

SEASON 2017 PREVIEW

IN THE 11TH
YEAR



A YEAR OF
FIRSTS!

TERRELLE PRYOR SR



MARCUS PETERS



MATT STAFFORD





EUROPE



CANTON (AP) – The EFL is fully 10 years old and about to venture into its second decade. 10 years is an early age to embark on a journey across the Atlantic to conquer a culture steeped in an ancient and more traditional brand of football. But the EFL is nothing if not bold. Two years after its doomed attempt to penetrate the Far East market, the league has sanctioned another move eastward, but this time to the Far West of the Old World – Europe.

The rumours that had swirled during the 2016 season of a Carthage and Markham move turned out to be true. Nevertheless, when the news officially broke it came as a shock to many and generated a roiling controversy that continues unabated as Week One approaches. For the teams involved the move to Europe is an “all-in” gamble that could make or break them. The EFL, in its quest for football supremacy, seems willing to sacrifice them.

The Cannibals had little to lose. Isolated on a tiny mound of dirt in the South Pacific they were largely unloved and unsupported. A surprise trip to the Gale Sayers Game in 2014 brought fleeting recognition and a measure of acclaim, but the effect wore off quickly. Fans in North America moved on and, for the fickle fans of Samoa, the novelty of the spectacle of pro football wore off suddenly when it became apparent the team was heading for another rebuild. With the Pentagon readying to cut its subsidies to the team by 50% in 2017 and attendance faltering, the writing was on the wall for owner/coach and tuna cannery tycoon, **Ken Main**. He knew a move was necessary – the question was: where?

In stepped *Duvel-Moortgat*, a Belgium brewery seeking to become one of the giants of the Belgian beer industry, alongside *InBev* and *Stella Artois*. The small and unremarkable country of Belgium is a world beer power;

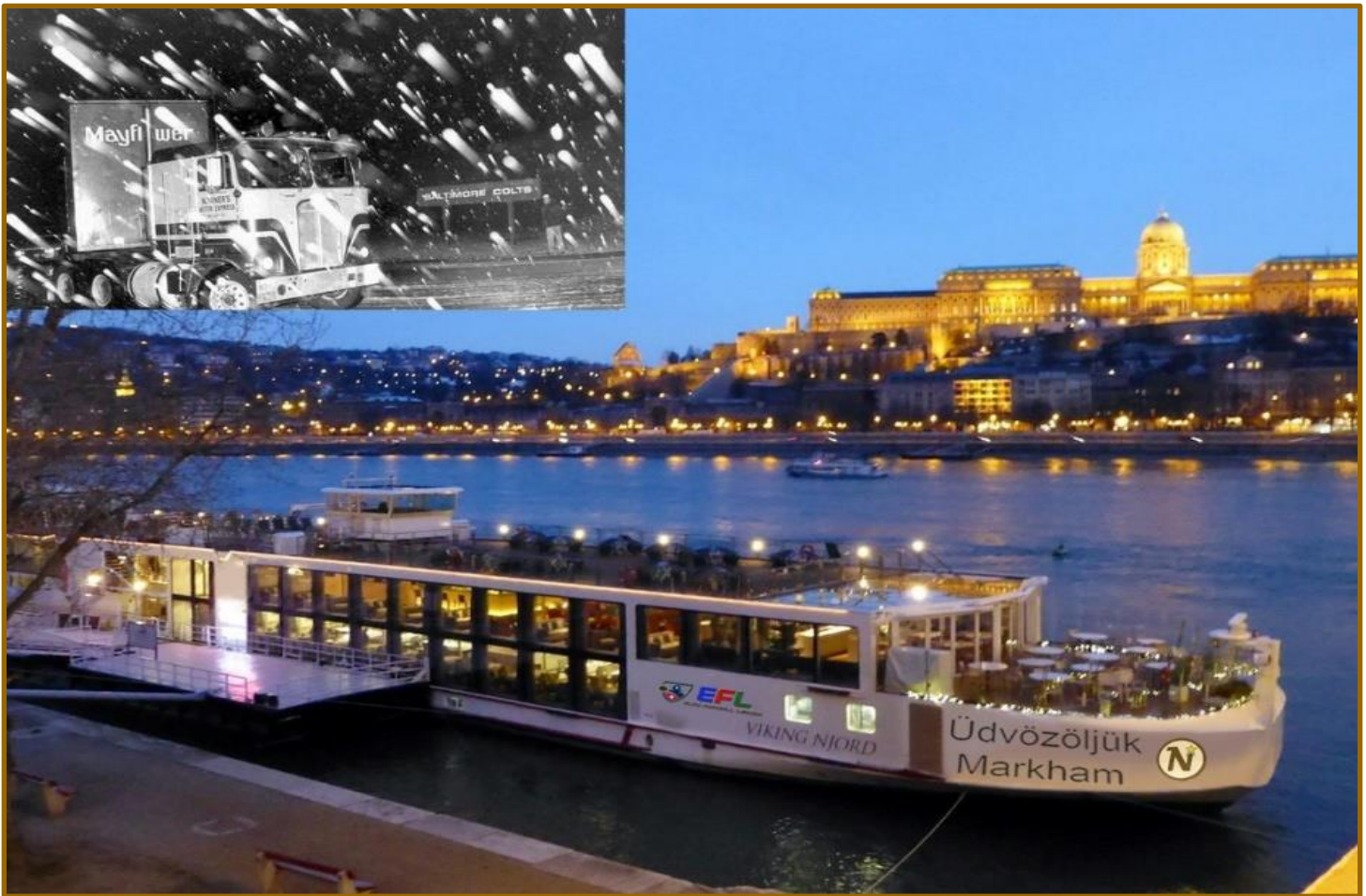
In one fell swoop, with little warning, the EFL blitzed Europe by parachuting two franchises into the heart of the Continent. Is it an invasion, or a liberation? Read on.....

and what goes better with football than beer? Duvel made an offer, seemingly out of the blue, that no owner of a team marooned on a Pacific island could refuse. The EFL quickly approved the sale and the Cannibals of Samoa were officially no more.

Ken Main and his new Euro-partners are banking on the synergy of beer and American Football opening the taps for their brand of Belgian beer to flow into new markets across two continents.

But as much as beer and football go together, the presence of an American-style football team in the capitol of the European Union raises concerns that it will be a target for terrorism. The team’s new moniker – the Bruxelles Bombers – and its small but ultra high-tech stadium boasting the latest security features – The Fortress – acknowledges this even as it seems to project a carefree dismissal of the dangers. Nor are Belgians clamouring for a new foreign sport. The sudden appearance of the Bombers caught the country off-guard and people are taking a wait-and-see approach. Season ticket sales so far have been underwhelming and mostly led by corporations.

With such cultural and market challenges the team cannot afford to be a big loser on the football field. In that regard, there is hope that this year’s version of the Cannibals/Bombers will stay in the East Division race long enough to generate fan excitement. Critically, the “Franchise Quarterback” is already in place, with *Marcus Mariota* living up to expectations despite two losing seasons. His supporting cast is improved over last year, with rookie running back *Leonard Fournette* impressing in training camp and *Terrelle Pryor Sr.* joining *Emmanuel Sanders* as a legitimate deep threat on the edges. A couple of



A chartered Viking Cruise Ship docks in Budapest at the end of the final leg of the North Stars' tense and daring 3-day escape from Markham. By all accounts, the Danube was a highlight. But what happened on the boat stayed on the boat.

Joes at tackle, *Staley* and *Thomas*, should give Mariota a little extra time to explore those options downfield.

On the defensive side of the ball, the Bombers can only improve over their near rock bottom finish in most meaningful defensive categories in 2016. The defensive line is a bit stouter and a lot quicker while star safety *Harrison Smith* is as healthy as he has ever been and ready to take charge of a talented but very young secondary. The unit will give ground and surrender its share of points, but the days of every opponent running rampant over a **Ken Main** defence appear to be over.

So when the Brooklin Hawks take the field in Bruxelles to face the Bombers in Week One, the first EFL game in Continental Europe should be a fireworks display worthy of the historical occasion.

If there is some logic to the Cannibals move to Bruxelles, there appears to be absolutely none to the highly controversial defection of the Markham North Stars to Budapest, Hungary.

Rumours of an imminent move had persisted during the 2016 season and had seemed too fantastic to be true. They had been largely dismissed by fans and commentators as a sly **Darrin Jones** negotiating tactic designed to pressure Markham City Council to fund upgrades to *The Dawg Pound*. But the truth – as exposed in a mid-season column, '*EFL Europe*,' by freelance sportswriter, **Spats McChad** – was that extensive under-the-table, tri-partite negotiations between the EFL, Jones and the Hungarian Ministry of Sports and Trade had carried on in earnest throughout a successful 2016 field campaign that saw the North Stars finish 10-6 and make their third trip to the playoffs in nine seasons.

Historically, the North Stars franchise overcame early ineptness to become an EFL Champion in 2012. The Markham fanbase, swollen by over 7 million residents of the Prefecture of Foshan, China – Markham's sister city – is the league's largest. They are, arguably, also the most loyal and among the most fanatical. A community-owned team, they are considered one of the league's great success stories. So why would the league conspire to help Jones move one of its marquis franchises to a Central Europe, where the only "football" the locals know is actually played with feet?

"The league has to put its best foot forward if it is going to survive a European expansion," explains **Peter Prince** of North America Today, one of the mainstream writers who consistently downplayed rumours of a North Stars move out

of Markham. *“I feel for the fans of Markham, of course. But this is a business, and the league evidently feels that it can make the expansion into a new market work if it features one of its signature franchises.”*

In the same vein, **Kris Hortenson** of ESPN’s Sports Central contrasts the move with the league’s now defunct attempt to plant the seeds of American football in Asia: *“The league’s big error in launching EFL Asia was that it stocked its teams with unknown semi-pro players. Most of them came from the Rustbelt and Appalachian regions of the United States, with hardly a native Asian among them. They hoped the sport itself would catch on but it was obvious that the sport didn’t look the same with a beer-drinking sandlot player named Billy-Bob playing quarterback.”*

Layers of the “Budapest Conspiracy” are being peeled away every day by resolute journalists searching for the truth. A general assumption that **Darrin Jones** and the EFL are lying about everything fuels what is quickly becoming a rabid inquiry into the mass of contradictory facts and assertions.

For example, in Jones’ emotional farewell address to Markham, posted to *YouTube* from his posh District V residence in Budapest, he claims: *“my pleas to the City of Markham and stadium management for improvements to the game day experience fell on deaf ears. For years I asked, practically begged, them to add variety to the concessions. I like peanuts and hot dogs as much as anybody, but do you think it would kill them to add something like a hamburger, or French fries to the menu? They wouldn’t do it. Not even potato chips. At the start of the 2015 season they informed me they would add unsalted peanuts and a jumbo hot dog, but adding grills and fryers would cost too much. I was furious. I finally came to understand that, for them, it was all about profit. They didn’t care about the fans. And that broke my heart to the point*



Drunken North Stars fans in Markham pose for the TV cameras before pulling down the statue of **Darrin Jones** in Jones Square, Markham. The statue was erected by the community in 2013, a year after the North Stars’ Championship win over Death Valley.

where, for the sake of the fans, I decided I had to take a stand by moving the team.”

But **Guy Gosselin**, vice-president of sales for *Universal Peanut and Hot Dog*, the company with concession rights to the Dawg Pound, tells a different story.

“Nobody said any’ing to me,” Gosselin protested to Channel 4 – Markham in a recent interview. *“I ask dem, do you like de peanut? Dey say yes, dey like de peanut. I ask dem, do you like the hot dog? Dey say yes, dey like the hot dog. I ask dem, do you like de mustard? Dey say yes, dey like de mustard. We do hot dogs and peanuts for a long time – we think we do hot dogs and peanuts better dan anybody.”*

Cogswell Cogs II, spokesman for the Committee of 13 that runs the EFL, declared in a prepared statement at a league press briefing in Canton: *“After careful consideration and considerable deliberation, in consultation with ownership of the Markham North Stars and the Hungarian Ministry for Trade and Sport, we believe it is in the best interests of the EFL and its fans to approve the relocation of the North Stars to Budapest, Hungary.”*

The Committee’s spokesman went on to describe the move as ‘progressive,’ ‘creative’ and ‘inclusive’ without attempting to explain how it was any of those things. The league’s official statement was over in 5 minutes and only one question, about whether the team would change its name to something Hungarian, from *Budapest Weekly Goulash* reporter, **Attila the Hun**, was taken before the conference was abruptly ended. The team will remain the North Stars for now but will sport a Hungarian flag on their jerseys.

Despite repeated declarations from the principal parties involved that the move is a natural, planned

progression in the development of the EFL and the North Stars franchise, the transition from Markham to Budapest is not going smoothly.

The entire team – players, staff and families – was literally shipped out in the dead of one hot summer night before the start of training camp. By then the move was an open secret but no details had been released. Jones and his faithful lapdog in the media, **Lanny McDonald**, continued to assert up to the last moment that the North Stars were planning to play in Markham in 2017. Unhappy and suspicious North Stars fans nevertheless attempted to block the move with a 24/7 picketing of the airport, the team’s head office at the Dawg Pound, and Absorbing Field, the North Stars practice facility. Unbeknownst to them, a plan was already in place to move the team by taxi, bus, and plane to Germany, then by cruise ship along the River Danube to Hungary. One night the entire team just seemed to disappear.

When the team resurfaced 3 days later in Hungary, the outraged fans in Markham rioted. The statue of **Darrin Jones** in Jones Square was pulled down and defaced by an angry mob. The Chairman of the Board of the Markham North Stars Football Club, **Chin Tu Fat**, declared the move “illegal” and promised to sue. Lanny McDonald’s favourite pubs, 8 in all, were firebombed. The Originals, a group of diehard Markham fans from the team’s early losing days, occupied the Dawg Pound and refused to leave. **Greta Clapper**, the infamous ‘Fat Lady in Row 54’ declared her intention to eat herself to death in the middle of Jones Square.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, authorities in Budapest did not appear to be ready for their new tenants. A verbal agreement to host the team at *Ferenc Puskás Stadium* immediately fell through when local sports officials realized that the North Stars were not a real “football” (i.e., soccer) team. M1-TV, owner of North Stars broadcasting rights, immediately sued the club for lost advertising revenue when a national chocolate company specializing in chocolate soccer balls cancelled their advertising contract. The final blow to the team’s image came when Hungarian soccer legend, **Gabor Kiraly**, upon realizing that the team he came to greet at the Budapest Cruise Port Terminal was in fact an American Football team, declared their presence an “insult to Hungary” and walked out of the welcoming ceremony.

The North Stars are scrambling to set themselves up in their new digs. The team will play on a strip of old Soviet-era runways at *Ferenc-Liszt International Airport*. The press and luxury boxes will be located inside an old air traffic



Ferenc-Liszt International Airport in Budapest, Hungary – home of the Budapest North Stars *American* Football Club. Out of sight is the moth-balled Soviet-era Air Traffic Control Tower, where the Press Box and Luxury Suites are located – 500 meters away.

control tower approximately 500 meters away from the field. The concessions will be run by *Sarkozy Sausages* and *Nilda's Nut Farm*. Ironically, the principal fare at "The Runway" (as it is called) will be – you guessed it – hot dogs and peanuts; although with a Hungarian flare.

With precarious fan support and a tainted public profile, the North Stars need to win over their new fan base on the football field. After playing all four pre-season games against the Bruxelles Bombers it is difficult to say for sure how they will fare against the rest of the league. But based on last year's performance it appears that Markham/Budapest will again be the favourite to finish at the top of the Coastal Division, but with some extra competition from a couple of unexpected places.

*"The core of the Budapest offence is intact from last year and could improve if **David Johnson** is able to carry a heavier workload,"* writes **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org in the 2017 Outriders Football Almanac. *"An attractive group of wide receivers makes this offence potentially one of the most explosive, but their impact will be muted if **Tyrod Taylor** cannot improve his progressive reads and distribute the ball all over the field."*

The question of the Markham quarterback being a drag on the North Stars' attack is disputed by others, however. **Lazor Ponk** of *Scouts Ltd* expresses some interesting views on this in his article 'Death of Offence.'

"Defences are becoming faster and more complex in response to the last several years of relative dominance by the offences," asserts Ponk. *"There are only a handful of quarterbacks – the Bradys, the Breeses, and the Ryans for example – capable of standing in the pocket and making 3 or 4 reads quickly enough to avoid being sacked. Even they can expect to be challenged more this year by the deceptive multiple blitz packages that defences are developing. A mobile and shifty quarterback, like a **Tyrod Taylor** or a **Russell Wilson**, possesses the ability to redeem broken plays and escape speedy linebackers. Neither QB may end up posting gaudy passing numbers, but you can expect them to move their teams effectively in a season that favours defence."*

Defensively the North Stars have best defensive end combo in the league in **Cameron Jordan** and **Calais Campbell**, giving them the capacity to bring pressure without the blitz. But they can also bring pressure from the second and third levels if needed, with **Bernardick McKinney**, **Lavonte David** and **Johnathan Cyprien** well capable of timing a rush to the pocket. But

"Markham – er – I mean Budapest, is a strong team – the clear favourite in the Atlantic Division, in my opinion," declared **Skope Boylezz** in a recent podcast on ESPN.com. *"But what about that travel schedule? What effect will that have? The league tried to help them out with one long road trip and a couple of three-game homestands and, sure, it works both ways since teams must travel to Europe now. But I think that the long-term effect on the European-based teams will be more severe. Will that allow a revamped team like Pickering, York or even an improved New Jersey squad to knock them off? Don't be surprised if one of them does!"*

With discussion of the European expansion dominating both mainstream and alt media, stories that otherwise might be prominent are taking a backseat. But they are no less relevant. One person who is relieved that the spotlight is elsewhere is beleaguered Scarborough owner and coach, **Chris Dickinson**. Now replaced by **Darrin Jones** as the most hated man in football, Dickinson finds himself able to move around publicly again after spending four months in a bunker following his trade of **Davante Adams**, **D.J. Swearinger** and the Eagles' no.1 pick in 2018 for ageing star **Eric Weddle**. This trade baffled experts and brought down yet another firestorm of criticism on Dickinson's head. But as the Blue Eagles enter their 7th season in Scarborough, early training camp murmurs of a possible deep playoff run are getting louder and more distinct as the Blue Eagles wrap up a perfect exhibition season in which they looked dominant.

Mumbar Thakar of *Pro Football Focal-Point (PFFP)*, whose stature rose after making the against-the-grain, but accurate, prediction that Cowtown would make the playoffs last year, makes a strong case for the trade and for the Blue Eagles as the principal contender in the Atlantic Conference:

"Set aside who won the trade for a moment," he begins in Week One PFFP feature article, 'How We See It.' *"The addition of **Eric Weddle** gives Scarborough the undisputed best secondary in the league – perhaps not the best of all time – but for this season there is no equal. Weddle is in a perfect scenario. He is a veteran with a nose for the football playing with young up-and-coming ball hawks. **Marcus Peters** may be the best cornerback in the league and **Landon Collins** cannot be underestimated. This is a group that will get a lot of interceptions and put **Aaron Rodgers** in optimum position to regain his winning form. The Blue Eagles are definitely the team to watch in 2017."*

Thakar is not alone in jumping on the Eagles bandwagon while there is still plenty of room. Prickly ESPN commentator, **Will Simons** had this to say recently: *"I look around the league and, honestly, no team scares the crap out of me like the Blue Eagles and it is 90% because of that defence. That secondary is elite. It will make everyone around them better – including **Aaron Rodgers**. I know Rodgers has had issues, but the whole team, from the owner down to the water boy, has had issues. This year they are going to create serious issues for others!"*

The Blue Eagles have been favoured before – more often than not – and have failed to deliver. But this year things

are different. There is no consensus among the experts that any single team has the capacity to dominate. That includes recent powerhouses like Aurora and Twin Cities. In the case of the Mustangs, their success in 2017 will depend mostly on the performance of the offence as the defence recedes in status.

Deathspun' columnist, **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** continues to forage around the periphery of the Mustangs' operation attempting to discover the truth about that recently dominant defence – that appears to be experiencing pre-season breakdowns – and what the Mustang “trainers” behind the scenes have planned for 2017.

“The EFL is either unwilling or unequipped to deal with the Frankenstein experiments of Project Adam,” writes Smith-Abdullah in his article, ‘Steroids Shmeroids,’ in which he posits that the true danger to competition lies in bio-genetic engineering and cyborg technology, not comparatively mild PEDs. *“The technology being attempted is far too advanced for football. That alone makes regulation difficult. And now other teams are catching on and undertaking their own research. Sources report that Farmer Brown of Cowtown has entered into a contract with agricultural bioengineering company, Moonsanta to develop a product called ‘Power Corn.’ The subject of the*



Chris Dickinson is whisked away by his security detail after his trade for **Eric Weddle** went public. He can emerge from hiding now that it seems his Blue Eagles are going to be a contender.

*the experiment will be, of course, **TJ Watt**, JJ's brother. Do not be surprised if no.20 overall pick TJ performs more like a no.1 this season. When so many people are willing to turn a blind eye to outrageous experimentation going on right now, it will get worse and people will get hurt.”*

Smith-Abdullah postulates that the struggles of **JJ Watt** to stay on the field in pre-season are the result of an adverse reaction to the technology that makes him monstrously effective on game day. Watt had to leave a pre-season match against York when he collapsed on the sideline, smoke billowing from his ears. The team claimed he suffered “heat exhaustion” but it was obviously something much more serious.

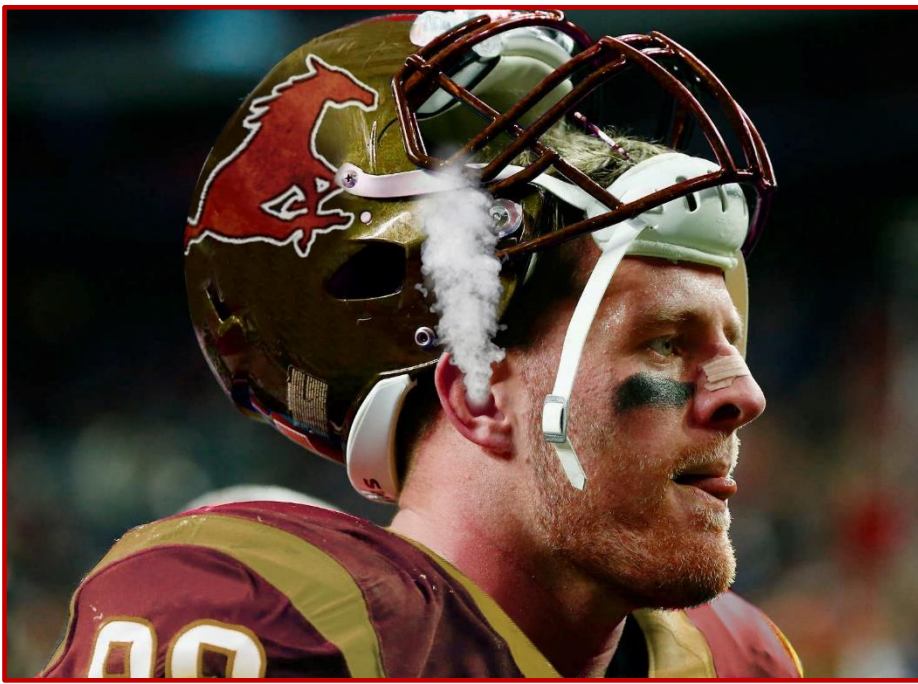
“Nature is rebelling against the short-sighted human manipulations of organic genetic frameworks using quantum laser technology and DNA re-sequencing,” Abdullah-Smith continues. *“Yet according to sources inside the team, the mad scientists of Project Adam plan to unveil bionic lens eye implants this season, piloting the technology with quarterback Matt Ryan.”*

Matt Ryan played much more in the pre-season than other starting quarterbacks, remarkable considering the injury risk and **Rich Liotta's** decision to break camp for the third straight season with just one quarterback on the roster. Ryan's pre-season numbers were off the charts. But more telling, he was not sacked or even hit once in 122 snaps, prompting Mustangs' local radio announcer, **Jim Buck** ‘the Horse Whisperer’ to remark with amazement during broadcasts on Ryan's “great field of vision” and “uncanny pocket awareness.”

One prominent analyst has taken notice. **Arpin Plunderflunder**, in his blog ‘Fantasy Freakz,’ writes: *“This will be a rebound year for **Matt Ryan** after a 2016 season plagued by interceptions and a poor showing in the conference final. **Davante Adams** arrives just in time to take over no.2 duties for an ageing **Anquan Boldin**. Adams is a deep threat compliment to reliable **Julian Edelman**. The running game lacks a go-to option, so the passing game will be featured in Aurora. In a year when nobody is going to throw 40 TD passes, Ryan could throw 40 TD passes.”*

The Aurora offence is ready to assume the lead role in the team's success this year, but that does not mean the defence will not contribute. **Patrick Peterson** and **Earl Thomas** remain co-leaders of one of the league's better starting secondary units and **Cliff Avril** is still a demon rushing the quarterback. Overall the defence remains strong and that means the Mustangs will almost certainly gallop to a South Division title again in 2017.

The three division front-runners in the Atlantic Conference, Scarborough, Budapest and Aurora will likely face stiff challenges from some notable rivals as increasing league parity comes into play. **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org zeroes in on the main factor in one team's bid to challenge the favourites and finish at the top:



JJ Watt (above) takes a series off during pre-season action against York due to a severe heat flash. Eventually Watt had to be assisted off the field after his equipment started to smolder. Sources suggest his secretly bio-engineered body is breaking down. Brother **TJ Watt** (below), drafted by Cowtown in the 1st round, is taking a genetically-engineered experimental “super food” manufactured by *Moonsanta Corporation*. TJ can be seen to grow larger, like the cartoon character *Popeye*, after cracking open and downing a can of ‘Power Corn.’

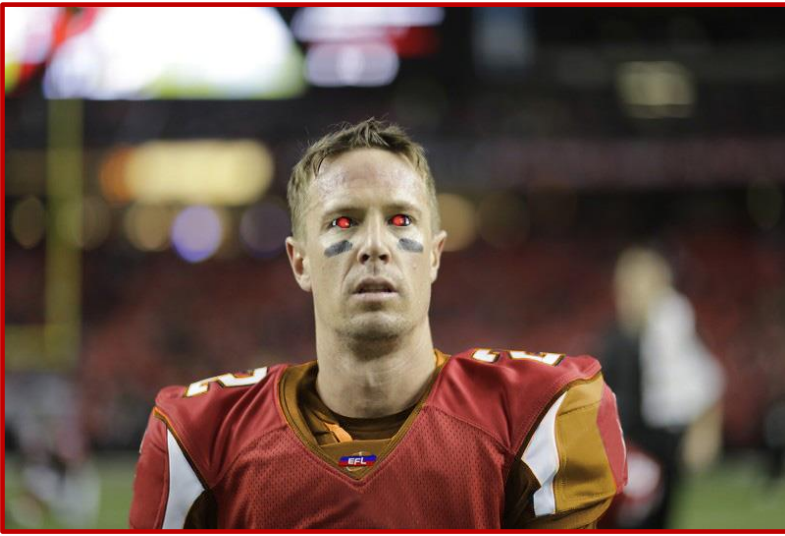


“Too many well-informed people are discounting the Thunder Lizards based on their disappointing showing in 2016. This is an error in my opinion. In a quarterback-driven league Durham still has one of the best – a sure hall-of-famer – in **Drew Brees**. They also spent big money landing a former pro bowler, **Cam Newton**, in free agency. Newton is a roster luxury this year, earning more than the starter to sit; but the point is that Durham has the strongest quarterback-duo in the EFL. Not only can Durham not be discounted, many scenarios we envision have them finishing no.1 in the North.”

Add in a budding superstar in **TY Hilton**, a promising rookie in **Cooper Kupp**, a healthy **Carlos Hyde** and **Jack Conklin** protecting Brees’ blindside and you have an offence that will score points at a top-four clip. Can the defence stop the run? Not likely. But the teams that are aiming to contend will be passing, not running, and the Lizards are in as good as position as any to limit and potentially shut down an opponent’s passing game. This was pointed out quite vociferously by **Russ Flont** on *EFL Round-Up*:

“People are talking non-stop about the Blue Eagles’ secondary and Mustangs’ secondary. *Ooh, they’re so great!* I’m not saying they aren’t good secondaries. But come on! In Durham you have **Richard Sherman**, one of the best, if not *the best*, cornerbacks in professional football history teamed with the most under-rated cornerback in the league right now, **Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie**, backed up by a freak at strong safety, **Kam Chancellor** and probably the best cover safety in history, **Devin McCourty**. If that isn’t the best starting set of DBs in the league right now, then I’m a loud-mouthed blowhard who doesn’t have a clue what he’s talking about! And we know that’s not true.”

Curiously absent from most playoff predictions is the Atlantic Conference representative at the Gale Sayer Game last year, the Sebastian Swordfish. The team that tore through opposing defences in 2016 like they were made of tissue paper en route to a 14-1-1 record appears ready for a sudden fall back to a familiar position in the standings: last. **Lazor Ponk** of *Scouts Ltd.*, explains



That burning look in the eyes of Aurora QB, **Matt Ryan** is actually a sign that his bionic lens eye implants are activated and scanning 360-degrees. Ryan was not sacked once in 122 pre-season snaps.

why:

“Sebastian is about to experience the worst crash since the Patriots 2014 fall to 3-13 after winning the championship in 2013,” Ponk writes provocatively. *“The reason boils down to the decision to trade **Andy Dalton** for basically firewood and hand the offence to **Jameis Winston**. They had to make a choice and they went with youth. That was probably the right long-term decision. But short term it will be painful. Winston performed well in the regular season last year, against all expectations, but his inexperience showed when he was pressed into action in the final. He has all the talent in the world, but with teams now game-planning for him, and with two of the top three secondaries in the league in his division, you are going to see a regression.”*

So what about the Sebastian supporting cast that is largely still intact from last year?

*“**CJ Anderson** is not an every down back and a recurring planter’s wart problem has held him out of training camp,”* continues Ponk. *“**Odell Beckham Jr** and **Doug Baldwin** aren’t much use if they can’t get the ball. The defence will eventually get tired having to stay on the field and that is when the weakness in the secondary will show. The Fish will be swimming upstream all season.”*

Most analysts have a similar forecast for Cowtown. Despite what appears to be a pretty strong offence, with **Mike Evans**, **Larry Fitzgerald**, **Todd Gurley** and **LeGarrette Blount** leading the way, the ‘Flacco Factor,’ – as **Mumbar Thakar** of PFFP puts it – is cooling enthusiasm for another Cowtown wildcard berth.

“He has not graded in the top ten since his MVP season in 2011,” Thakar notes of Flacco. *“In the past two seasons he has fallen below marginal in the rankings. He is deceptively mobile but he struggles under pressure and is reluctant to leave the pocket and run. There may be injuries we don’t know of or maybe the league has figured him out. Whatever the reason, he cannot be considered elite, if he ever was, and he may no longer be even be very good.”*

Once again, the Gladiators, now representing the State of Georgia in their brand new stadium in Greensboro, are the consensus favourite to challenge Aurora in the South. But it will be a comparatively flimsy challenge if **Severin Handfottner Jr**, of ‘Coaches Call,’ is correct in his assessment. Handfottner directs his criticism towards a defence that simply lacks the talent and make-up to compete at the highest level.

*“The Gladiators have one ace up their sleeve on defence and that is **Vic Beasley Jr**,”* Handfottner explains. *“He has what modern defences need to be effective: speed, versatility and multiple pass rush moves. But do you put him on the line where he can be double-teamed; or on the edge where he can blitz or fall back into coverage? This is a coaching dilemma when you have no other pass rushers worth mentioning in the front seven of your defence.”*

Despite this relative weakness, Handfottner and others, notably **Peter Prince**, believe Georgia will stay relevant in 2017:

“This year will be a coming of age for the Gladiators franchise,” Prince writes in North America Today. *“Georgia Stadium is a smart-looking, modern facility that has to be considered one of the top 6 venues in the league right now and a favourite to land a Gale Sayers Game in the near future. The Glads are a team that is always in the mix because they have a good coach in **Dave Birdsall**, an exciting running back in **LeSean McCoy**, and a future hall-of-fame quarterback in **Ben Roethlisberger**. I expect them to rise to the occasion for sake of the State of Georgia.”*

The buzz around the North Stars’ move to Budapest tends to drown out talk about the football situation on the ground in the Coastal Division. But for those who are willing to dig, there is a wealth of analysis available. **Schrell Partisian**, notable contributor to *Bleacher Feature*, and creator of the influential blog ‘Signals,’ predicts a war of attrition in the attempt to unseat Budapest.

“The reality on the ground is that the North Stars will have their hands full with more than jet lag,” writes Partisian. *“Two of their division rivals are much improved and the other has **Tom Brady** at quarterback. These teams may not be colossi, (even if the Spartans think they are) but they are no longer easy fodder between the pivotal match-ups with Durham, Aurora and the Pacific Conference West Division. There will be few rests on the Budapest schedule.”*

Of the threats facing **Darrin Jones** in his division none is more unanticipated than New Jersey. The Wrecking Balls were active in the trade market, landing what they hope will be their franchise quarterback, **Sam Bradford**, from the LA Knights; and a legitimate no.1 WR in **Michael Crabtree** from Seattle. They also shored up their linebacking corps, acquiring **KJ Wright** from Mohave for a 1st round pick in 2018 and veteran **Derrick Johnson** from Seattle in the Crabtree deal. But the biggest splash to hit the Jersey Shore was the free agent signing of ex-Driftwood Bullies star defensive tackle, **Damon Harrison**. **Jeff Cohen** and **Bruce Springsteen** handed over a whopping \$15,750,000 signing bonus on top of a \$7,000,000 salary to make Harrison, at almost \$23 million, the highest paid defensive player in the league this year. Harrison is gambling on himself, signing a one-year deal in the hope of possibly landing a long-term contract with a better team in 2018. Or he may decide to stay with the Wrecking Balls “if the conditions are right,” claims his agent, **Midas Steinstein**.

The conditions are looking good right now. On paper, New Jersey has a top-five defence. This will keep them competitive from week-to-week. But there are plenty of Jersey skeptics who see a terminally lame offence undermining the efforts of the defence:

“People who view **Sam Bradford** as the saviour of Stone Pony Shore are going to be disappointed,” comments **Kris Hortenson** on ESPN Sports Central. “He brings, at best, game management and stability to the offence. He will not make anybody better; and the best he has right now is **Michael Crabtree** – a number one talent with a number two head. There is a reason Seattle parted with him. Just look at how **Allen Hurns** outplayed him last year to understand why.”

Joining Hortenson in the chorus of Jersey naysayers is **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org. Of the Coastal Division he writes: “*The Division is going to be meat-grinder. Budapest has the edge entering play, but it will not take much to knock them off stride. The Spartans are going to surprise a lot of people, starting with the North Stars. They stole Everson Griffen from Toronto in Free Agency, but made no blockbuster deals like their Jersey rivals. However, they were active patching up holes in the roster in support of an unsung and impressive crop of home-grown and returning talent. Devonta Freeman is ready for a breakout season and the mostly unknown wide-receiving corps is well-rounded and sneaky dangerous. The Spartans defence typically performs better than projected, so expect them to mount a real challenge for the division title. The Wrecking Balls are going to live up to their nickname this year by ‘wrecking’ things for everybody, but ultimately they are unlikely to benefit from pulling off occasional upsets; the offence is just not strong enough. I would like, for Tom Brady’s sake, to say the Excaliburs have a legitimate title hope; but let’s not pretend that he is so great that he can manufacture a running game as well as make Quinton Patton into a legitimate no.2 wide receiver. York will show flashes but will not keep up the pace over the long haul.*”

Nowhere on anyone’s playoff projection board is South Carolina or Toronto. That is for good reason according to **Caleb Cogger** of *EFL Magazine*. The usually subtle Cogger minces no words in dismissing both team’s chances in 2017: “*In a season where defences are finally poised to catch up with runaway offences, the Regulators and Wolverines will not be joining the sack party,*” he writes with uncharacteristic flippancy. “*One wonders how long Luke Kuechly can last holding together a defence with so many weaknesses. But at least the Regs have Kuechly. The Wolverines have nothing like a Kuechly and will suffer the growing pains of the youngest defence in the league. Elder statesman, Trent Cole, acquired off the waiver wire, will do what he can to keep the pups in line, but it won’t be enough.*”

Offering a radically different view of things, of course, is **Sperl Sponefritter** of *Sperl’s World of Sports*. In his pre-season feature article, ‘The Affirmable Win,’ he postulates a theory that anyone can win in 2017 – provided the definition of “winning” is something other than finishing the game with more points than your opponent:

“*For teams locked into a traditional view of winning – the still prevalent concept of score differential as an objective measure of one team’s success and another’s failure – the score is like the bars of a prison cell, with one team, the ‘winner,’ standing outside of the cell and the other, the ‘loser,’ locked inside. The fear of being locked in is both motivating and debilitating, as is the fleeting satisfaction of being, temporarily, free.*” In other words, the fruits of victory and of defeat are equally restorative and damaging in their effect and there is no control over the reaction.

Sponefritter continues crazily: “*When the force of will is not enough to overcome the uncertainty of outcome it leads to an inevitable feeling of powerlessness that eventually captures both the winner and the loser in an emotional prison. So how liberating it must feel to be a player and a fan in Toronto, South Carolina or Seattle! Those teams have a different mission: to learn, to grow, to develop. They enter and leave the game free of the score prison. The exhilaration of score freedom is its own reward. And that feeling could also yield the fringe benefit of enabling a traditional ‘win’ on the scoreboard. Provided those teams remain focused on their mission of growth and not on the score prison, conventional wins could inadvertently pile up and turn the league upside down. Count on one of them pulling it off!*” In other words: some teams have nothing to lose and that could enable them to pull off a miracle.

Switching focus back to the real world and on to the Pacific Conference, the prospects of the Triumph equalling



Dak Prescott (left) is the new “Man” in Chino, replacing s Convicts “legend” in **Cam Newton** (above). Prescott was understudy to Newton for a 2016 campaign that saw the Convicts begin and end the season with 3-game losing streaks and fail to make the playoffs. No longer willing to invest in Cam, **Rob Nazar** did not match a \$12 million offer from the Lizards. Now Newton will be paid more than starter **Drew Brees** (\$9.5 million) to sit on the bench in Durham.

last year’s perfect season and repeating as league champs in 2017 is the topic that comes to air most often in-between news footage of **Kenny Main** quaffing *Duvel*, **Darrin Jones** sampling spätzle and rookie **TJ Watt** extolling the benefits of ‘Power Corn.’ But very few analysts predict another pristine finish for Twin Cities. One prominent commentator even goes so far as to predict something of a Twin Cities Apocalypse in 2017.

During a recent broadcast of *EFL Round Table* on ESPN, **Will Simons’** cranky side came out when addressing the subject of a Triumph repeat:

“As much as I am bullish on the Blue Eagles I am bearish, a freaking grizzly, when it comes to the Triumph,” Simons began, to much derisive guffawing from co-panelists **Kris Hortenson**, **Russ Flont** and **Skope Boylezz**. “Don’t laugh – I guarantee you I will have the last laugh on this. The Triumph are not only *not* pulling off another perfect run (last year was mostly luck by the way) they are not even going to win their *division!* Hear me out on this. **Carson Palmer** is done – end of story. He had a great run in 2016; in fact, he did not get enough credit for **Antonio Brown’s** MVP season. But suddenly he looks old. That’s what happens with quarterbacks – they age quickly and without much warning after the age of 35. And it is probably not politically correct to mention this, but **Doug Martin** looks like he’s on crack. He hasn’t stopped partying since Canton. **Melvin Gordon** is going to take over and that does not look like an improvement to me. Sure, they still have Antonio, as well as that monster **Bobby Wagner** at linebacker, but that just makes them another good team in a Conference full of good teams.”

The respected **Severin Handfottner** of *Coaches Call* has a different take: “*Most people don’t realize how intense Guy Williams is when preparing his team for a football season,*” he begins in his article, ‘A Coach’s Challenge: Improving on 19-0.’ “*It is no accident that a very good, but not a great, team finished off a rare perfect season last year under his guidance. He turned it into a great team. This year the Triumph will face a tougher challenge both inside and outside of their division. A perfect season is most definitely not in the cards. But expect Williams to have his team well prepared to take on a tough schedule. The tools are still there to execute an aggressive game plan on offence and a disciplined one on defence. You should expect Williams to make good use of those tools.*”

But if almost everyone agrees that the Triumph will be in a dogfight for the Central Division, nobody can agree on which divisional foe is most apt to take their place.

The Central Division is the most difficult to forecast. Literally anybody could win it, including Erieau.” reads the astounding intro line of **Harry Schultz**’s ‘Central Division’ chapter of the 2017 edition of ‘Fearless Forecast’ by [Football Outriders.Org](#). *“It is due to the fact that each team has at least one distinct edge over the others in certain important areas.”* After pointing out the reasons why the Triumph appear to be the best positioned, he proceeds to list the attributes that could just as easily propel the others into the top shelf. *“If you like Virden, it is because they have the biggest upside at quarterback, with **David Carr**, and the best running back tandem in the league in **Ezekiel Elliott** and **Mark Ingram**. They also have a deep and strong linebacking corps and a ball-hawking pair of safeties in **Eric Berry** and **Darian Stewart**. On the downside, Virden is, as usual, thin at every other position and will end up suffering due to fatigue and injuries, a curse they endure every year.*

The Violators desperately need something to go their way. Attendance reached a historical low for the franchise last year and rock bottom in the league overall. **Lance Barrate** may not be detested in the same way that Scarborough fans despise **Chris Dickinson** or outraged Markham fans loathe **Darrin Jones**, but he is not receiving the same courteous service at his favourite breakfast diners across the Province of Manitoba and he has dropped off several important Christmas Card Lists – a key indicator of dropping popularity in the Virden area.

Schultz continues: *“If you like the Patriots, it is due to the speed, depth and turnover potential of their back-seven on defence. The Pats will be able to take the ball away from the best of them and set up short fields for their offence, which will need them with **Blake Bortles** at quarterback. This, of course, is not a reliable path to success because it depends not only on defenders making plays, but also on opponents making mistakes. But the Pats appear prepared to capitalize on errors, which creates a window of opportunity for them to steal the division.”*

In Erieau, the question has moved from whether or not the Cadillac will finally win a game to when they will win a game. Schultz is not shy about predicting that a vastly improved Erieau squad will win many more than one game and could shock the EFL by securing a playoff berth: *“If you like the Cadillac it is because they have what could end up being the best front four pass rush in football. Drafting **Myles Garrett** to line up on the opposite end from **Joey Bosa** cemented the elite status of that pass rush. With **Connor Barwin** moving to the inside and **Trey Flowers** next to him, this line will create havoc in the backfield. Acquiring Matt Stafford in free agency means that the offence cannot be dismissed. But if the Cadillac end up breaking down this year it will be due to a dearth of impactful skill players, after **Jordy Nelson**, and a makeshift offensive line.”*

While it promises to be a fascinating fight for the Central, few are likely to be riveted by the race for the East Division prize. With few weakness and some notable strengths relative to their rivals, the Brooklin Hawks are well-equipped to hold on to the top spot. **Alex Smith** is one big reason. He flashed signs of being more than a “game manager” last year enjoys a wealth of receiving targets in addition to a solid offensive line anchored by **Andrew Whitworth** at left tackle and newly-acquired **Rodney Hudson** at center. More importantly, however, the Hawks’ defence is the best in the division by a wide margin. **Janoris Jenkins** has pro bowl potential and numerous solid playmakers fill key spots at each level of the defence. The teams most likely to challenge Brooklin – Bruxelles and Mohave – cannot hope to match the Hawks in a defensive struggle and will have to shoot their way out of trouble.

The Hellfire have not received much love from the journalistic establishment in recent years, but one prominent commentator weighed in unexpectedly in defence of **Bobby Elder**’s burgundy bumblers on *EFL Round Table*:

“Recent history has shown us that it is not wise to count on the Hellfire to deliver anything but frustration for their fans. But I am going to step out on a limb here and predict that they grab one of the wildcard spots this year!” pronounced **Skope Boylezz**, prompting co-panelist **Russ Flont** to spit up his glass of water on air. “Now, hear me out on this! **Andrew Luck** is back! This means an offence that won’t shoot itself in the foot! **Jay Ajayi** is looking really good in camp. People underestimate just how amazing **Aaron Donald** is. Then you have **Jordan Hicks**, **Whitney Mercilus** and **Bruce Irvin** making up the most intimidating group of linebackers in the league right now. I haven’t even mentioned the best receiver in football, **Julio Jones**, yet. Oh there, I mentioned him! That’s an above-average share of playmakers in an overall weak Pacific Conference!”

The perception that the Pacific is the weaker conference is disputed by **Arpin Plunderflunder** of *Fantasy Freakz*. He maintains it is an illusion foisted on fans by lazy journalists. *“We in the media like to be able to figure things out quickly and simply, but that is impossible this year in the Pacific Conference. We glance at the rosters, evaluate the film, and troll training camps for insider information looking for a few sure things to stake our reputations on. But apart from perhaps Iowa City and maybe Brooklin, there are no sure bets in the Pacific Conference. We tend to perceive that as a sign of team weakness when the real culprit is parity. There is only one truly weak team in the Pacific and that is Seattle. While St. Charles will almost certainly tumble out of the playoff picture this year, even they will enjoy moments of stunning success in a conference where not much separates them from the middle of the pack.”*

While the majority of analysts admit they have no clear idea what the final standings in the Pacific Conference will look like after Week 16, almost all are in agreement that the Cubs will finish on top of the West Division and are the favourite to grab the no.1 seed in the post-season. Returning to ESPN's EFL Round Table, **Russ Flont** had this to say about the Cubs:

"Look guys, all I know is this: I am going declare, *right now*, that the Cubs are going to win the West *outright!* That's right! Now hear me out on this!" Flont blustered frantically, despite none of his co-panelists laughing or attempting to interrupt him. "**Russell Wilson** is already in the Hall of Fame as far as I'm concerned. I know he's not retired yet, but he's going there and we all know it. And he has that massively talented offensive line protecting him! He will have *all day* to find his receivers. And if he can't find them he's going to run for 20 yards every time. There is no stopping the Cubs – the best that other teams can hope for is to slow them down. We've already had two perfect seasons in the last 3 years; we're going to have 3 in 4, with the Cubs going undefeated, mark my words."

At the mention of a perfect season by the Cubs, the *EFL Round Table* panel broke ranks with Flont. "Nobody is doing that again for a very long time," **Kris Hortenson** weighed in gravely. "Especially not the Cubs this year. Look, I like Wilson as much as anybody, but his receiving corps is actually quite thin. **Jeremy Hill** is solid but he is not going to carry a team on his back. I like the cornerbacks; they are going to make a mark, especially **Casey Hayward**. But the defensive line is not what it used to be and those linebackers are stay-at-home types that won't be making many big plays. I agree, the Cubs will win their division, but what next?"

A very good question, without a ready answer. Debate rages over who will challenge the Cubs in the West. Will it be Chino or LA? Certainly, it will not be Seattle. In the midst of the cacophony, **Jack Maximilian Ginsberg**, sports



Tyreek Hill reaches for a pass during training camp. The Wolverines made the former Doe County Sheriff (SFL) one of the top free agent signings, handing him a \$17.5 million signing bonus. Hill can do it all on offence and he will need to do it all for a Toronto squad that falls short in almost every area.

satirist, is calmly certain which of the remaining two it will *not* be:

"*Pity poor Dak Prescott,*" writes Ginsberg. "*He inherits a Convicts team utterly spent from years of hanging on in the hope that Cam the Prophet would them out of bondage. But, for those with eyes to see, Cam was revealed last year to be a false prophet. The vestments of his post-game ministry – the gold shoes, the silver top hat, the black & white long-tailed tux, the tie dye kerchief – are now relics of failure. But for the 'Cam Zealots' it is not His failure, but the failure of Rob Nazar and Convict Nation to believe in Cam. Thus, Cam's exile to Durham will not erase his presence at The Big House. Dak will struggle to rally a patchwork team haunted daily by the living ghost of Cam. Pity poor Dak Prescott!*"

The offensive situation in Chino is not as bad as Ginsberg paints it. The offensive line is admittedly mediocre and **Matt Forte** is approaching his 'Best Before' date; but new blood in rookie **Christian McCaffery** promises to inject life into the ground game and **Marvin Jones Jr** is a serious deep threat to complement superstar **AJ Green**. The problems in Chino will appear when their defence takes the field. **Ryan Shazier** is a good player but not the kind who will make an impact on his own. Their best defender is safety, **Barry Church**. And if you paused to wonder who he is, then no more needs to be said about the squad formerly known as the 'Lockdown Crew.'

If the Cubs are going to be taken down,

their old and hated nemesis, the LA Knights, will be the ones most likely to do the honours. Interestingly, no less a personage than **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* thinks it is an even bet that the 'Blue Shield' will block an Iowa rise to the top. Interviewed on *Eastwood-2*, Prince had this to say:

"No disrespect to the Cubs, they are a marvelous team with **Russell Wilson** and that offensive line," Prince began. "But what is there *not* to like about the Knights? They have **Le'Veon Bell** at running back, two complementary wide receivers in **Brandin Cooks** and **Jordan Matthews**, a serviceable offensive line and a proven quarterback in **Andy Dalton**. Of course, the *pièce de resistance* with any Knights team is the famous Blue Shield. **Sean Lee** is emerging as the next **Luke Kuechly** and the defensive line, with **Michael Bennett** and **Leonard Williams**, is as solid as it gets. Sure, it would be nice to see a shutdown corner in the mix to put them over the top – that's not going to happen this year. But they are serviceable and deep at cornerback. They have as good a shot as anybody to grab the no.1 seed."

Widespread parity will keep games close and outcomes uncertain. But there is one team that falls too short of the median to be competitive this year: the Seattle Pilots. New GM, **Mitch Gangwish** decided to tear it all down and start again after the franchise failed to deliver a winner for 5 years in Mission Viejo. Tearing down a 5-11 team doesn't take much effort and unfortunately does not yield much immediate benefit. Parting with veterans like **Derrick Johnson** and **Matt Forte** while they still had value was smart, but the return on those deals will not alter a losing picture this year.

It is shaping up to be another unpredictable and exciting year in the EFL. With so little separating the top teams from the middle teams, coaching and fortune will play a role in deciding who advances to the post-season and, ultimately, who wins the biggest prize of all.



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**

Hello EFL Fans. Welcome to the Football Oracle App. This interactive platform allows you to keep up with my visions and ask questions. Just tap on the '?' icon to ask about your favourite team or player. The spirits know all, but sometimes they like to play tricks. So I cannot guarantee that everything I see will actually happen. But I'm pretty good at sniffing out a capricious spirit. Access is by subscription as I have to pay to have somebody mind my corporeal form. One of the finalists in 2017 will be Iowa City. For the Atlantic Conference finalist, access the red 'A' on my app. - The Football Oracle

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

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

PACIFIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



12-4

BROOKLIN HAWKS

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

Alex Smith and **DeAndre Hopkins** will prove to be the glue that keeps a talented but injury-prone offence together. Acquiring **Rodney Hudson** upgrades an already good offensive line. **Markus Golden** leads a strong pass rush that will pave the way for many interceptions by ball-hawking secondary. Punter is the strongest part of special teams.



8-8

BRUXELLES BOMBERS

COACH: **Ken Main**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **C**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **B-**

Marcus Mariota now has an elite blindside protector in **Joe Thomas** and this will raise the efficiency of a promising and balanced offence. There is only so much **Harrison Smith** and **Terrell Suggs** can do to shore up the young and inexperienced defence, but pass rush will let it shine at times. Another team with the punter starring for Special Teams.



7-9

MOHAVE HELLFIRE

COACH: **Bobby Elder**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **B-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **B-**

The return of **Andrew Luck** brings stability. Expect great fantasy numbers from **Julio Jones** and **Jay Ajayi** but line and lack of TE will limit overall potential. **Aaron Donald** holds the defensive line literally by himself. Unbalanced D will stop the run but secondary is vulnerable. Plenty of options in the return game and one of league's better placekickers.



ST. CHARLES CHARGERS

COACH: **John Clingan**
OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **D+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **C**

The league catches up with **Carson Wentz** this year and that will limit the breakout potential of **Dalvin Cook** and **Mike Thomas**. **Reggie Nelson** remains reliable and DE **Yannick Ngakoue** could emerge as an impact defender, but otherwise D will be in trouble most weeks. **Adoree Jackson** is a bonus in kick returns and **Shane Lechler** is solid.

CENTRAL DIVISION



9-7

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

COACH: **Guy Williams**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-** TOT: **B-**

This will be a hard-fought campaign. **Carson Palmer** isn't getting any younger and that could spell trouble for the Triumph attack. **Antonio Brown** is a stud, but he can't throw the ball to himself. The defence will be tough against the run and will pressure opposing QBs, but safety position is vulnerable to big plays. Return game is largely non-existent.



8-8

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

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

We could see **DeShaun Watson** at QB before the season is out. The offensive line is strong and will be working overtime trying to keep their QB above water. The D-line is just okay, but the back 7, from **CJ Mosley** to **Ha Ha Clinton-Dix**, have a collective nose for the ball and will steal games. No true gunner weakens a strong special-teams unit.



ERIEAU CADILLAC

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

Matt Stafford to **Jordy Nelson** will be a feared combo by season's end but lack of a workhorse RB and poor pass protection bring down the grade. The defence will rise and fall with the pass rush – one of the league's best, led by **Joey Bosa** and **Myles Garrett**. **Stephen Gostowski** is an unflappable vet and **Jabrill Peppers** is a find in the return game.



6-10

VIRDEN VIOLATORS

COACH: **Lance Barrate**
OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **B-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **C**

Dangerously undermanned at WR, the Violators will rely on **Derek Carr** to hand the ball off to **Ezekiel Elliott** and **Mark Ingram** about 500 times this year. **Melvin Ingram** and **Eric Berry** lend credibility to the D, but the defensive line won't stand up over the long haul. **Marcus Sherels** is dynamic returning punts but no punter on roster will lose close games.

WEST DIVISION



12-4

IOWA CITY CUBS

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

Russell Wilson is working behind the best offensive line in the league, boosting a modest supporting cast of skill players. **Casey Hayward** and **Xavier Rhodes** lead a ball-hawking secondary that replaces the line as the heart of the defence. Special teams are special, featuring the dynamic **Tyler Lockett**, **Marqise Lee** and can't-miss kicker, **Justin Tucker**.



10-6

LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

COACH: **Jeff Dohn**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **A**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B**

Andy Dalton takes control of the offence and will be asked to ambush distracted defences with deep balls to **Brandin Cooks** between long strings of hand-offs and dump-offs to **Le'Veon Bell**. The 'Blue Shield' is typically deep and strong, with **Sean Lee** backing up a fearsome front four. **Andre Roberts** will earn his money returning kicks and punts.



8-8

CHINO CONVICTS

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

The 1st year of the **Dak Prescott** era will be a mixed bag, with run game woes slowing down a potentially explosive passing attack featuring **AJ Green** and **Marvin Jones Jr.** The defence has gone from too old to too young, with **Ryan Shazier** the new leader of the D. **Christian McCaffery** is an explosive punt returner but coverage will be ragged at best.



1-15

SEATTLE PILOTS

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

A team with **Allen Hurns** pencilled in as its no.1 WR and that trusts **Derek Newton** with LT duties is not going far, even with a hot rookie like **Kareem Hunt** running the ball. The defence is still respectable thanks to **Khalil Mack**, but it will spend too much time on the field. **Cyrus "Butter Fingers" Jones** will turn every punt return and into an adventure.

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



12-4

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

COACH: **Chris Dickinson**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **A+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A** TOT: **A**

Jaye Howard is ready to break out and **DeSean Jackson** is healthy, giving **Aaron Rodgers** a legitimate shot at returning to the Winner's Circle. **Ndamukong Suh** anchors an otherwise unremarkable D-line. This won't matter as the superstar secondary, led by **Marcus Peters**, will steal the ball and the show. Solid special teams are window dressing.



11-5

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

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

Drew Brees and **TY Hilton** will ensure the offence is a going concern. **Carlos Hyde** is better than you think, but the Lizards are still looking for a TE. **Richard Sherman** and **Devin McCourty** patrol a dangerous secondary, but lack of front-seven depth is a red flag. **Phil Dawson** is a reliable kicker but team is still holding auditions for kick returners.



7-9

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

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

Confidence in **Joe Flacco** is waning, pulling down the overall grade despite a strong receiving corps, two proven running backs and an O-line looking better with **Ryan Schraeder** at LT. **TJ Watt** may be rookie of the year, but the defence lacks durability and star power. The kicking game is as strong as any, but return game is a turnover risk.



4-12

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

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

This team belongs to **Jameis Winston** now. That could prove costly in a division where opponent's coverage is extraordinary. **Odell Beckham Jr** is a force but the ball must get to him. The defence, led by **Jadaveon Clowney** will keep the Fish close most weeks. Coverage and return games are a disaster but **Adam Vinatieri** is money on extra points.

COASTAL DIVISION



11-5

BUDAPEST NORTH STARS
 COACH: **Darrin Jones**
 OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **A**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B+**

David Johnson is one reason to believe in the offence. But can *Tyrod Taylor* get the most out of his top-flight trio of WRs? The jury is out on that. *Calais Campbell* and *Cameron Jordan* will power a solid defence built around stuffing the run and rushing the QB, but lack of a shutdown corner will hold them back. *Brandon Tate* is a pro in the return game.



10-6

PICKERING SPARTANS
 COACH: **Gus Konstantakos**
 OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **B-**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **B+**

The Spartans will ride *Devonta Freeman* behind a road-grading O-line for as long as it takes to pick-proof *Philip Rivers* and open-up the passing game. Fundamentally feeble defence will surprise with a sneaky pass rush led by *Everson Griffen* and big TO potential. *Caleb Sturgis* is a no-name elite kicker. Returner *Jakeem Grant* is high-risk, high reward.



6-10

YORK EXCALIBURS
 COACH: **Jay Hammond**
 OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **C**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C** TOT: **C+**

York will rely 110% on *Tom Brady* to move forward a patchwork supporting cast of skill players and he must do so with *Doug Free* guarding his blindside. *Von Miller* and *Geno Atkins* and serviceable vet *William Gay* will shoulder the same burden for the defence. Decent kick and coverage unit but the return game will do more harm than good.



5-11

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

Sam Bradford brings stability to the QB position but won't win on his own. *Isaiah Crowell* has moves and will need them to dodge keying linebackers. The addition of *Damon Harrison* beefs up healthy-looking front seven but flammable secondary will put them on hot-seat. Coverage unit is solid and *Eric Weems* is steady in the return game.

SOUTH DIVISION



13-3

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

Anquan Boldin has lost a step but *Matt Ryan* may be good enough to overcome his diminished receiving corps and lack of go-to guy in running game. *JJ Watt* is battling injury and front seven has lost a lot of weight, but *Patrick Peterson* and *Early Thomas* still in top form. Good kick-and-cover unit and *Kenyan Drake* flashes "house-call" moves.



8-8

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

Ben Roethlisberger and *LeSean McCoy* continue to rule this offence, but the addition of *Cole Beasley* and the emergence of deep threat *Kenny Stills* add new layers to the aerial assault. *Vic Beasley Jr* is a quarterback terror and undisputed leader of an overall mediocre defence. *Cairo Santos* and crack coverage team bump up the ST grade.



7-9

SOUTH CAROLINA REGULATORS
 COACH: **Hal Corson**
 OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **C**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C** TOT: **C+**

A cast of thousands surrounds *Kirk Cousins* on offence; one of them is bound to stand out and bets are that it's rookie WR *Corey Davis*. While the Regs will score at a respectable pace, the defence is in disarray after *Luke Kuechly* and *Akiem Hunt*. Trading the league's best PK in the off-season and not getting a gunner did not help the ST grade.



5-11

TORONTO WOLVERINES
 COACH: **Ryan Preston**
 OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **D+**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **C-**

The offence under *Ryan Tannehill* and *DeMarco Murray* is not as bad as you think but it will struggle with *Austin Pasztor* as the no. 1 O-lineman. For a team that has drafted mostly defence, the defence is as bad as anybody's – probably the league's worst. The coverage unit is elite and the return game is exciting with *Tyreek Hill* and *David Harris*.

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Jimmy's WEEK ONE PICKS

BROOKLIN @ BRUXELLES (line – HAWKS by 1)

Week One-point spreads are notoriously difficult to set, let alone bet. Throw in an historic first game in Europe and a home team looking to make a good first impression on their clueless fanbase and you have a true anything-can-happen scenario. As the incumbent division winner and the more well-rounded team generally, the Hawks must be considered the favourite here. But the Bombers and their intrepid young quarterback, Marcus Mariota cannot be taken lightly. With rookie running back Leonard Fournette looking like the real deal and two veteran tackles protecting his flanks, the play action pass could be used by Mariota to devastating effect with big play threats like Emmanuel Sanders and Terrelle Pryor Sr at his disposal. Alex Smith will want to slow the game down and extend his team's drives to keep the ball from the quick-strike Bruxelles offence. My bet is that Jonathan Stewart's nagging injuries in the pre-season carryover into this game and force Brooklin into a shootout scenario they don't want. **PICK: BRUXELLES**

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

The Chargers were one of the big stories in the EFL last year – an expansion team that made the playoffs and pushed the Knights to the wall before ultimately losing in the wildcard game. Their success came at the expense of the more talented Hellfire, a team they beat twice in the regular season to earn the playoff tie-breaker. This year the Hellfire are still more talented while the main mover of the Chargers' success, Carson Wentz, is one year more experienced. Unfortunately for young quarterbacks, one year of experience also means one year of game film for defences to dissect. The Mohave defence is much improved over last year, especially in the run game. The pressure will be on hotshot RB Dalvin Cook to put his moves on display to keep a pretty good Hellfire pass rush honest. Andrew Luck is back in the saddle for Mohave. If it comes down to the QBs, expect an easy Mohave win. **PICK: MOHAVE**

TWIN CITIES @ ERIEAU (line – TRIUMPH by 6)

I will give you a couple of minutes to stop laughing at the single digit line before I continue..... are you done? Good. This is not exactly the dramatic match-up many had hoped the Defending Champs would draw to kickoff the season. But it may turn out, in retrospect, to be an important game when Week 16 rolls around. The Triumph certainly have the psychological and physical edge over the only team to have never won a game in its history. But it is no longer a cavernous divide between the two. Matt Stafford is running the Erieau offence now and he has proven targets in Jordy Nelson and Kenny Britt to stretch the field. The Cadillac defence is studded with young talent led by a *bona-fide* emerging star in Joey Bosa. Add into the mix the Gale Sayers Game hangover that typically slows down an incumbent champion and you have the potential for a competitive match. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

CHARLESWOOD @ VIRDEN (line – PATRIOTS by 2)

The perennially underachieving Violators could surprise in 2017 but Vegas does not appear ready to factor that into the line against a Pats team that hasn't improved much from last year but still carries with it the aura of two EFL Championships over the past four years. Blake Bortles is on thin ice in Charleswood after a lacklustre 2016 campaign and a shaky training camp in which he was strongly challenged by rookie Deshaun Watson. Derek Carr, on the other hand, appears positioned for a breakout season with the best running tandem in the league at his back and Amari Cooper capable of running any pass route well. The fact that Cooper is the team's only good wide receiver and that he matches up against shutdown corner Aqib Talib in this game dampens the enthusiasm, but it ensures that Ezekiel Elliott will get lots of touches and that might be just enough to pull off a Week One upset. **PICK: VIRDEN**

SEATTLE @ IOWA CITY (line – CUBS by 9)

In a season where we can expect widespread parity to create multiple illusory upsets each week, this game stands out as one of the

few genuine mismatches of Week One. New management in Seattle has enlisted Eli Manning to preside over a major rebuild fueled in part by the dealing of its major pass-catching assets. What could possibly go wrong? The Pilots have a few exciting young players, most notably Khalil Mack, to give fans hope for the future. But don't think that because a young stud like Kareem Hunt can juke and jive with speed and power that Eli cannot undo it all with three or four interceptions – in the 1st half! The Cubs have one of the best offensive lines in football and a potential MVP at QB. Their defensive line is still strong and the secondary much improved. Don't overthink this one; take the money and run. **PICK: IOWA CITY**

CHINO @ LOS ANGELES (line – KNIGHTS by 6)

The decision to cut ties with Cam Newton and go with second-year phenom Dak Prescott is a sure sign that the Convicts are regrouping for a run in 2018. While coach Rob Nazar stands by his quarterback and claims he will impress, the dilapidated state of the Chino defence and the still developing offensive line rules out a serious push for a post-season berth. Meanwhile, the Knights have the hallmark of a contender thanks to the acquisition of Andy Dalton in place of the injured Teddy Bridgewater paired with its customary deep and solid group of defenders. Interesting that the odds-makers decided not to sit on the fence here. The history of the hard-fought rivalry between these teams is sure to bait the masses who aren't paying attention. **PICK: LOS ANGELES**

SEBASTIAN @ SCARBOROUGH (line – BLUE EAGLES by 3)

This game will demonstrate what a dramatic difference a year can make in the EFL. Expect a complete role reversal between these teams from their standing in 2016 as the Swordfish swim back to the depths of the North Division and the Blue Eagles soar to unexpected heights. Sebastian is going all-in with Jameis Winston at quarterback and they expect results with two of the league's top wide receivers at his disposal. But the strength of the Blue Eagles lies in their secondary, indisputably the league's strongest with the acquisition of Eric Weddle and the development of Marcus Peters and Landon Collins. Expect Winston to make some costly errors to put his team in a hole it will not be able to dig itself out of. For all his recent struggles, Aaron Rodgers remains a veteran with experience winning; expect him to re-emerge here against a marginal Sebastian defence. **PICK: SCARBOROUGH**

COWTOWN @ DURHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 2)

Perhaps nothing typified Durham's lost season in 2016 better than their two losses to the Corn Kings, where nothing went right for them in either game. Setting that recent history aside, the Thunder Lizards have the main advantages over their division foe heading into Week One. Carlos Hyde is finally healthy, TY Hilton is looking faster than ever and future hall-of-famer Drew Brees is looking to prove something yet again after George Kaldis signed Cam Newton to a huge free agent contract. The Corn Kings boast a deep and impressive corps of wide receivers and a complementary pair of running backs, but questions around Joe Flacco remain after a shaky training camp where he battled accuracy problems; which does not bode well against the Lizards' secondary. The Corn Kings' pass rush is strong, but if it held in check there is little there to stop a determined Durham push. **PICK: DURHAM**

BUDAPEST @ NEW JERSEY (line – NORTH STARS by 3)

Incredible as it sounds this game may not turn out to be another easy step for the North Stars on their road to the top of the Coastal Division. The Wrecking Balls were active in free agency and the trade market, bolstering their defence and landing a full-time quarterback. Sam Bradford looked good in training camp and Michael Crabtree is a solid no.1 at WR who will attract double-teams. But lack of depth at the skill positions and a questionable offensive line will pose a challenge against a solid Budapest defense that boasts a pair of fearsome defensive ends. On the other side, Tyrod Taylor will rely on workhorse RB, David Johnson to set up the play action pass to studs Demaryius Thomas and Brandon Marshall. It probably won't be so easy, but a relentless pounding by the North Stars running game will eventually cause critical cracks in the New Jersey D late in the game. **PICK: BUDAPEST**

PICKERING @ YORK (line – SPARTANS by 1)

The Spartans enter the campaign with high hopes for a playoff berth while the Excaliburs will be happy if they can survive another season with Tom Brady intact. Essentially, York's fortunes rest in Brady's hands on offence and Von Miller's on defence. No notable player moves in the off-season and total neglect of the running game spells a potentially long season for the Swords. But any team with the afore-mentioned stars can pose a problem for any opponent on any given Sunday. I expect that given Sunday to be this one as York fans are at their most vocal early in the year and player fatigue will not yet have set-in. The Spartans defence is not exactly Championship calibre and the hopes of the offence rest on the running game led by Devonta Freeman and supplemented by the exciting Ty Montgomery. Will that be enough to make a bold statement on the road against a flawed but proud team? Something tells me, not this week. **PICK: YORK**

AURORA @ TORONTO (line – MUSTANGS by 7)

The Wolverines are considered by most to have the worst defence in the EFL. A glance at their roster makes it hard to argue with that assessment, so expect Matt Ryan to enjoy a carefree day in the pocket. If Toronto hopes to compete they will have to control the ball on offence and find the end zone more than once. With Eric Weddle gone, JJ Watt experiencing nagging back issues and NaVorro Bowman struggling with a sore shoulder, the Aurora defence is not as imposing as it has been. It is still a good defence, but one that Ryan Tannehill and DeMarco Murray can handle on a good day. The one area where the Wolverines have the edge over the Mustangs is special teams, thanks to their elite kick coverage and the ability of the electric Tyreek Hill to do it all in the return game. This is a wildcard that could turn a close game against the favourites, but not worth betting on. **PICK: AURORA**

SOUTH CAROLINA @ GEORGIA (line – GLADIATORS by 1)

Vegas clearly does not trust that the Gladiators have improved enough in step with their move and subsequent claim to the entire State of Georgia to give them much more than a pick'em chance at home against Deep South rival South Carolina. While neither team impresses me much, the Glads hold the advantage in skill players who can bend a defender's ankles, with LeSean McCoy leading the way. They also have Big Ben – a potential force for overwhelming offence when he is on his game. On the Regs' side they appear to be hoping that dressing seven running backs every game will keep opponents guessing who will get the ball. Likewise, having more wide receivers – nine in total – does not necessarily mean more passing yards. Trying to divine what the Regulators will do on offence is foolish at this early stage, but predicting that they will not do it particularly well is a better bet, except that the so-so Gladiator defence is involved in trying to stop them. I suppose this game could go either way in theory, but ultimately the Gladiators are more motivated to impress their new home fans in Greensboro and will deliver. **PICK: GEORGIA**

