

2012



2012

EXPANSION EDITION

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EXPANSION



1 **TWIN CITIES**
Jay Cutler

CAN HE PLAY LIKE #1?

POTENTIAL, BUT.....

4 **COMMONWEALTH**
Jared Gaither



2 **SEBASTIAN**
Terrence Cody

HUGE ADDITION

MIS-FIRE? OR GENIUS?

3 **MISSION**
VIEJO
Koa Misi



The Twin Cities Triumph made former Chino quarterback **Jay Cutler** the first pick in the EFL Expansion Draft. There is mixed reaction all around. *(Story inside)*

4 NEW TEAMS TAKE SHAPE!

BUT WHICH TEAM IS IN THE *BEST* SHAPE?



CANTON (AP) – The EFL has four new teams. On Saturday, the **Twin Cities Triumph**, the **Sebastian Swordfish**, the **Mission Viejo Monarchs**, and the **Commonwealth Colonials**, in that order, began to take shape before the eyes of a national television audience as the league held its second four-team expansion draft in six years.

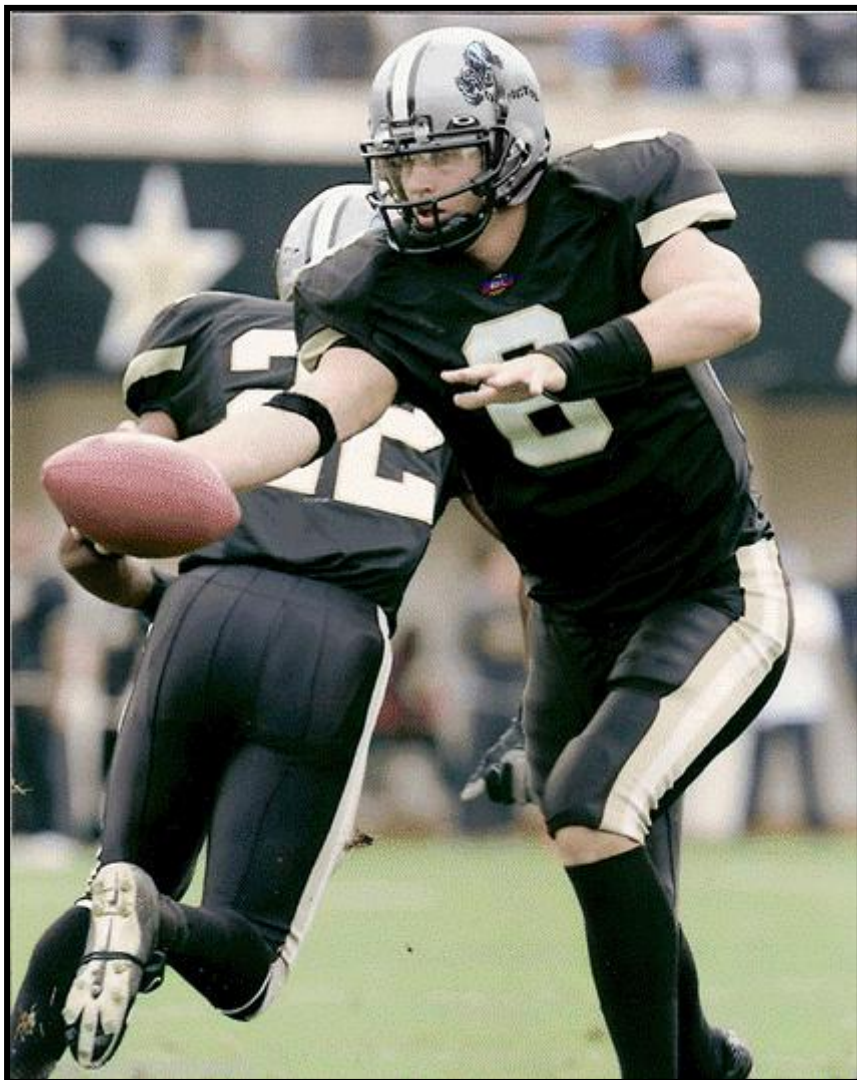
The new General Managers were gathered in Canton, Ohio to set the course for the future of their respective franchises. They were joined by the GMs of the existing 16 EFL franchises, who were there to protect the future of their own teams as much as possible. The only certainty heading into the day was that the expansion franchises would finish it with 160 players that had, the day before, been the property of established EFL teams. The 16 existing teams knew they would lose 10 players each and, although

they had each been allowed to protect 23 core players, there were going to be losses. Nobody would come away completely unscathed. The question was: how much damage would be done?

As it turned out, the future is not “now,” or even close to “now,” for any of the new franchises. Selections made in the early rounds were largely dominated by youth and undeveloped talent as opposed to proven commodities. That left many of the existing GMs breathing sighs of relief as players they had slotted for early claw-back were passed over for prospects buried lower on their recall boards.

The new GMs certainly defied the experts, especially in the first few rounds; not a single major mock draft board turned out to be correct and very few were even close. This left numerous analysts from the major networks highly critical of many of the picks, even while the new teams’ brain trusts gushed with satisfaction in post-draft press conferences.

Nowhere was a sense of triumph more abundant than in the war room of the team that makes triumph their very trademark. The **Twin Cities Triumph**, with the first selection of the draft, selected former Chino Convicts starting quarterback, **Jay Cutler**, to a decidedly mixed reaction from across the continent. That did not stop Triumph owner, GM, head coach, and chief nutritionist **Guy Williams**, from making a big splash with a jersey-presentation ceremony worthy of the first round college draft pick. The



Jay Cutler sets to hand off the ball on opening day in 2011 as the starter for the **Chino Convicts**. Cutler lasted four weeks in that role before being replaced by rookie **Cam Newton**. His handoffs weren't the problem – his passing was.



Jared Gaither is shown here as a member of the **Florida Dragons** in 2010. Gaither played in 7 games after losing the starting right tackle job to **Russell Okung** in training camp. Okung was passed over by the Colonials for Gaither.

big difference between this pick and Cutler's original first round college draft selection by the now defunct Denver Broncos in 2006 however, is that he now has a professional body of work spanning six seasons, five of those in the EFL, to take away most of the guesswork about his future prospects. The arm strength and the attitude is still there, but the perception that he is a capable leader took a big hit in 2011 when he was replaced by rookie **Cam Newton** after an 0-4 start by the Convicts for which Cutler was assigned most of the blame.

Cutler's fall from grace in Chino is the main sticking point in criticism of the pick. On the other side, supporters are quick to point out that he had proven himself in other years, and that his recent demotion would simply be

motivation to prove his critics wrong. With the Triumph holding the no.4 pick in the upcoming college draft, the premiere college quarterback prospects will most likely not be available for Guy Williams' team, which made filling the quarterback position a priority in their planning.

"Jay Cutler has experience and ability that we value," explained Twin Cities' offensive coordinator, **Davy Seal**. "We like what we know he can do for us. People can say what they want; I think the pick was a no-brainer."

"Brain-less, more likely," commented ESPN's **Kris Hortenson** in a post-draft round table discussion on EFL Tonight. "Cutler has all the ability in the world except the ability to use it properly. When you're a team going nowhere to begin with, getting there faster with a guy like Cutler is not a smart move."

While the selection of **Jay Cutler** no. 1 overall provoked the loudest banter in the media, the next three picks provoked the loudest silence while network researchers behind the scenes scrambled for information on players that had been mere footnotes in their prepared briefing notes. The **Sebastian Swordfish** made, literally, the biggest pick of the draft with their no. 2 selection of Iowa City defensive tackle **Terrence Cody**. At 6'4", 350 lbs, the Cubs' 4th round selection in the 2010 college draft is certainly huge, but that is almost all of what's known about him. Cody has 20 tackles as a back-up over two EFL campaigns and not a single big play to match his big frame.

In Cody, the Swordfish obviously see something more than mere size. They see him as the anchor of a defensive line that will also feature no. 2 pick; talented former Virden Violators' pass rusher **Carlos Dunlap**. It may end up being the perfect one-two punch in the Sebastian trench, but at the moment few are willing to take that leap of faith and fully endorse **Russ Lemmon's** first pick as head of an EFL franchise.

The Cody pick caused the Cubs to recall **Mario Williams** and **Davin Joseph** from the draft board, provoking an extreme reaction from Mission Viejo's **Chris Ferraro**, who had apparently already ordered a Williams jersey in royal purple for the occasion. Panic ensued in the Monarch's war room and the result was the selection of Pickering linebacker **Koa Misi**. The second-year Spartan and 4th round EFL college draft pick is talented enough to attract widespread interest, but his "tweener" size makes it difficult to fit him into a true position. A lineman in college, he is a better fit as a linebacker in the pros. He is a solid player, but if the Monarchs were looking for someone at #3 overall to build a defence around, most agree that Misi was not the best option.

The **Commonwealth Colonials** picked next, and their selection certainly furrowed brows across North America, even if not in England, where Will Blandford's billionaire business partner **Richard Bransen** beamed brightly over satellite as he was accorded the honour of being the first team official to announce a draft selection while standing on another continent.

"The English roots of the great State of Virginia are hereby honoured. Virginia got its start from England and the Colonials football team will too. I am proud to select offensive tackle **Jared Gaither** of the **Death Valley Undertakers**," announced Bransen as dozens of camera shutters clicked in the background.

With the Colonials winning the **Andrew Luck** sweepstakes, it was logical that Blandford's first priority would be

to buy some life insurance for the future of the franchise in the form of a blindside protector. But the choice of Gaither – who last played a down while a member of the **Florida Dragons** two years ago – had many commentators scratching their heads; especially given that highly-touted rookie **Russell Okung** was also available.

Gaither is one of the tallest players in the league and possesses undeniable talent; but he has been mentally and physically inconsistent throughout his career. He spent the entire 2011 season on injured reserve after being picked up by the Undertakers on the waiver wire from Scarborough. His agent says he is medically cleared to play, but that was not enough for ESPN's **Mel Sniper Sr.**, who was less than enthusiastic about the pick on national TV:

"He's medically cleared but I would be asking if he has been *mentally* cleared," Sniper blustered. "He has tremendous talent, but to say he's lived up to that talent when healthy would be untrue. I can't guess what the Colonials are thinking, except that they must really, really like him a lot."

Commonwealth turned around with the first pick of the second round and plucked another player from Death Valley, choosing rookie tight end **Kyle Rudolph**. Playing behind **Aaron Hernandez** and **Rob Gronkowski**, Rudolph had just 3 catches for 10 yards and a touchdown for the Undertakers in 2011. Without much EFL film to go by, one has to look back at his career with Notre Dame, where his main claim to fame was being the first freshman to ever start at tight end for the Fighting Irish. It was another curious pick – not because Rudolph is without ability, but because he is projected to be no more than a part-time contributor as he develops in his second year.

Mission Viejo followed up their first-round pick of Misi with a player who many argue is better. If a pass-rushing defensive end is one of the cornerstones of a dominant defence, then Chris Ferraro's pick of **Cameron Jordan** in the second round was a good first step in the direction of establishing one. Jordan played behind **Will Smith** and **Cliff Avril** as a rookie last year with the **Garland Mustangs** and tallied 26 tackles and 1 sack in limited action. Defensive ends can take two or three years to develop their full potential in the pros, but when Jordan reaches his peak, he may very well turn out to be a difference-maker for the Monarchs.

Sebastian followed up their first round pick of Cody with another lineman, opting for the more developed and already dangerous young defensive end, **Carlos Dunlap**. This was another pick that seemed more worthy of a number one selection than the team's actual number one selection. Dunlap missed four games due to injury but still posted 37 tackles and 7 sacks for Virden in 2011. He was also credited with 15 QB "hurries" and 6 stuffs behind the line of scrimmage. The fact that Virden exposed him in the first place was a surprise. The fact that he lasted until the second round was another.

Finishing off the second round, Twin Cites selected 2008 second round rookie pick **Mike Jenkins** from Mohave. Jenkins was a versatile and talented addition to the Mohave secondary, playing both corner and safety in nickel and dime coverage packages; but his truncated role in the Hellfire secondary after starting all 16 games and intercepting 4 passes for Ringgold in 2010, has some worried that he is regressing in his development. Jenkins is talented, but he will have to prove himself all over again in a likely starting role for the Triumph.

Drafting strategy was impacted continuously as the rounds progressed as established teams reclaimed two players



Koa Misi, as a Spartan, tackles Charleswood's **Adrian Peterson** in the 2010 EFL Championship. Misi is progressing well and turning heads, but is he a franchise player in the **Ray Lewis** mold?

from their exposure lists for each player claimed by an expansion team. It meant that the premier impact players and prized young talent vanished fast, causing some bloggers and commentators to express scepticism that any of these four new teams will win more than a couple of games in their inaugural campaigns. In spite of that, some proven commodities and top grade talent made its way onto the new rosters even as some golden opportunities disappeared.

Mission Viejo scored a hit by snatching tackle **Russell Okung** in the third round, but whiffed when they passed up nose tackle **Paul Soliai** in favour of veteran **Jonathan Vilma** in round four. Many agree that the Swordfish targeted linebacker **Jamar Chaney** a few rounds too early, allowing Commonwealth to snatch up tackling machine, **David Hawthorne** while losing out on safety

Jairus Byrd. But the Swordfish landed a pair of prize catches for their secondary in rounds 6 and 7 by reeling in top-notch corner **Leon Hall** and rookie safety **Rahim Moore** from Death Valley. Twin Cities picked up underrated guard **Craig Urbik** in round 7 in a move that provoked quiet curses in the Cubs' war room but probably over-reached for former Gwinnett linebacker **Jason Worilds** in round 3. With the Colonials sticking to a strategy of young talent at a low price, the early rounds were filled with unproven young back-ups with upside potential. **Domato Peko** was pulled off the Pickering roster in the 3rd round while little-known defensive **Greg Hardy** was plucked from York in round 6. Picks like these might work out nicely down the road, but they contrasted strongly with ageing vets at high prices in the later rounds; such as **Donald Driver**, who did not have to be picked in the 29th round; and the vastly overpaid **Matt Cassel** in round 33.

With the Colonials holding the first pick of the rookie draft, the selection of Cassel may have been the most controversial and highly criticized pick of the draft. EFL freelancer, **Spats McChad**, devoted a whole section of his special 'ExDraft' feature in EFL Magazine to denouncing the pick, while ESPN's **Trent Dilfer** was overheard commenting on-air when he thought the network had cut to a commercial, "If this means they're passing on Luck and going with Cassel, they are nuts!"

Draft day was long. It involved 160 player selections and 320 reclaims, for a total of 480 players announced. The networks cut out after 20 rounds and many of the GMs wished



Terrence Cody, reports to Cubs' training camp in 2011. Cody was picked by the Sebastian Swordfish at #2 overall in the 2012 Expansion Draft. At 350 lbs, Cody was a huge selection.

they could have as well. However, when it was all done, Expansion GMs jumped to the podium to announce their satisfaction and journalists wasted little time trying to gauge who the big winners and losers were.

EFL Magazine's, **Caleb Cogger**, was one of the first out-of-the-gate with his snapshot analysis of the EFL 2012 Expansion Draft:



COMMONWEALTH COLONIALS

GM: Will Blandford

IMMEDIATE IMPACT: Red Bryant

FUTURE STAR: Andre Smith

SLEEPER PICK: Justin Blalock

MOST EXPENSIVE: Matt Cassel (6.5 million)

TOP VALUE: Greg Hardy

WORST VALUE: Vince Manuwai

ANALYSIS: The Colonials targeted young talent on both lines and tried to keep the salary commitment down. Clearly, **Will Blandford** is looking ahead long term and is willing to wait for results. The selection of **Jared Gaither** at no.1 was a risky and perhaps unnecessary reach, but if he develops according to his best projections it will turn out to be worthwhile. There is good potential in **Antoine Cason**, **Quincy Black**, **Justin Blalock** and **Emmanuel Sanders**; as well as proven ability in **Domata Peko**, **David Hawthorne**, **Done Whitner** and **Ronder Barber**. **Andre Smith** could develop into an All Pro at right tackle. The selection of **Matt Cassel**, at 6.5 million for 4 years, sticks out as a big gaffe unless **Andrew Luck** or **Robert Griffin** is not in their plans at No. 1; but if so, one has to ask "why?" **OVERALL GRADE: C**



MISSION VIEJO MONARCHS

GM: Chris Ferraro

IMMEDIATE IMPACT: Ben Grubbs

FUTURE STAR: Russell Okung

SLEEPER PICK: Jeremy Zuttah

MOST EXPENSIVE: Ben Grubbs (5.6 million)

TOP VALUE: Adam Carriker

WORST VALUE: Dhani Jones

ANALYSIS: The Monarchs tended to favour defence over offence with their early picks but still managed to stockpile a nice mix of proven and potential ability on the offensive line with some astute grabs. *Ben Grubbs* will anchor a group that also features the talented *Russell Okung* and two underrated interior linemen, *Jeremy Zuttah* and *Danny Watkins*. Who they will be blocking for is the biggest question for **Chris Ferraro**; wide receiver *Steve Breaston* leads an unimpressive group of skill players and *Chad Henne*, rumoured to be injured, is the only QB under contract. On defence, *Adam Carriker* and *Cameron Jordan* over-shadow first round selection *Koa Misi* while *Jonathan Vilma* will provide leadership on the field. *Terrell Thomas* was a nice pick-up but his injury will leave safety *Sherrod Martin* as the best defensive back on the roster at present. **OVERALL GRADE: C+**



SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

GM: Russ Lemmon

IMMEDIATE IMPACT: Leon Hall

FUTURE STAR: Carlos Dunlap

SLEEPER PICK: Cam Thomas

MOST EXPENSIVE: Leon Hall (3 million)

TOP VALUE: Asher Allen

WORST VALUE: Jon Stinchcomb

ANALYSIS: Youth was the number one criteria for GM **Russ Lemmon** at every position except kicker. The most impressive group of youngsters is in the secondary, where 26-year-old corner *Leon Hall* leads a highly-talented quartet of corners that could make their mark in a couple of years. 27-year old *AJ Hawk* is the eldest of a trio of eager young linebackers that include *Jamar Chaney* and *Kavell Conner*. The defensive line is entirely under the age of 25, with *Carlos Dunlap* already proving to be dangerous and *Cam Thomas* and *Terrence Cody* boasting “huge” potential. The offensive line is well-stocked but filled with underachievers and failing projects. There is a semblance of an offence here with serviceable *Mark Sanchez* at the helm and *Robert Meachem* a target from the edge. *Pierre Thomas* is a pass-catching threat out of the backfield. **OVERALL GRADE: B+**



TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

GM: Guy Williams

IMMEDIATE IMPACT: Jay Cutler

FUTURE STAR: Jonathan Baldwin

SLEEPER PICK: Kraig Urbik

MOST EXPENSIVE: Dwight Freeney (5.5 million)

TOP VALUE: Jason Worlds

WORST VALUE: Bryant McKinnie

ANALYSIS: Of all the GMs, **Guy Williams** was the only one willing to take on older players at higher salaries. The result is a defence stocked with capable veterans and ageing stars like *Ray Lewis*, *Dwight Freeney*, *Takeo Spikes* and *Ike Taylor*, and an offence led by an experienced QB to overcome the challenges of a young supporting cast. The price of a more competitive team is less cap space available for free agents and re-signings; but there is no lack of youth for all that. *Bryant McKinnie* is the overpaid, but stabilizing veteran leader of a young offensive line with tremendous upside, while receiver *Jonathan Baldwin* and running back *Taiwan Jones* could develop into stars. If you haven't heard of *Jurrell Casey*, you soon will and *Jason Worlds* is a top grade talent who is still learning the pro game. A rejuvenated *Jay Cutler* could lead this team to 4 or 5 wins. **OVERALL GRADE: A-**



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

CANTON – I am *not* happy! Call me **Spats McMad** and I'm *not going to take it anymore!* Sadly, I will have to stop taking it only after I have finished writing this article; because having to write this article – in the middle of my off-season vacation – is the thing I intend to stop taking anymore, *after* I have taken it in this one instance. I know it's confusing, but in order for someone to *stop* taking something, they must, at some point, *take it*. This article is the thing I must *take*, and subsequently *not take* once I am done. Although I'm mad, somehow I am supposed to entertain and educate you in the process.

My editor, Mr. Finchley, knows darn well that I remove myself from football for two months following the end of the EFL Championship. When I say, "remove," I mean *completely*. I take myself out of the loop. I pick a remote destination for my holiday that requires somebody who *really* wants to reach me to prove it by having to take a boat, a propeller aircraft, or cross a suspension bridge over a 1,000-foot gorge to find me. I turn off my phone and, if it's available, check my e-mail or phone my voicemail once a week just to make sure nobody close to me has died unexpectedly; or that a late lost uncle hasn't left me millions of dollars in his Will and requires that I claim it within 7 days or else it will pass to an orphanage.

Why do I get away from it all? I really have no interest in the overblown carnival atmosphere of the EFL Combine and rookie draft. Analyst's mock drafts bore me to constipation and free agency drama does not interest me in the least. Of course, the rookie draft and free agency are extremely *important* – you'll get no argument from me about that! I review them both quite thoroughly once I have returned from vacation. It is the hyper-active speculation that fuels the rumour mill and the constant and, too often, meaningless media jabber around it all that I feel I must escape. I understand that keeping the EFL in the news is a marketing approach designed to keep people interested and talking about the EFL 365 days a year. I *get* it; but I don't need all that to hold my interest in the sport. In fact, forcing me to listen to ESPN's **Russ Flont** gush about a different "sleeper pick with All Pro potential" with each new segment of his unbearably superficial *Rookie Lookout*, makes me seriously consider taking up writing about a sport like cricket.

This year for my post-football vacation I had planned to visit Easter Island. A friend who had been there suggested I check it out because I might be interested in seeing heads that were bigger than mine. Although well-traveled and reachable by plane, Easter Island is located very far away from "civilization" and contains one of history's greatest mysteries – the famous giant stone heads that dot its beaches. The conventional explanation is that Polynesian natives carved them around 1500 and stopped when they ran out of trees to move them about. Yeah, *right!* – Something far more significant than that lies at the root of that mystery. I don't know what it is, but I know a stupid and implausible explanation when I hear one.

Anyway, I was about to board the plane to Santiago, Chile when my phone rang. I saw who it was and thought briefly that I might let it ring; but with the court case for my arrest during the 'Occupy Movement' coming up in a couple of months and my job with the syndicate hanging by a thread, I decided it was best that I answer it.

"Yes, Mr. Finchley," I said wearily.

"Spats! Cancel your vacation and get out to Canton right away," Mr. Finchley barked. "The Expansion Draft is in two days. According to our market data, our idiotic readers actually want to know your opinion about it."

"But..." I began to protest.

"I don't want to hear your whining, McChad. You're not doing this for me – I could care less what you think – the company needs you. Now turn around and head over to *Econo-Jet*; there's a ticket at the desk with your name on it!"

"EXTREME DRAFT"

The Expansion Draft, or Ex-Draft as it is being called, was a gruelling process. Those who participated in it, or had to cover it in person, refer to it now as the "Extreme Draft." Although only four teams were drafting new players, all 20 EFL teams had to participate due to a convoluted and screwy formula whereby the incumbent 16 teams got to "pull back" two of their *unprotected* players for every player they lost. In other words, their *unprotected* players were actually *partially protected*. Not only that, but any incumbent team that lost a player in the top 20 picks got an additional rookie draft pick in compensation. This gold-plated treatment for the 16 existing teams was, apparently, the steep price exacted by their owners in order for the majority to agree to expansion at all. So, right off the bat, the Expansion Four were facing an uphill battle just to emerge from

the draft with more than a bare modicum of talent. I found myself feeling sorry for them. But that empathy did not last long once the draft itself got under way.

THE FLOUNDERING FOUR

The existing 16 teams were able to fully protect 23 players from their rosters. This meant that, for the teams with an over-flowing stable of talent, there would be some unfortunate losses; and for teams like Markham, that could hardly find 23 players worth protecting, the losses would be a blessing in disguise. In fact, North Stars' GM, **Darrin Jones** had apparently offered to waive his pull-back rights but was refused.

In spite of rules that favoured the existing franchises, there were some big name players and potential stars available to the new teams. Play their cards right and a couple of them might surface with a base to be competitive in two or three years. When I saw the likes of **Mario Williams, Chris Snee, Jeff Saturday, Marcus McNeill, Casey Hampton, Sedrick Ellis, Michael Turner, and Anthony Spencer** on the list of available players my first thought was: who are the superstars who are taking the coveted protected spots *away* from these guys?

What do all of the above players have in common? All of them were passed over by the expansion franchises and were subsequently pulled back at the earliest opportunity by relieved owners. Most of them also carried higher salaries (because they are good), which caused the frugal-minded new GMs to avoid them as if they carried a communicable disease. The two main principles guiding the new GMs seemed to be, 1) draft youth, and 2) avoid salary....*at all costs!*

The overall result of this approach is that at least three of the four expansion teams are going to be hard-pressed to be remotely competitive in their first season and are likely many years away from scaring anybody. Looking at their respective war rooms provides some insight into the way these teams will



The **Ezron-2000**. Russ Lemmon's secret draft weapon was a robot that processed information 2000 times faster than the human beings conducting the draft. Excessive idle time caused it to overheat and break down in the later rounds of the draft.

develop.

The Commonwealth Colonials, led by the head historian of the Virginia Historical Society, **Will Blandford** – who somehow managed to finagle a British Billionaire named **Richard Bransen** into funding his venture into American-style Pro Football – devoted as much energy into promoting tourism in his home State of Virginia as he did into drafting his team. He and his entire staff were dressed in authentic 17th century garb for the draft, creating quite a spectacle. But real problems developed when he and his associates insisted on employing authentic 17th-century technology to track the picks, pullbacks, and send messages back and forth to their scouting staff. As a result, delays were common when it came Commonwealth's turn to pick as messengers wearing flattened black conical pilgrim hats ran hand-written messages back-and-forth, dutifully waiting for the ink to dry on the replies before folding the paper and carrying them back.

At the other extreme, **Russ Lemmon** of the Sebastian Swordfish, supporter of environmental causes stemming from his treasure-hunting nature expeditions along the east coast of Florida, touted that his team was the first to conduct a completely "paperless draft." His staff was forbidden from carrying pens, paper or even yellow "post-its." Lemmon unveiled home-grown "cutting edge draft technology" in the '*Ezron-2000*' supercomputer. Ezron stands for 'Electronic-zettabyte-RADCAB-OLAP-nelstutizer' and "2000" is an approximation of how much faster than a human it is than in selecting the correct draft pick. When asked what "nelstutizer" meant, Lemmon replied that what the '*Ezron-2000*' does is unlike what any computer has done before and therefore a brand new word was required to describe it. "Nelstutizer" is a word you will not find in any dictionary but, according to Lemmon, it describes perfectly what the '*Ezron-2000*' does. Had the draft lasted three hours or less, this piece of machinery might have attracted the admiring attention of Apple or IBM. However, as the draft wore on, Lemmon's supercomputer started to overheat, causing a strange noise that sounded like "*ozdoltorps*" to blare out at intervals. Finally, the smell of smouldering circuitry and increasingly loud outbursts of "*ozdoltorps*" caused the Draft Convenor to order the machine disconnected – leaving Lemmon scrambling for a notepad to track the picks in the late rounds.

The Monarchs' war room looked like a normal 21st century pro football draft operation in every respect except for the single large, ornate, high-backed purple velour chair at the end of the table where **Chris Ferraro** sat. It became known as Ferraro's Throne, and he directed his operation from there through the entire afternoon. He looked like he was accustomed to giving orders and was not too comfortable taking advice – but he communicated with tact and efficiency to his subordinates and occasionally allowed himself a smile, as he did after approving the selection of guard, **Ben Grubbs** in the 10th round.

The Twin Cities Triumph certainly appeared to be the healthiest front office group on site at Canton. **Guy Williams**, Birdie Burger CEO and Triumph owner, and his coaching staff were all dressed casually or in track gear. Everywhere they went



Will Blandford debates a draft selection with members of his coaching staff. The Colonials conducted their draft with strict adherence to historical accuracy, but the 17th century charm had worn off by the 10th round.

they either ran or power-walked with a triumphant air about them. They kept to themselves and seemed supremely confident, possibly even arrogant, and a couple of times were caught snickering when other teams made their selections. A notable exception was in the fourth round when the Swordfish announced the selection of former York cornerback, **Kyle Wilson**. That brought a pair of rapid-fire “F&\$ks” from Williams and defensive coordinator, **Jack Lumber**. The curses were picked up by the network audio, prompting ESPN’s **Ron Jaworski** to tut tut, “that kind of language is really deplorable coming from the leader of a professional organization. Saying ‘shit’ is one thing, but ‘fuck’ is at a whole other level – not as bad as ‘cunt’ or ‘motherfucker’ but far worse than ‘son-of-a-bitch’ or ‘jerk-off.’”

A SECOND CHANCE

Jay Cutler is going to get a second chance. Just when it looked as if the former Chino signal-caller would be exiled to the CFL or the Tex-Mex Football League, along comes expansion Twin Cities to put

their immediate future as a franchise in his uncertain hands. Hey, at least I wrote, “uncertain;” which is more optimistic than Convicts’ owner **Rob Nazar** would probably have described Cutler’s prospects. The stock of the new on-field leader of the Triumph took a major hit in 2011 when he was replaced after four weeks and out-played by rookie **Cam Newton**. After that, many people had written him off. But that knee-jerk view did not sit well with me – not because I like Cutler much, but because I like the big picture. It’s not as if Cutler had never played well in this league. In 2008, he led the Convicts to a 10-6 record and his spot starts in Chino’s 11-4-1 campaign in 2010 were respectable. The guy can play in this league and, of all the quarterbacks available in the expansion draft, Cutler carries the highest potential with the lowest risk of all of them. So, while the network analysts fret about Cutler’s status as Number One, I tip my hat to the Triumph for grabbing the best leader available and taking care of the most important position in the game.

COME ON MAN!

In a draft where there are only four picks in a round being selected in the first round carries so much more weight than in a conventional draft. For an expansion team it carries even more significance because the first round pick is literally the very first player on the team. It is a truly symbolic moment that, in my opinion, sets the tone for the franchise. So, when I heard the ‘Ezron-2000’, in its mechanical twang, blurt out **Terrence Cody** for pick #2, I thought I was witnessing a catastrophic malfunction of an untested technology. But when Lemmon was asked to confirm (because an actual human has to make the pick according to the rules) and nodded in the affirmative, I realized that, at the second pick, we had already reached a turning point in the draft. The cheers that followed came from the Cubs’ war room, not the Sebastian fans, as nobody among them knew who the hell Cody was. They did, however, know who **Mario Williams** was: the player who **Deron Redding** eagerly took off the table because now he could. It was all high-fives with the Cubs and quizzical expressions from everyone else.

The ripple effect continued. King Ferraro had planned to make Williams his First Subject in the Kingdom of Mission Viejo, but had to reverse his plans on the spur of the moment. The resulting selection of Pickering linebacker, **Koa Misi** prompted polite applause after a five-second pause due to complete bafflement. It looked like Misi might have been the number two option on the Monarch’s board, thrust into the spotlight of number one because of Williams’ sudden unavailability. Many analysts like Misi as a player, as do I, but he is not first round material in any draft. His selection allowed the Spartans to pull back two veteran anchors of their offensive line, **Chris Snee** and **Jeff Saturday**.

The last pick of the first round made some sense for a team with the first overall pick in the rookie draft: **Andrew Luck** would need a protector on the blind side; but the selection of **Jared Gaither**, announced with great pomp and circumstance from England by **Richard Bransen**, created another bank of silence in the audio feed broadcast from Canton. Everybody knew who Gaither was, and that was the problem. An immense physical talent, Gaither had shown all the signs of being a complete idiot on the field in his short pro career. Not only that, he was injury-prone. To say it was a risk would pay disservice to the meaning of “risk.” Not quite as bad as putting the mortgage money down on red at the ‘Casino Royale’ in Vegas, but close. The first round pick for any team is all about *eliminating* risk – that is the value of a first round pick – but for the Colonials, it was all about *creating* risk. If the gambit succeeds, we will chuckle in retrospect; but otherwise, there could be a lynching in Jamestown.

The networks were going crazy. All of the “experts” and their “mock drafts” were being blown out of the water and round two hadn’t even started. I chuckled because I knew the tone had been set and it would be tough to turn the tide back to a conventional draft plan – **Russ Flont** might actually have to think on his feet and talk about lesser known talents, which would be entertaining all on its own.

TEAM LEADERS WANTED – NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

Only time will tell which expansion team fared the best in the overall scheme of things as a result of picking their initial 40 players. I have read enough history to know that the conventional wisdom of the day is not always a reliable barometer of the future; so I will not pretend that I know which team came away with the best talent-haul in ‘Ex-Draft’ in the long term. However, I can tell you that, after 40 picks, if I were a coach, I would feel most confident taking the field with the Twin Cities Triumph. With free agency, much can change in a short period of time, but the base of a complete team, with reliable players at each position, is already in place in Minnesota.

Overall, I am appalled at the immediate skill that fell off the table due to the youth-focused and financial belt-tightening attitude that influenced the decision-making of three of the four new owners. It is a philosophical difference that, in philosophical terms, may have no right or wrong answer. In my view, however, it boils down to a here-and-now reality that few of the prospects selected in the early rounds of the Ex-Draft can play the game at the highest levels *right now* while the players who *have* proven themselves were viewed as not being able to do so for much longer; or too expensive. It is a developmental dilemma that could result in delayed progress for teams like Commonwealth, Mission Viejo and Sebastian, and more immediate returns for teams like Twin Cities.

PICKS I LIKED....AND PICKS I DIDN'T LIKE!

Perhaps the easiest way to give you my overall view of the draft is to break it down team by team and then score the team's overall performance based on a completely subjective, arbitrary whim. Well, not completely arbitrary. If there are more picks I like than I don't like, chances are I'll give that team a good mark. If I have trouble finding picks I like and stumble repeatedly into picks I don't like, I'll pan that team without mercy.

COMMONWEALTH COLONIALS – Picks of Genius: *Andre Smith* (T) – how did the big guy last that long? **Picks I Liked:** *Jonathan Fanene* – quietly dangerous when healthy; *David Hawthorne* (LB) – a run-stopping machine; *Justin Blalock* (G) – may emerge as leader; *Emmanuel Sanders* (WR) – high ceiling; **Picks I did NOT Like:** *Jared Gaither* (T) – went too early; *Kyle Rudolph* (TE) – went waaay too early! *Lance Moore* (WR) – not best choice with Eric Decker still on the board; *Eddie Royal* (WR) – at \$3.3 million, not the best choice with anybody still on the board; *Winston Justice* (T) – Son of Gaither; *Jacob Lacey* (CB) – a proven starting corner, proven to be crap that is; **Picks that deserve the Death Penalty:** *Stephen Gostkowski* (K) and *Adam Podlesh* (P) – picking kickers back-to-back in the 15th and 16th rounds of a 40-round draft is a true douche-bag move; *Matt Cassel* (QB) – when you have Andrew Luck in your back pocket, picking up Cassel's \$6.5 million tab is a greater mystery than the Easter Island heads. **THE FINAL WORD:** The Colonial plan is a five-year one, perhaps longer. It could get shorter if they make the right pick in Luck or Griffin with the first overall pick in the college draft. They come out of the Ex-Draft with loads of cap space, but too many holes to fill. They must sign Hawthorne, Smith and Blalock to long-term deals or else they will have wasted three of their better draft selections. Too many lapses in the mid-to-late rounds, a couple of early gambles, and selecting *Matt Cassel*; all bring the score down. **SCORE: 63.4**

MISSION VIEJO MONARCHS – Picks of Genius: *Jeremy Zuttah* (G) – snuck under most team's radar, but Ferraro found him, to South Carolina's chagrin; *Ben Grubbs* (G) – big salary didn't scare; *Adam Carriker* (DT) – big talent finally coming into his own. **Picks I Liked:** *Russell Okung* (T) – injuries only thing holding him back; *Terrell Thomas* (CB) – pre-season injury exposed him but Corn Kings hoped to pull him back; *Steve Breaston* (WR) – good value in ninth round; *Danny Watkins* (G) – another great value in 14th round; **Picks I did NOT Like:** *Chad Henne* (QB) – the kind of lazy mid-draft pick you make when you're bored and out of ideas; *Koa Misi* (LB) – a first-round stretch worthy of *Mr. Fantastic*; *Jonathan Vilma* (ILB) – good player, but better ones available at that slot; **Picks that deserve the Death Penalty:** *Ryan Longwell* (K) – at #21, a dweeb move. *Sav Rocca* (P) – at #24, not quite dweebish but definitely *not* cool. **THE FINAL WORD:** With the exception of the Misi pick, the Monarchs started strong, but did not show as much ingenuity in the latter portion of the draft (although *Nick Collins* was an intriguing pick at #26). They stocked both of their lines with young talent and had the sagacity to reserve one spot on each for a veteran leader. Although there were many astute individual picks, especially early, the Monarchs did not seem to have much of plan, apart from avoiding the skill positions, and why that was is anyone's guess. With the #2 overall pick in the draft, clearly they feel they have their quarterback position sewn up – either through draft or trade; but who are they going to put on the field at running back, wide receiver, and tight end? They have a lot of catching up to do on offence and in the secondary. **SCORE: 65.7**

SEBASTAIN SWORDFISH – Picks of Genius: *Carlos Dunlap* (DE) – should have gone in the first round; *Patrick Robinson* (CB) – future full-time starter is phenomenal value at #10; *Robert Meachem* (WR) – big potential finally developing, a steal at #17; **Picks I Liked:** *Kyle Wilson* (CB) – a slight reach at #4 but future capacity makes it excusable; *Leon Hall* (CB) – proven top corner will bounce back from injuries; *Cam Thomas* (DT) – solid prospect right now, could turn into a genius pick; *Pierre Thomas* (RB) – not a grinder, but adds life to an offence; *Michael Jenkins* (WR) – at #34 with an open contract, a nice pick-up; **Picks I did NOT Like:** *Rahim Moore* (S) – overrated coming out of College, proving it in the pros; *Gosder Cherilus* (T) – big

name, small performer has yet to live up draft day hype; **Jason Pinkston** (G) – a project, but drafted too early for a project; **Mark Sanchez** (QB) – a decent pick in theory, but something tells he’s a dead end QB; **Picks that deserve the Death Penalty: Terrence Cody** (DT) – literally, the *biggest* mistake in the first round, maybe in the entire draft; **Jamar Chaney** (LB) – can play, but at #3 he’d *better!* **THE FINAL WORD:** The Swordfish went forward on the assumption that they would not be able to snag a top-rated QB coming out of College at #3, which pushed them into drafting Sanchez. Under the circumstances, the pick makes sense, but I am far from confident that he is the long-term solution at the position – the fact that Markham, a team starving for any kind of leadership on offence, exposed him in a contract year should tell you something. There is no excuse for the Cody pick, but I am prepared to eat my words if he turns into the second coming of **Kelly Gregg**....that is, if the obese Cody doesn’t eat them first. Less egregious, but highly questionable, was snaring Chaney in the third round – average outside linebackers are not usually near the top of anyone’s list when building a new team. Still, despite some baffling lapses, the Swordfish also grabbed some of the best talent available in the early-middle portion of the draft, and that saved their day. They exit Ex-Draft with a good base on which to build, even if they won’t win more than 3 games in 2012. **SCORE: 70.2**

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH – Picks of Genius: Jay Cutler (QB) – a good pick elevated to “genius” because Twin Cities was the only team not to screw up the first round; **Craig Urbik** (G) – powerful, underrated guard who will make his mark in a couple of years; **Jonathan Baldwin** (WR) – at #8, this future star was snatched up at the perfect moment; **Picks I Liked: Jason Worilds** (LB) – nothing but upside and an affordable contract; **Alan Branch** (DT) – solid run-stopper; **Josh Wilson** (CB) – solid starter, surprised that York let him go; **Shane Vereen** (RB) – two or three years away from starting, but when he does he’ll be a nice addition to the offence; **Vincent Brown** (WR) – big play-making potential; **Taiwan Jones** (RB) – not an every down back, but the kind who’ll make the defence pay attention the ball; **Ike Taylor** (CB) – proven vet, not too expensive, will anchor the secondary in the short term; **Kevin Burnett** (ILB) – still has 3 to 4 productive years left; **Dwight Freeney** (DE) – would have been a “genius” pick except for the price tag; **Ray Lewis** (ILB) – finally showing signs of age, but leadership and intimidation factors are still strong; **Kenrick Ellis** (DT) – could develop into a top starter if he gets the chance; **Jason Campbell** (QB) – best journeyman available; good insurance if Cutler doesn’t work out; **Picks I did NOT Like: Eben Britton** (T) – coming off two injury-prone seasons, tall talent looks ready to go *bust*; **Stephen Paea** (DT) – a back-up who can bench press, big deal!; **Derek Sherrod** (T) – injury-prone, dubious talent was grabbed too early; **Drake Nevis** (DT) – may never develop into anything worthwhile, even if healthy; **Picks that deserve the Death Penalty: Luis Vasquez** (G) – injury-prone and merely average as a lineman, picking him at #6, allowing the T-Lizards to recall Michael Turner, was a major error; **Rob Bironas** (K) – at #20, a dork-like moment in an otherwise solid draft; **Albert Haynesworth** (DT) – thoroughly discredited as a teammate, his fading ability is not worth even late round speculation. **THE FINAL WORD:** The Triumph bucked the trend that seemed to dominate draft day by going for talent at all ages and positions and taking on some big contracts. Some of those contracts, like the ones belonging to **Tim Tebow** and **Bryant McKinnie**, are poor economic investments in the short term, but controlling both those players may pay dividends down the road. **Guy Williams** may feel that his team’s training regimen, featuring a diet based on Birdie Burger secret formulas, will help him rehabilitate his many injury-prone players. If there was a weakness in his draft strategy, it was his willingness to take on young players with big medical files too early in the draft. When it was all over, however, the Triumph emerged as the only expansion team with a chance to steal a win or two from a non-expansion team in the 2012 season; and they were able to do so without sacrificing the future. **SCORE: 76.5**

SHARKS SMELL BLOOD

As the long day came to a close in Canton, many of the incumbent EFL owners and their management staffs shook off their fatigue in order to “meet-and-greet” the new owners. Now that the draft was over, the established teams and the expansion teams were permitted to “officially” speak to each other. Due to the interactive nature of the draft, fear of collusion had caused the league to forbid the old teams from conducting trade or contract talks with the expansion owners prior to the draft.

The haste with which many of them made their way over to the newbies, sporting their crocodile-like grins, told me that they were being more than friendly. They smelled blood. Many of them had managed to reclaim their most coveted unprotected players and they sensed that there may be riches, in the form of draft picks, to be had with the right sales pitch.

No deals were made that night, but the groundwork for future contacts were made as everyone exchanged business cards and a few relaxed with drinks in hotel lounges throughout Canton. Intemperate Spartans’ owner, **Gus Konstantakos**, sported a Cheshire cat smile as he invited Monarchs’ owner **Chris Ferraro** and his staff, to dine with him at a swanky Canton steakhouse (yes, they have one there!) and “talk sports.” When I heard the wily Greek refer to Ferraro as “my liege,” and saw the flattered smile cross the young Monarch’s face, I could see the writing on the wall: his pick was doomed. The only question was how much he acquire in return.

One of the great things about the EFL is that a team can change a lot in a short period of time – the relative levels of success immediately after the Ex-Draft is not necessarily an indicator of where the new teams will be before the season starts. But whatever moves they do between now and then will be ones I will not witness. My duty to Mr. Finchley done, it is off to Easter Island to see the stone heads larger than my own!