



2008

# PREVIEW

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The Chinese Zodiac dictates the next 'Year-of-the-Dragon' will be in 2012. Florida coach, Jim Heaton feels that is too long to wait. He is planning his own 'Year-of-the-Dragon' and, if things go according to plan, it will occur this year.

"The team is coming together nicely," Heaton says from his office in the Dragon's Marshland training facility. "We expect to compete this year."

Heaton is soft-spoken and a master

of understatement. He does not often grant interviews, but today he is in a good mood. While he blandly professes his expectations to "compete," his Division rivals are near panic, struggling to imagine a game plan that could stop the Dragon's offensive juggernaut and break open cracks in their defense. To them, winning even one phase of the game on a given day is a challenge to conceive, let alone execute. The Dragons, it appears, are *that* good.

Fans and beat writers covering Florida's training camp and pre-season share one basic opinion: the Dragons are for real and appear to be unstoppable. Although rarely a reliable indicator of regular season performance, Florida was so impressive while going 4-0 in the pre-season that people are already talking "Championship" as if it is a done deal.

## IS 2008 THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON?



**Florida quarterback, Tom Brady.**  
Will he tire out his arms celebrating in 2008?



**Antonio Cromartie** is tearing up camp at a Pro Bowl pace. Get used to reading about him.

This kind of talk brings a gentle rebuke from Heaton. “It would be premature to assume anything about any team at this stage. The regular season hasn’t even started yet,” he says, leaning forward at his desk and steepling his fingers as if in prayer. “We have some very tough teams to contend with.”

That may be true, but the consensus is that Florida is the strongest of the strong – as much for their lack of weakness in any area as for the strength of their star players. The Dragons have quality starters at every position starting with the most important one, quarterback, where they have the best there is in Tom Brady. The offensive line, which kept Brady upright and un-sacked in the pre-season, is young, talented and effective.

They also have depth at key positions in the secondary, where budding star Darrelle Revis is playing nickel back because he cannot wrestle a starting job away from Antonio Cromartie or Leigh Bodden. And speaking of Cromartie, picked up by Florida on waivers last year after failing to crack the Patriot’s roster, he is making heads turn at training camp and has a lock on the starting right corner spot. If he continues to perform, he will vastly improve an area of the defense that was a

glaring weakness for Florida last year. Add to the defensive mix two ferocious pass rushers in Osi Umenyiora and Dwight Freeney, a top notch run-stuffer in John Henderson, and the steady Lofa Tatupu plugging the gaps, and you have one of the league’s more solid defenses, a virtual “Firewall” to support what is shaping up to be the league’s most spectacular offense.

Any offense led by Tom Brady is going to perform well, but this offense comes with a selection of dangerous weapons that will become even more deadly in the hands of a master like Brady. Steven Jackson is a workhorse back with speed and versatility and DeAngelo Williams brings an explosive change of pace when Jackson is resting. TJ Houshmandzadeh, Brandon Marshall, and Jericho Cotchery form the most dangerous trio of wide receivers in the league, and Heath Miller can block *and* catch. It really does not get any better than this.

So why does Jim Heaton look like he just sat on a warm shepherd’s pie when asked about the upcoming season? “I am anxious to see the team in action, of course,” he says, turning his head up from a blanket of excel spreadsheets on his desk and adjusting his reading glasses, “but I worry about the league’s long term future. I am afraid that some owners don’t understand the value of the money they are spending.”

He points to the nine million dollar free agent contract signed by DeMeco Ryans in the off-season when the expansion Death Valley Undertakers, flush with plenty of cap room, tried to lure the budding superstar away from Iowa City. “That is the kind of money that will bring a team down eventually, and when individual teams get in trouble, so does the entire league,” he says in the dispassionate, clipped tone of an investment banker who sits above the fray, shrewdly targeting value at a bargain while the herd on the trading floor chases the latest trend. “It is an astounding and highly risky commitment to make to one player. One injury could turn that signing into a disaster.”

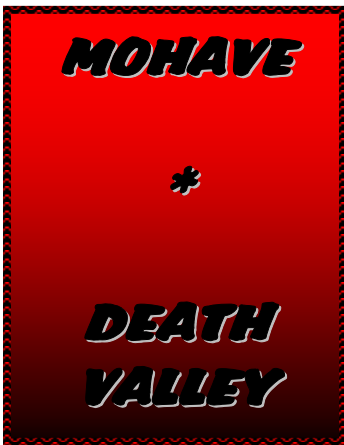
When asked about the three-year, 12.6 million dollar contract Tom Brady signed with the Dragons at the conclusion of last year, making him the highest paid player in the EFL, Heaton is momentarily silent. Then he levels the writer a withering look and snaps, “get out of my office!”

The security personnel at the Dragon’s Marshland training facility are almost as efficient as Tom Brady. They whisked me out of Heaton’s office quickly and left my limbs intact with only minor bruising. They even managed to somewhat mollify my rising anger by giving me a free hat as they pushed me out the door. Overall, I was impressed. It sure felt better than being tied to a chariot and dragged out of the Gwinnett County Coliseum, as I was last year when I tried to ask Carson Palmer about an interception he threw in a tough home loss to Mohave.

So, who stands between the Dragons and a Championship trophy? In the South Division, those nasty Gladiators stand guarding the gateway to a Division Title, but whether they are able to offer anything more than token resistance remains to be seen. In the other Conference, the defending Champions, the Chino Convicts will be looking to a rookie QB to lead them back to the final, but they will first have to overcome a vastly improved Iowa City Cubs team in order to do so. If somehow they do and end up facing the Dragons in the final, they will have to pull off a feat like the escape from Alcatraz to repeat last year’s Championship success.

Then, of course, within the Conference in the North Division there is Charleswood. Last year’s favourite to win the title remains strong this year and vastly improved in the running game with the acquisition of Arian Peterson. They remain the front-runner to stop the Dragons before the final. If the Patriots can’t get it done, Cowtown cannot be discounted from pulling off an upset, nor can Durham.

But, in the end, is any team really likely to slay the Dragon and save Middle Earth? The answer is probably not. Fret though he might over the remote possibility that an opponent will land a lucky blow or the Dragons will somehow self-immolate, Jim Heaton can rest assured that 2008 will be the *Year of the Dragon* in the EFL.



To the average commuter there is nothing noteworthy about Whites Road, apart from the mundane fact that it is one of the faster north-south routes feeding Highway 401 from the suburban sprawl on the eastern edge of Durham Region. Residents complain of rush hour speeders and Saturday night drag racers, but otherwise it is a typical minor commercial artery serving Middle Canadian suburbia – oversized strip malls, restaurants and gas stations dotting a concrete landscape broken up by struggling trees and withered gardens. Some would call it dreary, others would call it boring. It stays that way for most of the year. But when fall arrives, on the Seventh Day of the week, Whites Road undergoes a dramatic transformation.

It is football Sunday in Durham Region. From all over the region and as far away as Mississauga and Kingston, fans in cars, vans, buses, pick-ups and SUVs flock to Whites Road, the one route leading to the gates of the astounding hidden land of Jurassic Park, home of the EFL Durham Thunder Lizards. More than just a theme park, it is a marvel of landscape, weather and genetic engineering – a vision of the far past that, critics say, has no place in the present day, and especially no place as a theatre for football. But even the critics admit that it is a work of genius, mad though that genius may be, and supporters, (who appear to outnumber the detractors), love the place with an almost deranged passion. As they say in the commercial, “those who like it like it a lot.”

Most days the north end of Whites Road ends in a ‘T’ intersection at an embankment where large trees and bushes block the view beyond. But on football Sunday, the embankment literally opens up to reveal a wide dirt road on the other side. It would not be inviting to enter except for the large marquee ‘welcome – please enter’ sign erected over the entrance displaying the game time and opponents. If you look closely as you pass under it (and most people do not) you can read the words “at your own risk” at the bottom.

Almost immediately the road descends in a shallow but continuous grade until the wall of earth and foliage on either side rise high enough to block all natural light but the noon day sun. At night and especially in the rain, this is a treacherous path. The tiki gas lamps that substitute for halogen street lights create an eerie flickering glow that distort the shadows and have a bad habit of going out. Regular drivers boast the ability to drive the route with their eyes closed but first-timers, especially ones with a few drinks in their systems; have a tendency to wind up off the road. Fortunately the

speeds are rarely fast and there have been no traffic fatalities, yet.

Upon reaching approximately the one mile point on the road, the atmosphere changes dramatically. The air becomes thick with mist and the heat begins to rise. Adjectives like “hot,” “humid,” “oppressive” do not really capture it. “Sauna” is a better starting point, with faint aromas of green tea, earth and fish. The flora and fauna is other-worldly – giant green ferns with bugs the size of fists resting on the fringes, trees as thick as truck cabs with bark like wooden tiles towering overhead like skyscrapers. At this point, most people forget they are heading to a football game and look around in awe. Many cannot believe that they are looking at real plants and real trees, but even those in disbelief are in awe of the illusion if that is what it really is.

The road suddenly opens up and branches out in four different paths leading to the East, West, North and South parking lot areas around the stadium. East is reserved for tour groups and the



Entrance to Jurassic Park, home of the Durham Thunder Lizards.





**Tailgating outside the stadium can be dangerous at Durham's Jurassic Park.**

team's buses and entourage. West and North are for regular fans attending the game. The South lot is for young families too cautious to brave the stadium and the jungle. It contains a small and well-protected theme park with rides, restaurants, and a petting zoo enclosed behind a wall of gigantic trees and electric fencing to keep the "beasts" out. "Beasts" is a euphemistic term used by the staff at Jurassic Park to refer to the dinosaurs. Yes, dinosaurs. Not real ones, at least not the originals, but genetically engineered dinosaurs recreated by fragments of DNA recovered from archeological digs in the tar sands of Northern Alberta.

The genius behind these creations is an obscure Swiss geneticist named Upz Lukvativdun. Originally commissioned by Celine Dion and her husband, Rene, to create the world's most unique pet, Lukvativdun experimented with trace strands of dinosaur DNA and DNA from living animals and plants. His initial attempts failed to get past the egg stage

and he was on the verge of giving up, but Celine Dion refused to release him from his underground lab/prison until he had made her "a pet that people will look at and say, 'oh, I've never seen that kind of pet before, what is it?'" Eventually he found success, but it came at the cost of his assistant, Hellep Mimmastersmadd, who was devoured by an experiment code-named # 14-BAPO, a cross between an Allosaurus, a tiger, an onion and a piranha.

Lukvativdun realized that he had to temper the dinosaur's predatory nature while still retaining the dinosaur "look," so he experimented with more benign mixes. Finally, he designed a creature that gained Celine and Rene's unreserved approval. Created from a base strand of Raptor DNA, mixed with tree frog, pelican, hamster, wild orchid and Burmese sloth, the result was a fearsomely beautiful, dexterous and fast, yet surprisingly docile....*thing*. Dubbed the *Celinosaurus* in honour of its patron, the first, and the most striking, of Lukvativdun's creations now spends game day roaming the sidelines of Durham's home field, screeching like a prehistoric version of Dion herself while the visitors have the ball. More than average crowd noise, or a Celine Dion recording, the sound of the *Celinosaurus* gets inside the opposing

quarterback's head, disrupting concentration and causing migraine headaches. It is no wonder that opposing QBs combined for a 65.4 rating at Durham home games last season.

Buoyed by that success, Dion and her husband united Lukvativdun's genetics genius with the talents of Korean weather engineer, Mah Way-n, and Australian landscape designer, Landon Gardner, to create the most unique football stadium and theme park in the world – Jurassic Park, Home of the Thunder Lizards.

So what is it like to play football in prehistoric weather conditions surrounded by Frankenstein dinosaurs and a team owner who is an insufferable *'prima dona'*? "You kind of get used to it, actually," says Durham quarterback, Philip Rivers, "at least to the weather and the dinosaurs. We practice here and some of us live in the Dino-tel during the week of home games. As hot as it is, there's actually a lot of good oxygen here. I think it's healthy."

The heat alone is one thing, but the humidity is what breaks opponents and the less robust fans. Hovering around 95% on average during the summer and early fall, the threat of rain seems to be always in the air. With virtually no wind to fan the pervasive layer of sweat that forms on the skin within minutes of exposure, fans, players and on-field workers experience the constant feeling of having just emerged fully clothed from a hot tub.

"Don't even bother changing your socks," says one grounds-keeper, "unless you want to keep buying a dozen pair a day. I wear one pair until they rot off my feet before I switch to a fresh pair. That doesn't take more than a day, usually."

The grounds-keepers work seven days a week, sixteen hours a day, and are more familiar than anyone with the strange growing conditions in Jurassic Park. "We use a seed called 'Mezanoic Mat' that grows about an inch every twelve hours. The blades are flat and 4 inches wide. I don't know where they get the stuff but we go through about twenty lawnmower blades a week cutting it," says another grounds-keeper, named Bill. "It makes a nice stadium turf though."



**The Celinosaurus. Celine Dion's personal pet and Durham mascot.**

“I love the grass,” says Thunder Lizards running back, Frank Gore, nicknamed ‘Dino-Gore’ because of his raw, predatory rushing style. “It’s not as slippery as regular grass and that’s good, because it’s always wet.” He pauses and smiles wryly, “I love the grass but I hate the rain!”

Around the league, visiting players are nearly unanimous – Jurassic Park is not a place where they want to play football. The opinion of Kutztown quarterback, Tony Romo, whose worst game of the 2007 season came in Week 4 at Jurassic Park, is reflective of the general feeling around the league: “Jessica and her Dad loved the petting zoo and spent the rest of the time in the hotel, so they had a good time, for sure. But me, as a player? Come on! They have three guys in green rain coats on the field whose only job is to keep the balls dry, and they’re *still* wet! How can you play with wet balls?”

“It’s like the balls actually sweat,” adds Mohave running back, Brian Westbrook. “I’m not comfortable playing with sweaty balls, but I do my best.”

While the players worry about wet balls, tailgating fans in the West and North stadium parking lots worry about their cars and their lives. “Me and my buddies, we were chugging back some tall ones and scoffing down burgers from the BBQ in the North lot (that’s where we like to go) when suddenly we all heard this thumping sound,” says Lizard Larry, a die-hard Durham fan who lives for the tailgate party on game day. “I looked up, (we all looked up), and I saw this creature. It had a huge mouth and legs and these tiny arms, and it had what looked like a horn on its forehead and feathers. To this day I don’t know what it was, but it swooped down on Fred in a second and took him in one bite. Then it carried him off into that jungle and we never saw Fred again.”

Durham team officials acknowledge that it is unknown exactly what creatures roam the jungle in the “unsupervised” areas of the park. Lukvativdun conducted many experiments before hitting on the *Celinosaurus*, and some of them got away from the lab. “Generally, the parking lots are safe, but we obviously cannot guarantee it,” says George Kaldis, President and GM of the Thunder Lizards. “That’s why we sell tickets with a liability waiver attached. People have to look at the fun side, though. We encourage big game hunters to come and try their luck here and ‘Hunting Season’ in Jurassic Park is every day except game day! All we ask is that you bring the bodies back to us. You can take all the pictures you want but we need the bodies of these things. Every genetically modified creature here is copyrighted and we don’t want anyone cloning our creatures for commercial gain.”

At least one citizen’s group does not approve of Celine and Rene Dion’s “Dinosaur Disney World,” as it’s called. The non-profit action group, People Against Dinosaurs (PAD), is seeking a Court Order to have ‘Dino-Corp,’ the official corporate owner of Jurassic Park, immediately cease all genetic experiments and impound all of the creatures roaming the park.

“These creatures are an abomination!” pronounces Maxine Barker, spokeswoman for PAD. “There are no controls on the experiments. Nobody really knows what they are creating or how those creatures and strange plants affect our environment. What if the creatures get loose from the park, or those gigantic ferns and trees start growing in our gardens and our lawns? What then?”

Maxine is not just concerned about the effect of prehistoric animals and plants on her

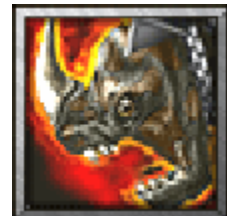
community, but as a football fan she is deeply concerned about the effect that stadiums like Jurassic Park, and others like Death Valley’s ‘Graveyard,’ and Mohave’s ‘Fiery Depths,’ are having on the integrity of the game that she and her husband love.

“Football was not meant to be played in a jungle with dinosaurs, or in a scorching hot desert, or in a graveyard. Especially not a graveyard with zombies!” she says, referring to Death Valley’s ultra-modern new stadium complex that includes real undead zombies serving food at the concession stands. “Football is not professional wrestling!”

She cites concern for her young boys, ages 6 and 8, as the ultimate reason why she has decided to fight against the proliferation of extreme football parks and the unnatural practices that accompany them. “How is this affecting our kids?” she asks. “We are sending the wrong message to them if we encourage parks with dinosaurs, and people who should be dead working in the concession stands! We are telling them that nature is wrong – that dinosaurs should not be extinct and that dead people can serve food. What kid wants to see a dinosaur or a zombie at a football game?”

But that is where Maxine is wrong. Kids love dinosaurs. In an age when people are demanding more excitement for their entertainment dollar and craving unique new experiences, Jurassic Park delivers the goods, especially for the kids. As for zombies, college kids love them. It’s all part of the sale and for many the hook is worth the price of admission. Heck, on top of that you get to watch a football game!

*NEXT WEEK:* Death Valley’s ‘Graveyard.’



**Artist's  
rendition of the  
thing that ate  
tail-gating Fred**



# The Smucker Scoop

By Orville Smucker

## The “Top Ten” Player Moves

COWTOWN – I do not approve of rating things. I especially disapprove of “top ten” ratings – it implies that everything worthwhile naturally comes in groups of ten. What if ten is too few, or too many? When faced with a large number of variables, we switch naturally to “top one hundred,” an inflated version of the “top ten.” Why do we do put ourselves through this irrational and unscientific exercise??

Because it is fun, that’s why! I may be an old curmudgeon who is tired of many things, one of which is the futility of top ten lists. But how can anyone, especially a football fan, tire of ranking things – even me? In spite of myself, I like to do it, and I really love to criticize other people who do it. I always find numerous flaws in their meticulously constructed lists and that is even more fun than making my own lists in the first place.

So, with the understanding that what follows is subjective, unscientific, missing subtlety, likely stupid, and subject to your ridicule and criticism, here are my Top Ten Player Moves during the 2008 EFL pre-season. By “move,” I mean transactions that *moved* a player from one place to another: a free agent signing, a trade, or a waiver pick. Rookies drafted out of college are not included, unless they happened to have been traded or picked up in waivers. Each move will be valuable for a different reason, so read carefully. From bottom to top, here they are:

**#10 – Winnemucca / Death Valley – Keith Rivers** (LB) goes to Winnemucca; **Jermaine Phillips** (S) goes to Death Valley. (Trade, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

The Outlaws get one of the top linebacker prospects in the draft to build around, while the Undertakers snatch a play-making safety to bolster their secondary. Death Valley is gunning for the East Division title while Winnemucca is already looking ahead to next year. This is a good trade for both teams under the circumstances.

**#9 – Winnemucca – David Garrard** (QB) acquired as an Unrestricted Free Agent, 1<sup>st</sup> Round

The “Devil’s bonus” of \$ 6,666,666 may have been a deal worth making for a new team like the Outlaws. Garrard can provide leadership this year and for years to come.

**#8 – Los Angeles – Olin Kreutz** (C) acquired as a Restricted Free Agent.

The Knights desperately needed a captain on the offensive line after watching David Carr lie on his back most of last season and they got one of the best in the angry former Hellfire center, Olin Kreutz.

**#7 – Brisbane Bay – Matt Hasselbeck** (QB) acquired as an Unrestricted Free Agent, 1<sup>st</sup> Round.

The Sharks are missing some critical parts to compete for the East Division title, but with Matt they have a proven and reliable quarterback to keep them in the games this year and to build around for the future.

**#6 – Death Valley – Fred Taylor** (RB) acquired as an Unrestricted Free Agent, 1<sup>st</sup> round.

The Undertakers cinched a powerful running game with this critical signing.

**#5 – Durham / Death Valley – Ike Taylor** (CB) goes to Durham; **Kris Dielman** (G) goes to Death Valley. (Trade, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

The Undertakers obtain a young, impact offensive lineman from a team stacked at that position and give up their talented nickel corner, while the Thunder Lizards shore up their depleted secondary with a playmaker to man the right corner position. Time will tell who ultimately got the better player, but both teams traded strength to fortify weakness and you can’t argue with that.

**#4 – Iowa City / Brisbane Bay – Sharks #1 rookie pick** goes to Iowa City; **Mike Vrabel** (LB) goes to Brisbane Bay. (Trade, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

The Sharks pick up their defensive leader for this year and the next in exchange for their first pick in the 2009 draft. The Cubs, deep at linebacker, could afford to part with a 32-year old star for a chance at landing a stud coming out of college. High value on both ends makes this an important deal.

**#3 – Death Valley – Donovan McNabb** (QB) acquired through Waivers.

If there was any previous doubt about who had the inside track in the race for the East, it was put to rest when the Undertakers snatched McNabb off the waiver wire. Last year's EFL Championship quarterback is a proven leader with a title under his belt. While he is unlikely to repeat the Championship gig on an expansion team, he will take Death Valley as far as they can possibly go.

**#2 – Mohave – Kurt Warner** (QB) acquired through Waivers.

Last year the Hellfire had all of the winning ingredients except a consistent quarterback. With Warner they have a steadier veteran at the most important position on the field, but without the same caliber of supporting cast. Nevertheless, Mohave is still dangerous, making this a critical pick up for them this year and moving forward.

*And the drum roll please.....*

*.....at #1.....the most important player move in the 2008 pre-season.....*

**#1 – Charleswood – Jerious Norwood** (RB) acquired as a Restricted Free Agent.

"What? A part time running back is the most important player acquisition in the off-season? Are you nuts, Orville?" you exclaim, slack-jawed. "Yes, it is the most important acquisition and no, I am not nuts. But I like nuts, especially almonds," I answer, without hesitation. While Norwood may not be the most important player on this list from the perspective of individual impact, his acquisition by the Patriots could end up being the key ingredient to their success this year. Norwood completes the "Super Back" package behind Peyton Manning. With Norwood spelling young Adrian Peterson, there will be no rest for Charleswood's opponents. It is a relatively minor move with potentially big consequences – a sleight of hand, a magic word, and maybe, just maybe, the difference in a big playoff game.

#### **Bonus Feature: Orville's Trash**

Ha! You did not think I could make it through an entire article emphasizing only the positive did you? An old, conservative curmudgeon like me needs to vent his spleen, especially when there are so many young whippersnappers running professional football teams these days!

So let's discuss free agency! I remember that the NFL was created in the first place because teams were getting carried away spending money on individual players for purposes of one-upmanship. Finally, they got it through their thick skulls that they were *all* going to go broke if they didn't put some rules in place. So, they did, and for years afterwards the players griped about their salaries. Nobody's happy, God damn it! But I see it simpler than all of that. Whatever makes the *fans* happy is what is most important! The owners and the players would be out on their duffs if it weren't for the fans watching their game and paying for tickets and jerseys. So I am for whatever makes the fans happy, and I don't think they will be happy down the road when it comes time for their teams to pay the Salary Cap Piper, *he he!* Who is in trouble? Let us look inside my trash can....

**Chino** – they spent almost 21 million dollars in bonus money for a cluster of marginal free agents, one of whom they dealt away. What is going on here? No wonder they couldn't re-sign their Championship quarterback, Donovan McNabb! If they could repeat, I'd forgive them. But they won't – take it to the bank.

**Iowa City** – the home of Demeco Ryans, the Nine Million Dollar Man, is in a better position than Division rival Chino, so I can't blame them for trying to hang on to their top talent, given that they aren't in a high salary position with their other players. But nine million dollars for a linebacker is still too much Jack for my Jill.

**Colorado** – Needlessly high bonus money paid to good, but not great offensive linemen and a one-dimensional tight end is the reason they were over the cap before roster deadline. They went for broke to land some starters, which, though understandable to some degree, meant they lost some flexibility in late trading and the waiver draft, something a building expansion team cannot afford to do.

**Kutztown** – Crazy money to Chris Cooley and Greg Jennings put the Golden Bears in a "must cut" position before the deadline.

**Winnemucca** – Took the shotgun approach and signed a boat load of players only to have to shove some others off an already overcrowded boat. All these transactions cost them money. Having to eat Jermaine Phillips' \$6,666,666 signing bonus will cause indigestion for years to come.

**Florida** – Would you break the bank and spend \$12.6 million a year for 3 years for Tom Brady? I know he's *Tom Brady*, but..... (see Demeco Ryans above)

There you have it. My opinion, for what it's worth, and it is worth a lot! I have more to complain about but I'll leave it to another day. Now I have to take my afternoon nap.





# EFL TRAINING CAMP REPORT

BY SPARKY MATCHESON, CONTINENTAL TRAVELER

SOMEWHERE IN NORTH AMERICA – I am Sparky Matcheson, and I travel the continent. I love to travel, but I hate the ocean, so I confine myself to one land mass. I am also a football fanatic, and my uncle owns the Tijuana Tacos of the Tex-Mex Football League. That’s cool, I guess, but I want to watch *real* football played by the best players in the game. My uncle is tired of me griping about his stupid league, so he gave a Platinum American Express Card and 100,000 of his Air Miles and sent me away to “scout” for the Tacos, to make them better, of course. I didn’t need to be told twice. Off I went, wondering who was kidding who.

Of course, I had no intention of hanging around the colleges and universities. Everyone knows that the best from those institutions are heading to the EFL after they graduate. I decided to aim as high as I could and made my plans to visit every single EFL training camp, so see who made the grade, and who fell just a little short. If the castoffs were good enough to get signed by the EFL in the first place, I reasoned, they would be good enough for my uncle’s Tacos.

I had a great time at the camps. I made it to each one. The contacts I made keep in touch me almost every day, so I know what I’m talking about when it comes to insider info. The EFL is a great league. It is the best, by far. But my uncle’s Tacos will be a lot better because of my North American tour of the EFL training facilities. Here is what I found:

**ANCHORAGE** – They train at a place called Bear Field, south of the Alaskan capital, to get “used to the tundra,” but they play their games on turf inside a heated dome – go figure! It was a pretty uneventful camp, except for the day Drew Brees decided to throw blindfolded to Sidney Rice against the Bucs secondary in a voluntary drill and completed 4 out of 8, with no picks, against Jason David and Ricky Manning Jr. There was one surprise cut, *Antwan Barnes*, freshly signed away from Chino in free agency but dumped at the final hour to make room for somebody, probably one million dollar long-snapper, Bryan Pittman.

**BRISBANE BAY** – The Sharks share a training facility with the Chino Convicts during pre-season. Or at least they did. When equipment started to go missing, they moved south to Baja, California. I liked the atmosphere around this team during practice; they were positive and supportive of each other in a very un-shark-like way. Too bad they’re going to get killed by Death Valley during the regular season. It was sad to see *Adam Archuleta* cut on the final day of camp, but he has fallen a long way from his former stature. I didn’t even offer him a job with the Tacos.

**CHARLESWOOD** – The Patriot’s Red River training facility is beautiful. It is rugged, yet peaceful. I almost postponed my flight to Iowa City to stay an extra day, but Peyton Manning is irritating as hell and with all of the starting jobs already locked up, there was no competition to watch. The only controversy, if you can call it that, was the decision to cut rookie *Darrell Robertson* and go with five linebackers on the roster.

**CHINO** – The Yard, as they call the practice field, is guarded by snipers in guard towers positioned at each corner of the field. If that doesn’t keep players focused on the drills, I don’t know what will. There was plenty of pre-season drama in Chino this year. The Donovan McNabb Posse disbanded when the Convicts released their star quarterback and the former members split between the Vince Young Posse and the Jay Cutler Gang. When Young disappeared, and was later found playing Grand Theft Auto in a dress and stilettos at the home of Monterrey Jacks quarterback, Charlie Batch, his supporters joined the Cutler Gang *en masse*, except for a few diehard ‘anti-Cutlerites’ who joined up with the Jake Delhomme Tea Party. If this wasn’t enough distraction, *Adam “Pacman” Jones* was arrested for giving crack cocaine to a stripper in Vegas and suspended for a season, and *Tony Pashos* was caught by an inmate raiding the prisoner’s kitchen at the Big House. Pashos was soon traded to Cowntown, where there is lots of beef and corn to feed the oversized tackle.

**COLORADO** – The South Park training facility, home to the Thundersnow, is a surreal place. Cows and Aliens are commonplace and Satan and Jesus shop at the same Walmart. Never mind, I was there for football. What I saw was a veritable Quarterback Carnival, with rookie *Matt Ryan* emerging as the guy who won the giant panda in the softball-into-the-wicker-basket toss. Sent packing was former Knights pivot, *David Carr*, as was *Matt Leinart*, but the latter was quickly reclaimed on waivers.



**COWTOWN** – *Boooooorrrriinnnggg!* The local Chapter of the North American Corn Growers Cooperative sponsors the Corn Kings training camp. They are about as exciting as a corn growers cooperative could possibly be, which is not very exciting. This is the first time I have seen potato sack races pass as drills at a professional football camp. They call them corn sacks, but they are really *potato* sacks, trust me. Nobody criticized Chad Pennington’s spaghetti arm and the cuts were predictable. No controversy, no fun. I hope they suck this year!

**DEATH VALLEY** – Nobody is really sure what the Undertakers are up to because nobody outside of the team wants to get close to their training field, which is right next to the their stadium, the Grave Yard. I got close enough to say I was there, but not close enough to tell you anything about it, except that there was a lot of mist still rising from it on a sunny summer afternoon.

**DURHAM** – The security around the Thunder Lizards practice field makes the Green Zone in Iraq look like an Open House. In order to over-acclimatize their players, the team holds practices in the “wild” area of Jurassic Park where the air is heavy with humidity and the landscape rife with predatory genetically modified dinosaurs. *Chris McAlister’s* asthma couldn’t take it anymore and he was dumped for rookie, *Patrick Lee*.

**FLORIDA** – The conditions at the Dragon’s Marshland training facility are the exact opposite of those at their Dragonmount home field. The reason they practice this way is anybody’s guess since the Heaton Regime (as it is called in South Florida) is not speaking to the media more than is absolutely necessary. I got to see *Clark Haggans* miss a tackle on Ray Rice, and another on Jonathan Stewart, and another on....well does it really matter? He got cut. *Rod Coleman* seemed to suffer in the heat and was dumped as well. None of that really matters because the Dragons are the class of the league with or without them.

**GWINNETT** – The Gladiators did not have many decisions to make in camp since they kept their training camp roster close to the regular season limit. But they sure worked out their players hard during the pre-season. Being “cut” by Gwinnett didn’t actually mean leaving the team; it meant actually being “cut” by an opponent in gladiatorial combat.

**IOWA CITY** – I thought the Corn Kings were boring, but now I have to redefine my concept of “boring.” GM, Deron Redding, eschewing competition and potential acrimony in camp, decided to do all the cutting *before* camp and invited only those who had made the team. “This way, camp is a team-building exercise, not a competition,” he explains. “As one big family we need to support one another.” It made me puke right there.

**KUTZTOWN** – This is more like it; cuts and controversy! Greg Jennings’ salary, as predicted, made some players angry, *Eddie Kennison* in particular. Goodbye, Eddie, hope you enjoy the scorching Mohave dessert! By the way, you don’t get cut from the Golden Bears, you get “kut.” It’s a distinction they make, FYI.

**LOS ANGELES** – *Charles Woodson* was obviously not happy during team drills. The Knight’s star corner has made no secret of his frustration with GM, Jeff Dohrn, and wants to be traded. To prove a point about the lack of commitment to the offense, he tied his arms around his waist in an intra-squad game and still defended two Tavaris Jackson passes. “Either I’m *that* good, or he’s *that* bad!” Woodson barked at amused reporters.

**MOHAVE** – I know what the pundits are saying about Florida and Charleswood, and I agree with them to a point, both teams *do* have the talent to go the distance this year. But those writers haven’t been to a Mohave training camp! Griddle Field is baked clay, open air, and 128 degrees Fahrenheit at high noon in July. Any player who can survive six weeks of that is ready to knock over any competition.

**RINGGOLD** – There was plenty of blood-letting as camp broke at Ringgold’s “Hawk’s Nest” training complex. *Deuce McAllister*, hampered by injuries, was released, only to be grabbed by Chino on waivers. Promising rookie tackle, *Anthony Collins* also got the boot and was signed by the Big Pond Pandas of the SFL. *Ed Johnson*, who would have made many rosters, was dumped for salary cap reasons.

**WINNEMUCCA** – This was, by far, the most fun I had at a training camp. There is a Wild West amusement park right next to the training field and it has *everything!* Real fake saloons and banks ready to be robbed by pop guns. I spent a fortune there. As for football, there was plenty of controversy and excitement, and I actually signed a player for my uncle’s team – *Donnie Edwards*, originally acquired by the Outlaws from Durham in a trade but cut over *Pisa Tinoisamoa* for salary cap reasons. Ageing *Ruben Brown* and *Jason Dunn* were cut, as were youngsters, *Keyaron Fox* and *Nick Hill*. Hill was cool afterwards and accepted my challenge to a High Noon Showdown on Main Street in ‘Old Winnemucca,’ as the amusement park is called. He shot me dead and I didn’t mind in the least.



# 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 Geek*

*New blood will boil in the East and death will triumph. In the West the young and innocent will be avenged over the wicked and rapacious. To the North a tremendous battle of titans will rage and lay waste to all but the Faithful and the True. In the South, a pillar of fire from the top of the dragon's mountain will scorch man, the barren earth, and the beasts of the air. The longitudinal axis will rule the path of the earth with the ascendancy of the Dragon. Thus it is written. . . .thus it will be. — The Football Oracle*

CANTON, OH – Receiving a reading from the Football Oracle is kind of like being suspended in mid-air by some mysterious force while x-rays examine you from every angle – you feel powerless and exposed. Of course, you are actually just sitting on a rickety old chair at a small stone table in a dimly lit cave that smells of cheese. Across from you the Oracle sits, her face hidden deep inside a dark grey hood. She wears a plain grey robe tied around the waist by a length of rope. There is a Green Bay Packers charm hanging from her neck, her only ornament. The walls and the floors are bare.

It was the Football Oracle who foretold of the demise of the old NFL two years ago. Since then, people have been clamoring for football readings. To be sure, many of these people are looking to place bets based on her predictions, but the Oracle sniffs them out right away and sends them packing. Her readings are few and far between and for a very select group. I am fortunate to be one of those she will speak to about the future of football.

While it is an honour to be among the chosen few permitted to sit with the Oracle, it is also a colossal headache. Firstly, it takes her hours to write a single sentence. (Apparently it takes that long for the information to transfer from the appropriate future space-time dimension back to the present). Secondly, when she is finally finished writing, I often do not understand what she's written. Thirdly, when I ask for clarification, her answer is always the same: "look within your heart for the meaning, my son. That is all," she intones solemnly. Sheeesh! Thanks a lot, Football Oracle!

Anyway, with her cryptic scroll of predictions in front of me, and after examining my inner being for the meaning of the more obscure passages, here is my take on what the Football Oracle knows about the EFL teams and what will happen to them in the 2008 season. I break them down first by conference, then by Division, in the predicted order of finish.

## PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

### EAST DIVISION



## DEATH VALLEY UNDERTAKERS

Chris Worthley

Predicted Finish: 9-7

**OFFENSE:** The running back firm of Taylor & Taylor will take some pressure off McNabb and a mediocre corps of wide receivers. Runyan and Dielman steady a serviceable offensive line bolstered by the arrival of top rookie pick Jake Long at right tackle. Reggie Williams, the only big-play threat at wide receiver, is inconsistent. This is a good offense in a close game or with the lead, but a lot will fall on McNabb's shoulders when playing catch up. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** The team will play a '3-4' base alignment to bring their solid group of linebackers into play, but questions remain about whether Kris Jenkins is up to the job of stuffing the middle of the line on his own. Jermaine Phillips heads a potentially dangerous secondary that could drop off quickly due to injuries. A general lack of depth on the defensive side could affect their consistency in games as the season progresses. **Rating: B**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Scobee is an asset when healthy. Larson will add little, but will not hurt the punting game. With Cartwright returning kicks and Northcutt returning punts, this unit will hold its own, but don't expect a lot of game-breaking plays. **Rating: B**

**SUMMARY:** The Undertakers are the most immediately competitive team of the expansion lot. Highly active in free agency and in trading, they will have to be aggressive on the field to make the most of a solid, but unspectacular team. The key to their success or failure this year will be the play of Donovan McNabb – he is motivated and if he ignites a fire under this team, they will be in the picture for more than just the East Division title.



## BRISBANE BAY SHARKS

Chris Mordas

Predicted Finish: 6-10

**OFFENSE:** This unit will rise and fall with the performance of quarterback Matt Hasselbeck, its most valuable asset. Jamal Lewis provides a steady option coming out of the backfield and will help in close games. The offensive line, featuring two sturdy young prospects at tackle, is decent but not dominant and will have to rely on blocking help from fullback, Mack Strong to boost their push in the running game. The lack of a top wide receiver will tell against this unit when facing teams outside of their Division. **Rating: B-**

**DEFENSE:** Mike Vrabel and the line-backing corps are the backbone of the defense while Ryan Pickett holds down the middle of the line. The arrival of two young pass-rushers in Chris Long and Derrick Harvey bodes well for the future of this defense, but the future is not now. A brittle and questionable secondary will be exposed as vulnerable if they don't get help from their pass rush. **Rating: C**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Darren Sproles and Dante Hall provide two dangerous options for kick and punt returns. Rian Lindell brings accuracy to the kicking game. Punter, Ryan Plackemeier needs to improve his distance. **Rating: B+**

**SUMMARY:** If the Undertakers come up stiff, then the Sharks are capable of surpassing them. They have the quarterback to take them to the top of the Division and a captain with no equal on defense in Mike Vrabel, but they are missing some key parts. The Sharks will compete well within their Division but they will likely struggle on both sides of the ball against the established teams. Still, a few lucky bounces at the right time could turn this team into Cinderella.





## WINNEMUCCA OUTLAWS

Pierce Roberts

Predicted Finish: 2-14

**OFFENSE:** At first glance this looks like a unit that could do some damage. There are some recognizable names on the offensive line, a top draft choice at running back, a clutch number one wide-out, and a good young QB who doesn't turn the ball over. The hidden problem will be durability on the offensive line. Many of the big names are nursing injuries from training camp and reportedly are suiting up hurt for the season opener. If the line can't stay healthy, then everything else will suffer. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** Brian Dawkins and Zach Thomas bring veteran leadership to the 'D', but they are not the players they once were. Chris McAlister is fighting injury and super-talented Keith Rivers is a rookie. After these four there are no names likely to boost Outlaws jersey sales, although their mothers would likely not agree. The team had serious trouble generating a pass rush in the pre-season, and without pressure, their secondary is in for a long and frustrating year. **Rating: C-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker, Adam Vinatieri has seen better days, but punter Chris Kluwe has a big leg. The return duties will be shared by a *ho-hum* but steady group featuring Pierre Thomas and Dexter Jackson on kick returns and the workman-like Reno Mahe tracking down punts. **Rating: B-**

**SUMMARY:** The Outlaws will make their mark on offense at some point this season, but not enough to overcome the marks that other offences will make on their rag-tag defense. With good coaching, fortune could smile upon them and double their projected win total from '2' to '4,' but any more than that would require some serious voodoo.



## COLORADO THUNDERSNOW

Kris Heaton

Predicted Finish: 1-15

**OFFENSE:** With rookies dominating the backfield and a rookie QB, Matt Ryan behind center, pressure will be on the offensive line and the wide receivers to step up their play. Unfortunately, the offensive line is also young and there are no wide receivers. Stud wide-out, Andre Johnson is nursing a foot injury and has hardly played during pre-season and Mark Clayton is, at best, a #3 receiver who may be called upon to play the #1 role. After those two, the depth chart is filled in with journeymen you have likely never heard of. At least the tight end can catch. **Rating: C-**

**DEFENSE:** Colorado has plenty of depth on the defensive line and a pair of veteran tackles in Corey Williams and Trevor Pryce, but they are missing a natural end to play opposite Calvin Pace on the right side. Jonathan Vilma leads a young team of linebackers that look like they will be dangerous some time in the future, but just not right now. The young and inexperienced secondary will get burnt like kindling wood in a bonfire. **Rating: D**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** The game Colorado wins will likely be when Allen Rossum's after burners kick in and he returns a kick for a touchdown. The kicking game is in "good feet" with a pair of 25-year olds, Robbie Gould and Sam Koch, kicking field goals and punts. **Rating: A-**

**SUMMARY:** In the natural order of football it seems that some team has to go 1-15 every year. Not 0-16, because that is rare ineptitude, but 1-15, because even the worst teams dig deep eventually for that one win. Last year, that 1-15 team was Meadowlands (now Ringgold) and that was not a terrible team on paper. The Thundersnow, sadly, *are* a terrible team on paper. There will not be too many opportunities for them to snatch that one win but, rest assured, it will come eventually, and their season will be complete when it does.

## WEST DIVISION



**IOWA CITY CUBS**  
**Predicted Finish: 10-6**

**Deron Redding**

**OFFENSE:** Jeff Garcia has plenty of weapons at his disposal to move the ball downfield in many different ways. The trio of Jacobs, Bush and Brown in the backfield offers diverse and dangerous options in the running and short passing games, while the top three wide receivers can each stretch the field. Add Kellen Winslow to the arsenal and you have an offense armed to the teeth. Pro Bowl linemen, Jason Peters and Matt Birk offer immediate stability to a young and promising offensive line. **Rating: A**

**DEFENSE:** The center of the field will be a “no go” zone for opposing runners with Vince Wilfork plugging the middle of the line and second year sensation, Patrick Willis and the “Nine Million Dollar Man” behind him in support. Defensive end, Mario Williams is a beast and Kenechi Udeze is a solid compliment on the other side. The secondary features shutdown corner, DeAngelo Hall and safety, Oshiomogho Atogwe to round off this well-balanced unit. **Rating: A**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Roscoe Parrish adds some razzle-dazzle to a thin group of return men. Jay Feely is very accurate but still appears to be just minding the store while Neil Rackers tries to get his kicking head back on straight. Durant Brooks is a highly touted but untested rookie. **Rating: B-**

**SUMMARY:** Last year Iowa City out-performed expectations and squeaked into the playoffs ahead of two teams that were better “on paper.” This year, as the “paper” favourite, the Cubs need only perform up to expectations to take the Division title, and perhaps more. This is a well-coached team that never surrenders. They could very well be bound for the Championship game.



**ANCORAGE BUCCANEERS**  
**Predicted Finish: 9-7**

**Tony Fenton**

**OFFENSE:** Drew Brees has an opportunity to inflict some real damage on Conference secondaries with three impact wide receivers, Randy Moss, Marques Colston and Kevin Curtis spread wide on the line, and the running back tandem of Joseph Addai and Willis McGahee threatening from behind. One of football’s best fullbacks, Lorenzo Neal, adds punch to a good, but not great offensive line. **Rating: A**

**DEFENSE:** The defense continues to be the Buccaneer’s weakness heading into their second season. The center of the ‘D’ line is vulnerable and the secondary is a gambling lot. The difference this year could be the presence of an improved Jared Allen and Andre Carter at the end positions on the line – they will apply the pressure that the Bucs ball-hawking secondary needs to be effective. Dwight Smith and Dre’ Bly have an eye for the pick but sometimes forget about the basics. Things have to go just right for them to succeed because, in the final analysis, the fundamentals just don’t hold up. **Rating: C+**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Devin Hester, Devin Hester, Devin Hester! Say it three times with your eyes closed and he will appear, as if out of nowhere, and disappear almost as suddenly toward the goal line. Hester will be the wildcard in every game Anchorage plays this season. Matt Stover is an ancient, but steady kicker, and Jason Baker has a big, if not always accurate, leg in the punting game. **Rating: A+**

**SUMMARY:** The team that defied the Oracle last year with a disappointing finish has the chance to do it again this year. The Bucs once again look like a contender on paper. They have a quarterback who can put points on the board while the defense has some big playmakers who can turn around a game or two and help to overcome weakness in the secondary. With some luck and good coaching they could upset Iowa City for the Division title. Reverse that scenario, and another sad season is in the works.



## CHINO CONVICTS

Rob Nazar

Predicted Finish: 9-7

**OFFENSE:** The Cutler Era begins in Chino and with it, uncertainty. Cutler's biggest skilled assets will be Tory Holt and Anquan Boldin split wide, and the ever dangerous L.T. in the backfield. The offensive line is studded with budding stars who, like Cutler, have not yet reached their full potential due to inexperience. The curious decision to enter the season without a *bona fide* fullback for the running game may have negative repercussions in close games against better competition. With Jake Delhomme the only other quarterback on the roster, everything rides on Cutler's performance this year. **Rating: B+**

**DEFENSE:** It will be difficult to run against the Convicts with Pat Williams and Haloti Ngata stuffing the center of the line and Julius Peppers and Adewale Ogunleye guarding the ends. Behind the line, Ernie Sims offers steady support while James Harrison is a predator in all phases of the game. The secondary is deep but missing an impact player at the safety position. An average pass rush could put pressure on those safeties in the deep passing game. **Rating: A-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Jeff Reed is money in the kicking game. Shane Lechler could be the best punter in the league. Joshua Cribbs is a dangerous and durable return man for both kick-offs and punts. It doesn't get much more solid than this. **Rating: A+**

**SUMMARY:** It is perhaps foolish to underestimate the Convicts. They showed us last year what happens when you do – they sneak up behind you and drive a shank into your side. But this is not the same team as last year's. Donovan McNabb and Adam "Pacman" Jones were a huge part of their success in 2007 and both are gone. Cutler is young, with great promise, but still young and a little hot-headed – he will make mistakes and probably against the better teams in big games.



## LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

Jeff Dohrn

Predicted Finish: 6-10

**OFFENSE:** A quick scan of this line-up tells you all you need to know about why this team is not destined for a playoff run – quarterback. Tavaris Jackson or Brodie Croyle, take your pick. Neither is yet ready to lead a charge against top level opponents. The offensive line, though improved with the development of Joe Thomas and the acquisition of Olin Kreutz, cannot throw the ball or run with the ball, and those trusted with such duties are questionable. Selvin Young could add some pep to the running attack, but he is not an every down back. As for the wide receiver position, poor Steve Smith and Roddy White will get open and wave their arms in the air to no avail. **Rating: C+**

**DEFENSE:** The Knights were experimenting with both a '4-3' and a '3-4' defensive alignment in the pre-season. Either way, they will be a tough defense to play against. All Pro tackle Kevin Williams anchors the line while Pro Bowl linebacker, Shawne Merriman roams the field looking for targets. Weakness at the defensive end position reduces the effectiveness of their pass rush, but their top two corners, Charles Woodson and Nnamdi Asomugha, will buy some time for them to get to the opposing quarterback. Not as strong as last year, the defense is still the Knight's strongest asset. **Rating: A-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Ted Ginn Jr. is a dynamic kick returner with breakaway speed. Kris Brown has the big leg to boot a long shot in the final seconds. Steve Weatherford is a serviceable punter. **Rating: A-**

**SUMMARY:** The Knights brain trust stubbornly clings to the notion that strength in other areas, like defense, will somehow bring out the best in marginal quarterbacks like Tavaris Jackson and young Brodie Croyle. The Knights need a real play-making quarterback before the rest of the league will consider them a serious contender.



# CAN-AM CONFERENCE

## NORTH DIVISION



### CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

Jason Findlay

**Predicted Finish: 12-4**

**OFFENSE:** Peyton Manning leads what promises to be one of the most prolific offensive units in the league. The “Super Back” duo of Adrian Peterson and Jerious Norwood will force teams to respect the run, and while they are respecting the run, the Charleswood passing game will be demanding the same respect with Wes Welker, Chad Johnson, Donald Driver and Jason Witten roaming free in opposing secondaries. The offensive line lacks a star, but they are good enough to give the stars behind them time to do their thing. **Rating: A+**

**DEFENSE:** A lack of depth on the defensive line could spell trouble if a starter falls to injury. The Patriots broke camp with only 5 linebackers on their roster, posing another potential problem if the injury bug hits. The secondary is, however, indisputably the best in the league, with Assante Samuel and Marcus Trufant manning the corners and Ed Reed standing sentinel behind them. When Quentin Jammer is relegated to nickel duty, it’s a strong unit and probably a difference-maker. **Rating: A-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Stephen Gostkowski is perfect kicking extra points and that’s what the Patriots will need him for the most. Craig Hentrich doesn’t get a lot of work and that’s a good thing. Jerious Norwood on kick returns and Wes Welker on punt returns will not hurt. **Rating: B**

**SUMMARY:** The North Division is the toughest to call, but the Patriots, due to their offensive fire power and elite secondary, are once again the front-runner to take the Division title and compete for the Conference Championship. Last year’s problems with the running game have been addressed, putting Peyton Manning in an MVP position beside Tom Brady.



### DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

George Kaldis

**Predicted Finish: 9-7**

**OFFENSE:** The Thunder Lizards boast one of the finest offensive lines in the league, featuring two All Pros in Steve Hutchinson and Walter Jones. Add two versatile workhorse running backs in Clinton Portis and Frank Gore and you have a serious rushing attack. Those assets should go a long way toward helping Philip Rivers overcome the challenge of finding his nearly invisible receiving corps. Antonio Gates will be the preferred target in the passing game, which is nothing to sneeze at, but likely not enough to make the passing game a consistent threat. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** The Lizards will rely on a solid defense in general, and Patrick Kerney and Bob Sanders in particular, to support their push to challenge Charleswood for the Division. While the defensive line is probably their greatest strength, they have weapons at each level to thwart opposing offences. Durability could be a concern if Adrian Wilson’s pre-season injury resurfaces during the season. The corners are just strong enough that Sanders can afford to take some calculated risks and possibly steal a game or two in the final frame. **Rating: A-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** The acquisition of Steve Breaston opens up exciting possibilities in the punt return game, while Ellis Hobbs is one of the best at returning kick-offs. Mason Crosby has a strong but erratic leg and Matt Turk is a journeyman punter. **Rating: A-**

**SUMMARY:** In the highly competitive North Division, the Thunder Lizards are one of those teams that could finish 10-6 just as easily as they could finish 6-10. They have potentially game-breaking weapons at their disposal, but also carry some obvious and exploitable weaknesses. Coaching and luck will make the difference and they are historically a well-coached team. After Charleswood, they remain the team to beat in the North.



**COWTOWN CORN KINGS**  
**Predicted Finish: 8-8**

**Jim Coghlin**

**OFFENSE:** When they want to load up and run the ball, they are capable of pushing back any defensive line in the league – a great asset to have in a close game or near the opponent’s goal line. But when they need a quick score the weakness in their passing attack will be exposed. The wide receivers are serviceable, but not exactly game-breakers and Game Manager, Chad Pennington needs the play action pass to be effective downfield and that means the threat to run the ball must always be in play. This unit will control the ball, but how often will they score? **Rating: A-**

**DEFENSE:** In one year the Corn Kings defense looks to have fallen from one of the league’s best to one of its more mediocre. The sudden disappearance of former standout Erik Coleman in pre-season play has vaulted rookie, Kenny Phillips into the starting free safety spot. Aaron Schobel appears to have lost some muscle over the summer, and star Rashean Mathis seems to have lost a step at right corner. On the plus side, the defensive line should be able to stop the run against all but the elite teams. **Rating: B-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Glenn Holt is a fixture returning kick-offs but they have not settled on a permanent punt return man. Mewelde Moore, Donnie Avery and Tramon Williams will share the load in that area. Jason Hanson has a strong leg but struggled with accuracy in the pre-season. Mike Scifres is a top drawer punter with both good distance and accuracy. **Rating: A-**

**SUMMARY:** The decision to stick with Chad Pennington instead of pursuing free agents, Kurt Warner or Donovan McNabb could relegate the Corn Kings to spectators for the playoffs if they don’t firmly establish their running game. This is another team that is on the bubble of competitiveness in the grueling North Division. As contender or spoiler, however, the Corn Kings will leave their mark.



**KUTZTOWN GOLDEN BEARS** **Pete Katsafanas**  
**Predicted Finish: 7-9**

**OFFENSE:** Tony Romo must step up and play well consistently if the Golden Bears are going to compete for a playoff spot. The team broke the bank to snatch big-play wide receiver, Greg Jennings and sure-handed tight end, Chris Cooley in free agency. For the investment to pay off, Romo must get time to throw. Last year’s Iron Man at running back, Larry Johnson, appears to be breaking down, begging the question of whether Kenny Watson, or rookie Felix Jones can carry the load in the backfield. With no fullback to support a very average offensive line, Kutztown could be flying high or crashing hard with Air Romo throughout 2008. **Rating: B+**

**DEFENSE:** Kutztown will run a ‘3-4’ as their base alignment in 2008 with rookie tackle Glenn Dorsey entrusted with the middle of the line. He is well-supported by Jason Taylor and Aaron Smith beside him on either end and by Ray Lewis and E.J. Henderson at the two inside linebacker spots. The secondary is good, but thin and vulnerable to injury which could spell trouble later in the year if the starters don’t hold up. **Rating: B+**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Nick Kaeding is one of the best at kicking off the ball and is no slouch kicking field goals either. Punter, Brian Moorman is one of the best at downing the ball inside the twenty yard line. A committee of *so-so* kick return men do not give them an edge over anybody in that category, while Patrick Crayton is steady but unspectacular returning punts. **Rating: A-**

**SUMMARY:** The Golden Bears, like Durham and Cowtown, could finish as high as number two or as low as number four in the North Division. Coaching and luck will play a big role, especially when it comes to the offense. If Kutztown fails to make opponents respect their running game, Tony Romo may be forced to pass more often than is healthy against the better teams.

## SOUTH DIVISION



### FLORIDA DRAGONS

Jim Heaton

Predicted Finish: 14-2

**OFFENSE:** This is a unit that is ready to set offensive records that will stand for many years. Tom Brady appears to have rebounded from last year's struggles and looks totally poised and confident in the pocket. Speaking of the Florida pocket, it is a deep one. The offensive line is like a fortress wall in front of Brady and running backs, Steven Jackson and DeAngelo Williams. T.J. Houshmandzadeh, Brandon Marshall, and Jerricho Cotchery form the best trio of wide-outs in the EFL, and Heath Miller is a pass-catching tight end who can block. **Rating: A++**

**DEFENSE:** The defense is strong at each level, starting with run-stuffer, John Henderson and pass-rusher, Osi Umenyiora on the front line. Lofa Tatupu is rock solid against the run at inside linebacker while Will Witherspoon and Terrell Suggs add dynamite to the pass rush. Antonio Cromartie heads a deep, ball-hawking secondary, vastly improved in coverage ability over last year's version. **Rating: A**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Yamon Figurs and DeSean Jackson provide dangerous dual options for punt returns, while Figurs has a lock on kick return chores. Matt McBriar has a great leg for a punting game that will not see much action in 2008. Mike Nugent is better than needed as a kicker on a team that will probably score more touchdowns than field goals. **Rating: A**

**SUMMARY:** The question is not whether Florida will win their Division or advance to the Conference final. The question is, who will beat them if my predicted finish of 14-2 is accurate? Charleswood is good enough, but they have to visit Dragonmount this year, giving Florida the edge. Gwinnett is capable and will get a shot at them at home in Week One. More likely, though, they will fall unexpectedly to a second rate contender due to some terribly unlucky twists and turns in a bad weather game.



### GWINNETT GLADIATORS

Dave Birdsall

Predicted Finish: 11-5

**OFFENSE:** Carson Palmer has more to work with this year with the emergence of Braylon Edwards in training camp as a consistent deep threat. Reggie Wayne and Tony Gonzalez will be the beneficiaries of this as defenses can no longer double-team them with impunity. Willie Parker may have lost a step, but he is a smart and durable runner who can find the holes. The offensive line features Chris Snee at guard and Nick Hardwick at center with a workmanlike supporting cast filling out the remaining three spots. **Rating: A**

**Rating: A**

**DEFENSE:** Solid throughout, this unit will keep the Glads in every game despite the lack of a single high impact player. The defensive line has run-stuffers, Casey Hampton and Darnell Dockett, as well as pass-rushers, Will Smith and Robert Mathis, to form a well-rounded foursome. The line-backing corps is strong and steady and the Troy Polamalu-led secondary equally so, when healthy. **Rating: A-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** The Glads boast one of the strongest kicking games in the league with place-kicker, Josh Brown and punter, Andy Lee. Terrence McGee is a fine kick return man and Nate Burleson is steady and always a threat to break one loose returning punts. **Rating: A+**

**SUMMARY:** The Gladiators are on the edge of being one of this year's elite teams, but are missing the true superstar power to push them across the line from very good to great. Despite that, they are one team capable of knocking off a Charleswood, or a Florida on any given Sunday. In a Division chasing Florida, they are a clear second place choice, but they have a virtual lock on one of the wildcard playoff spots in the Can-Am Conference.





## RINGGOLD CRIMSON HAWKS

Tim Molinaro

Predicted Finish: 8-8

**OFFENSE:** A quick glance at this squad's skill position players creates hope for Crimson Hawks fans that the team can post big numbers on the scoreboard. Take a closer look at the bigger picture, however, and hope fades to concern. "Big Ben" and Maurice Jones-Drew could be in serious danger playing behind an offensive line that has not improved since last year, when they allowed sacks at the whopping rate of 11%. In fact, the line may be worse than last year's, meaning one of the finest quarterbacks in the league will struggle to live up to his potential while dodging blitzers and his own linemen as they are pushed backwards on every play. Still, the weapons are there, and against the lesser defenses this unit should score a lot of points. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** Almost surprisingly, Ringgold could have the league's most dangerous pass rush and one of the best defenses overall. The Hawks can bring the "house" on passing downs without actually bringing the "house." With Kyle Vanden Bosch and Elvis Dumervil applying pressure from the edges, and Shaun Rogers pushing up the middle, it doesn't take much more, if anything, to get the opposing quarterback running for his life. When that "little extra" is DeMarcus Ware, a collapsed pocket is almost guaranteed. The line-backing corps is flat out the best in the league and the secondary features two stars in Ronde Barber and Kerry Rhodes, but little depth after that. **Rating: A**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Shaun Suisham is a capable kicker and Dustin Colquitt an accomplished punter. Chris Carr is an average but prolific kick return man while rookie, Eddie Royal holds down the punt return duties. **Rating: B+**

**SUMMARY:** It will be interesting to see if Ringgold, formerly Meadowlands, can squeak into a playoff spot with a spirited and inspired campaign. They were gross underachievers last year, but with a little over-achievement this year, there could be something to cheer about in Ringgold.



## MOHAVE HELLFIRE

Bobby Elder

Predicted Finish: 7-9

**OFFENSE:** The youngest offensive line in the league will experience growing pains in 2008. With the departure of Olin Kreutz, Ryan Cook takes over at center. He is a good prospect, but was clearly over-matched in pre-season games against opponent's first-stringers. Enter, Kurt Warner, whose veteran presence will compensate to some degree for the weakness of the line. He is helped by flashy offensive stars, Brian Westbrook and Terrell Owens, but ultimately there is only so much even they can do when there is so little time to do it. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** If Mohave is going to compete this year, they will need their stars on the defense to rise to the occasion. The remnants of last year's powerhouse are concentrated on this squad, and they are an intimidating group. Jamal Williams plugs the middle of the line while Julian Peterson roams the width of the field at the second level. Champ Bailey and Al Harris can shut down almost any wide receiver duo in the league while Kelvin Hayden takes out the slot receiver on passing downs. The starting safeties are talented, but young and potentially vulnerable to the deep pass. **Rating: A**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Place-kicker, Rob Bironas has distance and accuracy in his leg. Punter, Mike Barr was signed the day before breaking camp and brings who-knows-what to the punting game. Aundrae Allison is an explosive kick returner but prone to injury. Punt returner, Antwan Randle-El jukes and dips and looks dynamic, but runs as far sideways and backwards as he does forward. **Rating: B**

**SUMMARY:** The Hellfire have a stable of stars on offense and defense, but they also have a nursery of fledgling talent at starting positions that will take time to develop. This juxtaposition of star power with youth could be beneficial in the long run, but this year, in this Conference, it will certainly hurt their chances of a playoff berth. On any given day, however, they remain dangerous.

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**JIMMY'S WEEK ONE PICKS**

**CHARLESWOOD @ DURHAM (LINE – PATRIOTS BY 3)**

This is a benchmark game for Charleswood. Starting off on the road against a tough Divisional opponent is not an easy way to launch a campaign, but it will force the favoured Pats to bear down out of the starting gate, which will set the right tone for the season if they win. Durham has the home field advantage, enough talent, and the coaching to snatch a win from the Pats. They too, will be looking to set the right tone. While it is too early to say this is a “must win” game for both teams, it is a very important game for both teams. The Pats must seize the initiative on offense and shut down the Durham running game in order to win. The Thunder Lizards have to keep Peyton Manning from getting into rhythm early and keep the game close in the first half. A low-scoring contest favours the Lizards. An early Pats lead will be difficult for Philip Rivers and the Durham passing attack to overcome against the best secondary in the league. This is a difficult one to call, but when in doubt, go with the favourite, I always say. **PICK: CHARLESWOOD**

**COWTOWN @ KUTZTOWN (LINE –GOLDEN BEARS BY 2)**

In the highly competitive North Division no team can easily afford to throw a game away, least of all these two, marginally the weakest of the four. Every win counts. The Corn Kings will take a win any way they can get it on the road against the Golden Bears to start the season. They will need to establish the run, control the ball, and take an early lead in order to do so. They will also need to pressure Tony Romo, who is eager to take a shot at the weakened Corn King secondary. If Cowtown cannot bring pressure to bear, Romo will be set up for a big day. Kutztown is not afraid of a shootout here. This is another tough one to call, so I will be a homer and go with the favourite. **PICK: KUTZTOWN**

**FLORIDA @ GWINNETT (LINE –DRAGONS BY 5)**

Florida is in the same position as Charleswood: starting the season favoured on the road against their top competitor in the Division. Like Charleswood, the Dragons want to set the right tone for the season by making a strong statement against a strong Divisional opponent. For the Gladiators, this is their best shot at a win over powerhouse Florida and a possible advantage in a tie-breaker down the road if it comes to that. They will need every bit of their home field advantage, a solid game plan, and more than a little luck to pull it off. Florida’s coaching staff must take Gwinnett seriously, but should not over-think their approach to the game and try too hard to “fool” their opponent. Pick some solid plays that work and leave it to the players to execute. They certainly have the best players and that will make the difference in the outcome. **PICK: FLORIDA**

**RINGGOLD @ MOHAVE (LINE –HELLFIRE BY 3)**

Mohave opens at home against the team more likely than any other to give their young offensive line fits. The Ringgold pass rushers are drooling over film of Rob Sims and Ryan Cook missing blocking assignments during the pre-season. Warner’s pocket sense will need to be switched ‘ON’ if he is going to survive. On the other side, Mohave’s defensive coordinator is smiling at scouting shots of rookie left tackle Ryan Clady stumbling in pass protection. “Big Ben” better be hard to pull down or Trent Cole could have a big day. The winner will be the team with the quarterback left standing at the end. I say that will be Ben. **PICK: RINGGOLD**

### **BRISBANE BAY @ DEATH VALLEY (LINE – UNDERTAKERS BY 3)**

This is an historic first game between the most competitive of the expansion franchises. The winner gets a leg up in the race for the Division title, but a win means much more to Brisbane Bay. Although it would sting, the Undertakers could probably overcome a loss here. The Sharks, conversely, cannot afford to drop a single match if they are going to keep pace with the Undertakers through all 16 games. Death Valley is simply the better team, but they can be taken. Look for Death Valley to establish the run early with Fred and Chester Taylor to open up space for their suspect receiving corps. If Vrabel and the Shark's defense can keep the Taylors bottled up, McNabb will be forced to work some magic to move the ball. The Sharks would also like to establish the run, but going straight to the pass is an option with Hasselbeck at pivot and some breakaway speed at wide receiver. An upset could very well occur if Hasselbeck is on his game and the Shark's linebackers come to play, but more likely Death Valley will grind it out for the win. **PICK: DEATH VALLEY**

### **WINNEMUCCA @ COLORADO (LINE – OUTLAWS BY 1)**

Another historic first game for both teams, but one that is likely to be significant only as one team's first ever victory. Karma may rebound on me for writing this in Week One, but there will be no playoff spot riding on the outcome of this contest. The weakest teams in the league square off at the brand new Toyota Thunderdome with #4 rookie pick, Matt Ryan over center for Colorado and David Garrard taking snaps for Winnemucca. The Outlaws boast two solid running backs in Justin Fargas and the #3 pick in the draft, Darren McFadden, to go along with the best wide receiver in the East Division, Hines Ward. The Thundersnow will attack the Outlaws defense with two rookie running backs and a hobbled Andre Johnson at wide receiver. Both offenses could have some success as both defenses are not very good. Put your money on Garrard having the bigger day. **PICK: WINNEMUCCA**

### **CHINO @ IOWA CITY (LINE – PICK 'EM )**

The Iowa Broccoli Growers Association is sponsoring a promotion at Joe Ferguson Stadium to kick off the EFL campaign. They will be handing out free hats, painted broccoli table ornaments, and serving free 'Broccoli Dogs' to celebrate "100 Years of Iowa Broccoli." In spite of this, team officials are still expecting a sellout. Is anyone surprised? I'm not. Even broccoli couldn't keep me away from this game if I were fortunate enough to have a ticket – it will be a barn-burner! Chino gets the Championship benefit of the doubt in the betting line here, but don't underestimate Iowa City. Many have predicted the Cubs to steal the West from Chino this season and I can see exactly why. The Cubs have the offensive weapons to move the ball, even against Chino's solid defense. The Cubs defenders, featuring Vince Wilfork and Mario Williams on the line and Patrick Willis and the Nine Million Dollar Man at linebacker, are vastly improved over last year. The Convicts will be starting Jay Cutler, and what he will bring over Donovan McNabb remains to be seen. I see this one see-sawing back and forth and finally turning on a key blunder late in the game. It's anybody's contest, but since I have to pick one, I will go with the Cubbies and the home field. **PICK: IOWA CITY**

### **ANCHORAGE @ LOS ANGELES (LINE –BUCCANEERS BY 2)**

This could be a 'mirage' game for Los Angeles if things go well at home on opening day. One of the Buc's well-documented short-comings is a vulnerable secondary which, if they have a bad day, could temporarily create the illusion of Tavaris Jackson being good without actually changing the fact that he sucks. If that translates into a win, the 'mirage' of contender status for the Knights will appear like a shimmering pool of hope for their suffering fans. That mirage can easily be dispelled on Sunday if Drew Brees performs to his ability and the Buccaneers defense gets pressure on Jackson. One of the Buc's other short-comings last year was a high-powered offensive engine that sputtered and stalled at inopportune times, costing them games they should have won. If they can reverse that inconsistency and just do what is expected of them, they should win this game going away. I like them, but with the caution that they are still Anchorage, so who really knows? **PICK: ANCHORAGE**