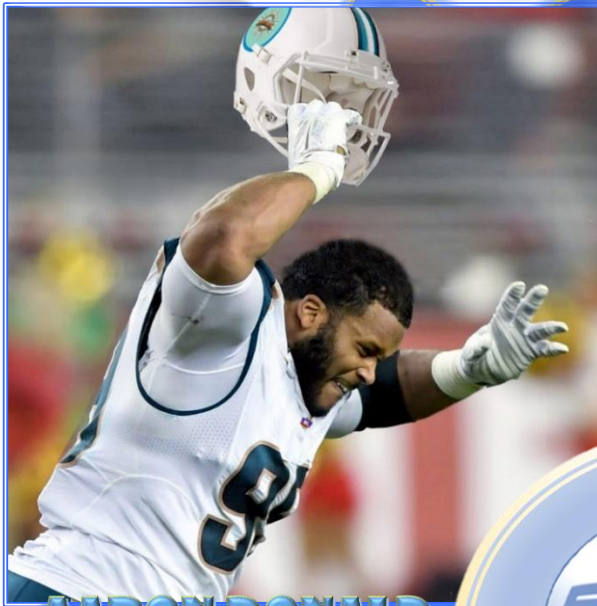


EFL 2019 PREVIEW

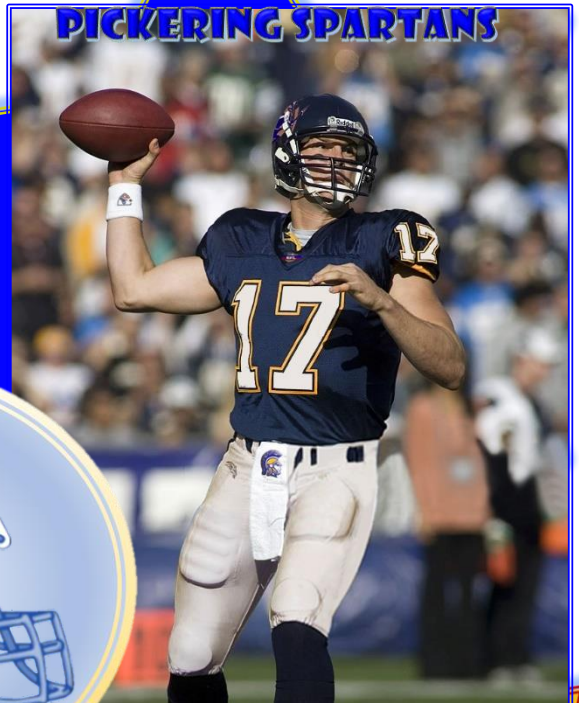
XIII



WHO WILL BE LUCKY AND WHO WILL BE UN-LUCKY IN SEASON 13?



AARON DONALD
BUFFALO DERAILERS



PHILIP RIVERS
PICKERING SPARTANS



PAT AHOMES
VIRDEN VIOLATORS



JJ WATT
AURORA MUSTANGS

ARE YOU FEELING LUCKY?



CANTON (AP) – Whether you believe the number 13 is lucky or unlucky, pretty much everyone agrees that the EFL is truly fortunate to be entering its thirteenth season; stronger than ever before. While rival leagues are literally struggling for survival, the EFL is growing. Despite many of its franchises finding homes in previously obscure small market locales, a strong national TV market from coast-to-coast is flooding the owners’ coffers with cash.

There are signs, as well, that the league’s international gambit might actually pay off. Both the Bombers and the North Stars have survived two years on foreign soil. While local revenues in Europe are modest compared with their North American counterparts, American football is trending upward, albeit at a conservative pace.

The Bombers’ success on the football field has boosted the Belgian football fanbase, putting American-rules football almost on par with swimming in national preference polls. Further east, in Budapest, cultural inroads have been more low-key. But **Darrin Jones’** central European experiment could take a lucky turn this year if his Stars can follow-up their pre-season success with positive results on the field in the regular season.

Jones’ team is one of many viable contenders poised to make a strong bid for the ultimate prize in 2019. Although we in the media tend to say that every year, many people truly believe it this year and that belief is turning 2019 into one of the most anticipated seasons in the league’s history.

The Chargers’ Championship victory in Gale Sayers XII was a lacklustre game on the field, but it was a game-changer for the league. The appearance of St. Charles and York in the final lent credence to the EFL’s principal tenets of fairness and equal-opportunity leading to competition so close that luck, good or bad, could be the deciding factor.

The astounding phenomenon of three perfect seasons (two of them by one team) and two certified Dynasties over the preceding 11 seasons had been a quiet embarrassment for the league behind closed doors. And while there had been no blowouts in the finals of both of Aurora’s perfect seasons, nor an easy finish for Twin Cities in GSX, the air of dominance had permeated all three campaigns. Faint hope does not keep many fans of the non-perfect teams glued to the TV set.

The stunning run by the Chargers, not to mention York’s late-season heroics and Toronto’s shocking South Division title over Aurora, caused a shift in perception amongst the fans and the owners. The talent differential among the top half of teams now appears small enough that any one of them could get hot and pull off an upset. Tanking is more difficult to justify under such circumstances. Who



If you can’t decide on a favourite team, want to keep your favourite team a secret, or just like the league, this official EFL 13th Season Commemorative Jersey is for you. Reasonably priced at just \$189.99 it can be ordered online at EFL.com.

wants their team to be sole whipping boy in a league full of contenders? The fans demand better.

In addition to giving most franchises hope heading into 2019, the St. Charles championship win has prompted another kind of discussion. While it was relatively easy for analysts and pundits to dissect the strengths of teams like Aurora, Twin Cities and Charleswood in their recent Championship runs, experts are still debating the secret behind the Chargers’ success in 2018.

“I mean no disrespect to **John Clingan** or the Chargers’ organization by admitting that I did not see it coming,” **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* confessed on *EFL Kickoff* recently when discussing the Charger run. “St. Charles was hardly in the discussion as a contender for their own division in the lead-up to last season. I think people saw a good team, but certainly not a great team; one capable of displacing teams like the Cubs and Triumph.”

Prince’s pre-season assessment of the Chargers was shared by many, if not most of the national and local Press. That the team laboured under a talent deficit relative to their rivals remains the only point on which most can agree.

“The final statistics in almost every category except the

'Win' column bear out the fact that the Chargers of 2018, on paper, were not much more than a mediocre team," writes **Harry Shultz** of [Football Outriders.Org](http://FootballOutriders.Org) in the 2019 Outriders Football Almanac. "Our retro projections for the 2018 season based on actual output still place them behind Bruxelles and barely neck-and-neck with New Jersey in the East Division. The computer models we have built cannot explain their success, short of significantly increasing randomization. Accounting for the St. Charles Effect is the biggest challenge in our projections for 2019."

The better-be-lucky-than-good maxim comes to mind when pondering the Chargers of 2018. But chalking it up to simple good luck is not an acceptable explanation for those who do prognostication for a living. And, of course, teams looking to copy-cat the Chargers' winning formula need to have something to copy.

"We plan to take the ball away more this season," proclaims Erieau head coach, **Mike Smith**, when asked how his team intends to contend in what some analysts believe is the toughest Division in the EFL this year; the South. "We noted positive turnover differential as one of the keys to the Charger's success last season and we believe we have the type of defence that can force mistakes and take the ball away."

Smith, the Cadillac's third head coach entering the team's fourth season, believes he can turn around the fortunes of one of the league's perennial doormats in a single year based on the Chargers' model. But is that model as simple as a plus-10 turnover differential?

"There is no question, we need to protect the ball better," Wrecking Balls head coach, **Bill Parcels** stated solemnly at his official pre-season press conference. "You look at what the Chargers were able to accomplish last year – a big part of their success was the low number of turnovers they committed. Ball security is a point of emphasis for us this season. If we are successful in that area, I believe we can turn things around like the Chargers did last year."

"Our defence struggled to stop opponents in the red zone last year," observed Brooklin coach, **Tom Jones**. "I think it is safe to say red zone defence was one of our big downfalls. You take a close look at what the Chargers accomplished last year and you can see that it was difficult to score on them in red zone. It was the secret to their success, I believe. So, we have made that a focus of our off-season plan – strengthening the performance of our defence in the red zone."

But while some coaches and analysts pour over the stats and the game film looking for key elements in the Charger's blueprint for success, others are looking off the field. One prominent talk show host is taking the lead in bringing attention to what an increasing number of football executives are trumpeting behind the scenes as the real key to the Chargers' remarkable success in 2018.

"It's all about *ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE*, you Dummies!" spouted **Cowan Bullherd** to his audience on his syndicated talk show, *Morning Bull*. "The Chargers have a strong *ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE*. Their owner, **John Clingan**, has instilled a *WAY OF BEING* in his entire organization that reminds everybody in it, every day, that they are CHARGERS; and they are expected to do things the *CHARGER WAY*! If you don't do it the *CHARGER WAY*, you hit the *HIGHWAY*! It's that simple, folks! Capeesh?"

The Culture Movement is gaining momentum in the EFL and is currently outpacing data analytics as the new priority for teams looking for an edge to turn things around or sustain their success. Teams believed to possess a strong organizational culture are being studied. Teams that have historically struggled are taking a critical look inward to try and determine if an unhealthy culture is the reason.

But what, exactly, is "organizational culture?" 'Culture Wars' – a two-hour exclusive feature on EFL Network – probed the topic in-depth through a series of interviews with players, coaches and experts on culture:

"Culture is literally *everything*!" proclaims, **Zaped Zopostrio**, one of a new breed of highly-sought after 'Culture Champions' being hired by franchises around the league. "Culture is everything we say and do and think inside an organization. It is what and how we do what we think and say; and it is how and why we think what we say and do. It is achieved when the people of an organization no longer think of themselves as working *for* the organization; but think of themselves *as* the organization!"

Twice victims of close losses in 2018 to the Charger culture juggernaut, the 3-13 Buffalo Derailers hired Zopostrio to help fix the cultural flaws in the organization that had contributed to those and 11 other losses.

"I knew it couldn't have been my coaching or the players I had drafted," explains Derailer head coach, GM and owner, **Daryl Brothers**. "Bringing Zaped in was a real eye-opener. It confirmed what I had felt all along deep down; that it wasn't my fault. Poor culture that we inherited from Mohave was to blame."

"The players were playing for their pay cheque and nothing more when they were in Mohave," Zopostrio concluded. "The very few of them who identified with the Hellfire franchise – because they had been drafted by the team and got along with **Bobby Elder** – felt betrayed when he sold the team. Suddenly, they were in Buffalo – a place most of them thought of as an outpost. Going from blazing hot Mohave to freezing cold Buffalo was more than just a culture shock. That kind of situation builds up what I call, the 'Mercenary Mentality.' These players, from the rookie quarterback all the

way down to the long snapper, only cared about being paid. They did the bare minimum to keep the game cheques coming.”

After a 4-0 pre-season, there is a distinct ‘new air’ at New Era Field heading into the regular season. Whether it is primarily the result of Zopostrio’s numerous culture clinics, where he inculcates the ‘Derailer Way’ in every tiny aspect of the player’s day; or the return of a healthy **Andrew Luck** and the sudden blossoming of high-end talent on defence to complement superstar, **Aaron Donald**; the Derailers appear ready to make a serious push for the East Division crown.

“For the first time the players realize that they are a good team,” Zopostrio claims. “But they also know it is not good enough to be good. They also need to be Derailers – to do things the Derailer Way.”

When asked what that ‘Derailer Way’ means, GM and head coach, **Daryl Brothers** replies: “*We tear it up!*”

According to international Culture Consultant, **Teemu Lord**, it is no coincidence that the most successful teams tend to have the strongest organizational cultures. But is success on the field a product of strong organizational culture; or is strong organizational culture a product of success on the field?

“It is both,” answers Lord. “Take the example of the Aurora Mustangs. Essentially you have the exact same group of players – highly talented – struggling to realize their potential when they were playing in Garland under **Doug Shirley**. They moved to Aurora under new corporate ownership and a brand-new head coach in **Rich Liotta** and <abracadabra!> they turned into the most powerful dynasty in EFL history. They needed those talented players to play at a high level to earn those perfect seasons; but those players also needed a strong organizational culture to perform at that level.”

But does culture really work that way? Can it be instantly instilled in an organization like it appeared to be in Aurora? Doesn’t culture take time to develop?

“Organizational culture is similar to bacterial culture,” explains **Greta Fornworm** of *Culture Lab Ltd.* “The

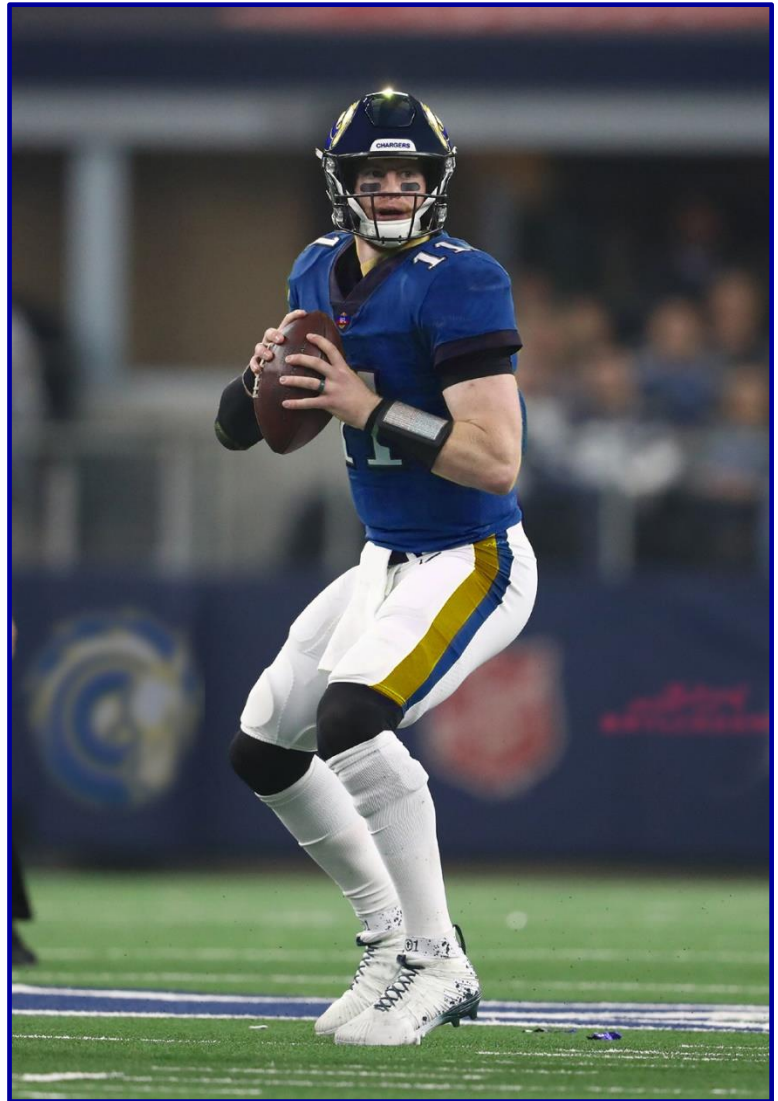
organization is a petri dish for the employees, or bacteria, to breed into something potentially dangerous or ultimately beneficial. The speed at which this occurs depends on the bacteria in your petri dish. But at the end of the day, the question every owner or CEO has to ask of him or her self is: Is my organization a ‘Streptococcus’ or a ‘Probiotic?’ If you can answer, ‘probiotic,’ you have a beneficial culture in your organization.”

Other strong organizational cultures can be found in Charleswood and Twin Cities. To **Teemu Lord**, the reasons are obvious:

“Leadership is the most important catalyst for organizational culture,” he declares. “The Patriots are, to this date, the most successful of the original 12 EFL franchises for the simple reason that they had rock solid leadership from literally the very first pick of the inaugural EFL Entry Draft. **Peyton Manning** gave the team the best leadership possible on the field, while owner **Jason Findlay** ran the team’s operations with a rare combination of firmness, wisdom and humility. The Patriots also had the nicest stadium back in 2007, which sealed an indelible image of class and professionalism.”

The leadership style in Charleswood is hardly similar to the leadership style in Twin Cities, however. Yet both franchises possess rock-solid cultural foundations for their players. Is one way better, or easier to attain than another?

“No two team cultures will be exactly alike but different ones can produce the same effects,” **Dr. Spen Thock** of Evergreen State College confirms. “The Patriots organization has many of the classic



St. Charles Chargers QB, **Carson Wentz** surveys the field looking for an open man. He will be looking for openings in a tough schedule as he aims to lead his team to a repeat in 2019.

features of a timeless institution, while the Triumph organization derives its strength from the almost cult-like figure of coach, **Guy Williams**. He is the **Vince Lombardi** of the current era in both his work ethic and in his approach to his players. He runs the show completely. People love and hate him for it at the same time. The style of **John Clingan** in St. Charles is similar, which is one of the reasons why those two GMs did not get along with each other from the start. Both Clingan and Williams came into the league as heads of expansion teams and, tellingly, both refused to accept the limitations inherent to expansion status. Neither is, or ever will be, fully satisfied and both drive their players to the brink; but Clingan is more willing to delegate authority.”

‘*Culture Wars*’ is recommended viewing for fans who are interested in delving into the psychology and behind-the-scenes influences that drive the performance of the EFL’s 24 teams. The show makes a compelling case that we have entered an era in football where organizational culture is being assessed in every team’s prognosis, along with traditional measures like talent, coaching and training. But the idea of “culture” having anything more than a passing and minor influence on results on the football does not sit well with some traditionalists:

“I’ll tell you what ‘culture’ is,” **Benny Clamp** of ABC’s weekly TV Magazine ‘*Crush*’ says provocatively. “We used to call it *winning*...winning by smashing an opponent in the mouth and stomping him into the dirt! You do that and <presto!> you have culture!”

Other skeptics are less extreme, but remain firm in the belief that fundamentals outweigh culture as the drivers of success.

“We typically do not scout ‘culture’ when looking at players coming out of college entering the draft,” **Lazor Ponk** of *Scouts Ltd* stated dryly while participating in an EFL Network round table discussion of culture. “We look at the programs the players come from, of course. These programs have a strong impact on the player’s skills and development because they are all tailored to produce different traits and capabilities. But we do not, for example, favour players from Alabama because they have a strong winning tradition and yell ‘Roll Tide’ at the top of their lungs; we rank them higher because their programs produce a lot of EFL-ready players from the perspective of skills and endurance.”

ESPN’s sometimes testy **Will Simons** made a prediction on *EFL Upon Review* recently that could come back either to haunt him or bolster his controversial reputation:

“I’m sorry to break it to Chargers fans,” Simons began, sporting a cynical grin. “But the current champs will do well if they can stay out of the basement in the East this year. The other teams, particularly Buffalo, are ready and itching to knock the Chargers down a peg. The fans can scream ‘CHAH-JA-POW-AH until they are Charger-Blue in the face, it won’t make a difference. I don’t see enough improvements on the roster for Clingan’s crew to withstand sixteen weeks of teams gunning hard for them because they are the champs.”

The East Division is shaping up to be one of the toughest ones to call, judging from the disagreement among top pundits on which team will emerge as the winner. National columnist, **Peter Prince**, puts forth a mainstream view when he writes: “*The Chargers have to be considered the favourite for the simple reason that they are the champions. Until another team can demonstrate the ability to turn potential into results, the Chargers have to be given the benefit of the doubt. John Clingan has built a strong, resilient organization, while coach Mike Martz has shown that he can tailor his system to bring out the best in his players. Plus, they have a real stud at outside linebacker, Darius Leonard, emerging as the leader of the defence. I would not be surprised if Leonard is an All-Pro by the end of the year.*”

The Chargers are getting the kind of attention due a champion. But the new shiny object in the Pacific Conference is undoubtedly the Buffalo Derailers (ex-Hellfire). This is not only because **Andrew Luck** is back and apparently healthy again. **Caleb Cogger**, of *EFL Magazine* makes the case for a Derailer run in 2019:

“*Buffalo’s offence was abysmal last year,*” writes Cogger. “*Josh Rosen was not ready to start and Julio Jones had to fight through sixteen weeks of double and triple teams, which made his output of 83 catches and 5 touchdowns the most impressive receiving achievement of 2018, in my opinion. The return of Andrew Luck will raise the level of offensive play. But the most dramatic impact on the reversal of Buffalo’s fortunes will be the defence led by monster offensive line-wrecker, Aaron Donald. Unlike previous seasons, this year’s edition of the Derailer/Hellfire defence features emerging, potentially elite talent at all three levels. The question will be whether or not neophyte coach, Daryl Brothers, can get the most out of such an impressive group.*”

The switch of **Byron Jones** from safety to cornerback could prove transformational, if his pre-season performance is a reliable indication of what to expect in the regular season. The switch was made possible by the rapid development of safety **Eddie Jackson**, who made 3 interceptions in three quarters in Buffalo’s third pre-season game against Erieau. The surfacing of 2017 seventh-round pick, **Jayon Brown** as a force at outside linebacker promises to prove a nice bonus and complement to 2018 first-round pick, **Bradley Chubb**. The defence looks like it can do it all.

“*The Buffalo defence has the talent to be a top-five defence in the league this year,*” confirms **Harry Schultz** of



Tarik Cohen, from the Tijuana Tacos of the Tex-Mex Football League, became one of the top signings in free agency, receiving close to \$13 million as a signing bonus on two-year deal with the Wrecking Balls. Money was no object for **Jeff “Money Bags” Cohen** in his goal to inject youth into the rushing attack and to support young QB, **Jared Goff**.

Football Outriders.Org. “*But the group has no track record in games that matter. Last year was a wash for the defence – it spent far too much time on the field. Our projections cannot confirm that they will perform as advertised. The Triumph and Bombers’ defences, on the other hand, can be expected to be the real deal and be the Derailers’ top competitors.*”

No conversation about contenders in the Pacific Conference would be complete without bringing Twin Cities and Bruxelles into the discussion early. The Bombers have a better chance than most to derail the Derailers thanks to a secondary that looks even better than last year’s unsung, but highly effective, unit.

“**Marcus Mariota** and **Leonard Fournette** get most of the attention and credit for Bruxelles’ year-in, year-out competitiveness,” began **Kris Hortenseon**, host of ESPN’s *Sports Central*, as he introduced a panel discussion addressing the question, ‘*Who is the Beast in the East?*’ “But I predict that it will be the Bombers’ defence, especially the secondary led by **Harrison Smith**, that tips the balance for **Kenny Main**’s team and makes them the Beast of the East in 2019.”

“No question that **Harrison Smith** is one of the best safeties ever to play the game of football,” sputtered typically hyperbolic *EFL Round-Up* analyst, **Russ Flont**. “But let’s not forget future hall-of-fame cornerback **Kyle Fuller** and the absolutely phenomenal pass-rushing duo of **Chris Jones** and **Frank Clark**! Mark my words: that pair is destined to make football history this year sacking quarterbacks. Don’t be surprised if the Bombers go all the way this year!”

Rounding out the quartet, as an afterthought in the discussion about who will be come out on top in the East, is the Wrecking Balls. **Jeff Cohen**’s customary flurry of off-season moves failed to impress the heavy-hitters in the media.

“You want to talk about culture as a barrier to success?” **Skope Boylezz** of *ESPN.com* asks rhetorically. “Nobody can figure out if the Wrecking Balls are a primarily a football team or a marketing firm for Cohen Entertainment. I don’t know where the owner gets all of his money, but somebody in his organization should remind him that the EFL has a salary cap. He gave **Tarik Cohen**, a total unknown from the Tex-Mex League, over fourteen million greenbacks just to sign on the dotted line. Add in the guy’s salary and you’re looking at a deal worth more than \$21 million! Who the heck is **Tarik Cohen**? He’s the Twenty-One Million Dollar Man, that’s who!”

Despite being active in all facets of the off-season, there is no clear sign that New Jersey is ready to be anything more than mediocre again this year. The jury is still out on quarterback, **Jared Goff** while his big-name weapons, **LeSean McCoy** and **Demaryius Thomas** are both showing signs of age. The defence may have improved slightly, or maybe not.

Panelist, **Will Simons** weighed in acerbically: “It’s impossible to tell what the Wrecking Balls are doing other than

lots of trading and lots of spending. **Jared Goff** needs more help, in my view. This Cohen kid better work out for them or I say they will be serving up another Nothing Burger in New Jersey this year.”

While the East may be the scene of the closest race for a division title in the Pacific, the eventual conference finalists are likely to come from elsewhere, according to **Peter Prince** of *North America Today*:

“The Triumph still have one of the best defences in the league from top to bottom,” writes Prince in his article ‘Triumph Still the Best.’ *“That defence will put their young quarterback, **Mitch Trubisky** in a lot of advantageous positions. Add in weapons like **Antonio Brown** and **Melvin Gordon** and you have an offence that can strike quickly to complement that tough defence. Factor in coach **Guy Williams**’ creative schemes on both sides of the ball and you have a steady team that will be in every game they play and win most of them.”*

Prince’s endorsement will have an impact on pre-season Gale Sayers betting odds, but not everyone in the national media agrees with such conventional wisdom.

“This is Mitch Trubisky’s team now and I don’t think he’s ready for it,” pronounced **Kris Hortenson** of ESPN’s *Sports Central* during a round table discussion titled ‘Who’s Central in the Central?’ “He’s arguably the fourth best quarterback in his own division. If you don’t think that will make a big difference in key divisional games, I think you’re missing something. I am not saying that the Triumph won’t win their division – I am just saying it won’t be as easy as some people think.”

That is a bold statement from Hortenson, considering that one of those other three quarterbacks in the division supposedly better than Trubisky – **Pat Mahomes** of Virden – did not throw a pass in a professional football game last season and has just one start under his belt in his career. Nevertheless, the Violators’ 2nd round pick in 2017 is drawing accolades after a stellar pre-season in which he supplanted **David Carr** as the no.1 quarterback in Virden.

*“**Lance Barrate** would have never traded **David Carr** to Brooklin if he did not have complete confidence in the ability of **Pat Mahomes** to carry his Violators to the next level,”* asserts analyst **Lazor Ponk** of *Scouts Ltd.* *“There were many scouts enamored with Mahomes in the lead-up to the 2017 draft; he obviously has lots of talent. But the talent comes with risk. His high-stakes gambling style of play, à la **Brett Favre**, made some scouts nervous. But if he can be even half the player Favre was, he will be a tremendous upgrade at the QB position in Virden.”*

Mahomes is the ‘X’-Factor in the Central Division. If he lives up to the hype, he has the weapons around him to turn the defender’s side of the field into a shooting gallery. **Ezekiel Elliott** is a bell cow with thoroughbred’s instincts who



Bobby Wagner is the captain and anchor of a Triumph that projects to make the difference for Twin Cities in the race for the Pacific Conference title and maybe even the Gale Sayers Game itself.

opposing defences cannot ignore; while **Juju Smith-Schuster** and **Amari Cooper** are top-tier wide receivers who will be vying for attention. **Marshall Yanda** and **Lane Johnson** give Mahomes reliable protection on the blind side and in the event that things go awry, Mahomes has the feet to extend the play and make something out of nothing.

“The Violators will be the surprise of the league offensively,” predicts **Severin Handfotner Jr** of *Coaches Call.* *“**Lance Barrate** has what amounts to an offensive coordinator’s dream in a mobile quarterback with a strong arm and – according to reports from camp and exhibition – uncanny football instincts and timing. The running back and wide receivers are pro bowl grade. Most people stop there when looking at the Virden offence. But there’s more: **Eric Ebron** and rookie **TJ Hockenson** are both receiving threats from the tight end position. The young kid can block as well.”*

The excitement around the Violators’ attack may prove to be overblown, but for now it is having a positive effect at the box office in Virden, where an influx of fan interest and cash through advance ticket sales is desperately needed now more than ever. The cross-conference move of the Cadillac from the

Central Division to the South Division came as a result of the EFL awarding the orphaned Cincinnati franchise to another Winnipeg Manitoba investment interest. **Carling Thule Richardson**, the multi-billionaire owner of *Thule Society Exploration*, an Arctic natural resources exploration firm, snapped up the Crusaders and decided to plunk them in the middle of Winnipeg; apparently unconcerned that there were already two football teams (Blue Bombers & Pats) in the city as well as the Violators a hundred-odd miles down the road. The Peg City Crusaders joined the Charleswood Patriots and Virden Violators as the latest Manitoba entry in the EFL.

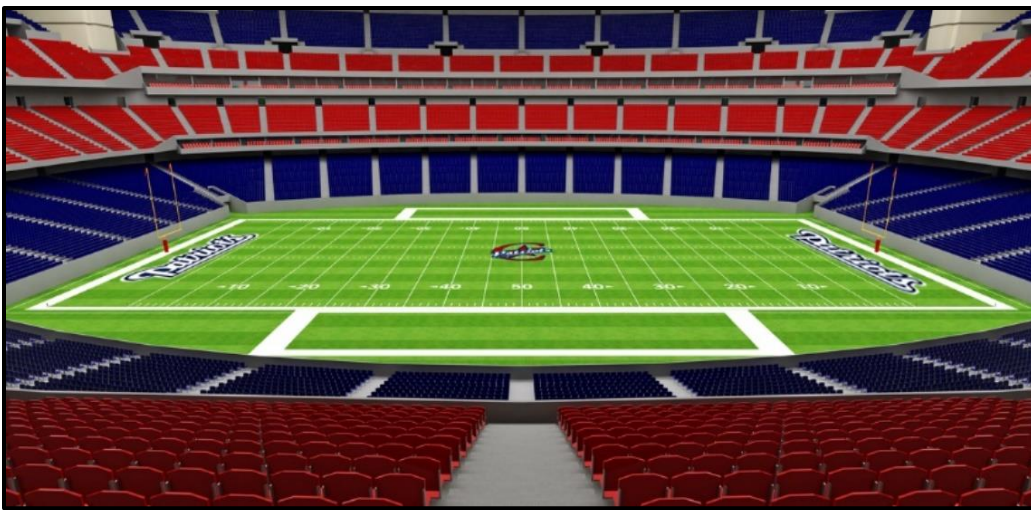
“This is sheer craziness from the league!” spat out **Will Simons** as the *ESPN Sports Central’s* round table heated up. “This is nuttier than putting a team in Hungary. You now have four pro football teams, with four different stadiums, playing within 185 miles of each other in a Province with a total population of 1.3 million. This is a market that barely supported the Winnipeg Blue Bombers of the CFL in its heyday and now the league expects it to support three EFL teams as well? The only benefit here – and it’s short term, trust me – is that road trips within the division will be very, very short.”



The infamous **TERRORDOME** stands, inhospitable and foreboding, on a desolate landscape on the outskirts of Virden. The least of four pro football stadiums in central Manitoba, it projects to attract the most fans, eager to see a resurgent Violators team.

They are calling Winnipeg “the city of stadiums” now. The Peg City Crusaders, a team few expect to compete for anything other than a premium draft pick this year, will play their games in *True North Field*, located west of *James Armstrong Richardson Airport*, on Sturgeon Road. It is a brand new state-of-the-art domed stadium rivalling Twin Cities’ *Wilhalla Stadium*. Paid for in its entirety by the Thule Society on land purchased from the City of Winnipeg at triple its market value, its existence places no burden on the local taxpayer, at least for now. But it most definitely threatens the viability of *Patriot Place* a few blocks away. The Board of Directors for *Patriot Place* filed several court injunctions opposing construction of *True North Field*, all of which were summarily dismissed. The money backing the Crusaders clearly outweighs the gold backing *Findlay Media*, the news consortium that owns the Patriots.

“As a native of Winnipeg with a deep attachment to the community it thrills me on one hand that the sports infrastructure is in place to support three professional football teams – not even New York City can boast the same,” writes



The “city of stadiums,” Winnipeg, Manitoba, was already home to the Winnipeg Blue Bombers of the CFL and the EFL’s Charleswood Patriots before the sudden arrival the Crusaders’ franchise from Cincinnati. With the new team came a brand new, state-of-the-art domed stadium, *True North Field* (pictured top left) constructed just west of the airport at an undisclosed cost – rumoured to be in the multi-billion-dollar range – slightly less than 14 miles away from *Patriot Place* in Charleswood. Winnipeg residents eager to see the new stadium flocked to get a glimpse during the Crusaders’ pre-season game against Buffalo. They left unimpressed with the Crusaders’ performance on the field but in awe of the dome itself. The home of the Patriots, one the EFL’s original 12 teams, was once considered the top football facility in the league. The artist’s rendition of its interior (pictured bottom left) captures the cozy ambience that Patriot Faithful believe remains unmatched by any other park.

Charlie Wood of the Charleswood Banner. *“But the realist in me sees a giant white elephant on Sturgeon Road. It is an impressive white elephant, but a big, glowing white elephant nonetheless. Patriot Place will always be where real football players come to play!”*

On his radio talk show, *Morning Bull*, **Cowan Bullherd** cut through the Crusaders’ international (yes, international!) promotional campaign in his trademark scathing manner: “If I had all the money in the world, I could build a giant stadium with all the amenities, cover it in gold, build a giant parking lot, install a couple of massive TV screens and one hundred big ones all around the stadium, put in wide cushioned seats, serve the best food and give everybody free internet and all the people who came would say ‘wow!’” Bullherd paused for effect...then continued: “But if my defence was unable to stop a little old lady and my offence couldn’t move the ball against tackling dummies, *EVENTUALLY*...NOBODY WOULD COME TO MY GREAT STADIUM!”

The Crusaders, as a team, are not in such dire straits as Bullherd insinuates, but they have the misfortune of being the least talented of a highly talented group of teams in the Central Division.

*“The Crusaders hired a virtual unknown, **Stephen Katopodis**, to be the head coach,”* writes **Severin Handfottner Jr** in his blog, *Coaches Call*. *“He may work out fine, but he is up against three formidable veteran coaches, two of whom have won championships. There will be a steep learning curve for him in his first year.”*

While the Triumph appear to a slim cut above the rest of the pack in the Central; and all eyes are on the Derailers to see if they have what it takes to knock off Bruxelles and St. Charles in the East; there is hardly any debate about which team will finish on top of the West again this year. ESPN’s *Sports Central* panelists tackled the question, *‘Who is Best in the West?’* recently:

“Today we turn our attention to the EFL’s West Division,” began host **Kris Hortenson**. “And the question really should not be *who* is best – because I think there is a consensus that the Cubs are the team to beat – the question should be whether being best in the west is *good enough* to take the Conference Championship this year. We’ll start with Skope....”

“Good question, Kris,” replied **Skope Boylezz**. “As we all know, **Deron Redding**’s Cubs have been like a pizza with no cheese in the playoffs – something seems to be missing in their post-season game. They have won five division titles in 12 years, made the post-season in nine of those years, but have made it to the final game only once. I don’t know if it’s what some people are calling these days, a ‘culture’ problem. All I know is that **Russell Wilson** is one of the best quarterbacks playing the game today and he can’t seem to solve the Cubs’ playoff problems!”

“The Cubs are once again on paper one of the top teams in the Pacific Conference. Our simulations for 2019 have them finishing in first place 9.5 times out of 10,” writes **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org. *“We have them upgraded overall on defence and at the skill positions; and slightly downgraded on the offensive line due to problems at tackle. We think the upgrade at the skill offensive positions, particularly at running back, will go a long way to getting **Russell Wilson** back on track after an off-year statistically in 2018. However, we do not project them to advance past the semi-final round. A good defence can shut down the Cubs’ main weapons, placing a heavy burden on **Russell Wilson** to do it alone.”*

“There aren’t any top fantasy prospects on the Cubs’ roster,” asserts **Arpin Plunderflunder**, whose blog, ‘*Fantasy Freakz*,’ is the leading fantasy football service on the web. “You can make a case for **Russell Wilson** going early in the second round of your draft. **James Connor** has the skillset of a poor man’s **Le’Veon Bell**; but how many touches is he going to get with a healthy **Joe Mixon** on the roster?”

It is increasingly becoming the norm, when discussing talented teams on the cusp of greatness falling short, to question whether ‘culture’ is the problem. In a segment that garnered a lot of attention in local Iowa media, **Tony “The Coach” Carlucci-Colangelo** of *EFL Network* tried to wrap his head around football culture in response to an Iowa caller to his talk show, *Signals*. When asked whether the Cubs had a culture problem, Tony replied in his brusque, ‘Gabagool’ New Jersey accent:

“I don’t now what culture in football is. To me, culture is Italian cuisine. If you ask me what I think of culture in football, I think it has to do with *reputation*. Your Cubs’ reputation around the league – at least from the players I’ve talked to – is that they can be intimidated; that they’re a bunch of *wusses*. So, any player going to the Cubs is thinking to himself, ‘*I’m going to a wuss team.*’ Then they get there and they get lots of positive reinforcement, are constantly validated and pampered by their father-like coach – who just *loves* all of his new draft picks. They feel good about themselves – *too* good. Then they get on the field and their opponents – the good ones – are calling them wusses, or worse. Then they start thinking, ‘*maybe I am a wuss.*’ Then they start playing like wusses. It’s all psychological. Now, I realize they win a lot of games. I’m not saying they’re not talented. They’re usually talented. But they aren’t usually tough. Why is this? They always have one of the youngest rosters in the league, with no strong vets to show them what it takes to survive 10 years in this brutal sport. Then they have that bleeding-heart coach, who has a keen eye for talent but no stomach for discipline. So, the players run the show. It’s hard to win playoff games – the games that matter – that way!”

Culturally, the Cubs have stiff competition in their division from Chino and Los Angeles. Both of these traditional rivals have a Gale Sayers trophy sitting in their respective Halls of Honour and distinct traditions that give them definable identities. The Convicts are convicts – with brutal rookie hazing rituals and a willingness to do anything to win. The Knights are True Defenders of their glittering Realm of Los Angeles, afflicted by a schizophrenic split between the defence and the offence well-suited to their hot-and-cold, love’ em and leave ‘em LA fan base. But unfortunately for fans of the Convicts and Knights, their teams enter the 2019 season with team culture as their highest value asset.

“The Convicts registered a false positive with their late challenge to the Cubs last season,” writes **Caleb Cogger** of *EFL Magazine*. *“**Dak Prescott** showed flashes of brilliance in some big games; that took the heat off a defence that over-achieved at times, but crumbled in their Week 16 loss to the Cubs. The overall talent situation has not changed much this year. This is a team in transition, with a few unsung difference-makers, like 2015 4th-rounder **Grady Jarrett** at defensive tackle and 2017 1st rounder, running back **Christian McCaffery** (who does not get enough attention in the national media). But they had to offer **Larry Fitzgerald** stupid money to pry him away from Cowtown just to begin to get serious at wide receiver. I see another check-down passing game taking over in Chino to go with a defence that will not be able to hold off the fine quarterback talent in the Pacific Conference.”*

Not everyone agrees that the Convicts will be an also-ran. **Russ Flont**, spurred on by his fascination with the Chino quarterback, had this to say on *Sports Central*: “Everyone is handing the West Division to the Cubs but I don’t agree! The Convicts have **Dak Prescott**, a mature young man with untapped potential that could some day put him in the Hall of Fame!” he began his tirade as his panel colleagues rolled their eyes. “A quarterback like that teamed up with the best running back duo in the league in **Christian McCaffery** and **Mark Ingram** can create something really, really special this year in Chino. Nobody was ready for it when the Triumph went 16-0 a few years ago. The football world will be just as unprepared for the rise of the Convicts in 2019!!”

While some reserve faint hope for a Convict challenge to the Cubs, there is no prominent voice standing up for LA

or Seattle to join the race for a playoff berth in 2019.

“The Knights and Pilots are in rebuilding mode and making no secret about it,” opined **Kris Hortenson** on *Sports Central*. My question to the panel is this: Is there any hope for the fans in LA and Seattle that one, or both of these teams could surprise with a Cinderella type run?”

Will Simons broke through the round of guffaws with a bold prediction: “I see the beginnings of a good defence in LA but they aren’t where they need to be yet. They went out and grabbed **Lamar Jackson** in the second round two years ago to be their quarterback of the future. He sat on the pine in his rookie year and it looks as if **Jeff Dohrn** plans to go with the veteran **Ryan Tannehill** to start the year. But I predict that Jackson will see the field in 2019 and when he does, he may turn some heads. Not that it will help the Knights make the playoffs, but it will give the fans hope heading into 2020.”

The situation on the field in Seattle is almost as bleak as the local weather, according to the majority of analysts. **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org sums up the consensus in his 2019 Almanac: “*The only thing saving Mitch Gangwish’s job is low expectations. But even Seattle*



On a team reputed to be a little on the soft side, Iowa City guard, **Quenton Nelson** is one of the toughest linemen in the league and the key to protecting the Cubs’ no.1 asset, QB, **Russell Wilson**.

*fans will not tolerate double-digit losses forever. They have players like **Khalil Mack** and **Marshon Lattimore** who will hold the back end of the defence together and keep them in games. But we do not project the offence under **Eli Manning** to deliver much. Eli needs help these days and he is not going to get any. Expect **Sam Darnold** to be starting toward the end of the year to create some interest in an otherwise dull team.”*

On the other side of the continent in the Atlantic Conference fans can expect to see some familiar faces making some noise in the post-season, according to **Peter Prince** of ‘North America Today.’ “*I think we will see the Mustangs rebound after what was, for coach **Rich Liotta**, an off-year in 2018,*” Prince writes. “*They invested a ton of money to keep their offensive line from abandoning ship in free agency and paid off two of their biggest stars on defence, **JJ Watt** and **Patrick Peterson** to return this year. They also signed the key to their offence, **Matt Ryan**, to a five-year deal worth over \$63 million. They are fully invested in getting back on top, where they feel they belong.”*

The upstart Toronto Wolverines, surprise winners of the South Division in 2018, appear equally invested in staying on top after trading three high draft picks, including their no.1 pick in 2019, to the Blue Eagles for a chance to sign beleaguered quarterback, **Aaron Rodgers**. The EFL Championship winner of 2009 jumped at the chance to land back on a winning team and signed a five-year deal worth over \$60 million. But will Rodgers be the stable solution the young franchise is looking for to man the game’s most important position for the next five years? Some have their doubts.

“*Rodgers has lived on that Championship win in Florida for nine years and he’s getting hungry,*” writes ‘Deathspun’ columnist **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah**, in his article, ‘Aaron Rodgers Reflects Hypocrisy of the EFL.’ “*But it may take more than **Tyreek Hill** and **Saquon Barkley** to focus his attention back on the sport of football. Even the dancers at **Filmore’s**, the local strip club, are no longer impressed by him, even as they still flock to him for the \$100 tips. If it was only rumours of drug abuse, wild bacchanalian parties on **Dickhead**, (**Chris Dickinson’s** yacht), and all-night benders in Toronto’s entertainment district, my editors at **Deathspun** would advise extreme caution in writing about it. But these indiscretions are no secret – they are well-documented on phone videos all over the internet. Which bears the question: Why does the EFL hunt down poor potheads like **David Irving** and **Josh Gordon** – who ‘happen’ to be African-Americans – for using a drug that is legal to possess in a third of EFL cities, but do not take action to stop **Aaron Rogers’** coke-induced, **Jim Morrison-like** race down the road to self-destruction? Not only is it hypocritical – it’s explicitly racist.”*

Smith-Abdullah’s question and allegations hang suspended in mid-air; the mainstream media won’t address it. The league deflects and when cornered usually makes some vague official statement about its ‘Wellness Program’ working well

with all of its players. But off-field controversy seems to be the last thing on Toronto GM and Coach **Ryan Preston**'s mind.

“Coach and GM, **Ryan Preston** has taken a risk by going all-in to make **Aaron Rodgers** the center of his rebuild,” **Severin Handfottner Jr**, editor of *Coach's Call* observed when interviewed on EFL Network's show, *Young Mavericks*. “And he stuck with the signing of **Tyreek Hill** even as pictures surfaced of physical abuse allegedly inflicted by him on his 3-year old son. There are whispers emerging from inside the Wolverines that elite cornerback, **Jalen Ramsey** is a high-strung narcissistic psychopath, and linebacker **Avery Williamson**, acquired from the Wrecking Balls for a third-round pick, is apparently already in Preston's doghouse for refusing to move outside to play ‘Sam’ linebacker. There are going to be personnel issues with this team, but Preston has shown in his brief coaching career the ability to get the most out of his skill position players regardless of what is around them. Anyone who can rehabilitate **Jay Cutler** is a miracle-worker.”

As all questions focus on whether Toronto can repeat their astonishing feat of last year and whether Aurora can stage a dramatic comeback and return to the podium, the situations in Georgia and Erieau are easily overlooked. This is a mistake, according to **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org:

“Our simulations predict a robust performance by the Gladiators in 2019. The acquisition of **Josh Jacobs** in the first round will be impactful. Pairing him with **Sony Michel** to create an effective dual-threat rotation at running back will take the heat off of **Big Ben**, opening up play-action opportunities that did not exist last year,” writes Schultz in the Almanac. “The defence did not improve over last year, however. They drafted **Lonnie Johnson Jr** to fill a gaping hole at cornerback but he does not look ready to start. That position will be a concern, as will the pass rush. But **Dave Birdsall**'s track record speaks for itself; he schemes well and gets the most out of his limited talent.”

The Cadillac, newly-arrived from the other conference, is expected to play the role that the Crusaders/Regulators have played in the South Division over the years. Although they are improved on offence, mainly on the offensive line; and their defence will be a tough nut to crack, with **Myles Garrett** leading the pass rush and **Stephon Gilmore** and **Desmond King II** shutting down opposing receivers; the lack of quality and depth at the skill positions will ultimately be their undoing in a division possessing an abundance offensive talent.

The mis-named Coastal Division, is expected to be the scene of numerous bloodbaths in 2019 between ultra-competitive and closely-matched rivals who have developed quite a hate for each other over the years. But for the second year in a row, the narrow consensus favourite entering the season is Pickering; although no self-respecting analyst is willing to endorse them without a caveat.

“Here we go again!” trumpets **Skope Boylezz** on ESPN's *Sports Central* segment, ‘Who Has the Most on the Coast?’ “I find myself looking at the Spartans roster and drawing the logical conclusion that they should – I repeat, *should* – end up winning the division. They have the deepest group of receivers in the division, even if none of them stands out as



Toronto coach, **Ryan Preston**, reviews plays with newly-acquired QB, **Aaron Rodgers**. Preston turned **Jay Cutler** into a useable player in 2018 and is planning to revive the fortunes of the struggling former Blue Eagles star.

a big, ‘number-one’ guy. This is really important for a quarterback like **Philip Rivers**, who can make multiple reads and find the open man. I also like this **Miles Sanders** kid they stole in the third round of the rookie draft. He will be a good complement to **Doug Martin**, who appears fully recovered from his crack addiction. The defence isn't great, but it's solid and capable of making stops against the better offences in the league. So, what could go wrong? Well, we're still trying to figure out what went wrong last year when the team imploded for no obvious reason. The coach can be a bit of a lunatic on the sideline, which certainly does not help in a game situation with today's younger, fragile players. But **Gus Konstantakos** has won a Championship before while performing berserk antics during the game. Who knows? I say Pickering has

the most on the coast, but I am not sure they will...”

“Whoa, steady there, Skope!” interjected **Will Simons**. “I don’t necessarily agree with your assessment of the rosters. The North Stars have one of the stronger defences in the league this year, and that is taking into account a soft spot in the center of the defensive line and an unknown, but highly paid free agent manning the top corner position in **Pierre Desir**. **Cameron Jordan** and **Calais Campbell** continue to be the top twin-end combo in the league and **Bernardrick McKinney** is literally all over the field at the inside linebacker position. That is going to make a big difference. Then you have this fiery kid, **Baker Mayfield** at quarterback, bringing an aggressive attitude long missing from North Stars’ offences of the past. I think **Darrin Jones** has the most in the coast, myself.”

“I cannot believe what I am hearing!” burst out **Russ Flont**, his cheeks reddening. “You are both totally disregarding the best quarterback to ever play the game of football – **Tom Brady**! There is a living legend on the field and you think he won’t lift York back to a division title? You’re both nuts!”

“No, you’re nuts, Russ, and always have been!” shot back **Skope Boylezz**, to stifled chuckles from the other



Fans are excited to see what 2018 first round draft pick **Baker Mayfield** can bring to the traditionally ultra-conservative North Stars’ attack. Mayfield took over the starting role in the pre-season and is developing a budding chemistry with wide receiver, **Stefon Diggs** and tight end **George Kittle** as the Budapest offence has already shown quick-strike capability.

panelists. “The Excaliburs have nothing on the right side of their offensive line to protect Brady. Apart from **Zach Ertz** he has nobody reliable to throw the ball to. And the defence – geez! **Jay Hammond** has still not solved his chronic problem at corner and will have to play one of his better safeties on the other side of **Darqueze Dennard**, who is covering like a safety these days. Yes, they have **Von Miller**, but his numbers have dropped off since they traded **Geno Atkins**. They’re good enough to pick off any team in the North division, but in their own division, York is going nowhere but down.”

“And, of course, let’s not forget the Hawks,” jumped in **Kris Hortenson** as **Russ Flont** was gathering air for a tirade in reply to Boylezz. “I like the acquisition of **Derek Carr** – he’s a smart quarterback who never really got the protection he needed in Virden. He now has one of the league’s best offensive lines blocking for him, one great wide receiver in **DeAndre Hopkins** who can make big catches in double-coverage and probably the finest tight end combo in the league. At very least, Brooklin will score a lot of points this year.”

“Sure, they’ll score,” countered **Will Simons**. “But like last year, they won’t be able to stop anybody. **Clelin Ferrell**, who they drafted in the first round from Clemson, looks good, but he’s not going to turn them into a top ten defence – which

is the bare minimum they need to keep these really good offences they are scheduled to face in check. I can picture the Hawks breaking hearts as the spoiler down the stretch, but they aren't balanced enough to survive the long haul."

This view of the Coastal as a pyrrhic battleground is shared by many top analysts in the business, as well as Vegas odds-makers, who will be challenged every time teams within the Coastal face each other: "Injuries, when they happen and who they happen to, will be very important in setting the odds this year and determining a winner in the Coastal," said **Jimmy the Geek** on his Nevada TV sports bar betting show, *Odds 'n Suds*. "When any team has a close to 50-50 shot at beating any other team on any given Sunday, funny bounces, blown coverages, untimely penalties and place-kicking under pressure will often become deciding factors. That's one of the reasons why I am giving Budapest a slight edge – their kicker, **Jason Myers**, is money from long distances."

But culture critic, **Greta Fornworm** of *Culture Lab Ltd*, sees a Budapest playoff run as unlikely, for cultural reasons: "I look at Budapest from a cultural point of view and I see a team struggling to find a new identity to fit a culturally alien environment in Hungary. In Markham, they were 'North American Blue Collar,' gritty and tough with an underdog mentality that eventually led to success. Things changed when they were adopted by a Chinese fanbase, but the changes made sense, given the demographics in Markham. **Darrin Jones** was idolized by the Chinese community as some type of football **Norman Bethune**. In Budapest, the locals do not know what to make of the North Stars and American Football. It is so depressing for the players that they actually welcomed the five-game road trip the league scheduled, even as their coach complained. Until the North Stars feel accepted in Hungary, they will play for their paycheques."

While debate over the which team should be considered the Coastal front-runner will likely continue up until the final weeks of the season, there are few commentators willing to declare that any of the teams in the North Division would be able to win a title outside of their own division.

"*Somebody will win the North Division,*" **Caleb Cogger** of 'EFL Magazine' writes. "*But do not expect whichever team that is to go on and represent the Atlantic Conference in the finals, or to even survive the quarter finals. This is not because they are all bad teams. While Scarborough can be classified as 'bad' – even 'awful' or 'pathetic' – the others balance out their strengths with corresponding weaknesses, resulting in three average, or slightly below average, teams. Within their little northern pond, it will be an interesting fight. When they swim in the ocean of the rest of the league, they will be eaten by the sharks.*"

"Take Scarborough out of it and I can see any of the other three teams winning the North," stated **Will Simons** matter-of-factly on *ESPN's Sports Central* round table discussion, 'Who Will Go Forth in the North?' "Cowtown's **Todd Gurley** is the best running back in the division, probably in the league; Sebastian's **Drew Brees** has the same status at quarterback; and Durham's **TY Hilton, Tyler Boyd** and **Cooper Kupp** form the best wide receiver trio in the division, arguably in the league as well. But the Thunder Lizards don't have a strong running game, the Corn Kings don't have a strong quarterback, and the Swordfish lack depth at wide receiver, not to mention they will be operating a running-back-by-committee system that does not usually work wherever it's tried. None of the defences will take the ball away very often and none have shutdown capacity in the secondary. In a passing league, they will each give up their share of points. I wouldn't bet on any of them going far in the playoffs, but the fight for the North will likely go down to the final week."

Not everyone agrees. Alt-sports writer, **Sperl Sponefritter** of 'Sperl's World of Sports' has convinced his followers that an alternate universe could swallow us all up at any moment, giving Scarborough a chance to pull off one of the greatest upsets in history: "*With the departure of Aaron Rodgers, only two players remain on the Blue Eagles roster from the Florida Dragons. Those players are DeSean Jackson and Ndamukong Suh. Both players are 32-years old which added together makes their combined age 64. On one hand, this number represents the amount of negative force remaining (unleashed by the 'Heaton Curse' at the time of separation from his team) that still affects the fortunes of the Blue Eagles. But the number '64' is also an important cosmic number. It represents a message from the universe to remain positive to achieve one's desires. In effect, it means that the curse is lifting and that an influx of positive energy can overturn the power of the curse before the end of its natural life. A Blue Eagles fanbase dedicated to prayer and meditation and repudiating violence, could alter the course of our reality and create the conditions necessary for a Blue Eagles upset.*"

Back in the real world, controversy is swirling around the quarterback position in both Cowtown and Durham; and cultural influences are being cited as the reasons behind some strange decisions.

Organizational Anthropologist and certified 'Culture Champion,' **Stockington Thweem**, interviewed on 'Culture Wars,' had this to say about the quarterback situation in Cowtown: "The majority of people believe, especially now, that politics in the Beltway is as messy and cutthroat as it gets. But the majority of people have not studied small town politics, which can be, and often is, worse than Washington. As quaint and as safe as a small community often is, the seeds of authoritarianism find more fertile ground there, which is why so many people end up leaving to make their fortune in the big cities, where anonymity breeds its own kind of freedom."

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“Interesting. But how does this apply to the quarterback situation in Cowtown?” asked the interviewer.

“Well, I was invited to take a look at the culture in Cowtown, a small community, and discovered a remarkable story that will explain,” replied Thweem. “It appeared to the entire football world and most of the Cowtown fans that the **Joe Flacco** era had come to an end and that **Jimmy Garoppolo**, after performing a couple of playoff miracles, would take over the starting role this year. But that was before Garoppolo started to date **Penny Appleton**, the ‘other daughter’ of **Herman Appleton** of North Cowtown, son of a principle town elder and vice-president of Appleton Cheese.”

Penny Appleton had become a woman of ‘questionable virtue’ after she had gone missing for a weekend with **Dean Smith** when they were both 17-years old. At the time it had caused great scandal and alarm among the leading families of Cowtown. Although many years had since passed, and **Dean Smith** had moved to Baxter City to run one of his father’s tractor dealerships, the stain on Penny’s reputation had not lifted. She worked as a clerk in a back office at Appleton Cheese and rarely engaged in social activities. She met Garoppolo by accident, when the budding Cowtown star showed up to film an endorsement for Appleton Parmesan. He was smitten by her and they started to date.”

This was not just a scandal in itself, but it made **Missy**, the daughter of Corn Kings’ owner, **Farmer Brown**, insanely jealous, as she had a hard crush on *Jimmy the G-Man*, as she called him. Instructions were apparently given by **Farmer Brown** to Coach Coghlin to ‘give Joe another look,’ which was all Cowtown’s only coach needed to hear to understand the message. **Joe Flacco** was signed to a four-year deal and resumed taking first team reps. And just to make sure that Jimmy the G-Man stayed in roster exile, journeyman **Ryan Fitzpatrick**, a one-time quarterback for the Hellfire back in 2016, was signed to a two-year deal as his back-up. The team also drafted **Easton Stick** out of North Dakota State to dress as the third ‘emergency quarterback’ on game day. The fans are unhappy about this, but they understand the situation and are responding by trying to sabotage the relationship between **Jimmy Garoppolo** and **Penny Appleton**.”

Over in Durham, the Thunder Lizards parted ways with **Cam Newton** after he posted the worst QB rating among starting quarterbacks in 2018. But remarkably, it was not the lack of performance on the field that prompted the final release – it was Newton’s strange behaviour and obvious incompatibility with the culture of the Durham locker room that finally caused Coach **George Kaldis** to defy Thunder Lizards’ owner, **Celine Dion**, and cut Newton.

Jean-Marc Delapellides, a ‘Culture Therapist’ and ‘Life Artist,’ hired by Dion to, in her words, “fuse elements of violence and art to create an edifying pastiche to guide the world,” spoke to *Culture Wars* about the unique cultural dynamics produced by the odd liaison between Dion and her GM/coach, **George Kaldis**.

“**Celine Dion** is an artist. She does not know a thing about football,” Delapellides begins. “In the beginning, she was content to enjoy her stadium, *Jurassic Park*, with all of its exotic genetically-engineered creations, and leave football to the coach. But then something changed. It began with **Colin Kaepernick**’s protest and evolved from there. She began to see football in the context of a changing society and saw that it had influence. She became aware that her team had never had an African-American quarterback and had therefore, never experienced play-calling through the cultural lens of an African-American. When **Cam Newton** became available in free agency, she insisted that ‘we invite Cam to our team.’”

This, of course, made no sense from a football point of view. The Thunder Lizards already had one of the best quarterbacks in the league in **Drew Brees**. Even though Newton’s rival, **Dak Prescott** was starting to show promise, it would take a lot of money to pry Newton away from Chino. Landing him would require that he sit on the bench or that Kaldis trade Brees, which would have been extremely stupid in a year, 2017, when the team expected to compete in the post-season. Nevertheless, Kaldis, fearing that he would be fired, offered Newton over \$12 million a year for four seasons. The Convicts did not hesitate and cut the cord.”

It was not common knowledge at the time that Newton, fearing a young rival in Prescott, had started to experiment with a Vegan diet in order to gain a competitive edge that would not violate the league’s drug policy. This diet was already beginning to affect him in Chino. In Durham, nobody noticed in the first year because he sat behind Brees. Once Brees was traded and he took over, his struggles were obvious but the reasons were not. Doubling down, encouraged by Dion, he became in the off-season an ‘*Anorganan*,’ a very rare category of person who does not eat anything that was at one time alive. This diet, consisting mostly of water, salt, honey, vinegar, and clay (yes, clay) was the diet that had turned **Celine Dion** into a skeleton. By the first week of training camp the diet had done the same to Newton. He tried to cover it up by dressing up in bulky clothing and wearing a hat to conceal his thinning hair. But in the end, he could not cover up the fact that he could not throw a football more than five yards and would faint at the end of every drop back. Defying his owner,



The *Cam Newton* era is officially over in Durham after a single, unsuccessful season. Newton (above) was photographed leaving Jurassic Park at the end of training camp after being informed of his outright release by GM/Coach **George Kaldis**. Concerns about Newton's deteriorating mental and physical health, believed to be brought on by a strict 'Anorganan' diet, were the main reasons for parting ways according to team insiders. Publicly, the team stated simply that they had decided to part ways with Newton as the Lizards seek to open up opportunities for 2018 first round pick *Josh Allen*. Concurrently, the team planned to surprise its fans with another uniform change. A photo of the new Durham helmet (left) was leaked to the media.

Coach Kaldis cut Newton and handed the game ball to *Nick Foles*, his long-time standby for such situations."

The main beneficiary of the internal cultural divide that had brought *Cam Newton* to Durham was, of course, divisional rival Sebastian. The gift of his arrival to the east coast of Florida meant the Swordfish could focus on other needs.

"With *Drew Brees* at quarterback, all things are possible offensively," writes **Lazor Ponk** of 'Scouts Ltd.' "For this reason, I would not count the Swordfish out at any point, barring catastrophic injuries. They are in the interesting position of having traded off a few playable pieces to beef up their 2020 draft board while retaining their competitive viability in 2019. In a season that promises to be unpredictable, they are in the best of both worlds."

As we head into the EFL's 13th season, hope springs eternal for all but a few teams. But even those teams may turn into contenders with a powerful enough organizational culture shift and the right combination of good luck and bad. So, with every team in the race, sound the gun on Season Thirteen!





It is written

The Football Oracle

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

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

Hello EFL Fans. Welcome to the Football Oracle App. This interactive platform allows you to keep up with my visions and ask questions. Just tap on the '?' icon to ask about your favourite team or player. The spirits know all, but sometimes they like to play tricks. So, I cannot guarantee that everything I see will actually happen. But I'm pretty good at sniffing out a capricious spirit. Access is by subscription as I have to pay to have somebody mind my corporeal form. One of the finalists in 2019 will be Twin Cities. For the Atlantic Conference finalist, access the red 'A' on my app. - The Football Oracle

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

In fact, the Football Oracle is gone from Canton altogether. The former Green Bay Packer fan, who foretold the demise of the old NFL and was driven mad by the vision, has apparently gone over to "the other side." Not dead, but astrally-projected. She loves it there when she travels out of her body. And now, due to advances in digital technology she can communicate with anybody with an I-Phone and the Football Oracle App. It makes things a lot easier. Read on.....

PACIFIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



12-4

BUFFALO DERAILERS
COACH: **Daryl Brothers**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **A**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **A-**

Aaron Donald and **Eddie Jackson** are the anchors of the most talented defence in the league. **Andrew Luck** is healthy again and **Mitchell Schwartz** will help him stay that way. **Julio Jones** poised for a career year. They need a bell-cow running back to bring offence up to the next level. Fine kick & return game, but lack of gunners brings down ST grade.



10-6

BRUXELLES BOMBERS
COACH: **Ken Main**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **A-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **B+**

Kyle Fuller and **Harrison Smith** star for the league's top rated secondary while **Chris Jones** leads the pass rush, but 'D' can be run on. Brittle running back rotation may be the weakest link in an offence that boasts play-making receiving corps and a mobile **Marcus Mariota**. Solid kickers and dynamic returners round out a superior ST cadre.



8-8

NEW JERSEY WRECKING BALLS
COACH: **Jeff Cohen**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **B-**

Jamal Adams spearheads a respectable defence that suffers from lack of depth at linebacker and corner. **Jared Goff** will have time to throw behind one of the top pass-blocking front fives in the league. Versatile **Tarik Cohen** adds spice to the offensive backfield and the return game. Kicking game and ST coverage will hold their own.



7-9

ST. CHARLES CHARGERS
COACH: **John Clingan**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **C+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **C+**

Darius Leonard is a star but will not be able to do it alone on a defence that will struggle to stop the run. **Adrian Peterson** looks young again and **Carson Wentz-to-Michael Thomas** tandem will make its mark, but weak right side of O-line could cause attack to stumble some. No much impact expected in return and kicking game or in ST coverage.

CENTRAL DIVISION



14-2

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH
COACH: **Guy Williams**
OFFENCE: **A** DEFENCE: **A**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **A**

Mitch Trubisky has the protective O-line and the skill players he needs to succeed in **Antonio Brown** and **Melvin Gordon**, but when they falter, he has his feet. **Bobby Wagner** secures a top tier defence that will be punishing to run against and takeaway a lot of balls. The return game is sub-standard by a lot, but ST coverage and PK are reliable.



9-7

VIRDEN VIOLATORS
COACH: **Lance Barrate**
OFFENCE: **A** DEFENCE: **C-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-** TOT: **B-**

Pat Mahomes brings intriguing possibilities to an offence already stocked with impact players **Ezekiel Elliott**, **AJ Green** and **Juju Smith-Schuster**. The defence will look to **Melvin Ingram III** and **Prince Amukamara** to save it from mediocrity, but the offence will have to bail it out more than not. Struggles in the kicking game may hurt in close games.



8-8

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS
COACH: **Jason Findlay**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B-**

Dynamic backfield duo of **Alvin Kamara** and **Lamar Miller** will take the heat off **DeShaun Watson** and open up the pass game. **Derwin James** dominates a secondary a little thin at corner that looks to benefit from pressure by twin edge rushers **Cameron Heyward** and **Demarcus Lawrence**. Kicking and return game are good and ST coverage adequate.



5-11

PEG CITY CRUSADERS
COACH: **Stephen Katopodis**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **C-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-** TOT: **C**

Jason Kelce and Shaq Mason lead one of the more quietly dominant O-lines and Chris Carson will be the beneficiary. Kirk Cousins has more than one game-breaking option at WR. Luke Kuechly commands the center of the 'D' but will be on his own. Depth and quality at CB are issues. No regular PR and gunner will hurt in the field position battle.

WEST DIVISION



11-5

IOWA CITY CUBS

COACH: **Deron Redding**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A** TOT: **A-**

Russell Wilson and the RB tandem of **Joe Mixon** and **James Conner** will be the drivers of a ball control offence that will feature the occasional big play to **Tyler Lockett**, but play better with a lead. The addition of **Dee Ford** brings a blitz option to go with the push of **Fletcher Cox** up the middle. Best PK in the league and top-notch ST coverage top it off.



8-8

CHINO CONVICTS

COACH: **Rob Nazar**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **B-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **B-**

Dak Prescott and dual threat **Christian McCaffery** will keep defences guessing and speed on the back-end of the WR corps will keep them honest. O-line is decent in pass pro but weak in run game. **Grady Jarrett** plugs the middle of a presentable, but not a dominant defence. **Jakeem Grant** brings flash to the return game but ST coverage is shaky.



3-13

SEATTLE PILOTS

COACH: **Mitchell Gangwish**
OFFENCE: **C-** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **C**

Khalil Mack and **Marshon Lattimore** lead an impressive back-seven on defence, but front four is below standard and will get gouged. **Eli Manning** will put in tough time running an offence with a fragile running game and no game-breakers in the receiving corps. Good ST coverage for good punter **Britton Colquitt** will be a needed consolation.



3-13

LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

COACH: **Jeff Dohr**
OFFENCE: **C-** DEFENCE: **C+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **C**

Ryan Tannehill is a placeholder to protect the development of **Lamar Jackson** on a team with a waiver pick-up starting at RB. **Brandin Cooks** will see a lot of double-teams. Young CBs **Tre'Davious White** and **Greedy Williams** show promise for the future but are one year away. **Andre Roberts** is top-notch in the return game but no ST gunner will hurt.

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



9-7

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

COACH: **Jim Coghlin**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **B**

Todd Gurley may be the most dynamic offensive player in the league and **Mike Evans** is an elite deep threat, but O-line and murky QB situation could hold the offence back. **JJ Watt** and **Ryan Kerrigan** bring nasty blitz pressure from both sides but fragile secondary can be burned. **Johnny Hekker** and a good group of gunners bump up the ST grade.



8-8

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

COACH: **Russ Lemmon**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **B-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C** TOT: **B-**

Drew Brees and **Odell Beckham Jr** are elite but the running-back-by-committee and few receiving options will hold the offence back against good defences. **Jadeveon Clowney** and **Chandler Jones** bring great pressure but secondary unlikely to cause coverage sacks. **Dan Bailey** is solid as a PK and **Chris Moore** is steady as a KR but no gunners will hurt.



8-8

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

COACH: **George Kaldis**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **C**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B-**

Whoever starts at QB, **Andy Dalton** or **Nick Foles**, will enjoy throwing to a deep WR corps led by **TY Hilton** but lacklustre running game will take away play-action. **Devin McCourty** is the best player on a patchwork defence that is back-heavy and susceptible to the run. **Cyrus Jones** is an exciting PR, ST coverage is good but **Daniel Carlson** could cost games.



2-14

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

COACH: **Chris Dickinson**
OFFENCE: **D** DEFENCE: **C-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **D+**

Zack Martin is the only star on the offence. When a guard is your best player, it does not bode well for the offence. Expect an off-year from **DeSean Jackson** with nobody to throw him the ball. The defence is not much better but has a future with **Nick Bosa** developing in a rebuilding year. Kicking and gunners are passable but return game is questionable.

COASTAL DIVISION



9-7

PICKERING SPARTANS

COACH: **Gus Konstantakos**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B+**

Xavien Howard and **Denzel Ward** form a nice pair of ball-hawking corners and **Geno Atkins** gives the defence confidence up the middle. Philip Rivers has a variety of reliable options at WR and TE and a steady platoon at RB, but weakness at guard could slow the ground game. Solid ST coverage and return game but kicker could be an Achilles Heel.



9-7

BUDAPEST NORTH STARS

COACH: **Darrin Jones**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **A-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **B+**

Baker Mayfield will look for **Stefon Diggs** and **George Kittle** to deliver the chunk plays while bell-cow **David Johnson** will avoid a weak right side of the O-line. Tag-team of death, **Calais Campbell** and **Cameron Jordan** set the edges of a solid defence with few holes. Return game is steady, ST not so much. PK, **Jason Myers** is one of the best.



8-8

BROOKLIN HAWKS

COACH: **Tom Jones**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **B-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C** TOT: **B-**

For better or worse this is **David Carr's** offence. **DeAndre Hopkins** and **Rob Gronkowski** will make his job easier as will the first-rate O-line in front of him. **Leighton Vander Esch** is the bright spot of a mixed bag defence that hopes to take the ball away to make up for its shortcomings. No ST gunners and no full-time returners will take its toll over time.



7-9

YORK EXCALIBURS

COACH: **Jay Hammond**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **B-**

Tom Brady will need to flash a magic touch and **Zach Ertz** will have to get open a lot to raise this offence to the competitive level of the division. The Super-Safety trio, led by **Kevin Byard** remains, as does **Von Miller**, but depth and ability at corner is a big concern. Kicker, **Graham Gano** is okay, but the return game and ST coverage is barely adequate.

SOUTH DIVISION



12-4

AURORA MUSTANGS

COACH: **Rich Liotta**
OFFENCE: **A-** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **A-**

JJ Watt is back, and with him the possibility that Aurora's defence will return to the top echelon. Shutdown CB tandem, **Patrick Peterson** and **Jason McCourty** will help. **Matt Ryan** will rely on **Davante Adams** and **Julian Edelman** to post gawdy passing numbers and rack up points. PK, **Wil Lutz** is money. The return game and ST coverage are stable.



10-6

TORONTO WOLVERINES

COACH: **Ryan Preston**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **B-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **B**

Aaron Rodgers is exactly what stars, **Saquon Barkley**, **Adam Thielen** and **Tyreek Hill** need to flourish and the hodgepodge O-line needs to remain anonymous. **Jaylon Smith** anchors a defence that has holes, but should hold its own against most competition. Dynamic returners, a HOF kicker and a trio of gunners rounds off a good ST unit.



8-8

GEORGIA GLADIATORS

COACH: **Dave Birdsall**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **C-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **B-**

Strong at safety and nowhere else, this defence will need all the attention **Dave Birdsall** can give it to stay in games. **Ben Roethlisberger** is who he is and that could make the entire offence and rookie RB, **Josh Jacobs** good enough to nullify that leaky defence. The returners are pedestrian and the gunners are bad, but kicker **Brett Maher** is a beast.



4-12

ERIEAU CADILLAC

COACH: **Jamie Rilett**
OFFENCE: **D+** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A+** TOT: **C+**

Stephon Gilmore and **Desmond King** are the top CB tandem in the league. Along with **Myles Garrett** and **Justin Houston** this defence will steal a game on a rainy day. The offence is stuck in neutral again but should be able to break the 200-point barrier for the first time in team history. The returners, gunners, and kickers are as good as anybody's.

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Jimmy's WEEK ONE PICKS

BUFFALO @ ST. CHARLES (line – CHARGERS by 2)

We start off this week's opening slate with the Champs of 2018 at home facing one of the Chumps of 2018. It couldn't get easier, right? Well, hold on a sec! A lot has changed in the off-season and the biggest change of all is the return of Andrew Luck. This fact alters the calculus by itself. Julio Jones, Robert Woods and Tevin Coleman will be used to better effect. But the potential difference-maker this year over last is the development of the Derailer defence at all levels, particularly in the secondary. No longer is Aaron Donald doing it on his own with an assist from Nick Chubb. Expect Byron Jones to make life difficult for Michael Thomas and Eddie Jackson to pick-off any ill-advised throws from Carson Wentz. Of course, the Chargers are coached by a master and have additional weapons of their own, which include an ageless Adrian Peterson and a captain of the defence in Darius Leonard to rival Luke Kuechly. It's the brain of the Charger coach versus the brawn of the Derailer D to start the season and I'm picking brawn. **PICK: BUFFALO**

BRUXELLES @ NEW JERSEY (line – BOMBERS by 1)

The Wrecking Balls appear to be, fundamentally, not much different from last year, except that they now have a curious-looking gadget known as Tarik Cohen in the backfield and somebody who could be called a defensive leader in safety, Jamal Adams. Will this make a difference against a Bruxelles team that often plays over its head and appears to be improved over last year's wildcard finalist? This is impossible to answer without knowing the New Jersey game plan or whether Cohen can do in the EFL what he did in the Tex-Mex League. If he can, he will make life easier on Jared Goff, who is full of potential but, so far, lean on performance. Working underneath to draw in the Bruxelles defenders may be the only way to free up his wide receivers against an air-tight Bruxelles secondary. The Bombers boast a nice group of wide receivers this year and Marlon Mack looks good subbing for a banged-up Leonard Fournette. I give Marcus Mariota a slight edge over his opposite number here, leading to Week One road win. **PICK: BRUXELLES**

CHARLESWOOD @ VIRDEN (line – VIOLATORS by 3)

The first regular season test of the highly-hyped Patrick Mahomes comes at home against cross-province rival Charleswood. This should be a barnburner. As much as Mahomes is expected to help Juju Smith-Schuster and Amari Cooper impose their will like gods on any defence; Pats QB, DeShaun Watson and the running back platoon of Lamar Miller and Alvin Kamara are expected to take a fair-sized bite out of the suspect Virden defence. Upwards of 60 points is a real possibility in this Week One free-for-all, so take the over if you can't decide which team is going to have its way with the other more. I have a feeling that when all of the fireworks have died down the whole crazy melee will come down to a field goal, with Cairo Santos missing it. **PICK: CHARLESWOOD**

LOS ANGELES @ CHINO (line – CONVICTS by 6)

With most of the football world already crowning the Cubs as West Division titlists, the Convicts could use a confidence-booster to start the season. The schedule-makers gave them one at home against the rebuilding Knights. While the Convicts certainly enter the game with all the advantages from a talent perspective, they should refrain from being too cocky. Week One has the ability, unique among all of the weeks of the season, to throw fans and players a curveball. When everyone is 0-0, everyone has hope. Jeff Dohrn's eternal optimism, even when facing the prospect of a winless season (a feat his team achieved in 2014), could translate into his team not realizing how bad they really are and coming in with a quiet confidence of their own. They have some good players: David Bakhtiari is as solid a left tackle as they come, Brandin Cooks can score from anywhere on the field and their young corners, Tre'Davious White and Greedy Williams are hungry to make a name for themselves on the 'New Blue Shield.' Of course, all it will take is Christian McCaffery gashing the LA defence with a big screen followed by an off-tackle run and a deep post from Dak Prescott to John Brown to pop the visitors' bubble of Week One optimism. **PICK: CHINO**

SCARBOROUGH @ SEBASTIAN (line – SWORDFISH by 8)

My write-up of the Los Angeles-Chino game applies here, with Sebastian taking on the role of Chino and Scarborough taking on the role of LA. The names are also different, with the exception that I cannot find four impact players on the Blue Eagles roster to create the illusion that they stand a hope; although I will mention Zack Martin here to acknowledge his greatness as a guard. This game will be a good warm-up for Drew Brees and Odell Beckham Jr, to iron out the kinks for their Week Two match-up against Cowtown. It will also allow the Swordfish to experiment with a pecking order for the gazillion running backs they are carrying on their roster. I am trying really hard to think of how Scarborough can make a game of it and drawing a blank. **PICK: SEBASTIAN**

COWTOWN @ DURHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 3)

This one will be interesting. The Thunder Lizards are not as bad as they were advertised to be during the off-season and the Corn Kings are not as good as they should be. Cowtown elected to return to Joe Flacco as their starting quarterback for reasons that are not clear. This is a clear downgrade, no matter how vociferously Coach Coghlin denies it. Whispers of Jimmy Garoppolo having a mysterious, undeclared injury, is the only explanation that makes sense. All of a sudden, Todd Gurley's Fantasy draft stock is dropping on board's everywhere. Cowtown's star running back will remain the catalyst for the Cowtown attack, just not as volatile a one. Durham cut ties with Cam Newton, giving hope to a healthy-looking stable of wide receivers of which TY Hilton is the stud. Both Nick Foles and Andy Dalton can get the ball to a group like that and Josh Allen is able to run with the ball if he can't. It's a pity that the running game has no legs. If the Corn Kings pass rush can get through more often than not and Gurley can ignore the keys in the run game, it won't matter much if Joe Flacco throws the odd wounded duck. But if one of those 'ifs' doesn't happen, the advantage switches to the Thunder Lizards at home. **PICK: DURHAM**

YORK @ PICKERING (line – EXCALIBURS by 2)

Vegas is obliged to acknowledge last year's finalist in the Gale Sayers Game in the Week One betting line not only for symbolic reasons, but to catch all of those casual bettors who don't pay attention to the off-season and carry the memory of last year's playoffs into the new season. The last memory casual fans have of 2018 was York making the final. For anyone paying attention to Pickering near the end of 2018, the memory would be of a demoralized team in disarray on the field. That has all changed – at least for now. The Spartans are reinvigorated and eager to slay the demons of last year, even if they remain essentially the same team as last year, apart from improvement at the offensive tackle positions. The Excaliburs are coming off a languid off-season in which they did little more than trade spare parts and draft prospects. If anything, they became a little worse all around by not addressing the cornerback position and not seeking out a true no. wide receiver. So, it will be interesting to see if Brady can work his magic again in 2019. Magic that powerful takes time to warm up. So, I am going with the "fresh start Spartans." **PICK: PICKERING**

BROOKLIN @ BUDAPEST (line – NORTH STARS by 3)

This is a very important game for setting expectations and gaining leverage in what will certainly be a brutal four-way battle for the division title. Of the top ten players on both of these rosters, Budapest has six of them. From there it's a neck-and-neck battle, with the Hawks eking out the edge on offence and the North Stars taking the prize on defense due to fewer weaknesses and the presence of strength at all three levels. This gives Budapest the talent edge heading into a home game, but the edge is not so big that it cannot be undone by a single Baker Mayfield indiscretion. The mercurial Budapest quarterback looks ready to make a name for himself. But his enthusiasm could get the better of him against a Brooklin defence that will give up its share of yardage but is also capable of stealing the ball through the air. Derek Carr is hoping a change of scenery will return him to the promising form of his early career and with DeAndre Hopkins going against Pierre Desir it may happen this week. Unlike most Brooklin games of last year, don't expect this one to be a firefight. Expect it to remain nail-bitingly close until the end. **PICK: BUDAPEST**

TORONTO @ AURORA (line – MUSTANGS by 4)

The Mustangs did not have to wait long to get their shot at the snot-nosed Toronto team that pushed them off their pedestal in 2018. This year, the Wolverines won't have the advantage of surprise. But they will have the advantage of a true franchise quarterback, Aaron Rodgers, to get the most out of high-end talent, Saquon Barkley, Tyreek Hill and brilliant route-runner Adam Thielen. The Aurora defence is improved over last season thanks to the return of JJ Watt and Patrick Peterson to top form. But the most important change over last year is the return of Julian Edelman to take the heat off of Davante Adams. Quick strike offence is the weapon Rich Liotta prefers to use to hammer opponents into submission; the Edelman security blanket for Matt Ryan makes that possible. Expect the Wolverines to be more aggressive in the passing game because they can and because they will need to in order to keep up with Mustangs. Expect them to have less success at it, though, on the road against a tough defence. **PICK: AURORA**

GEORGIA @ ERIEAU (line – GLADIATORS by 3)

The Gladiators enter the game the natural favourite for the obvious reason that they are the better team and have a more experienced coach. But the one thing that could upset their plans to get the season off to a good start by smashing up the Caddies: A Big Ben interception-fest; is the one thing the Cadillac are well-qualified to pull off. The Georgia quarterback will have to be patient. He should get many opportunities to find the end zone – thanks to the perennially stagnant Erieau offence – and can refrain from forcing a ball through a tight window to Cole Beasley and having it picked off by Desmond King. The Glads acquired Josh Jacobs for the purpose of being able to rotate backs and keep the legs fresh, so handing off the ball should always be an option. If Big Ben can control himself, this will be a slow-cooker, with the Cadillac fully done by late in the 4th quarter. **PICK: GEORGIA**

TWIN CITIES @ PEG CITY (line – TRIUMPH by 9)

Welcome to the Central Division, Peg City! Your “rookie” hazing ritual begins with an invitation for the biggest bully in the conference to come into your new home and beat the living crap out of you. For a rookie coach, this is not the match-up you want to start your coaching career in the EFL and for an owner it is not the first game you want your new fans to see. Nevertheless, it is something a new coach and owner must endure to stand a chance of some day getting revenge – just ask John Clingan about it. So, the key to surviving your opening day thrashing with your dignity intact is to not try to do too much. Stick to your game plan, using simple, achievable plays, and hope that enough time passes between Triumph possessions for your defence’s ass to recover. You will give up a lot of points no matter what you do, don’t worry about it. A touchdown or two from your capable offence will be enough to send the Triumph the message that you plan to be a thorn in their side when you finally have your team built. **PICK:**

TWIN CITIES

SEATTLE @ IOWA CITY (line – CUBS by 10)

This home-opener against a team that has never failed to achieve double-digit losses in a season looks like the ideal Week One confidence-booster for a good, but fragile team needs a little encouragement now and again. Except, for the Cubs, it is the opposite. Bring on the Triumph to start the year, pleads Deron Redding. Anyone but the Pilots! Since the Monarchs moved to Seattle the Pilots have bedeviled the Cubs in Week One, narrowly losing to them in 2017 and beating them handily in 2018. To give you an idea of the mis-match, the Pilots’ combined win total in those two seasons was 6, compared with 23 for the Cubs. So, the last team the Cubs wish to face in Week One is a lock and loaded Pilots squad that has one musket ball to fire and its blunderbusses pointed squarely on their chests. Apart from the psychological edge that Seattle seems to have over their big brother in the West, there is no other reason to consider the possibility of a Seattle upset. Kareem Hunt is still the best player they have on offence and that won’t be enough. Khalil Mack making a mission out of Russell Wilson is the only way this will stay close and Wilson has the legs to win that race. **PICK: IOWA CITY**

