on it was textbook mid-range slants, completed with precision, that brought Virden into position to boost their lead even further. On 3rd & 3 at the Chino 9, Mahomes delivered a dart to *TJ Hockenson* on a come-backer for the touchdown. 'Metal Attack' blared obnoxiously over the stadium speakers while the Hooded Hangman grabbed another dummy in convict costume, fitted a noose around its head and propped it up onto a gallows. With sinister flair he made gestures in an appeal to the crowd.

"HANG HIM! HANG HIM!" the punks from the mosh pit screamed. In response, the Hooded Hangman pulled a lever, opening the trap door beneath. The dummy fell through the door and jerked to a stop about 1-foot from the ground. The camera quickly cut away as the Hooded Hangman approached the swinging dummy, depriving viewers of the whatever additional imaginary torment he had in store.

Halftime soon arrived, with the Violators holding a 17-3 lead. They had possessed the ball three times and scored each time. They had given up one long field goal drive, but otherwise had kept *Dak Prescott* and the Chino offence in check. The fans, making up for lost opportunities during the COVID year, were acting out their roles as psychos to perfection. Things were going according to plan.

However, the other team has a say in how quietly they go down to defeat or not. The mock executions and the urgency of time ticking away seemed to imbue the Convicts with a sense of death row desperation in the second half. Down by two touchdowns, there would be no more attempts to play keep-away from the opponent's quarterback. It was time to go on the attack and unleash 'The Dak.'

The Chino quarterback struck hard on the Convicts' drive to open the second half. After a gutsy play call to covert 4th & 4 from their own 40-yard line – a hitch route to *Tim Patrick* behind the drawn-in coverage – Prescott went long to *Michael Gallup* streaking down the seam. It was a perfectly thrown ball that Gallup plucked out of the air without breaking stride, allowing him to gallop the remaining 20 yards for a 45-yard touchdown pass. The Convicts were now just one touchdown behind, trailing 17-10.

Inspired by the opening display of their offence, the Convicts' defence did what it needed to do, get a stop. The Violators remained aggressive, but there was nothing even Mahomes could do against disciplined coverage in the secondary. They managed to plough forward 25 yards before the drive came to an anti-climactic end with a botched snap on 3rd & 10 at the Virden 48 that Mahomes was lucky to recover. On came Andy Lee for Virden's first punt of the day.

With now just one score separating them, coach **Rob Nazar** dialed back the aerial aggression slightly, mixing in runs and a screen with one attempt to go deep. This approach gained them 30 yards to their own 46, where they faced 4th & 4 and another decision.

"And Rob Nazar is keeping his offence on the field, Troy," observed **Joe Duck**. "It worked last time in a similar situation, so why not try it again, I guess."

"I think the Convicts are past second-guessing whether to keep the ball in their own hands or give it back to Patrick Mahomes," **Troy Acheman** commented. "But the reality is that this is still a high-risk move. If they fail to convert here, they are opening up the door wide for the Violators to make this a two-score game."

The Convicts chose to run a screen on the pivotal play of the drive. Unfortunately, they over-sold it, allowing Virden's best defender, *Leonard Williams* a free run at the quarterback. Prescott back-pedalled deftly as he waited for *Christian McCaffrey* to sneak free behind the Virden line. He underestimated Williams' closing speed, however, and just before he could release the ball the Virden star engulfed him totally, pinning his arms to his side and bringing him down for a 14-yard loss. The crowd erupted in manic glee.

“And down he goes!” Duck exclaimed. “All the way back at the Chino 32-yard line. And that’s going to give Virden the ball in great field position.”

“Leonard Williams has been making big plays like that for Virden all season long,” Acheman weighed in. “There is still plenty of time left, but if Virden scores here, we may have just witnessed the turning point of the game. And who would have guessed it would have been the much-criticized Virden defence turning the game around? Not many people, that’s for sure.”

Chino linebacker, **Za’Darius Smith** tried to make up for the damage. On 2nd & 7, he came streaking in on the blitz and seemed to catch Mahomes off guard. Despite an attempt to scramble, Mahomes was corralled and brought down skilfully by Chino’s star defender all the way back at the Convicts’ 38-yard line. The result brought up 3rd & 16 and the very high prospect of limiting the damage caused by the 4th down miss to a Virden field goal.

The Convicts chose that moment to switch from zone to man coverage in order to take away Virden’s two most explosive receivers on the outside, Chase and **Gabriel Davis**. That opened up space in the middle of the field that Mahomes exploited expertly by connecting with **TJ Hockenson** on a slant pattern. The big tight end’s momentum carried him forward an extra 6 yards after the catch as safety **Marcus Maye** hung on, finally bringing him down at the 21-yard line – good enough for a first down.

It was a back-breaker of a play. Although Smith broke through for his second sack of the drive on the next play, Mahomes would not be denied. He hit Hockenson for 13 yards and Elliot for 11, setting up the running back’s second TD run of the game from 3 yards out to make the score 24-10, one minute into the 4th quarter.

‘Metal Attack’ blared over the PA system of **TERRORDOME** as bodies flew freely in the end zone mosh pit. The Hooded Hangman no doubt beginning to set up one of the convict dummies for another mock execution but the **FOX** producer opted to have the cameras focus on the Virden sideline celebration instead, while the broadcast crew filled the air with commentary to obscure the apocalyptic din of thrash metal in the background.

“And Virden regains its two-touchdown advantage! Patrick Mahomes seemed to will that drive into the Chino end zone, Troy,” Duck observed. “There is no other way to describe it.”

“We saw Chino’s best defender go after Virden’s best offensive player during that sequence and Mahomes came out on top,” Acheman reflected. “But you have to credit both competitors there. They both made plays. Mahomes just made a couple of more.”

With the end of their season staring them in the face, the Convicts – unlike when they began the 2nd half – seemed rattled and resigned to their fate. A poorly-executed screen for a 3-yard loss, a missed assignment resulting in a blindside sack of Prescott by role-player **Oshane Ximines**, and a pressure-induced incomplete pass on 3rd & 19 brought on the punting unit. **Tress Way** lofted a high fly that zeroed in on a post just inside the Virden 20. Returner, **Pharoh Cooper**, taking no chances, signalled for the fair catch. But the ball came down like a mortar round and, incredibly, slipped right through his arms, causing a mad scramble that ended when Chino lineman, **Shaq Mason** curled his massive frame around the loose ball. It was a stunningly unexpected turn of events.

“The referees are signalling Chino ball!” Duck called out in disbelief. “What a break for the Convicts!”

“That is exactly what the Convicts needed at this point in the game,” Acheman jumped in. “I don’t know what happened to Cooper on that play. He made the smart decision not to risk fumbling the return but then mishandled the fair catch. Punt returning is not as easy as it looks, folks. There is no wind here in the **TERRORDOME** but sometimes, when a ball is coming straight down on a spiral like that, it’s easy to misjudge the velocity. He looked late to react, even though he was watching it in the whole way. That’s football!”

It took the Convicts six plays from the Virden 19-yard line to find the end zone. They needed 4th down to do it. Prescott, under heavy pressure, ducked out of trouble and squirted forward 4 yards, landing with the ball on the goal line for the major. The **FOX** cameras focused briefly on Prescott celebrating with his teammates before shifting to the Virden sideline, where Cooper sat on the bench holding his head in his hands.

“There’s nobody in the stadium more anxious for Patrick Mahomes to guide another touchdown drive than Pharoh Cooper right now,” observed Acheman dryly.

Buoyed by the new lease on life, the Convicts’ defence forced a three-and-out. They got some help from Mahomes himself, who looked to be rushing his throws. He missed Chase, overthrew a wide-open Green and hurriedly dumped it off to avoid Smith on the blitz on 3rd down, bringing up 4th & 7. Chino promptly got the ball back in decent field position at their own 28 and proceeded to methodically move up the field, converting three third downs along the way. After the third, a frustrated **Marcus Peters** took a swipe at McCaffrey, drawing a 15-yard penalty that put the ball at the Virden 15.

“What we’re seeing here is what we’ve seen all year from this Virden defence,” remarked Troy Acheman. “A lack of discipline and focus in the 4th quarter. If they aren’t careful, it will cost them another lead.”

Sure enough, three plays later Chino was in the Virden end zone on a 6-yard run up the gut by **Ronald Jones II**. The Violators looked geared to stop the run on the play, but were tossed aside by the surging Convicts’ line, who formed a wedge and led Jones into the end zone. Butker came on to tie the game at 24, causing an eerie quiet to fall over **TERRORDOME**. There were still 57 seconds left on the clock – more than enough time for Mahomes to get his team into field goal range – but for the home town hopeful, the sense of momentum was all going the wrong way.

Indeed, Virden seemed to be losing its nerve. They tried to get it all on the first play with a bomb down the sideline to Chase but the Convicts were ready for it, with both safeties playing deep, which allowed **AJ Terrell** to take away the throw underneath. Two more scattershot incompletions and Virden was punting again, giving Chino the ball at their own 27 with 0:23 left. Rather than pushing the



Pickering coach, **Gus Konstantakos**, lets part of the “Old Gus” sneak through his sideline veneer as he watches his defence collapse late in the 4th quarter. After fighting back to tie the game at 22-22 on a touchdown and two-point convert, his secondary let **TY Hilton** run free for a 57-yard gain, setting up the game-winning FG.

ball downfield, however, coach **Rob Nazar** opted for a conservative screen pass to McCaffrey that went for a modest 8 yards. More importantly for his opponent, the play ate up 14 seconds, more time than yards. The Violators held easily from that point, sacking Prescott as time expired in regulation.

It was minor consolation for **Lance Barrate** and his team, however. They had let the game slip away from them and now it would come down to a coin flip. The crowd was well aware that the impending coin flip would hold the key to victory. They did not trust their defence to hold the Convicts, especially with the momentum firmly on their opponents’ side. Therefore, it was with the exhilaration of a touchdown that the crowd erupted in a frenzy when Virden won the toss.

The kick was downed in the end zone by **Joe Reed**, giving his quarterback the ball at the 25. Mahomes came on the field looking more composed. He set in motion a drive that gathered force with each first down. He completed 4 of his first 6 passes, moving the ball all the way to the Chino 34 in the process.

Playing with increasing desperation, the Chino defenders upped their aggression. Maye arrived early on a pass for Hockenson and was flagged for pass interference. Then **AJ Bouye** was flagged for holding, erasing an incomplete pass and putting the ball at the 22.

Mahomes tried to end it on the next play, going long to Chase, but a solid tackle by

Terrell kept the speedy rookie out of the end zone, bringing him down at the 4. The Convicts brought in their goal line package, but there was no thought on the Virden side of going power football. Mahomes wanted this. He dropped back and flicked the ball to an open Hockenson, but the tight end juggled and dropped the ball. A collective groan came over the crowd, but it was quickly replaced by renewed cheering as they anticipated another shot.

The Convicts switched back to a conventional nickel package and sent Smith on the blitz. This time, Elliott picked him up, giving Mahomes a clean pocket from which to drill a laser to John Brown facing tight coverage in the end zone. The receiver secured the pass firmly and both sideline officials simultaneously lifted their arms in the air, signalling, *touchdown!*

“Mahomes drops back...lots of time...fires to the end zone...he’s got Brown! Touchdown Violators!” Duck announced excitedly.

“And it looks like it’s going to stand, Joe,” Acheman added. “I see no flags on the field, although the Convicts are calling for one. I’m not sure what they’re complaining about but whatever it is, is falling on deaf ears with the officials. And the Violators will advance to the quarter final round. It turned out to be more difficult than it should have been, but overall, this was a well-earned victory for them.”

After the game, the Virden coach refused to be baited into perpetuating the pre-game drama. He focused on the play of his team and, in true classy form, allowed a tiny bit of room for complimenting his opponent: “I thought we executed our game plan pretty consistently throughout the game,” Barrate stated flatly. “They made some plays that got in the way and, of course, the fumble is something you can’t really factor into the game plan. Could we have shown more resolve on offence late in the 4th? Sure, we could have. But in the end, Patrick got it done and kept the ball out of their hands in overtime. So, it was a hard-fought win. I liked our resiliency.”

On the Chino side, an exasperated **Rob Nazar**, hinted at injuries as the reason his team fell short and did not feel compelled to congratulate his opponent: “We were banged up heading into the game and I think that showed, especially late in the game. We really missed Ali Marpet up front – you can’t take a Pro Bowler out of the line-up and not expect it not to have an impact. The secondary played well considering we were missing Donte (Jackson) and Jimmie (Ward). In the end we couldn’t make the stop and we’re going home.”

And, so ends an up and down campaign for the Convicts. The Violators move on and have as good a shot as any in the Pacific.

TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY

Okay...I admit that this was an entertaining game. It featured ups and downs throughout and featured a dramatic ending that kept the

football world planted in their comfy chairs, or on their bar stools, and hooked up to the beer supply until the very end. The 25-22 final in favour of Sebastian, decided by 34-yard **Daniel Carlson** field goal with 0:18 left in the 4th quarter, had all the superficial trappings of a playoff classic. The game's biggest highlight, a 57-yard catch-and-run by **TY Hilton** to set up the game-winner, is already an iconic play in Swordfish Lore, regardless of how far this team ultimately goes. Unlike the Chino-Virden game, however, as I watched this contest unfold, I became unpossessed by the illusion that either Sebastian or Pickering – whichever team ended up winning – deserved the honour of standing against mighty Budapest in the quarter final.

This sentiment was at odds with what I had thought heading into the game. For different reasons I had considered both of these Atlantic wildcard entrants to be capable of giving the North Stars a run for their money Now, after watching them go at each other in the wildcard round, there is no doubt in my mind that Sebastian is done after next week. And it likely won't be pretty.

Unlike my coverage of the Pacific Wildcard game, I will not take you through a blow-by-blow description of the action. There is no point. The natural ebb and flow of this game, as a by-product of players building on their successes or digging deep to overcome their failures, was not permitted to develop. The Sebastian coach would not allow it.

Had this game proceeded along its natural trajectory, as dictated by the actual players, it would most likely have resulted in a comfortable Swordfish victory. This was because the Spartans struggled throughout to generate offensive momentum. The run game was solid enough statistically, but on this day the Swordfish defence was able to sniff out when it was coming more often than not. In the final analysis, it was not imposing enough to give **Philip Rivers** a free hand. Not that it would have mattered. Rivers, despite a respectable final stats line, failed to execute in many key moments, following a familiar late-career pattern of his. The Spartans' offence did not look as if it was capable of hanging 22 points on the Swordfish if left on its own to sputter, while the Swordfish offence looked more than capable of scoring, even if not at the high rate to which it had become accustomed.

Enter, maverick Swordfish coach, **Russ Lemmon**, a fourth-down fetishist of the pathological kind. His astounding success on 4th down during the regular season (75.5% in 53 tries) had been a big part of Swordfish offensive dominance. This success had only reinforced his natural reckless tendency. This weekend, however, his obsession almost cost his team the game. *All* of the Spartans 22 points came on drives set up by failed 4th down gambles by the Swordfish at, or inside, their own half of the 50-yard line. At the time of these decisions to go for it, the Swordfish were either tied (early 1st quarter) or leading by 8 or more points (3rd & 4th quarter). These had the same effect as turnovers, igniting a fire under an otherwise damp and listless Spartan attack.

A good coach should never get in the way of his team. While that is likely unavoidable at times (coaches have a lot of say and don't always make the "right" decision) in this game the Sebastian coach seemed determined to leave his personal mark on the contest, regardless of the cost.

His first failed 4th down gamble, coming on Sebastian's first possession of the game, had that business-as-usual feel about it: 4th & 2, at the 50-yard line, after having held the Spartans to a three-and-out on the game's opening series; such a gambit was predictable given the Sebastian coach's predilection for aggression. But the Spartans' defence stacked the box and stopped **Jonathan Taylor** one-yard short of the line-of-gain. Fired up by the stand, the Pickering offence drove 51 yards in 7 plays against an off-balance Sebastian 'D' that no doubt felt it had been put up against the wall needlessly early in the game. **Miles Sanders** crossed into the end zone from 2 yards out to make it 7-0 Spartans and tense Thermopylae Stadium was pulsating with war-like fervor.

After this happy start for the home team, the natural beat of the Sebastian offence took over. Before the half was done the Spartan lead had been erased by a 3-yard TD pass from **Kirk Cousins** to **Odell Beckham Jr** and a 45-yard field goal by Carson. The Sebastian coach's boldness paid off in a 32-yard completion to Beckham on 4th & 2 from their own 47 to set up the touchdown. However, the zealous decision to go for 2 points and subsequent failure to convert took some of the shine off the accomplishment. This would have ramifications later in the game.

By late in the 3rd quarter, the Swordfish looked to be in control. They were leading 16-7 after taking the opening drive of the 2nd half 75 yards in 12 plays, finishing with a 9-yard TD pass from Cousins to **Terrace Marshall Jr**. After holding Pickering to an unproductive 27-yard drive, the Fish took over at their own 12 and went to work trying to make things happen. The Spartans appeared to have forced a punt after a long pass to Beckham on 3rd & 2 was nearly picked off by **Denzel Ward**. But instead of punting from his team's own 20, the Sebastian coach kept his offence on the field, to the absolute incredulity of the broadcast booth and most fans across the continent. Once again, the Spartans prepared for Taylor and they got him, stopping him one-yard short of the line of gain. Two plays later, Sanders was in the end zone on a 4-yard checkdown for his second TD. That made the Sebastian lead 16-14 late in the 3rd.

Of the three 4th down gambles that failed, this one was the most inexcusable. There is no rational or even irrational explanation for it. The impulse that guided it lies beyond scrutiny somewhere deep in a quasi-autistic niche of an otherwise healthy, well-functioning human brain. **Russ Lemmon** doesn't look crazy. Off the football field he looks and acts like a regular nine-to-five Joe. But something is off. In which "analytics" world is going for it on 4th & 2 from your own 20, with a 9-point lead late in the 3rd considered a sound move?

Fortunately for the Sebastian faithful, the Swordfish players were determined not to let their coach lose them the game. The offence drove 62 yards in 8 plays and found the end zone on a 6-yard run by Taylor to make the score 22-14. A simple extra point would give them a two-score lead – 9 points – erasing the Pickering gains from their last touchdown. But, no! No doubt fixated solely on the fact that a 10-point lead is better than a 9-point lead, the Sebastian coach went for two...and failed. Now it was possible for his opponent to tie the game on a touchdown, which is exactly what happened after the Sebastian coach's third ill-advised 4th down gamble.

The final gallant gesture to let his host back in the game came with 5:22 left in the 4th quarter and the ball on the Swordfish 48. It was a 4th & 4 situation this time, no gimme. Still, there are people out there ready to defend the Sebastian coach for "going for the win"

in that situation. They ignore the fact that this was not a *get-the-first-down-and-win* scenario. This was a *get-the-first-down-and-get-a-chance-to-burn-some-more-clock-and-perhaps-get-another-first-down* scenario. It was also a scenario where failure to gain the first down would give Pickering another short field, already close to field goal range, and plenty of time to get the ball back again if they were unable to take advantage. The 4th down call, a pitch to Taylor, was a dud. The running back was unable to turn the corner against **Romeo Okwara** and was stopped after just a 1-yard gain. The Spartans took over at the Sebastian 49.

With 4:35 left and just 49 yards to cover, the Spartans had their full playbook at their disposal. This enabled them to grind out a 10-play drive, the “Spartan Way,” scoring on an off-kilter wide receiver screen pass to **Sterling Shepherd** from the half-yard line for 6. Watching this game, one had the sense that Fate was going to send a message to the coach who had tempted Fate all game and that the Pickering 2-point attempt was fated to succeed. It did. A pass to **Pat Freiermuth** on a perfectly-executed play action cashed in 2 points and the game was suddenly and unexpectedly tied 22-22 with just 0:49 left in the 4th quarter.

By that point, the Sebastian coach was taking a pounding on social media and on the TV broadcast. The decision to go for two on the last Sebastian touchdown was the main focus of controversy. A simple extra point (no gimme of course) would have made any Pickering extra point strategy after their touchdown moot. The Spartans would have had to get the ball back a second time.

The camera focused on **Russ Lemmon** on the sideline. His uncompromisingly steady demeanour suggested he had no regrets. It could possibly have also been an indicator that he had no clue what he had wrought. His players, on the other hand, were clearly in an urgent disposition. The offence huddled on the sideline in anticipation of getting the ball back for one last stab. The coordinators were consulting with them. Tellingly, there was nobody within 10 feet of the head coach. He stood by himself taking it in.

It took the biggest play of Wildcard Weekend to finally bring justice to the Swordfish players and grace to their maniacal and unrepentant coach. After downing the kickoff in the end zone, the Swordfish took over at their own 25. The Spartans deployed 7 defensive backs in loose coverage, guarding against the deep pass. Cousins instead tried to go short and outside to **Anthony Miller**, who up against the sideline. Seeing that he would be tackled immediately, Cousins looked for his second read and found Hilton open underneath. The Sebastian playmaker had been neutralized all game by All-World corner **Xavien Howard**. He had caught just one ball for 11 yards to that point. But with Howard playing back, there was enough cushion for the elusive and speedy Hilton to manoeuvre. He took off from the 33, shook off two tackles and looked to go going all the way until he was finally corralled by Howard at the Pickering 18 after a 57-yard gain. It was a phenomenal one-man effort and it had the effect of a dagger through the heart of Spartans’ coach, **Gus Konstantakos** and the thousands of rabid Spartans fans in attendance. Three plays and three Pickering timeouts later, the ball was at the 16 with 0:22 left. Carlson came on and drilled the kick dead center from 24 yards for what would be the game-winner.

The Hilton play was the magical “football moment” in this otherwise absurd football game. The Swordfish players, led by arguably their most accomplished offensive star, found a way to overcome both the Spartans and their own coach to advance to the next round. In that regard, the work of the Swordfish players on both offence and defence signified a real triumph over adversity – self-generated adversity mind you, but adversity nonetheless.

For the Spartans and their newly temperate coach, the Hilton play was undoubtedly a tragedy – a cruel and abrupt reversal of their hard-fought comeback. Sure, the opposing coach had given the Spartans opportunities they should not have had, but the Spartans did their part by making the 4th down stops and taking full advantage of the short fields. On a day when the Pickering offence struggled to generate its own impetus, it was still able to seize the moment when it presented itself. For that they deserve credit. Although the failure to show more drive against one of the league’s worst defences is an indicator that, despite a strong end to the season and coming off a signature win over Brooklin in Week 16, the Spartans were all along nothing more than pretenders.

After the game, **Russ Lemmon** acknowledged that he “didn’t think we deserved to win that game.” I would take issue with that statement. Coach Lemmon did not deserve to win that game, but his players earned their keep under the circumstances.

In his post-game presser, a crestfallen but surprisingly well-behaved **Gus Konstantakos** could not help falling back on old habits and decried that “the Gods” had abandoned him and his team in the final seconds. That, and the unnatural noise rising from his belly in the aftermath of Hilton’s incredible play, were the only two signs that there is still work to be done to complete the full modernization of the Spartans and their anachronistic coach. But the non-deployment of the ‘Gus Gun’ is an encouraging sign that the work of modernization in Pickering will eventually be successfully completed.

So, the Swordfish head off to get annihilated by Budapest next week. I, for one, am not looking forward to it.

FOURTH DOWN MISFORTUNE

There are pundits, particularly supporters of analytics as a substitute for coaches making complex decisions, who point to the Swordfish of 2021 as a success story that validates a more liberal approach to 4th down. Indeed, the previously cited 4th down success rate of the Swordfish – 75.5% in 53 tries – dwarfs the league average 4th down conversion rate of 56.6%. It is an impressive number that no doubt contributed to their offensive proficiency. But in the big picture it is an outlier – unlikely to be replicated in the future.

The mean average of 4th down attempts per team in 2021 was 27.5. However, this number was skewed upwards by prolific gamblers like Buffalo (61), Sebastian, of course (53) and Twin Cities (46). Most EFL teams, in fact, attempted fewer than this. It is more accurate to compare based on the median, which calculates at 24.5 attempts per team. 12 teams are below this number and 12 teams above that number. What are their records? Teams below the median finished 128-63-1, a .669 winning percentage. Those above finished 60-125-7, a .331 winning percentage. Of those above the median, only the Swordfish had a better than 500 record. Of course, bad teams are more likely than good ones to need to gamble on 4th down. But there is plenty of evidence that many of these teams did so as much out of choice as necessity, compounding already bad situations by blindly chasing the “analytics dream.”

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PACIFIC CONFERENCE QUARTER FINALS

VIRDEN @ CHARLESWOOD (line – PATRIOTS by 5)

INJURIES: Virden – Chris Harris Jr., (OUT), Kevin King (OUT); Charleswood – None.

If it seems to you like it was only two weeks ago that Virden was playing Charleswood in Patriot Place, that's because it was. The Violators pulled off the upset in the final week of the season, to advance to the post-season and earn the opportunity to do it again in the quarter finals. The Violators were battling for their playoff lives in that game and the Pats had no pressing need for another win. The Pats rested a few mid-tier starters but allowed their main stars to play, resulting in a competitive game that ended with a strong 4th quarter push by Virden tilting the difference in the Violators' favour. If there was a dip in intensity for Charleswood in that game, it was impossible to tell. Nevertheless, the stakes here are higher for the Conference no.1 seed and the Violators can expect to experience the Pats' best effort, not to mention their full starting line-up. The deck appears stacked against Virden. A healthy Pats squad at home, after enjoying a week of rest, should be enough reason to stick with the favourites. Add in a Virden secondary weakened due to injury and having to play an overtime game in the wildcard round and the Violators look quite violable. Strangely enough, this is the healthiest shape the Virden team has been all season since breaking training camp. They also have Patrick Mahomes, who out-dueled DeShaun Watson when the chips were down in the 4th quarter two weeks ago. For this reason, I recommend proceeding with caution if tempted to take the Pats with what appears to be a reasonable line. I know that's what I will be doing. **PICK: CHARLESWOOD**

LAS VEGAS @ COBB COUNTY (line – COYOTES by 4)

INJURIES: Las Vegas – Andrew Beck (OUT); Cobb County – None.

These teams did not face each other in the regular season. The coaches have just a one-game history, with the Assassins one of many victims who fell to the rabid Coyotes last year in their first season in Cobb County. That is not much to go on if you are looking for easy clues as to which team has the tactical edge in this contest. The Coyotes have been the stabler team throughout the campaign. This is due to their conservative approach on both sides of the ball and a reliable core of linemen and defenders who do not force the skill position players to over-extend themselves. Ryan Tannehill's comfort in the pocket and the security afforded him by the prolific Coyote run game has resulted in steady production and eye-popping passing efficiency. All the same, nobody is ready to vote him in as MVP. His opponent, first-year starter Justin Herbert, is already viewed as more of a gamer, despite his relative inexperience. The Assassins' system relies on his arm, although they have the second-best running back in football, Dalvin Cook. After Cook, the cupboard is bare in the run game, which is one of the reasons Herbert's arm gets such a workout. Las Vegas seems to be recovered emotionally after a five-game losing streak in the second half almost knocked them out. They have a higher ceiling than their steadier opponent but a much lower floor. How Herbert will respond to the spotlight is the question nobody can answer. If he is inspired by it, he can prevail on the road with the league's 4th-ranked defence at his back. Anything less, and the tried and tested Coyotes will advance. **PICK: COBB COUNTY**

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE QUARTER FINALS

SEBASTIAN @ BUDAPEST (line – NORTH STARS by 13)

INJURIES: Sebastian – Jordan Akins (PROBABLE), Justin Reid (DOUBTFUL), Nick Chubb (OUT); Budapest – None.

When these teams met in Week Three of the regular season the powerful North Star offence pulled away from the almost-as-powerful

Swordfish offence in the 4th quarter, on its way to a comfortable 19-point victory. Budapest topped 40 points without the benefit of short fields yielded by aberrant 4th down gambles. Even the swashbuckling Sebastian coach could calculate that the risks far outweighed the benefits against the North Stars powerhouse. The Fish looked to be in control most of the game in their win over Pickering last week, but jeopardized their gains and almost lost anyway due to a pair of irrational 4th down gambles that backfired and led to two Pickering touchdowns. Similar attempts and failures against Budapest this week will spell their doom. However, the mismatch between the Budapest attack and the Swordfish defence is so lop-sided, that a case could be made that what constituted insanity against Pickering would amount to rationality against Budapest...in a pre-emptive 'Hail Mary' sort of way. The only path to a Sebastian upset is winning an unbridled shootout, modulated by a healthy dose of the running game mixed in to give time to Kirk Cousins in the passing game. With Nick Chubb out, such a strategy will be tougher to execute. On the other side, the North Stars might choose not to run a single play on the ground until they are comfortably in the lead and get away with it. They face, after all, a Swordfish secondary that recorded a league-low two interceptions all season and ranked 23rd in passer rating against. Football is a strange game at times, but this game would have to be exceptionally strange for the Swordfish to come out on top. The Stars, who turned the ball just 6 times all season, would have to lose the turnover battle by a wide margin, every crazy trick in the Sebastian coach's tickle trunk would have to work to perfection and the officials would have to be in on the fix. It's been a wild run for the Swordfish this year, but it ends here. **PICK: BUDAPEST**

EAST ELMHURST @ DURHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 7)

INJURIES: East Elmhurst – None; Durham – None.

The regular season meeting between these clubs is no barometer to go by here. The Irish were stricken by a COVID-19 outbreak and played mostly second or third-stringers in a 31-10 loss. With Jalen Ramsey out of the line-up, Josh Allen threw for over 350 yards, demonstrating just how valuable the All-Pro corner is to the Irish defence. Almost nobody expected to see East Elmhurst in this position when the year began. Pundits underestimated the value of players like Ramsey, Tyreek Hill, Adam Thielen and an unsung, but effective backfield that rushed for 5 yards per carry and an average of 148 yards per game. Rookie Micah Parsons has exceeded expectations and defensive tackle Jonathan Allen has been an undeclared force on the defensive line. Few expected Baker Mayfield to hold his own in the passing department either, or show such leadership under fire. This is, believe it or not, a good team that dares to challenge the no.2 seed in the conference on its home turf. Speaking of turf, the rain-soaked carpet in Jurassic Park has yielded its share of fumbles and bumbles this year. The slipperiness is one of the few things keeping the Durham behemoth in check this year. The Lizards are ranked no.1 in points scored and no.2 in points allowed. In any other year they would be the team to beat. This year, they dominate the rest of the league in the shadow of the North Stars, to whom they have been looking in anticipation of a re-match after falling to them in Week 13. Herein lies the subtle danger for Durham. They cannot afford to take an eye off the Irish in order to gain a march on Budapest in preparing to meet them again in the conference final. The Irish are decided underdogs here, but have the star talent to pull off an upset, if given the opportunity. A Durham squad not fully focused on crushing the upstart Irish could find themselves in an uncomfortable position late in the game. This is what I expect to see. A much closer game and a field goal either way. **PICK: EAST ELMHURST**



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This Week in EFL History
With Professor Sterling Smitherman

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – In 2015, the EFL was still one year away from its first dedicated Wildcard Weekend. So, at this time 6 years ago the Quarter Finals would have been underway, with two wildcards from each conference playing the role of the no.3 and no.4 seeds in the first round.

In the Pacific-Atlantic Conference, the West Division Iowa City Cubs ranked at no.3, with an 11-4-1 record and would face their division rival the Beaufort County Ravens. The no.4 seed Twin Cities Triumph, making their second straight wildcard appearance would face their division rival Charleswood.

In the Can-Am Conference, the Gwinnett Gladiators, at 10-6, would try their luck as the no.3 seed against North Division winner, Durham. The Cowtown Corn Kings, at 9-7, slipped into the no.4 seed and faced the unenviable task of facing the 15-1 Aurora Mustangs, kings of the South Division.

Few predicted that the first round match-ups would be competitive or even particularly interesting. The one exception was the match between the Cubs and the Ravens, where the visiting Cubs were favoured by 1-point in Vegas. Although the Ravens had won the division, the Cubs were considered the better team. They had failed to solve the Ravens in two tries and had dropped a stunner to Mission Viejo in Week One. Otherwise, they dominated in more offensive and defensive categories. Many expected the Cubs to advance to the final.

Upsets were not foreseen in the other three contests. The Triumph were given an outside chance against the Patriots, more because the Pats had looked half-speed all year despite winning 15 games. Typical Charleswood.

Despite the Glads having had success against Durham in the regular season, they came in as 8-point underdogs; while the Corn Kings, at 11-point underdogs, were being written off by everybody except Farmer Brown's niece, Emma-Lou.