

2017



GALE

XI



EFL

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION



In our 11th season and still going strong!

March 11, 2018

2017



SAYERS

XI

EAST



CENTRAL



WEST



NORTH



COASTAL



SOUTH



Matt Ryan



Aurora Mustangs

Gale Sayers Game XI



17

BOMBERS



24

MUSTANGS

Mustangs QB, *Matt Ryan* is all smiles as he basks in the glow of an adoring crowd of Mustangs supporters following Aurora's second Championship victory over the Bruxelles Bombers. Ryan did not throw a TD pass, snapping a 34-game streak, but was efficient through the air. *(Full story inside)*



17



24

Bruxelles

CHAMPIONSHIP

Aurora

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Mariota	20	30	206	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Fournette	18	111	6.2	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Fournette	7	61	8.7	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Bruxelles	0	7	3	7	-	17
Aurora	7	7	0	10	-	24

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Ryan	22	33	284	0
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Woodhead	14	84	6.0	2
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Edelman	8	116	14.5	0

Play of the Game
 In the 2nd quarter, 4th & 6 at the 43-yard line of Bruxelles, **Matt Ryan** threw high to a double-covered **Julian Edelman**, who made a leaping catch for a 14-yard gain, to keep a TD-drive alive.

MUSTANGS WIN RACE ON VETERAN'S LEGS! DANNY WOODHEAD SCORES 2 TDs TO LEAD AURORA TO 2ND CHAMPIONSHIP

SUMMARY: On a clear, crisp, unusually cold winter day in idyllic Avalon in York Township, fans from across North America and Europe converged on the football fortress known as Camelot to witness an historical first: an inter-continental battle for the EFL Championship.

Representing Europe: the Bruxelles Bombers; a team that few had predicted would make it to the post-season, let alone survive two tough playoff bouts to earn the opportunity to contend for the ultimate prize. Representing North America: The Aurora Mustangs; a team unbeaten after 18 regular and post-season games and not willing to share center stage in the finale for the third time in four seasons under head coach, **Rich Liotta**.

While this contest signified the first cross-continental showdown in Gale Sayers Game history, it was not the first time these two franchises and head coaches had faced each other in the ultimate battle. Bombers coach, **Ken Main**, had challenged an unbeaten Aurora once before, back in 2014, when his team was known as the Carthage Cannibals. Based in Samoa, the Cannibals had been a small-market underdog that, against long odds, had acquitted themselves with distinction in falling 31-17 to that Aurora juggernaut; the first team to record a perfect season in league history.

This time, the Bombers again faced a tough challenge, but one that many commentators thought they could overcome. Although perfect in record, the Mustangs of 2017 were not the dominant force that had trampled all-comers in 2014. There had been close calls in the regular season; one of them coming against this very same Bruxelles team in Week Three. On top of that, there had been times when the Bombers had appeared charmed. Although few serious commentators cited "destiny" as a deciding factor in supporting the underdog, most did perceive that "intangibles," brought to the Bombers' game by their

QUOTES: "I thought this game was very winnable for us, but they played great defensively and smart offensively. They deserved to win! I hope fans don't criticize Marcus after this. He gave it everything. That defense took a lot away."
 – Bombers' coach, **Kenny Main**
 "Danny got the official recognition from writers – good for him. But the MVP could have gone to a dozen players today. Matt was cool as a cuke, Julian caught everything, Malik was on fire, the secondary was great. The team had something to prove tonight and they proved it!" – Mustangs coach, **Rich Liotta**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



Faart van Wijnendaele FVW@BrusselsTimes
 The Bombers had their chances. Like the Flemish Nationalist movement, they faltered when opportunity beckoned. But they won't give up.



James Duthie @efljamesduthie
 Can we end the debate now? Mustangs #1 all-time! Live with it!

quarterback, **Marcus Mariota** and irrepressible head coach, **Kenny Main**, could tip the scales in their favour given the right circumstances. But despite a strong minority constituency believing that a close game was in the offing, the Mustangs remained the consensus favourite amongst both bettors and the mainstream media and, at 7-points, a clear favourite at that.

"Welcome to the magical village of Avalon, home of the mighty football castle known as Camelot!" proclaimed TV host, **Phil Winterall** of ESPN. The trumpeting orchestral opening theme from the network's *Monday Night Football* broadcast abruptly stopped, replaced abruptly with stirring brass staccato chords over a sonic backdrop of tempestuously humming violins. "We are at the site where continents will collide as the Bruxelles Bombers of Europe take on the Aurora Mustangs of North America in the 11th EFL Championship game. Some people may not realize it, Bill, but these teams have met before in the Gale Sayers Game – not too long ago in fact."

"Yeah, Phil. This is one of those cases where they changed the name of the team, changed the uniforms and moved halfway across the world for a fresh start," agreed colour analyst, **Bill Badden**. "That's likely going to fool some folks. But make no mistake, this Bombers team is the same football team that fell apart in the second half of the 2014 championship and allowed the Mustangs to finish off their perfect season."

"Many people believe the Bombers are capable of making up for that loss with a victory today, Bill," Winterall stated matter-of-factly. "Do you concur with such an idea?"

"Conquer? Heck, I'm not doing the conquering, Phil," Badden replied. "I stopped coaching long ago. But if you're asking me what the Bombers need to do to conquer the Mustangs, well, they're going to need to play football at a high level. They're going to have to score points and they're going to have to make stops. Not many teams have been able to stop Matt Ryan this year and that's why the Mustangs have won so many games. If the Bombers are going to conquer the Mustangs, they're going to have to conquer Matt Ryan!"

Winterall paused then moved on: "If the Mustangs win today that would mean two perfect seasons for the franchise and for coach, Rich Liotta. One perfect season is obviously an amazing accomplishment; two perfect seasons is unheard of. Do you think we are looking at a dynasty here and, if so, how long will it last?"

Badden's brow furrowed. He looked at his booth partner with a touch of unease. "Well, I hope not, Phil because I'm here to watch football, not Dynasty. I never really got in to Dynasty; I preferred Dallas. Both last about an hour, I think, unless you are talking about looking at all the episodes. I don't remember how many seasons Dynasty played – it must have been more than a couple."

Winterall chuckled nervously at the inane response from his colleague and improvised: "Well, if the Mustangs win today do you think they have a claim to be the best football team of all time, Bill?"

Badden guffawed then replied as if he was correcting a child. "I don't know about all time, Phil! All time is a long time! But if they win, they certainly have to be considered one of the best teams this year, that's for sure!"

A brief but uncomfortable silence enveloped the broadcast booth as the camera switched to the field where head official **Clete Blakeman** motioned for the team captains to come forward for the official coin toss. **Marcus Mariota**, wearing the team's controversial third jersey – a drab light grey – and red pants with black and yellow trim, represented the Bombers; while **Kenyan Drake**, dressed in his team's home scarlet jerseys with white numbers and gold pants, represented the Mustangs.

"Here's an interesting move, Bill," Winterall broke the silence. "The league was so concerned about the coin toss problems in previous championships that they brought in Clete Blakeman to referee this game today. Clete is an attorney by profession and the league is confident that his qualifications will help immediately resolve any disputes if there is a problem with the coin toss."

"Well, the last couple of incidents have been an embarrassment for the league, no question," Badden added soberly. "But coin tosses usually work out fine, at least for one of the teams. I am confident we are going to see a good one here."

Blakeman switched on his microphone and addressed the players while the football world watched and listened. He carefully explained the rules of the coin toss, citing section two, article two of the official EFL Playing Rules. He then showed both sides of the coin to both captains to confirm that they were different and to identify each as either 'Heads' or 'Tails.' As captain representing the official visitors, Mariota was instructed to call out his choice of 'Heads' or 'Tails' while the coin was in the air. Blakeman asked Mariota if he understood to which the Bombers' quarterback replied that he did. So far everything was running smoothly.

Blakeman flipped the coin high in the air. As the coin reached its apex Mariota called "Heads!" But like a carefully balanced 'hors d'oeuvres' tray in the hands of a skilled and steady waiter, the coin rose and fell without once turning, landing flat on the grass in the same position as it had been when it left Blakeman's hand, with the 'Tails' side up.

"The result is tails," declared Blakeman, at which news the Mustangs fans in Camelot let out a rousing cheer. But as the crowd celebrated, Mariota objected: the coin had not turned, that wasn't fair, he claimed.

This caused Blakeman to pause. There was, in fact, a provision for this in the rulebook. Citing the identical section and article of the rules Blakeman addressed the crowd: "The coin did not turn therefore a re-toss will take place. Captain of the visiting team, please call it in the air," he said to a mixed smattering of boos and claps from the fans in the stands.

Mariota again called 'Heads' and this time the coin flipped in the air and turned up heads. The Bombers had won the second toss, causing their supporters in the stadium to bellow their approval, while perplexed and outraged Aurora backers hissed and jeered.

"You don't see that every day, do you, Bill?" Winterall remarked to his partner in the booth.

"Well, of course not, Phil," Badden replied. "We don't play football every day."



THE GAME



1st QUARTER (Aurora 7, Bruxelles 0) – The 11th EFL Championship began with Aurora place-kicker **Wil Lutz** lofting a high, spinning kick to just inside the Bruxelles goal line. Seeing the running lanes clogged in front of him, rookie returner **Dede Westbrook** promptly took a knee and the Bombers' offence, led by quarterback **Marcus Mariota**, took the field to the sound of wooden war drums and Belgian fight songs.

"That drumming you hear is from the Samoan fans in the crowd," Winterall explained as the camera panned across a section of end zone seats in the north corner of the stadium. Dozens of chanting, chest-thumping fans in grass skirts and winter jackets swayed back-and-forth to the frenetic drum beat. "And the reason you don't understand the singing is because those are Belgian fans singing in the stands," Winterall added as the camera flipped to mid-field, where a section of Bombers fans raised their cups and waved their flags in salute to the international TV audience.

"They're singing about cherries and bras, Phil. *Ahhh ohh eh maaaa cherries...moww ooohaaahhhh bras!*" Badden chuckled as he attempted to sing along. "Those crazy Europeans! They have to be crazy, Phil, they came all this way to be outnumbered as far as I can see!"

"Apparently that's the Belgian national anthem they're singing, Bill," interjected Winterall. Then, in an attempt to move quickly off the topic, he added, "Marcus Mariota will take charge now. He led the league's second most productive offence during the regular season, Bill. Was that a surprise to you?"

"Not really, Phil," Badden began. "You go back to his rookie season and he showed real early what he was capable of. Last year he took a step backwards – that thing they call the soapbox jinx. But this year they paid big money to Terrelle Pryor, drafted Leonard Fournette and brought in a snarly, mud-stained, covered-in-bandages true warrior named Joe Thomas to play left tackle. People forget about those guys on the line, Phil! They put their bodies on the line so that guys like Mariota can dance around and dippy-doodle back there. Thomas is the best frontline warrior in the EFL. There is mud under his fingernails he will never get rid of!"

The Bombers went straight to the attack. On the first play from scrimmage, Mariota dropped back five feet, rolled out and looked downfield where tight end **Travis Kelce** was running a deep cross and **Terrelle Pryor Sr.** was streaking deep down the sidelines, Aurora corner **Patrick Peterson** with him step-for-step. His targets covered, he checked down to **Leonard Fournette** who salvaged 3 yards to bring up 2nd down & 7.

"Looks like the Bombers plan to challenge the Aurora corners, Bill," Winterall noted as the teams withdrew to their huddles.

"They are going to have to, Phil, if they are going to have any success today," Badden opined. "But you aren't going to catch the Aurora secondary napping on the first play of the Gale Sayers Game! No way! The adrenaline is pumping, the juice is kicking in, they are ready to jump out of their shoes itching to hit somebody. The linebackers were looking for Fournette on that play but the corners looked like they were ready for anything."

The Bombers switched gears immediately. The next play was a pitch to Fournette who, with surprising speed, beat **NaVorro Bowman** to the corner, cut back through the arms of **Earl Thomas** and charged straight ahead until dragged down by Peterson for a 27-yard gain. Bruxelles supporters in the crowd howled deliriously while Fournette rose to his feet without any theatrics and jogged back to the huddle.

"And Leonard Fournette cuts through the Mustangs' defence for a gain of 27 yards!" Winterall announced.

"Fournette looks to be all business today, Phil," Bill Badden observed. "His performance is going to be the key to this game. If he can keep churning out 27-yard runs every time he touches the ball it's going to be a long day for the Aurora defence."

Fournette got the call on the next play, running off left tackle for 6 yards then again two plays later, driving through the arms of **JJ Watt** for a 10-yard gain, recovering 5 yards lost to a **Cory Harkey** false start penalty and gaining a first down at the Aurora 34-yard line. The Bombers were already within range of the long leg of kicker, **Chandler Cantanzaro**.

"Fournette is running with authority, Bill," Winterall observed. "He ran right through JJ Watt on that play. When was the last time you saw Watt get overpowered like that?"

"I can't say I remember ever seeing it, Phil," Badden declared after brief reflection. "JJ is one of those blood-stained frontline warriors you want on your defensive line if you're a coach. He's mud-stained too. He's a muddy, bloody mucker who sticks his head in there where it doesn't belong and he'll take a punch as well as punch you in the nose!" Badden's voice was rising excitedly. "But Leonard Fournette suckered him on that play. JJ was slightly off balance coming off his block and Fournette actually charged into him, using him as a kind of blocker on the play! That's smash-mouth football at its finest right there, Phil! That's smash mash mouth!"

On the next play the Bombers took another shot downfield. Working off a slickly executed play action, Mariota took a deep drop and fired a missile on target about 20 yards down field to Kelce. The ball hit the tight end in the chest and bounced to the ground, incomplete.

"And he *dropped it!*" Winterall exclaimed. "The Mustangs dodged a bullet there, Bill. That ball looked to have touchdown written all over it!"

"And Kelce knows it too!" Badden joined in. "He was wide open with a full head of steam, but he was thinking 'touchdown' before he had the ball. That happens a lot, even to the pros. For the kids watching today, take it from me, it's important to catch the ball when it's thrown your way. I've been coaching most of my life and I have learned that there is not much point getting open and running away from the defender if you don't have the ball in your hands. So, catch first, score later, kids! That's my tip for the day!"

Badden's discourse on football basics segued into the next play; a 12-yard scramble by Mariota that gave Bruxelles a first down at the Aurora 22-yard line. Then, in response to repeated blitzes by regular season sack artist, **Willie Young**, the Bombers attempted a screen on the next play. But the pressure of the Aurora pass rush was so strong that it bowled over the retreating Bombers' line, forcing an off-target throw from a backpedalling Mariota that was nearly picked off by linebacker, **Shaq Thompson**. They had dodged a disaster in the near-pick, but another disaster

apparently loomed to replace it as Mariota got up slowly after taking a hit from Young.

"Mariota looks hurt. He's walking off under his own steam but it looks like he got his bell rung, Bill," Winterall said gravely.

"The only thing worse than being chased by Willie Young is being hit by Willie Young!" Badden declared animatedly. "And he rocked Mariota on that play! The Bombers fans are booing, wanting a flag there, but that was a legal hit, Phil. It was a football hit! The kind of hit that tells you you're in a football game. And that's what football does, Phil. Sometimes football takes out your best player!"

The Bombers' drive that one play ago had seemed so promising suddenly felt doomed. **Nick Foles** came in for Mariota and threw toward the sideline, where an open Kelce bobbled the ball and lost the handle for his second drop of the drive. Then, on 3rd and 10, Foles overthrew **Emmanuel Sanders** to bring up 4th down and a 40-yard field goal attempt for placekicker, **Chandler Cantanzaro**.

"The kick is up...and it's *no good!*" Winterall exclaimed as the ball sailed outside the right upright. "Looks like he pushed it just a bit, Bill."

"No, Phil, he kicked it. He just missed it!" Badden countered. "That's not the way the Bombers wanted their opening drive to finish, though. When you get the ball to start the game your number one job is to put points on the board and the Bombers failed to do that after getting into field goal range. Points are going to be the key to this game, Phil. The Bombers are going to have to do better next time if they intend to win today."

The Mustangs took over at their 30-yard line, led by a confident-looking **Matt Ryan**. A prolonged commercial break was not long enough to dissipate a sense that the early momentum had swung decisively to the league's top-scoring team. **Phil Winterall** attempted to capture the feeling:

"The Mustangs' offence takes over now, led by regular season MVP, Matt Ryan; and I would expect that there would be less pressure on him now, Bill, knowing that his defence has passed its first test against the dangerous Bomber attack. Would you agree?"

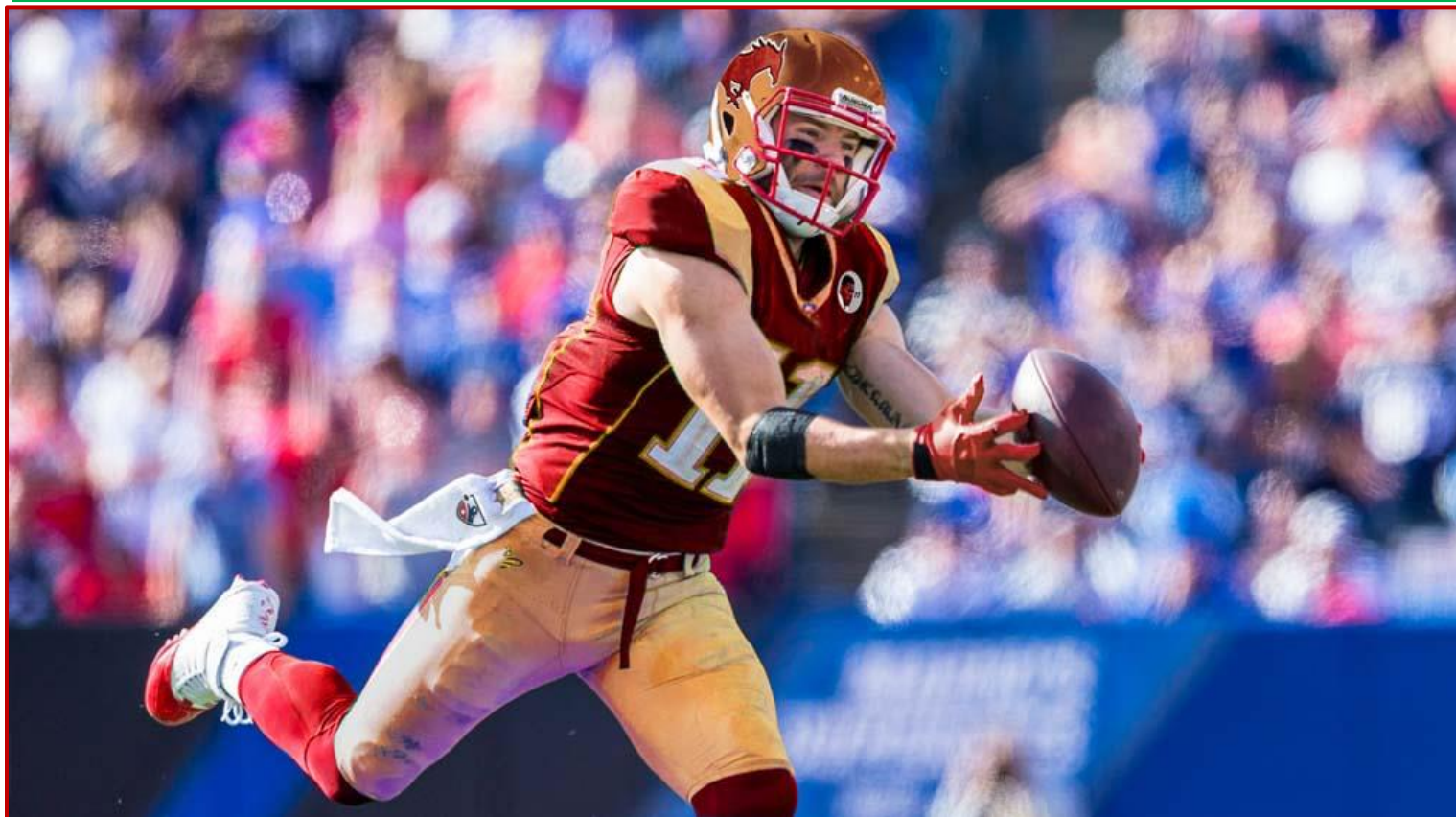
"Any time you get the ball after your defence has kept the other team off the scoreboard it loosens up an offence for sure, Phil," Badden answered. "But you can't be too loosey-goosey out there! The other team's defence is going to try and one-up what your defence did. For the Bombers' defenders it's their first action of the game so expect them to come out like a snarling pack of hungry wild dogs."

The Bombers' defence attacked as advertised, blitzing with **Emmanuel Ogbah** and **Bud Dupree** on the first two plays. But the Mustangs' line was ready, giving Ryan plenty of time to find **Julian Edelman** and **Devonte Adams** for gains of 14 and 15 yards respectively to open the drive. A deflection by corner, **Josh Shaw** broke up the sequence but Ryan resumed carving the secondary on 2nd down with another 14-yard completion to Edelman to bring Aurora into field goal range at the Bruxelles.

"Matt Ryan doesn't seem fazed by the Bombers' blitz, Bill," Winterall noted as the linesman placed the football just outside the 27-yard line.

"The blitz can hurt the defence when it doesn't get pressure on the quarterback, Phil," Badden replied authoritatively. "The Mustangs have run the same play four times in a row right across the middle. That's no accident. The Bombers adjusted on the last play but Julian Edelman snuck in a hole in the zone and Matt Ryan found him. That's what MVP, pro-bowl-caliber players do. They make plays!"

The Mustangs came back with their fifth medium cross in a row but the Bombers by now were waiting for it. His receivers covered, Ryan threw incomplete at the feet of **Danny Woodhead**. On second down, Adams broke outside and appeared to be open but a well-timed leap by



Aurora wide receiver **Julian Edelman** extends to haul in a pass from **Matt Ryan** on the run to give his team another first down. Edelman caught 4 passes on the Mustangs' opening drive, three of them for first downs and another for 21 yards to wipe out a Bruxelles sack.

Tashaun Gipson broke up the pass to bring up third down. Needing 10 yards, Ryan dropped back into a clear pocket and fired a bullet to Edelman for 13 yards and a first down. Aurora was in the red zone and looking very dangerous.

"That was not the result Bruxelles wanted to see on that third down play, Phil," Badden said somberly, without prompting. "They need to make a play now or forget it!"

The Bombers knew it. Extra effort from a blitzing Ogbah on the next play paid off with a blindside sack of Ryan for a 10-yard loss.

"And he's *down!* Ogbah with the sack, loss of ten!" Winterall called, his voice turning guttural as he emphasized the word, 'down.'

"And what a huge sack that is, Phil!" Badden chimed in. "Look at Ogbah, pounding his chest like a warrior! He's from Nigeria, so he's got that chest-pounding warrior blood in him, Phil! Matt Ryan looked like an English soldier in that movie, Zulu on that play!" Badden chuckled. "You - !"

Winterall jumped in hurriedly, "And that will bring up second down and a long twenty for the Mustangs! They can still get a first down without scoring, Bill, but I expect their priority will be getting a little closer for their kicker."

Anticipating another blitz but apparently not fearful of one, Ryan calmly threw short across the middle, complete to Edelman, who slipped away from Gipson and cut diagonally through a wide gap in the middle of the field, picking up steam heading toward the end zone. A charging **Harrison Smith** corralled him at the 3 to prevent a touchdown. The Aurora fans jumped out of their seats while Bombers fans slumped. The sack had been negated and more; the 21-yard gain had given the Mustangs a first down and potentially four shots at the end zone.

The Bombers geared up to make their stand, anticipating a run, but as the linebackers honed in on Woodhead, Ryan shoved the ball quickly into the chest of seldom-used fullback, **Mike Tolbert**, who put his head down and plunged toward the goal line. Blitzing linebacker, **Bud Dupree**, appeared to have him stopped at the one-yard line. But the video review clearly showed Tolbert knifing under a converging pile of bodies and thrusting the football across the plane of the goal line before his knee touched the turf.

Referee, **Clete Blakeman**, after what seemed like an interminable period of time under the hood, strode to center field and turned on his field microphone: "Upon further review, the ball broke the plane of the goal line before the runner's knee touched the ground. The ruling is a touchdown!" And with the word 'touchdown; he raised both his arms as Mustangs boosters howled their approval.

"The linesman on the wing was off his spot by a lot there, Bill. A full yard – you don't usually see such disparity," Winterall said.

"That's why we have instant replay, Phil!" Badden declared. "To get the call right! It took a long time but it was worth every second! You have to remember the officials are human; they make mistakes like everybody else – more than everybody else, actually. They seem to be making more and more mistakes these days. What you don't want to see is their mistakes influencing the game too much."

The Bombers got the ball back, down by a touchdown. But a calm Mariota was able to overcome a busted play on the first snap of the series then move his team 48 yards in 7 plays to set up a 1st & 10 at the Aurora 27-yard line. The mini-drive had featured an 11-yard pass to Sanders to convert 3rd & 7 and some nice, hard-nosed running by Fournette. The Aurora defence, confused, had been forced to call a timeout.

"The Bombers have something going here, Bill," Winterall commented as Mariota broke the huddle and strode toward the line of scrimmage.

"Anytime you string together a couple of first downs you know you have a drive going," Badden agreed. "I think they'll go in for the kill here!"

As if on cue, Mariota took the snap and faded back, deep in the pocket, his eyes scanning downfield where both Sanders and Pryor were streaking down the seams. But the Mustangs' corners had been playing off and were looming in the vicinity. So focused was Mariota on his targets that he did not see nose tackle **Malik Jackson** bearing down on him. As he lifted his arm to throw, Jackson put helmet to sternum, jolting Mariota and jarring the ball out of his hands. Fortunately, the momentum from the hit knocked him back toward the ball and he was able to recover his own fumble.

"Mariota is *leveled!* The ball is loose!" Winterall shouted. "...and he manages to pounce on it. But that's a sack and loss of 15, Bill!"

"Malik Jackson pushed Bombers' right guard, Josh Kline out of the way like he was a pretty, pig-tailed little school girl, Phil!" Badden marveled. "He knocked him out of his skirt! Monster pressure up the middle and Mariota doesn't see it coming. Jackson is like one of those bunker-buster bombs blowing up the protection. Pressure is going to be the key to this game, Phil! Pressure causes sacks and forces mistakes!"

The Bombers faced a challenging 2nd & 25 at the Aurora 42, but an 8-yard screen to Fournette and a 13-yard hitch to Pryor gained back 21 of those yards to put them in field goal range on 4th down at the Aurora 21. Mariota sauntered back to the sideline as time ran out on the 1st quarter, likely assuming, as did almost everyone else, that the field goal unit would take the field to start the 2nd quarter. But **Ken Main** had other plans....

2nd QUARTER (Aurora 14, Bruxelles 7) – "And we have the Bruxelles offence on the field following the break to contest 4th down, Bill," Winterall began as the camera panned the Bombers' huddle. "Are you surprised to see them going for it here?"

"Nothing coach Kenny Main does would surprise me, Phil," Badden replied. "Passing up a good chance to score points does seem kind of nutty, but more and more coaches are choosing to take risks and going for it on 4th down. Kenny Main might feel that field goals aren't going to keep pace with the Mustangs' offence and he would be right about that."

"Or maybe they are hoping to draw the Aurora defence offsides, Bill," Winterall added.

"That might be it too, Phil," Badden chuckled. "But if they try that and Aurora falls for it I'll barbeque my shorts at Magna Park for their home opener next year and eat them for charity. They'd go down nice all slathered in *Sweet Baby Ray's* or *Stubb's Original*. Am I allowed to mention those brands on TV? I don't think *Sweet Baby Ray's* is a sponsor, so I probably shouldn't be mentioning them over our official BBQ sauce...what is it again?"

"Mariota in the shotgun," Winterall jumped in. "They need to reach the 17 for a first down. Here's the snap, pitch left to Fournette, cuts back, wrapped up by Reddick behind the line! And the Bombers will turn the ball over on downs! Looks like he lost a yard on that play, Bill."

"Huge play there by the rookie, **Haason Reddick**," Badden gushed with enthusiasm. The replay ran. Badden commented while scribbling x's, o's and arrows on the screen with an electronic pen. "You see the play is designed to go around the left edge between the tackle and the wideout – *<there!>* – but **Shaq Thompson** reads it well and holds the edge, forcing Fournette back in – *<here!>* – and pause that...look at that green in the second level! If

he reaches that with a full head of steam he's probably in the end zone. Okay roll it...but that's where Reddick hits him and hangs on to turn a potential big play into a 1-yard loss. The way Fournette has been breaking tackles today, that's a massive play by the rookie!"

The recovery and stand by the Aurora defence had an obvious exhilarating effect on the Mustangs fans in the crowd. Many of them stood up and waved their golden horsetails while chanting 'AU-RO-RAHHHHH! AU-RO-RAHHHHH!' as Ryan led his offence onto the field. The energy seemed to spur on the Mustangs' offence. Pass completions of 17 and 14 yards to Adams and tight end, **Zach Miller** earned two quick first downs to cross midfield and a 4-yard check-down to Edelman brought Aurora to the Bruxelles' 43. But the Bombers rallied, with **Terrell Suggs** knocking down a pass attempt at the line and **Harrison Smith** batting down a long pass in front of Adams, bringing up 4th & 6.

"The Bombers hold off the Mustangs on their second possession with a couple of nice defensive plays. How important was that stand, Bill?" Winterall turned to his booth partner, expecting to have to fill some air time as the punting unit took the field.

"Pretty important, Phil," Badden began. But as he started to elaborate he stopped himself and, after a brief pause, exclaimed: "but it looks like they haven't stopped them yet, Phil. Rich Liotta has sent his offence back on the field!"

Indeed, the Mustangs' offence had turned around and moved back to the huddle. With 6 yards to go for a first down, it was clearly not to draw the Bombers' defence offside. This was a direct challenge. With Bombers and Mustangs fans both standing and the Bombers' fans bellowing at the top of their lungs, Ryan dropped back into a secure pocket and fired across the middle to Edelman for a 14-yard gain and a first down.

"It's complete to Edelman! He's got the first down and more, brought down by Shaw at the Bruxelles 29-yard line! What a daring play, Bill!" Winterall enthused.

"Matt Ryan is playing with a lot of confidence right now, Phil," Badden joined in. "That's a product of him being confident. You know, the coach can sense that; he knows when his quarterback is confident and when he is confident that his quarterback is confident, he is confident that he can ask a little more from him. You know, confidence will be the key to this game, Phil. In football, the team that is confident is the team that wins."

The next play was a pitch to Woodhead for 9 yards, followed by another pass batted down by Suggs to bring up 3rd and 1. The Bombers either sensed or knew what was coming next. They loaded up the box and sent Ogbah and Dupree on the blitz, gunning for Woodhead. But a pro-bowl calibre block by left tackle **Trent Williams** opened up a hole that the speedy and elusive Woodhead popped through like a champagne cork for 6 yards and a first down. With the Bombers' defence reeling, the Mustangs went straight back to Woodhead on the next play. The veteran found a gaping hole between the center and right guard, knifed through the Bruxelles' line and darted, virtually untouched, 14 yards and into the end zone.

"Woodhead through the line....and he's going to score! Touchdown Danny Woodhead!" Winterall cried. "He made it look easy, Bill."

"Danny Woodhead is a smart runner, Phil. He follows his blockers well and uses his natural moveability to get away from pursuit," Badden raved. "He was a forgotten man on the roster in the regular season, but he's been the team's leading rusher in the playoffs. It's as if Rich Liotta was saving him for the playoffs and it's paying off so far."

Lutz came on and kicked the extra point to make the score 14-0, Aurora. With 10 minutes remaining in the first half there was still plenty of time, but the early momentum was swinging strongly in the Mustangs' favour. As the special teams units took to the field, Bruxelles fans stood up and bravely bellowed to rally their team. The Samoans beat their drums as furiously as ever and the Belgians sang their national anthem boldly and as discordantly as they had before the opening kickoff. But the bravado concealed a well-founded trepidation that the Bombers could be in danger of being blown out. The Mustangs had not yet unleashed their big guns and the Bruxelles defence, while it had not embarrassed itself for lack of effort, had still surrendered two touchdowns in two drives to a pair of runners who had combined for just 37 carries during the regular season. The feeling was that Bruxelles needed to score on the coming drive, or the game would get away from them.

The kickoff from Lutz was downed in the end zone by a cautious Westbrook. That appearance of caution continued in the play selection. Fournette was limited to 2 yards on 2 carries then Mariota, his receivers covered, chucked a ball at the feet of Pryor on third down for a safe incomplection. The Bombers' response to falling behind by two touchdowns had been a flat three-and-out. The punting unit headed onto the field.

"A quick three-and-out for the Bombers' offence and the Mustangs will get the ball back," Winterall observed laconically.

"That was *not* how the Bombers' offence wanted to respond, Phil," Badden added. "Now their defence is going to *have* to make a stop or risk making things even worse. No team wants to fall behind by 21 points in a championship game."

Bruxelles punter, **Pat McAfee** got a hold of a kick that bounced out of bounds at the Aurora 19 for a net gain of 54 yards. The Mustangs would, at least, have a long way to travel. But the Bombers' defence had so far proven unable to stop them when the chips were down. The game's first moment of truth had arrived – the path to a rare *Gale Sayers Game* rout was now open for Aurora. Would the Bombers be able to block that path?

Initially, the Aurora offensive machine continued to fire smoothly. **Rashad Jennings** followed the left tackle, Williams, for an 11-yard gain and Ryan completed his first three passes for a total of 28 yards to bring his team across mid-field into Bruxelles territory at the 42. But a play designed for Edelman deep downfield was foiled by excellent pass coverage then followed up on the next play with a sack of Ryan by blitzing linebacker **Bud Dupree** to put the Mustangs in a 3rd & 22 hole back at their own 46-yard line.

"Dupree has him....and Ryan goes down!" Winterall announced. "The Bombers blitzed again on that play, Bill."

"They sure did, Phil!" Badden agreed. "They came with their two head hunters, Emmanuel Ogbah and Bud Dupree, but the Aurora line was only able to pick up Ogbah. You can see, Dupree has a free run at the quarterback and almost overshoots him. But he's able to hold on and pull him to the turf for a big loss. The last time they got a big sack, Ryan got most of it back with a big pass on the next play. The Bombers can't let up here. Following up sacks with good defensive plays will be the key to this game, Phil. Not much point in sacking a guy if you're going to let him get those yards back on the next play!"

Ryan got 10 of those lost yards back with a check down to Miller, but not nearly enough for a first down. The Mustangs faced 4th & 12 at the

Bruxelles 44 and a certain punting situation. Or maybe not....

"Matt Ryan and the Mustangs are still on the field," Winterall observed with surprise. "Do they not realize what down it is, Bill?"

"Uhhh...what down is it again, Phil?" Badden whispered, apparently forgetting both the situation and the microphone on his lapel.

"Are you surprised they appear to be going for it on 4th and 12 here, Bill?" Winterall asked, emphasizing the down and distance.

"Well, they might not know what down it is, Phil," Badden stammered as he attempted to regain his bearings. "Or they might know exactly what down it is. It's one or the other. But either way, it's not normal, Phil. Russ Lemmon might not even try this kind of gamble in this type of game situation...early in the game, with a 14-0 lead. But the way Matt Ryan's been throwing the ball today, why not?"

The decision to go for it caught even Mustangs' fans off guard, as the body of them were slow to react to the presence of the offence on the field. Once it became clear what was happening, it provoked a strong reaction from both fan groups. This was a direct and brazen challenge to the Bombers' defence – an imperious assault through which the Mustangs hoped to tame their opponent for good. **Rich Liotta** sent out 4 wide receivers for the job while **Kenny Main** answered with 7 defensive backs and, adding a wrinkle, sent **Harrison Smith** on the safety blitz. Ryan took the snap and dropped back into a faltering pocket disrupted by the unexpected presence of Smith knifing quickly through a gap in protection. Ryan hardly had time to note that his first option was covered before he was forced to abandon the fort and attempt to run for the first down. But he did not get far – a mere 3 yards before **Kenny Clark** knocked him to the turf. The Bombers had rejected the Aurora gambit.

"Clark tackles Ryan at the 41! And the Bombers hold!" Winterall announced. "Mariota will get good field position here, Bill. Would you call this the kind of break they have been looking for?"

"It gives them good field position, but they still have to move the ball to score, Phil," Badden observed with an air of sagacity. "That was a must-do play by the defence there. If Aurora gets the first down in that situation it's a big blow to the defence's pride. A bit of gamble for the Mustangs because you not only don't get the first down, but giving up the field position is like losing a turnover and puffs up the opponent. Let's see if the Bombers are puffed up enough to score here."

The defensive stand on 4th-and-long was apparently not enough to focus the Bruxelles offence. A holding penalty on **Cory Harkey** negated an 8-yard run by Fournette on the first play and deflated the Bombers' balloon. A 7-yard screen to Fournette on 1st and 20 followed by two incomplete pass attempts by Mariota meant that the Bombers faced 4th & 13 at their own 38, three yards back from where the drive had started.

"And the Bombers will have to punt again," Winterall observed in a monotone.

"That was *not* how the Bombers' offence wanted to respond, Phil," Badden declared. "Now their defence is going to *have* to make another stop or risk making things even worse. No team wants to fall behind by 21 points in a championship game."

A 51-yard punt by McAfee was returned 7 yards by Edelman to the Aurora 18-yard line, where the Mustangs took over. The first play was an 8-yard run by Woodhead, made easy by a quick seal block by **Joe Berger** and an aggressive cut through the hole by Woodhead.

"The Bombers don't seem to have an answer for Danny Woodhead, Bill," Winterall noted. "When he's been used, he's been effective."

"That's because he's running well, Phil, and following his blocks," Badden explained. "Blocking is the key to running and running is the key to gaining yards. The more yards you get, the more first downs you get. That tires a defence out."

"Kenyan Drake comes into the game to replace Woodhead in the backfield," Winterall interjected as the Mustangs made substitutions. "Here's a guy who has also been effective this year, but we haven't seen much of him today."

"Yes, Drake is one of those specialty guys that everybody forgets about until he's scoring on you and then everyone remembers, 'oh yeah, *that guy!*'" Badden chuckled. "I think coach Rich Liotta has put him in here as a decoy for the passing game; or he's going to run with him."

The Bombers guessed decoy and set up to defend the pass, sending two blitzers for good measure. Ryan handed off to Drake, who cut outside, only to be nailed and downed by the blitzing Dupree behind the line of scrimmage. On 3rd and 3, the Mustangs tried again but the Bombers had the play read and Dupree again finished off the honours with another stuff of Drake behind the line.

"Nowhere to go for Drake and Dupree takes him down again! That's another 1-yard loss and brings up 4th down; and I would say the punting unit as well, but I'm not calling it until I see it this time," Winterall joked at his own expense.

"<Bwa ha ha ha!>" Badden erupted in laughter. "That's called '*calling it as you see it*,' Phil! It's the key to calling a good game."

The Bombers called timeout with 2:33 left in the 1st half. That gave time for **Rich Liotta** to mull over his options. After some deliberation he sent on **Sam Koch** to punt the ball, but not before what appeared to be a serious discussion with his quarterback.

"Here comes Sam Koch and the Aurora punting team," Winterall announced. "I would have to think they are going to punt here. Any chance of a trick play, Bill?"

"Well (don't take offence Phil) but if you are thinking trick play here then Kenny Main is thinking trick play here; and if Kenny Main is thinking trick play here then Rich Liotta is thinking that Kenny Main, and *even* the play-by-play announcer, is thinking trick play here; and if Rich Liotta is thinking that everyone's thinking trick play then there's no point in calling a trick play. That's because the point of a trick play is to trick your opponent; you know, like fool him into thinking you're going to do one thing then do something else that wouldn't work unless the other team thought you were doing the other thing that everyone thinks you're going to do, but you didn't – so it fooled him," Badden paused for breath. "I never liked trick plays, Phil. I liked sending my linemen to bash the other team's linemen and telling my running back to put his head down and run like a bull. Trick plays aren't football, Phil – at least not the football we love here in America. Maybe it's different in Bruxelles, Phil; probably is – we had to save them from the Nazis so that should tell you something about those cherries and bras over there!"

"And Koch gets a good one off!" Winterall interrupted. "It's way up there...Westbrook fields it outside the 20...he tries for the right side but he's decked by Janis after a 3-yard gain! And the Bombers will take over with just over 2 minutes remaining in the half and two timeouts remaining."



Bruxelles' third-down RB, *Chris Thompson* hurls himself over the goal line for a TD to finish off a 44-yard pass play with 0:23 left in the 2nd quarter. His spectacular play cut the Aurora lead to 14-7 and salvaged what had been a difficult 1st half for the Bomber attack.

"Time is now a factor, Phil," Badden jumped in. "The Bombers have to score before time runs out in the half. If they don't, they won't get any points before half time."

"And you also have to worry about the Mustangs getting the ball back with time on the clock, I would think, Bill," Winterall filled the air as Mariota strode toward the line.

"That's true, Phil," Badden agreed. "And we all know it doesn't take the Mustangs a long time to score on one of those big bombs to Davante Adams. We haven't seen one of those yet. It means they are due!"

The drive the Bombers hoped would salvage their dismal first half did not start well. A ferocious rush by *Cliff Avril* disrupted the timing of a screen pass to *Chris Thompson* and left him exposed to be flattened by *NaVorro Bowman* for a 3-yard loss. On the next play, pro-bowl tackle, *Joe Staley* was flagged for holding on a poorly executed running play to set up 2nd and 23 at the Bruxelles 11-yard line. A choppy-executed delayed draw to Fournette was sniffed out by Jackson, who was able to drag him down after an insignificant 4-yard gain to bring up a hopeless-looking 3rd and 19.

"Is that a questionable play call, the delayed draw, on 2nd and 23, Bill?" Winterall asked as the Bombers collected themselves behind the line of scrimmage, no longer showing any signs of being in a hurry.

"It is when it's only good for four yards, Phil," Badden snarked. "The Bombers were hoping to catch the Mustangs in deep cover mode. Fournette's job there is to wait in order to draw the defence in, follow his block, or make the first guy miss then rumble through the big green gap they hoped would be there. But the Mustangs were playing middle depth and Malik Jackson had his eye on him the whole time. Jackson looks like he's on some serious drugs today, Phil! I could probably play a few downs if I had some of what he's on!"

"Mariota in the shotgun," Winterall cut in. "The Mustangs' corners are playing back...the snap is good...he drops back...looking downfield...sprints out of the pocket...looks like he'll run...he throws...broken up by McCourty...*no!* Fournette's got it and he's got room...Norman misses him...there he goes...and he's finally tracked down by McCourty who drags him down at the 42 after a 27-yard gain! Oh my!"

"Well, that's what happens when you have Marcus Mariota at quarterback and Leonard Fournette as his outlet receiver, Phil!" Badden pronounced with authority. "That play right there doesn't happen without those two guys on the field! Sure, they caught a break on the deflection, but the rest was all them and now they have a first down. That kind of play just drives a defence crazy!"

The unlikely first down lit a fire under the Bombers. They hustled to the line then Mariota dropped back and looked deep once more. As on the previous play, the coverage held and he was forced to check down to Fournette, who darted to the outside and was knocked out of bounds after a 9-yard gain. On the next play, another check-down, this time to Sanders, gave them 5 yards and a first down at the Mustangs' 44. But with the clock still running the Bombers cautiously called their second timeout with 0:38 remaining.

"And the Bombers call timeout at the 38-second mark; they still have one left," Winterall announced. "So, what do they do here, Bill?"

"They've been trying to get the ball downfield to their speed guys but the Mustangs' corners are sticking to them like crazy glue, forcing Mariota to improvise, which he's done well so far," Badden began his dissertation. "What they *don't* want here is to be sacked or intercepted. But they can't run the ball either because they don't have enough time. They need to come away with some points, even if it's just a field goal, and that means they'll be running a play here that will get them enough yards to get into field goal range."

Sure enough, the play was a simple medium out to running back **Chris Thompson**, who was unattended near the sideline with the Aurora secondary playing deep. **Jason McCourty**, the nearest defender, attempted the big hit and missed, giving Thompson free reign down the sideline as the Aurora secondary desperately changed course and converged on the Bruxelles running back. A last-ditch dive inside the five by **Patrick Peterson** also missed, allowing Thompson to hurl himself across the goal line into the end zone.

"Touchdown Bombers!" Winterall cried. "Can you believe it! Chris Thompson takes it all the way and Bruxelles is finally on the scoreboard!"

"They needed that, Phil," Badden weighed in. "There's no worse feeling for an offence than getting shutout in the first half and it was looking like that was going to happen to the Bombers before that play. The Mustangs weren't paying any attention to Thompson and the back-up running back took advantage to make the biggest play of his young career so far. He's going to want to hold on to that football for his trophy room at home."

Chandler Cantanzaro drilled the extra point to make the score 14-7, Aurora with 0:23 left. Barring something unusual, it appeared as if the teams would head into the locker room separated by a touchdown. But the ever-threatening presence of **Kenyan Drake**, standing near the goal line to receive the kickoff, prompted the Bombers to play it safe. Cantanzaro angled the kick away from Drake, sending a two-hopper to the up man, **Sammie Coates**, who knifed his way past the gunner for a 24-yard return to the Aurora 27. With kick return heroics no longer a possibility, fans started to rise and head for the exits to refuel for the extended halftime show. But the Mustangs were determined to squeeze every last competitive second out of the first half. They sent four wide receivers onto the field to contest the final 18 seconds.

"Look here, Bill," Winterall noted with a tone of mild surprise. "The Mustangs have four wide receivers on the field. Doesn't look like Matt Ryan is going to kneel down here!"

"Well, this is Rich Liotta's M.O., Phil," Badden commented. "If he has a chance to score, he'll try to score. I guess he figures that with Ryan at quarterback and Davante Adams at wide receiver he always has a chance to score. He's not too concerned with things going wrong, either, because he has confidence in his players."

The Bombers countered with 7 defensive backs and sent safety, **Harrison Smith** on the blitz. Ryan took a deep drop and looked downfield. The pocket quickly crumbled, forcing Ryan to scramble. With Smith bearing down on him, he launched the ball high in the air, but with too much hang time, allowing it to be easily batted away by corner, **Fabian Moreau**.

"And there is a flag on the field!" Winterall announced. "It looks like they are calling Smith for roughing the passer. That will give Mustangs another shot, but 15 yards closer this time."

The replay of the hit played on the TV screen as Bill Badden commented: "I don't know about that one, Phil. Smith is coming in with a full head of steam and hits Ryan as he throws the ball. That's a legal hit in my rulebook. But, *<heh-heh>* my rule book also includes good, old-fashioned leather helmets and those wool shoulder pads they used to sew into the jerseys back in the day. My grandfather had a set of those pads in the attic and I used to wear them around his house when I visited him as a little kid. I felt real tough in those pads. Now they wear these space-age helmets made of poly-whatch-a-ma-call-it and those gigantic shoulder pads. Those pads make every player look like one of those toy Transvestites my nephew likes to play with...what's his name, Op...Optical...or Opticus...Mime?..."

"I think you mean *Optimus Prime*, Bill," Winterall interjected. "And speaking of transformers, Matt Ryan is about to take a shot at transforming this 7-point lead into a bigger one if he can connect on a Hail Mary here!"

With 3 seconds remaining and the ball on the Aurora 42, Ryan dropped back to take one last shot at the Bruxelles end zone, hoping to get lucky. But with **Terrell Suggs** bearing down on him and his receivers covered, Ryan flipped the ball to Miller, who was soon tackled by **Artie Burns** after a 6-yard gain. The gun sounded and there were no flags to prolong the exercise. The first half of *Gale Sayers XI* entered the history books with the Mustangs ahead by only a touchdown after dominating the play. The Bombers had survived an all-out attempt by the Mustangs to blow them out early, leading to the sense that it would not take a great change in fortune for the Bombers to make a comeback in the second half.

3rd QUARTER (Aurora 14, Bruxelles 10) – "We are back at Camelot for the second half of the 11th EFL Championship game! I'm Phil Winterall along with Bill Badden and we and our video crew here on ESPN will be bringing you all of the action live." Winterall turned to his booth partner. "While it certainly felt like the Mustangs controlled the first half, the stats tell a slightly different story, Bill. The Bombers actually had more yards from scrimmage – 206 – versus the Mustangs' 194, and a slight edge in time of possession. Why didn't this translate into as many points?"

"They were inconsistent, Phil. Until that last drive, Marcus Mariota had just 56 yards passing, not including that 15-yard sack he took that nearly turned the ball over," Badden explained. "They tried but were not effective passing to their wide receivers or tight end. You look at those two big pass plays on their final drive, both of those were to running backs. They also had a couple of bad holding penalties that put them in a hole."

"What about the Mustangs, Bill? They scored on their first two possessions then went silent on offence," Winterall said.

"Credit the Bombers' defence with putting the Mustangs in a 4th & long position on that third drive then stopping the conversion attempt on fourth down," Badden replied. "Aurora got a little greedy there and it may have backfired a little. 4th & 12 is not good odds, even for a great offence. It fired up the Bombers' defence. But you know, Phil, the only stat that really matters is the score. The team with the most points at the end of the game usually wins. If the game were to end right now, Aurora would have more points. So, it's up to the Bombers to turn things around in the second half if they want to win this game."

Before the Bombers could turn things around they were going to have to first stop the Mustangs. The kickoff from McAfee was low and fast;



Emmanuel Ogbah celebrates his second of 3 sacks on the day in late 3rd quarter action. Four plays later, Aurora was in the end zone. The Bruxelles linebacker did his part – putting Aurora in a hole – only to see **Matt Ryan** dig himself out.

it snuck into the end zone just 1-yard deep, where **Kenyan Drake** fielded it. Without hesitation he bolted out of the end zone, following the wedge in front of him all the way to the 40-yard line where he was decked by **Preston Smith**.

“And the Mustangs will start the third quarter with excellent field position at their own 40,” Winterall announced as **Matt Ryan** and the Mustangs’ offence took the field.

“That was a good play by Preston Smith to stop Kenyan Drake in his tracks after the big gain, Phil,” Badden noted. “After him it was the kicker and we all know how that race would have ended. Not a very good kick by the kicker there. Drake is a dangerous returner and Cantanzaro served one up on a platter for him. Special teams play is going to be the key to this second half, Phil; this is when they become extra special to a team’s success.”

The Mustangs were unable to capitalize on the nice return. A check down to Woodhead for 3 yards was followed by a Ryan scramble for 2 yards. On 3rd & 5 an apparent completion to Miller was broken up by Ogbah at the last split second. On 4th & 5 there was no hesitation on the Aurora sideline – the punting unit took the field.

The punt from Koch sailed high toward the sideline and out of reach of the returner. It bounced out of bounds at the Bruxelles’ 14-yard line after traveling 41 yards. The Bombers’ offence took the field and lined up in their usual pro set. But before the first snap could be made, left tackle **Joe Staley** rose early out of his stance, drawing a 5-yard false start penalty.

“And a mistake will cost the Bombers five yards off the bat,” Winterall deadpanned.

“That’s not how the Bombers wanted to start their first drive of the second half,” Badden tsk-tsked. “The offence is supposed to move away from its own goal line, not towards it. That just plays into the hands of the Aurora defence. The Bombers will be trying to move forward on this play.”

Bruxelles moved forward with conviction on the next play; **Leonard Fournette** broke a tackle to turn a simple off-tackle run into a 15-yard gain. He followed that up with back-to-back carries of 6 and 10 yards for a first down, reaching his team’s own 40-yard line. On the next play, Mariota dropped back in the pocket, looking deep downfield. The pocket held impressively but his wide receivers could not shake the Aurora corners long enough to make a safe throw. The field, however, opened up before him. With one defender between him and open space, Mariota took off running, slipping by **DJ Swearinger** across mid-field then sliding to safety at the Aurora 43-yard line.

“Mariota gives himself up near the 43-yard line!” Winterall announced. “But he’s happy to do so; that’s a 17-yard gain out of what looked like nothing initially, Bill.”

“Well, the Bombers are really chewing up the turf here at the Castle Lot, Phil,” Badden observed. “But they still can’t get the ball to their wide receivers and that’s because the Aurora corners are having a heck of a game. That’s the difference so far, Phil. The play of the Aurora corners is going to be the key to this second half. The Bombers need to show that they can make a play through the air; or they are not going to keep pace with the Mustangs over the long haul.”

Undeterred, the Bombers went back to the air, but **Earl Thomas** tipped a pass intended for **Terrelle Pryor Sr** for an incompleteness on first down and **Patrick Peterson** delivered a big hit to jar the ball out of Pryor’s arms on 2nd down.

“Big hit by Peterson knocks the ball loose!” Winterall proclaimed. “Oh wait! There’s a late flag on the play! It looked like a legal hit, Bill.”

“I think this is going against Aurora and they are going to say that Peterson arrived early, Phil,” Badden noted. The replay filled the TV screen and Badden continued his commentary. “Hmmm...I’m not sure about that, Phil. That’s a bang-bang play. But because Peterson isn’t going for the ball there the referee is giving the wide receiver the benefit of the tie, I guess. I don’t agree with it, but <hey!> that’s why I’m up here and not down there. If I was down there, I’d let them play. Hard-nosed, smashmouth, bone-breaking football – that’s what we want to play here in America!”

The penalty netted the Bombers another 19 yards then a holding penalty on corner, **Josh Norman** negated a **JJ Watt** sack and put them inside the Aurora red zone at the 19-yard line. But two plays later a holding penalty on center **Mitch Morse** pushed the Bombers back, setting up 2nd and 18 at the 27-yard line. The Bombers deployed a third wide receiver and replaced Fournette with **Chris Thompson** in the backfield. The Mustangs countered with a four-man front and five defensive backs. On the snap, the Aurora ends, Watt and Avril, both charged the passer. But Mariota pivoted away and tossed the ball to Thompson as the running back broke toward the left side. With the edge gone and **Joe Thomas** leading the way, Thompson easily muscled past an off-balance **Haason Reddick** then shook off Swearinger as the safety came up to plug the gap.

"And there goes Thompson! He's at the 15...across the 10...and he's out of bounds inside the 5-yard line!" Winterall cried. "He was pushed out by Reddick. That's a 23-yard gain and it brings up 1st and goal at the 4."

"Well the kid, Thompson, is having a great day, Phil," Badden remarked as the linesman placed the ball just outside the four-yard line at the left hash mark. "That's another big play when they needed it. The Mustangs were not expecting the Bombers to run there. Good recovery by Reddick after missing his chance to get Thompson back at the 25 – he saved a touchdown by hustling back into the play."

With the Mustangs seemingly off balance the Bombers decided to stick with the running game. Three times they tried to break through the Mustangs' line on the ground, but excellent reads by the Aurora linebackers denied them any advance and actually pushed them backwards on a third down 4-yard stuff of Thompson by **Zachary Orr**. Facing 4th and goal at the 8, the Bombers opted for the conventional choice and sent in kicker, **Chandler Cantanzaro** to try the field goal.

"It looked like Orr had that play read the whole way, Bill," Winterall observed as Cantanzaro jogged onto the field.

"Oh yeah! He sure did, Phil!" Badden raved. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice...well, it ain't gonna happen on this play. Zachary Orr is in the Bruxelles backfield before Mariota lets go of the ball. Heck, he probably could have taken the pitch himself but he is focused so much on Thompson that he doesn't think about intercepting that ball. That's a good, solid tackle right there. He squares his body to the target, gets down low, puts the clamp on him with both arms and drives through him until he's down. That's the way we used to tackle, Phil. Nowadays, the young kids are all going for that big booming hit and half the time they're missing and hurting themselves or their teammates. The first goal of tackling is to stop the ball-carrier. If you end up ringing his bell and knocking him out of the game, that's a bonus."

The attempt from 26 yards was a virtual chip shot. Cantanzaro made it easily on the first try, but an offside penalty against **Terrelle Pryor Sr.** forced him to make a second attempt from the slightly more challenging 31-yard line.

"He'll try it again from 31 yards away," Winterall intoned. "The kick is up...and he drills it home. Cantanzaro narrows the gap to 4 points; it's Aurora 14, Bruxelles 10 with just under 6 minutes left to play in the third quarter."

"That was an important drive for the Bombers," Badden weighed in. "I mean, they have to be disappointed they couldn't score a touchdown from 4 yards away, but they have to be happy that they were able to move the ball and kick a field goal to add some points to their total. They need points if they plan on winning this ball game."

A nice kick return by Drake was nullified by an illegal block, setting up the Mustangs back at their 9-yard line for their second possession of the second half. Unintimidated by the shadow of their goal posts, they proceeded to move methodically up the field; **Matt Ryan** completing 4 of 5 for 57 yards and **Danny Woodhead** adding 12 yards on 3 carries to bring the Mustangs well into Bruxelles territory with a first down at the 22.

"And it's Jarrad Davis with the tackle at the 22-yard line," Winterall announced. "Zach Miller was wide open on that play, Bill, and he didn't need to do much to turn that into a 19-yard gain."

"Well, if the Mustangs are making a statement here with this drive they are sure saying something, Phil," Badden remarked with a measure of gravity. "It's coming through loud and clear."

It had looked all too easy for the Mustangs up until this point in the drive. But on the next play, **Emmanuel Ogbah** knifed through Ryan's

protection on the blitz and brought him down hard for a 7-yard loss at the 29-yard line. Rowdy Belgian fans howled in glee over the spanking sound of Samoan war drums in the background.

"And he's *down!* Ogbah with the sack, loss of seven, his second sack of the day!" Winterall cried, his voice again turning guttural as he emphasized the word, 'down.'

"Look at Ogbah!" Badden raved. "He comes in like one of those crazy Zulu warriors there...he doesn't care about that rifle called Matt Ryan's arm; he just charges in...you know, you can almost hear the 'ooga chukka' as he –"

"And that will end the third quarter," Winterall abruptly interrupted his colleague. "Aurora will regroup and wait until after the break!"

The eleventh Gale Sayers game was going to come down to the final quarter. The Mustangs had been threatening but had been checked by the Ogbah sack. Would the drive fizzle out, or would they rebound? The moment of truth would soon arrive – after the commercial break.



Aurora running back **Danny Woodhead** pumps his fist after scoring his second touchdown of the game. The Mustangs' "secret weapon," little-used during the regular season, led the team in rushing yards in the playoffs and earned game MVP.

4th QUARTER (Aurora 24, Bruxelles 17) – When play resumed, the Mustangs lined up in the two-tight end set, the formation they had been in for most of the game. It was not a formation normally associated with an aggressive passing attack. With 17 yards to go for a first down, the Mustangs would almost certainly need to complete a big pass, although on second down a run could not be ruled out. The Bombers defence appeared to be hedging its bets; arrayed in a basic 3-4 set with the secondary playing straight zone coverage. With the snap of the ball, linebacker **Terrell Suggs** blitzed from his outside right position toward the center of the line, where he was met squarely by guard, **James Carpenter**. Ryan took three steps back and fired to his left, hitting **Julian Edelman** near the sideline. The shifty veteran made a move inside, drawing in corner **EJ Gaines**, then broke sharply back outside and took off down the unguarded sideline. Linebacker, **Tahir Whitehead** was able to knock him out of bounds, but only after what appeared to be a 17-yard gain and another Aurora first down.

“Edelman is finally shoved out of bounds at the 12-yard line, close to the first down marker,” Winterall reported. “Did he get it? Yes, he did!”

“You know, this is almost a carbon copy of what the Mustangs did after Ogbah’s first sack, but instead of sending Julian Edelman inside, this time they send him outside,” Badden remarked lucidly. “EJ Gaines bites on the inside move and overcommits and then its clear sailing for Edelman down the line. Is it right to call it ‘sailing,’ Phil, when he’s running on the turf?”

“And it looks like Kenny Main is going to challenge the spot, Bill,” Winterall interjected, ignoring the question. “There’s the red flag. On replay it looks like the ball might be just shy of the marker when he steps out.”

As multiple angles of the replay ran on the screen for the television audience, the booth partners commented on what they saw.

“Well, from that angle it looks like the nose of the ball crosses the plain of the yellow line showing where the marker is, Phil,” Badden noted. “But our audience should remember that that yellow line is not actually painted on the field,” he added with a note of caution. “Our great production crew put that line there on your TV using a computerized electronic gizmo that can do those things. The referee and linesmen don’t have the benefit of that yellow line to make their call.”

“It is also not official, Bill,” Winterall added. “It is just a visual aid to help the viewer. And I don’t know if he got it, Bill. From the overhead view you can see that Edelman is out before the ball reaches the yellow line, or about one foot outside the 12-yard line according to the field marker.”

“Yeah, but if you look at the ground angle it looks like Edelman’s foot is not actually down on the white line, Phil,” Badden argued. “It just kind of hovers there for a split second as he pushes the ball forward past the marker. I think it’s a first down.”

“And here is a shot from Edelman’s ‘Cheat Cam,’” Winterall jumped in. “And it shows, I think, pretty clearly that the foot comes down on the line just inside the 13-yard line. Unfortunately, we cannot see where the football is from the ‘Cheat Cam’ angle.”

“You know, Phil, I sometimes think there are too many replay cameras, especially in the Championship,” Badden opined. “I mean, we have all these angles that we’re seeing and I am told the referees have more that they can view and it just confuses everybody. I mean, which angle do you use when they all show something different?”

“Referee, Clete Blakeman is still under the hood,” Winterall noted. “He wants to make sure he gets this right and, as we can see, it’s not an easy call. Remember, the call on the field was a first down. Indisputable video evidence is needed to overturn the call on the field.”

“You know, there once was a time when a first down was a first down,” an irritated Badden interjected. “Everybody knew it when they saw it. The ref would stomp his foot down on the spot and motion with his arm like this and the whole stadium would cheer if it was a first down for the home team and boo if it was a first down for the visitors. I mean, it was a simpler time but that was football darn it! Waiting around like this isn’t football. We are talking about a foot here, at most. Give them the first down and get on with it!”

In all, it took just over four minutes from the moment the challenge flag was dropped for the officials to finally rule that Edelman had missed the first down by less than one foot. A cheer rose from the whole crowd as play finally resumed, with the Mustangs lining up for third and inches with just one wide receiver split wide. Ryan took it himself and drove forward as blitzing Bombers ricocheted off their blocks away from the thrust of the sneak. Ryan was brought down a full yard from the line of scrimmage, giving the Mustangs a first down at the Bruxelles 11.

“And Matt Ryan will take it himself...first down!” Winterall announced. “No doubt about that one, Bill.”

“The Bombers really came after the run on that play, Phil, but it looks they did not expect Ryan to keep it,” Badden noted. “It’s an easy play for Ryan there. He gets a good block up front and all he has to do is basically fall forward for the first down. Now they have a chance to take control of this game if they can score a touchdown here.”

With **Mike Tolbert** now in the game at fullback it was clear to the Bombers who was going to get the ball. They switched to a four-man front and took aim at Woodhead, but the veteran running back found a hole inside the right guard and bolted straight forward for a 7-yard gain.

“And Woodhead is down at the 4-yard line, brought down by Gaines!” Winterall called.

“The Bombers came hard and aggressive on that play, Phil, and the Mustangs had the perfect play call,” Badden observed. “The left guard Carpenter comes around and trap blocks Wilkerson, who was already set out wide on the line, opening up a big hole for Woodhead that is closed on a good tackle by Gaines. But the Bombers look tired and frustrated, Phil. I say give the ball to Danny Woodhead again and see what happens!”

The Mustangs strode as a group purposefully up to the line; not in hurry-up mode but not wasting time either. A quick snap count caught the Bombers defence flat-footed. Ryan turned and stuffed the ball into the arms of Woodhead, who stepped once to the left and dove toward a narrow hole opened up by **Cody Whitehair** and **James Carpenter** in the center of the Bruxelles line. It was enough for the slippery Woodhead, who squirted through the tight gap and bounced across the goal line after being tripped up on a late grasp by **Chris Jones**.

“Touchdown, Danny Woodhead!” called out Winterall as the diminutive runner leaped to his feet and held the football high above his head.

“You know something, Phil,” Badden began. “Danny Woodhead may be a veteran of this game but he is a little kid at heart. Look at him holding that ball up like that – there’s a kid who loves the game of football and who loves to win! That’s what you need in this game. You need the will to win. If your players don’t want to win you aren’t going to win many games in this league!”

The point-after was good and as the teams retired to the sideline to prepare for the ensuing kickoff, **Phil Winterall** noted that, while the score was now 21-10 for the Mustangs and it was once again a two-score game, there was still plenty of time remaining – over 13 minutes – for the Bombers to stage a comeback. As expected, that prompted a response from **Bill Badden**.

“That is certainly true right now, Phil,” stated Badden. “But as soon as that clock starts ticking there is going to be less and less time. Marcus Mariota is going to have to make something happen on this drive.”

A sense of urgency began to envelope the Bombers’ fanbase just as Mustangs supporters experienced the exhilaration brought on by the Woodhead touchdown. Thousands of swirling, golden horsetails glittered in the night light like a sparkling halo over the heads of the crowd. The chant of ‘*AU-RO-RAHHHHH! AU-RO-RAHHHHH!*’ all but drowned out the Belgian National Anthem and the incessant patter of war drums. It was a chant that said ‘victory is close.’

“An interesting fact, Bill; the Mustangs under Rich Liotta have never lost a game in which they were leading by 11 points or more in the 4th quarter,” Winterall stated with an air of solemnity. This revelation had the effect on the TV audience of sentencing the Bombers to death, even if it also had the potential to set up a maximum level of drama in the event of a Bruxelles comeback.

“And I’m sure they’ve had even more success when leading by more than that, Phil,” Badden added. “So, the Bombers can’t afford to give up any more points. First, they have to cut that lead down then stop the Mustangs then take the lead themselves and do it all before time runs out. It’ll be a chore but, as we’ve seen today, Mariota is a bit of an ‘X’-factor. He more than anyone on the field is capable of making something out of nothing.”

Badden’s off-the-cuff observation about Mariota took on the air of prophecy on the very first play from scrimmage following the touchback. He faked a handoff to Fournette then, as the Aurora line reacted, abruptly turned on his heel and sprinted around the weak side, following center **Mitch Morse**. The Mustangs were in their nickel package and their linebackers understandably overcommitted in pursuit of the Bomber running back who had been gashing them for most of the day. The result was a wide-open field and a 26-yard gain for the fleet-footed Mariota.

“Mariota is brought down across mid-field after a 26-yard run!” Winterall cried. “That’s a good start for the Bombers, Bill.”

“That was a great play call there, Phil,” Badden gushed. “The Mustangs were thinking pass all the way and Mariota sold it perfectly. The result was a big gain. Maybe that play will create some room in the secondary for the Bombers’ wide receivers who haven’t done much all day.”

The Bombers’ coach apparently had the same thought. With both backs staying in to block, Mariota took a deep drop as his wide receivers both sped downfield. But again, the Aurora secondary, deployed in a zone, doggedly guarded their areas. Finding no one open, Mariota flipped the ball to Fournette, who was dragged down by Bowman after a 3-yard gain. The Bombers hustled to the line as the Mustangs scrambled to take up their defensive positions. Mariota handed the ball to Fournette, who swept left and stepped out of bounds at the Aurora 37-yard line after a 9-yard gain.

“First down, Bruxelles!” Winterall exclaimed, the added; “They aren’t wasting any time, Bill.”

“That was all about catching the Mustangs in their nickel set and getting a first down. Phil,” Badden noted, sagely. “But the Bombers are going to have to complete passes downfield at some point. Leonard Fournette has broken the 100-yard rushing mark on the day, but his team is still trailing. The Mustangs have declared a no-fly zone in their secondary.”

After off-setting penalties nullified a 4-yard gain, **Terrelle Pryor Jr** flinched at the line, drawing a flag and setting the Bombers back 5 yards. On 1st and 15, Mariota took a quick drop and turned to Thompson in the slot. But before he could release the ball, **Malik Jackson** split the gap between **Mitch Morse** and **Josh Kline** and drove him to the ground for a 7-yard loss.

“He’s *sacked* by Jackson!” Winterall declared, his voice turning guttural on the word ‘sacked.’

“That was one thing the Bombers did not want to happen on that play, Phil,” Badden pointed out. “They try to get Thompson out in space to make up some of that penalty yardage but Malik Jackson blows the whole play up with a great individual effort. That’s just a great football play, Phil. It’s the kind of play you expect a football player to make in a football game!”

An incomplete pass on the 2nd down was wiped off the stat board when Morse, burned by Jackson on the previous snap, was called for holding. The penalty pushed Bruxelles all the way back to their own 41-yard line and set up a formidable 2nd and 32.

“This once promising Bomber drive looks to be in trouble, Bill,” Winterall noted grimly.

“Well, the Bombers are going the wrong way, Phil,” Badden grumbled. “They are supposed to be going toward the Aurora goal line but now they’re going toward their own goal line. They need to switch direction on this play.”

The Bombers stuck to their two-back set, with Thompson again split wide, while the Mustangs added a sixth defensive back to saturate the deep part of the zone. Mariota, in the shotgun, took the snap and glided to the right as he dropped back in the face of a determined push by the Aurora defensive line.

“Mariota in trouble...he tosses it up...picked off by Jackson!” Winterall cried. “Fournette is there and takes him down, but not before the interception. Oh boy! Malik Jackson with another big play for the Mustangs.”

“Malik Jackson is having a game, isn’t he?” Badden chuckled as the replay began to display. “He explodes off the ball to rush the passer but sniffs out the screen pass and suddenly comes off his block, <see!> and drops back to cover Leonard Fournette. All Mariota sees his JJ Watt’s huge head coming at him and he throws it right to Jackson. That’s not how they designed that play, Phil! They are in a heap of trouble now.”

The Mustangs took over in Bruxelles territory at the 43 but were immediately pushed back to their own side of mid-field on **Emmanuel Ogbah**’s third sack of the day. But, as with his two previous sacks, the effort was soon negated by a **Matt Ryan** pass, this time an 18-yarder to back-up wide receiver **Sammie Coates**, that brought up 4th and inches at the Bombers’ 33-yard line. The play to Coates had originally been ruled a first down but was overturned by another spot challenge by **Ken Main**.

“Another successful challenge by the Bombers’ coach brings up fourth down and a decision here for the Mustangs,” Winterall commented.

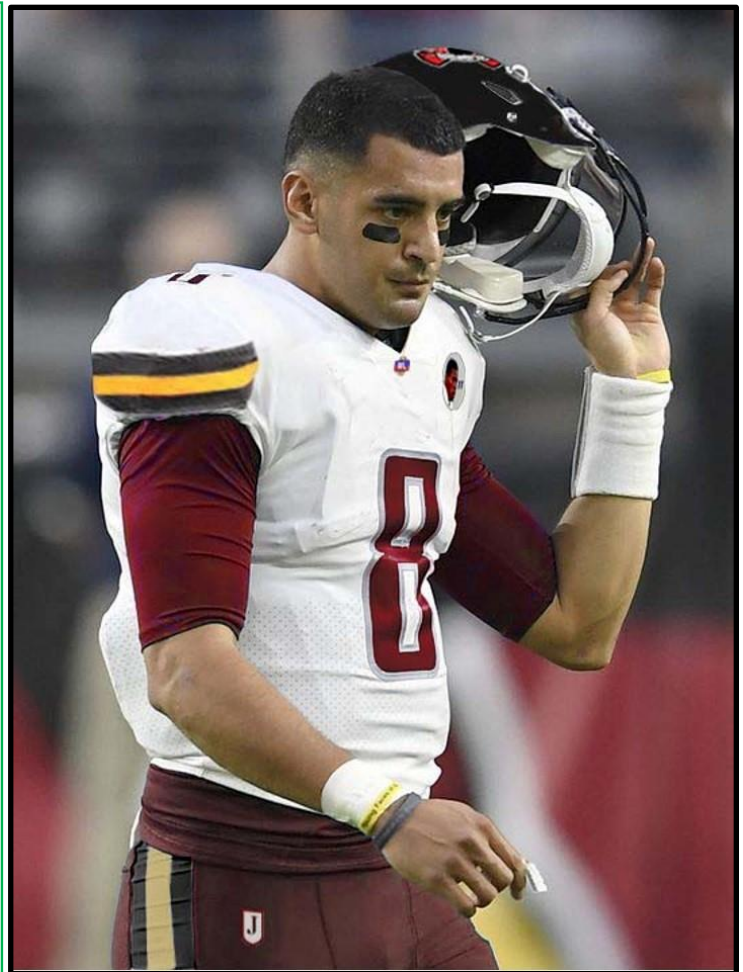
"Well, this is a no-brainer for Rich Liotta, Phil," Badden guffawed. "Any guy who goes for it on 4th and 12 in the first half is not going to pass up a chance to possibly put the game away on 4th and inches in the 4th quarter. There's no guarantee that getting a first down here will do that, but it gives them at least three more downs to gain yards and take time off the clock. And, yep, Ryan doesn't even leave the field to consult with his coach. He and the offence are staying put."

Anticipating another quarterback-keeper, the Bombers loaded the line with six big bodies and sent everybody else on the blitz, taking aim at Ryan. But the center of the Aurora line retained the initiative and opened up a small pocket for their quarterback to stuff his head into for a 1-yard gain.

With a new set of downs, the Mustangs took advantage of the Bruxelles focus on Woodhead to pick up 25 more yards on a pair of **Mike Tolbert** runs and a neatly-executed, 19-yard play action pass to Edelman that put them inside the 10-yard line at the 7. A terrible pass by Ryan on the next play was tipped and nearly intercepted by **Tashaun Gipson**, however, and the hiccup arrested the momentum. The Mustangs got 4 yards closer on a trap by Woodhead but, on fourth down and a long 3, were not ready to gamble that they would get lucky a third time on 4th down.

"It looks like Rich Liotta will play it safe, Bill. Wil Lutz is coming in for what is most likely going to be a field goal attempt," Winterall said. A smattering of boos could be heard coming from Mustangs fans who thought their team was letting the Bombers off the hook.

Badden proffered his view: "This is the right play in this situation, Phil. It should be an easy kick from here. If he makes it, Aurora will have a two-touchdown lead, which means Bruxelles will need to score at least two touchdowns to tie the game. But if he misses, the lead will remain where it is right now...unless the Bombers block the kick and return it for a touchdown, which would change the situation quite a bit, I think. You know sometimes as a coach these things go through your head in moments like these and they can make you do some crazy things. But I don't expect Rich Liotta to



A frustrated **Marcus Mariota** storms off the field after being intercepted by **Malik Jackson**. Pressure and excellent coverage by the Aurora secondary made for a tough day behind center.

do anything crazy here."

Lutz finished off an uncontested 21-yard kick to add 3 points to the Aurora total. The Bombers had been clearly expecting a fake and had made just a token attempt to block the kick. Mustangs fans cheered happily, despite many of them having wanted another touchdown. The game was still going well; with 7:03 left on the clock the Mustangs led 24-10 and looked in control.

The kick-off went through the end zone for a touchback at the Bruxelles 25-yard line. The Bombers continued to deploy a two-back set while the Mustangs bolstered their pass defence by adding cornerback **Jason McCourty** and safety **Michael Thomas** to the secondary. Mariota immediately went to the air, completing consecutive passes of 6 and 3 yards to **Emmanuel Sanders** to bring up 3rd & 1. A false start penalty on **Joe Staley** changed the third-down equation offensively even as the Mustangs continued to protect the deep zone. Seeing the corners back, Mariota audibled and completed a pass underneath to **Terrelle Pryor Sr** for 8 yards and a first down.

"And Terrelle Pryor has the first down!" Winterall called. "That's just the second catch of the day for him, Bill and just the seventh catch of the day for a Bomber wide receiver, with three of those coming on this drive."

"And none of those catches have been for big yardage, Phil," Badden added. "Heck, Pryor averaged over 20-yards a catch during the regular season. He's been hornswoggled today, that's for sure."

The Bombers continued to play dink-and-dunk in an effort to gain yards and generate some momentum. But the Aurora defence was playing with a lot of confidence and moving to the ball with aggression. Good tackling limited Thompson to a 3-yard gain on a well-executed screen pass on first down, but a late hit on Mariota by **Cliff Avril** cost them 15-yards more and a first down across mid-field at the Aurora 45-yard line.

"I hate to say it, Phil, because protection of the quarterback is paramount in the league today," Badden weighed in as the referee walked off the 15-yard penalty. "But that late hit was one of the best things that could happen to the Bombers right now. The Mustangs will have to pull back a bit to avoid giving away anymore yards on penalties."

Now across mid-field and with over 5 minutes left, the Bombers tried to exploit the mis-match in formations by running twice with **Leonard Fournette**. But the fired-up Aurora defence swarmed the Bruxelles workhorse, limiting him to just 3 yards on those two plays. On 3rd and 7, Mariota found **Travis Kelce** open in a soft spot in the zone, but the ball went right through his hands to bring up 4th & 7 at the Aurora 42.

"And Kelce misses it *again*!" Winterall exclaimed. "That will bring up 4th down, Bill, and I imagine the Bombers are likely to go for it here."

"Awwh, Travis Kelce is having a rough day," Badden observed, solemnly. "That's his third drop. You know, when a player of his calibre

misses easy catches, it affects the whole offence. Now the Bombers are going to have to make a play or else this game is pretty much over.”

On 4th down, with **Willie Young** bearing down on him on the blitz, Mariota stood in and fired a laser to the left of a leaping **JJ Watt** in the direction of Kelce. The struggling tight end dove and, this time, made the catch at the 36-yard line, rolling forward to the 34 before being touched down by McCourty. It was enough for a first down.

“Kelce with the diving grab for a critical first down! They went right back to him, Bill. Are you surprised?” Winterall asked.

“Not surprised at all, Phil.” Badden declared. “Kelce probably told Mariota in the huddle, ‘give me the ball.’ When a player like Kelce tells his quarterback to give him the ball you give it to him. Plus, you see, the Mustangs let up on him a bit on that play – he was wide open. Mariota’s throw was off line but Kelce had room to make a diving catch and still pick up 2 more yards.”

Sparked by the 4th-down conversion, Mariota went deep to Pryor Sr on the next play. The ball was slightly underthrown and Pryor was exposed as he held up to make the grab. **Patrick Peterson** drilled him as the ball arrived and he lost the handle for an incomplete pass. On second down, the Bombers line held off a concerted push by the Aurora line just long enough for Mariota to check down to Pryor Sr. The Bomber wideout made **Willie Young** miss then darted across the middle of an open field. For the first time that day, Pryor’s speed and shiftiness, which had made him one of the premier scoring threats at his position, was on display.

“Pryor has it...he cuts back...there he goes...past the 10...and McCourty saves a touchdown with a shoestring tackle!” Winterall proclaimed. “They’ll mark him down at the 2! That’s a 32-yard gain for Terrelle Pryor and the Bombers are threatening.”

“That’s what they’ve been missing all game, Phil,” Badden commented. “A big play from one of their playmakers. That just shows you what a 32-yard play can do for your offence! You go from being 34 yards away from the end zone to being 2 yards away from the end zone. And you can bet it’s a heckuva lot easier to score from 2 yards away than 34 yards away!”

The Mustangs brought in their goal line package and leveled their sights on Fournette. It took the Bombers three tries, but on 3rd and goal they found success through the air thanks to a nice snare by Kelce after a deflection in traffic.

“Quick drop back...here comes the blitz...he fires to Kelce...caught in the end zone by Kelce! Touchdown, Bombers!” Winterall hollered. “A catch in traffic racks up 6 points for Bruxelles. And, with 3:40 left on the clock this game is far from over, Bill.”

“That’s what they needed, Phil,” Badden added. “They needed a touchdown. Kelce shows great concentration on the ball there. Shaq Thompson gets a hand on it but Kelce stays with it and hauls it in.”

Cantanzaro made the point-after, narrowing the Mustangs’ lead to a converted touchdown at 24-17.

3:40 remaining in the 4th quarter was just enough time to make the decision between kicking away and kicking onside a tricky one. Bruxelles had all three of their timeouts remaining and a stoppage at the two-minute warning as well. It boiled down to the odds of the Bombers’ defence making a stop against the league’s best offence. The problem became an obvious point of discussion in the broadcast booth.

“Do you go for the onside kick in this situation, Bill,” Winterall asked.

“Well, if I am Kenny Main, I know my defence has had trouble stopping the Mustangs,” Badden began, speaking at a measured and somewhat drawn out pace. Both teams were at the sidelines and no hint had yet emerged as to what the Bombers were going to do. “But I also know that the Mustangs will be handling the ball with care on offence.”

“You don’t think Rich Liotta would try a pass at some point?” Winterall interjected.

“Well, he might. I wouldn’t put it past him. But you have to remember that the Aurora defence has been pretty successful today,” Badden drawled slowly, pausing frequently. “And they have Danny Woodhead in the backfield, somebody the Bombers have struggled to contain. I think...if I’m Kenny Main...I like to see, maybe, if I can get the ball in the hands of my offence right away after the touchdown...unless, of course...”

The Bombers were on the field, lining up to kick-off with what appeared to be their usual personnel. The Mustangs prudently guarded against the onside kick possibility by deploying their hands team. The distribution of coverage was distributed evenly along the Bruxelles line, one sign that a conventional kick was coming.

“I think they will kick away here, Phil!” Badden declared confidently. “And it’s the right call in this situation. Pin the Mustangs back and trust the defence to hold them off. The other option is to try a disguised onside kick, but that’s a longshot with the Mustangs looking ready for it.”

The kick from Cantanzaro sailed through the Mustangs’ end zone, putting the ball at the 25 for the drive that could decide the game. The Mustangs deployed in their standard two-tight end set with one running back, **Danny Woodhead**, in the backfield. The Bombers lined up in their standard 3-4 set, their corners and linebackers tight to the line of scrimmage. As **Matt Ryan** called the signals, **Emmanuel Ogbah** maneuvered into the gap between nose tackle **Chris Jones** and **Terrell Suggs**, indicating a blitz. The long, dragged out snap count had the desired effect on the uptight Bombers’ defence; Chris Jones jumped across the line prior to the snap, prompting an immediate flag.

“*Encroachment – number 95 – defence – that’s a five-yard penalty, repeat first down,*” declared referee **Clete Blakeman** over his stadium mike as the linesman paced off the yardage.

“That’s not how the Bombers wanted to begin their most important defensive stand of the year,” Badden jumped in without prompting. “It looked as if the Bombers were expecting a pass on that play. Now, 5 yards closer, you can bet that the Mustangs will run Danny Woodhead here.”

And they did. Back-to-back carries by the wily Woodhead netted 10 yards and a first down, prompting Bruxelles to call a timeout with 2:49 left on the clock.

“Danny Woodhead just seems to find a way through that Bruxelles line, doesn’t he Bill?” Winterall commented while team captains conferred with their coaches on the sidelines.

“Well, if this score holds up Danny Woodhead has to be in the discussion for Gale Sayers MVP, Phil,” Badden remarked. “The Bombers were going after him on both of those carries and he still picked up 10 yards. Of course, you can’t forget Matt Ryan when talking about MVP, but



Swordfish quarterback **Andy Dalton** is carted off the field holding his knee during first quarter action. Dalton was injured at the end of the game's opening drive and never returned. The early loss of Dalton meant **Jameis Winston** played most of the game.

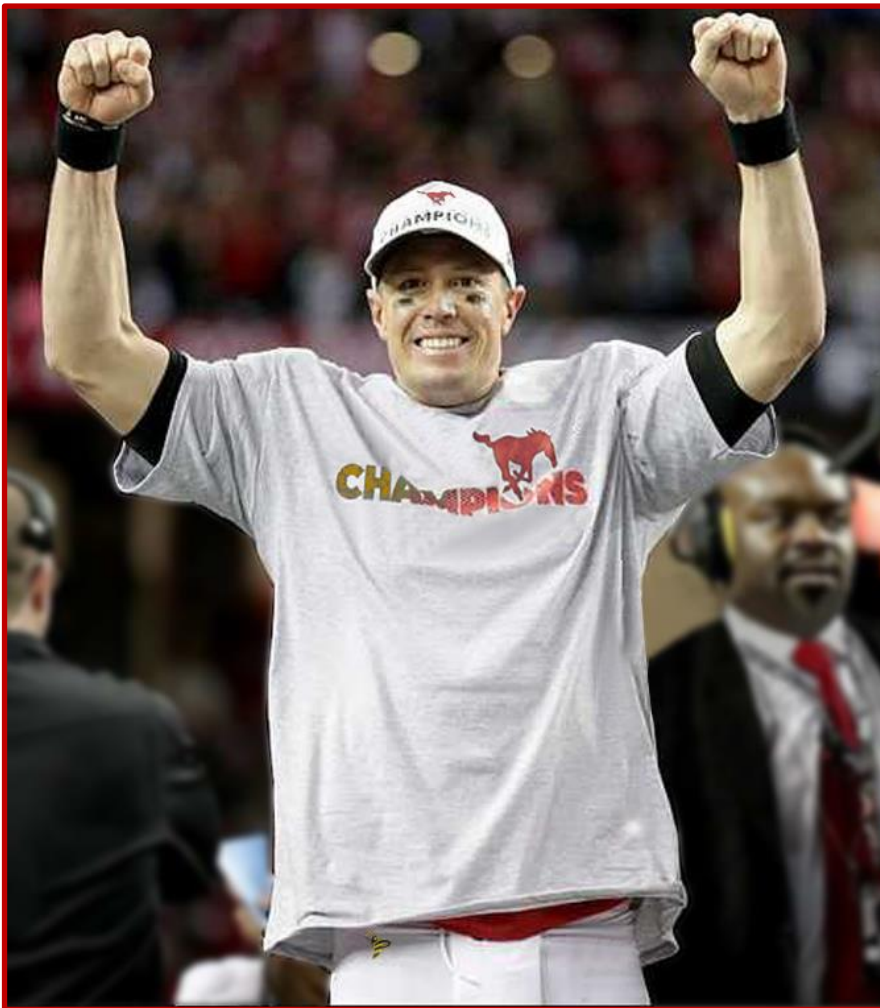
Danny Woodhead definitely gets some votes from the writers I think.”

The Mustangs added fullback, **Mike Tolbert** to their formation and split **Julian Edelman** out wide. It was a straight up running set. The Bombers had added a fourth defensive lineman on the previous play and were focusing on Woodhead all the way. Ryan turned and handed the ball to Tolbert, who covered it up with both hands as he followed a block by **Cody Whitehair** and fell forward for a 4-yard gain. Suggs turned to the referee and signalled timeout. There was now 2:43 left on the play clock.

The Mustangs lined up as they had on the previous play, but this time Woodhead got the call. He found room around the right tackle and squirted forward, reaching out toward the first down marker as **Bud Dupree** tripped him up.

“It looks like he may be short of the marker, Bill,” Winterall observed. “They are going to measure it.”

“Yeah, he may have come up short there, but that was a great effort,” Badden raved. “Right tackle Duane Brown gets a good block on Frank Clark there, which opens up a hole. You know, Phil, it looked like the Bombers were defending the pass on that play. Clark cuts inside, which is a pass



Aurora QB, **Matt Ryan** raises his arms in celebration after hearing, erroneously, that he had won GSXI M.V.P. The announcement was quickly corrected after a recount of AP writer's electronic ballots from Florida.

rush move, instead of holding his lane. That may have cost them the game. We'll see, this is a big play coming up."

The Bombers were forced to call their final timeout after the measurement, with 2:23 showing on the clock. The spot of the ball was a little more than one foot away from the line of gain. This prompted Bruxelles to bring in a heavy package consisting of five defensive linemen and four linebackers. The Mustangs remained in their two-tight end set. This was the play that would decide the game. Whitehair snapped the ball to Ryan, who thrust forward through a tight hole up the middle into the arms of **Muhammad Wilkerson** for a 1-yard gain and a first down.

"Ryan will keep it...and he's through the line...brought down by Wilkerson! The referee is signalling first down Mustangs!" Winterall announced with an air of finality. "That may have done it, Bill. The Bombers can't stop the clock."

"Yeah, they're out of timeouts, Phil," Badden concurred. "The Bombers, they are praying for a miracle now."

The clock ran down to the two-minute warning. As it did so, the Aurora fans at Camelot stood as one and waved their golden horsetails in frantic unison while chanting 'AU-RO-RAHHHHH! AU-RO-RAHHHH!' Their voices took over, obscuring the sound of a few diehard Samoans beating their war drums at a sluggish, almost funereal, pace. The Belgian nationals, those few who remained, stood in mournful silence. As **Bill Badden** had observed, it would indeed take a miracle now.

The end came swiftly after the commercial break. **Rashad Jennings** started it off with a dive up the middle for no gain; followed by a trap for a 2-yard loss by Tolbert,

CHAMPIONSHIP MVPS

I – 2007

LaDainian Tomlinson
Chino Convicts

II-2008

Will Witherspoon
Florida Dragons

III-2009

DeAngelo Williams
Florida Dragons

IV – 2010

Chris Johnson
Pickering Spartans

V – 2011

Josh Freeman
Los Angeles Knights

VI – 2012

Eli Manning
Markham North Stars

VII – 2013

Jacoby Jones
Charleswood Patriots

VIII – 2014

Brandon Boykin
Aurora Mustangs

IX – 2015

Lamar Miller
Charleswood Patriots

X – 2016

Antonio Brown
Twin Cities Triumph

XI – 2017

Danny Woodhead
Aurora Mustangs

The Honour Roll of EFL Champion MVPs. **Danny Woodhead** earns the honour of being #11 following a rare tight vote by the writers.

then a trap for a 4-yard gain by Woodhead. The fact that the Mustangs chose to hand the ball off three times instead of kneeling with **Matt Ryan** was the only suspenseful aspect about the final three snaps, allowing for the possibility of muffed exchange or a fumble.

“Woodhead is tackled at the 47...and that will be it, the Mustangs will let the clock run down,” Winterall announced as players from both sides started to flood onto the field. At the sound of the gun, fireworks exploded in alternate bursts of gold and red high above Camelot. Aurora fans erupted in joy. A triumphant **Matt Ryan** removed his helmet and waved it above his head.

“The Aurora Mustangs have finished off an historic second perfect season and are the 11th EFL Champions – their second EFL Championship in four years!” Winterall proclaimed. “Are we talking about one of the historic dynasties in professional sports here, Bill?”

“Yeah, I think so, Phil,” Badden replied as the camera angle switched to the view from the *Brylcreem Blimp*, high above the stadium. “I mean, many people may not realize that when we talk about a perfect season, we’re talking about a *whole* season – regular season and playoffs – without a single loss. That’s hard enough to do once, but twice is about two times as hard as that. It’s really tough to do in football too. Football’s a game where so many things can go wrong... getting it right 19 games out of 19 is just incredible. So, yeah, I think you have to put the Mustangs up there on the list of great football franchises.”

The opposing coaches, **Ken Main** and **Rich Liotta** shook hands at mid-field as smoke and confetti fell around them. **Matt Ryan** embraced **Marcus Mariota** as throngs of reporters and cameras gathered around. A mix of Bombers and Mustangs knelt in a circle in prayer near the Bombers’ sideline. The network sideline reporter, **Sarah Portugal**, glided with her cameraman over to **Danny Woodhead** once his announcement as *Gale Sayers MVP* became official. A night of revelry lay ahead for the victorious Mustangs and their fans, while the Bombers and their supporters would console themselves with the knowledge that they had made it farther than anyone had expected. The 11th Gale Sayers Game was now history.

POST GAME

The 11th EFL Championship was truly an historic game. The Aurora victory, coming off the Twin Cities victory over Sebastian in 2016, completed an unprecedented second consecutive perfect season for the league. It was also an epoch-making second perfect season for the **Rich Liotta** Mustangs, a feat that cements their claim to the mantle of “Dynasty.” During the four-year period from 2014 to the present, there has been no better team in the EFL. Football historians will likely debate which of the league’s two historic Dynasties – the Mustangs or the Dragons – deserves recognition as the “best of all time.” But those who occupy the Dragons’ camp will have to rely on their back-to-back championships and a hypothetical *what might have been* had the Dragons remained in Florida in order to support their position. Based on continuous dominance, the Mustangs are the objective choice to head the list of the all-time best EFL teams. In terms of the contest itself, the 11th Gale Sayers Game featured haunting echoes of the Mustangs’ first championship win. As in 2014, they entered the final unbeaten against a **Kenny Main**-coached team that had surprised the experts by winning their conference. As well, they entered the game as 7-point Vegas favourites and the media’s near-unanimous choice while their opponent enjoyed support from a broad base of fans cheering for the underdog and hoping for a good game. As in Gale Sayers VIII, Kenny Main’s troops battled hard, forcing the Mustangs to deviate from their established game plan, but in the end the underdogs could not overcome the disparity in talent or replicate the formula that had brought them to the Championship in the first place. There were differences, of course. Unlike in 2014, when the Cannibals had the Mustangs on the ropes early and led at halftime, there was little sense from the flow of play of an impending upset in GSXI. The Bombers’ notable accomplishment in the first half was fending off an early beatdown attempt by a Mustangs squad determined to score a first half knockout. Adding a late touchdown to pull within 4 points at half time was a fortuitous bonus – the surprise result of a play designed to achieve much less, and therefore unlikely to be repeated. The Bombers tried every offensive trick they knew, igniting the odd flash of success, but it was not enough to create sustained pressure on the Aurora defence – a group that defended the pass brilliantly throughout and did not allow the threat of **Leonard Fournette** to deflect it from its primary mission to keep **Marcus Mariota** away from his wide receivers. Few expected greatness from the Bombers’ defence against the league’s top-rated offence, but they were able to thwart the Mustangs’ deep passing game, allowing not a single downfield completion travelling more than 15 yards through the air. Had the Mustangs forced the issue, it might have been a different ball game. But the Mustangs’ offence game-plan was an unusually patient one, relying on short and medium passes and the irrepressible running of veteran **Danny Woodhead** to grind out three touchdown drives of 70 yards or more. The trademark Mustangs boldness was present, evidenced by running the identical play five times in a row on the opening scoring drive and an ambitious 4th & 12 attempt in the 2nd quarter, but the tactical decision to reign in the bombing campaign distinguished this offensive performance from the far less successful one in 2014, proving that **Rich Liotta** had learned something from that earlier encounter. GSXI will not join the ranks of classic championship games, even though it successfully maintained its competitive form and provided moments of drama. But it will certainly occupy a hallowed spot in the Hall of Fame, with counterparts, GSX, GSVIII and GSIII, as one of the league’s historic competitive landmarks as well as the official crowning of a Dynasty in Aurora.



Who was slick in the Championship?

“Brylcreem” THE EFL’S FIRST SPONSOR



Danny Woodhead
RB
Aurora Mustangs

14 Carries; 84 yards; 2 TDs.
Impossible to stop in the red zone.



Malik Jackson
DT
Aurora Mustangs

5 Tackles, 2 Sacks, 2 Hurries, 1 FF, 1 INT. Big plays at big moments.



Bruxelles 17 Aurora 24

	1	2	3	4	F
Bruxelles	0	7	3	7	17
Aurora	7	7	0	10	24



Complete

* Championship * 03-18-2018 Camelot Temp:25 Wind:0-5 None No Line MVP:Woodhead HF

1	6:34	Aurora	TD	Tolbert 3 run (Lutz) (10-70-4:01)	0-7
2	10:05	Aurora	TD	Woodhead 14 run (Lutz) (10-78-4:49)	0-14
2	0:23	Bruxelles	TD	Mariota 44 pass to Thompson (Catanzaro) (6-76-2:03)	7-14
3	5:48	Bruxelles	FG	Catanzaro 31 (13-78-7:21)	10-14
4	13:25	Aurora	TD	Woodhead 4 run (Lutz) (13-91-7:18)	10-21
4	7:03	Aurora	FG	Lutz 21 (10-40-4:00)	10-24
4	3:40	Bruxelles	TD	Mariota 2 pass to Kelce (Catanzaro) (14-75-3:23)	17-24

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Mariota	30	20	206	3	1	2	2	94.6
Foles	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	39.6
	32	20	206	3	1	2	2	88.8

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Ryan	33	22	284	0	0	0	4	93.5
	33	22	284	0	0	0	4	93.5

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Fournette	18	111	6.2	6	4	27	0
Mariota	5	58	11.6	3	3	26	0
Thompson	3	18	6.0	1	1	23	0
	26	187	7.2	10	8	27	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Woodhead	14	84	6.0	5	1	14	2
Jennings	2	11	5.5	1	1	11	0
Tolbert	5	11	2.2	1	0	4	1
Ryan	5	8	1.6	3	0	3	0
Drake	2	-2	-1.0	0	0	0	0
	28	112	4.0	10	2	14	3

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Fournette	7	0	9	61	8.7	1	1	27	0
Sanders	5	0	7	38	7.6	3	0	13	0
Thompson	3	0	3	44	14.7	1	1	44	1
Pryor Sr.	3	1	6	53	17.7	2	1	32	0
Kelce	2	3	7	10	5.0	2	0	8	1
	20	4	32	206	10.3	9	3	44	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Edelman	8	0	9	116	14.5	6	0	21	0
Miller	5	0	6	62	12.4	3	0	19	0
Adams	4	0	9	58	14.5	4	0	17	0
Rudolph	2	0	4	21	10.5	1	0	12	0
Jennings	1	0	1	6	6.0	0	0	6	0
Coates	1	0	1	18	18.0	0	0	18	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Mariota	1	1	0
	1	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
	0	0	0

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

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Drake	2	62	31.0	41	0
Coates	1	24	24.0	24	0
	3	86	28.7	41	0

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

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Edelman	1	0	7	7.0	7	0
	1	0	7	7.0	7	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Catanzaro	1-2	31	2-2	5

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Lutz	1-1	21	3-3	6

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
McAfee	2	105	52.5	0	2	0	54

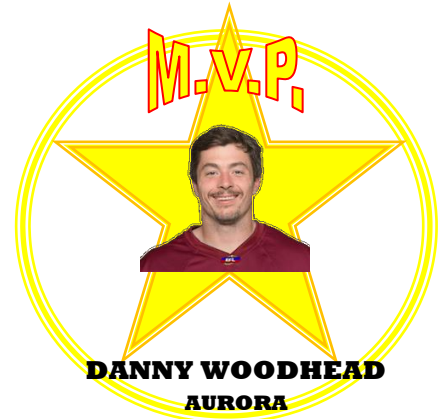
Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Koch	2	96	48.0	0	1	0	55

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
McAfee	2	105	52.5	0	2	0	54

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Koch	2	96	48.0	0	1	0	55

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Davis	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Dupree	6	1	0	2	0	0	0-0
Shaw	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Ogbah	4	3	1	0	0	0	0-0
Gipson	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Clark	4	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Whitehead	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Gaines	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wilkerson	3	0	1	0	2	0	0-0
Smith,H	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Verrett	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jones,C	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Suggs	1	0	2	0	3	0	0-0
Smith,P	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Walker,D	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Burns	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Robinson	1	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Wilson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Brothers	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	56	4	8	3	6	0	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Bowman	10	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson	5	2	0	0	2	1	1-0
Young	5	0	0	1	1	0	0-0
Norman	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
McCourty	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Thomas,E	3	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Peterson	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thompson,S	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Orr	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Reddick	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Avril	1	0	0	0	2	0	0-0
Watt	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Swearinger	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Janis	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Autry	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Dansby	1	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Thomas,M	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	48	2	4	4	6	1	1-0



The 'Secret Weapon' in a total team effort. 2 TD runs earns him an MVP.

	Bruxelles	Aurora
First Downs	22	25
Rushes	26-187	28-112
Passes	32-20-206	33-22-284
Sacked	2-22	4-37
Fumble	1	0
Penalties	11-85	5-47
Turnovers	1	0
Missed Tackles	2	15
Dropped Passes	4	1
Bad Passes	2	1
Passes 25+	3	0
Runs 10+	8	2
Blitzes	53	31
Time	29:04	30:56
Third Down	4-10	4-11
Fourth Down	1-2	2-3
Red Att/Td/Fg	2/1/1	5/3/1
Net Offense	371	359



AT THE EFL CHAMPIONSHIP With Spats McChad

AVALON – What you are about to read is the most remarkable piece of journalism I have ever produced. “Remarkable” may not be a strong enough adjective actually. But I will leave it to you, my faithful readers, to amplify the tribute, if you see fit, after digesting what, for me, is a rather smallish article* but which, nonetheless, carries massive implications for our common view of space, time and reality itself. It is likely that most of you will simply not believe me. I won’t blame you for it. I can hardly believe it myself. Nevertheless, every word of it is true. And the fact that the ‘Fake News’ Mainstream Media will not utter a peep about it simply bolsters my case. It also increases the likelihood that I will never work in mainstream journalism again – relegated to the colourful yet disparaged ranks of the lunatic fringe of “conspiracy theory” journalism. This is an outcome I might have tried to avoid two years ago, prior to the success of *Fool*. But since I don’t need a paycheque from the Syndicate to survive, I might as well investigate things and reveal what I see, the way that old school journalists did in the age of black & white. You may dispute my claims and I respect that. But do a little research of your own – if you have the inclination and the time – before dismissing my essay in its entirety. And if you don’t have the time nor the inclination, keep faith that Spats would never steer you wrong.

WHERE ART THOU AVALON?

The first sign that led me to suspect something was strange about the home of the York Excaliburs appeared when I attempted to gather some basic information about the place. It is my practice to do light research on destinations I have never visited before prior to visiting them then supplement that research with on-the-ground experiences in order to add a robust local flavour to my articles. I had never been to York and, to my private shame, did not know where it was. I was under the vague impression that York was an urban centre and that Avalon – the locale where the stadium was located – was a quaint suburb or neighbouring community. I soon discovered that I was wrong. But getting a clearer picture of what was “right” was oddly difficult.

In addition to being an historical city in England, York is the original name for the City of Toronto and the name of a vast region of municipalities bordering Toronto’s northern edge. Avalon was not to be found in either of those Ontario locales, although its relative proximity to York Region gave the team its name and most of its fans. Those fans hailed from mid-size urban centres such as Newmarket and multitudinous small communities like Georgina. But what about Avalon? Where was it, *exactly*, and what kind of community was it? Finding out from the internet proved to be an uncompromising challenge.

Google did not provide its usual instant gratification. The first return produced an extensive page detailing an island in Arthurian legend. A disambiguation search revealed hundreds of other possible “Avalons,” some of them places, but most of them something else. None of these returns led me directly to the Avalon that, supposedly, was home to the York Excaliburs. Similarly, a search of “Camelot” yielded a primary Wikipedia return on the castle fortress of King Arthur. A disambiguation search, however, did return “Camelot” – Sports Stadium, home of the Elite Football League’s York Excaliburs and the Arthurian Knights Rugby Team of the Legends Sports Circuit. The rather bare page, which included a photo (see next page), gave the capacity of the stadium as *‘feala busend’* and its location as *Avallen*. A search of Google Earth, however, yielded absolutely nothing on this specific location. I would eventually discover – by searching on the York Excaliburs’ homepage – that the stadium was situated somewhere on Lake Simcoe in the area of Cook’s Bay. But even this bare fact was shrouded in ambiguity. The Excaliburs team homepage listed the “address” for the stadium simply as ‘Avalon,’ with directions under ‘Find Us’ leading the traveller along common routes to a place called Sword Point where one was instructed to “wait for the ferry.”

* *Editor’s Note:* This claim is simply false. Far from being a “smallish” article, this piece by **Spats McChad** exceeds by many thousands of words the maximum 5,000-word limit imposed on him for this edition of the EFL Newsletter. Not only is it too long for publication, the article contains an inappropriately high proportion of fictional content relative to factual content and therefore cannot be classified as journalism. The publisher has consented to publishing the first 5,000 words of this essay only. The remainder of the article may be acquired directly from the writer.

-Alfred Finchley, Editor.



Camelot, the “football fortress” home of the EFL’s York Excaliburs and site of the 11th Gale Sayers Game, is situated on the top of a hill and overlooks the lush green fields of the enigmatic island of Avalon. Limited parking and a truly “medieval” road network make travel to this destination as adventurous as watching the Excaliburs play football.

My official primary sources exhausted I turned to scouring travel reviews and media accounts by the likes of - <gulp> - **Peter Prince** and **Will Simons**, as well as local writers, such as **Merlin the Magician** of the *Round Table Chronicle*, to glean what I could from the accounts of individual visitors and locals with knowledge of the area. After digesting what I could find, I formed the impression that the home of the Excaliburs was not a town, but an elaborate medieval theme park – like *Medieval Times* on steroids – of uncertain origin, plopped in the middle of a tranquil northern, rural, beach community that seemed to possess very limited means to support such an Arthurian “Disney World,” never mind a professional football franchise.

Officially, the Excaliburs were owned by a consortium, not surprisingly named the Round Table, of which Head Coach and GM, **Jay Hammond**, was a member. Hammond was the only publicly named shareholder and, for all intents and purposes, he was the ruddy face of the corporate franchise, along with ‘Knight in Shining Armour’ quarterback, **Tom Brady**. Yet Hammond’s public profile prior to assuming operational control of the Excaliburs was discreet to say the least; and the source of his wealth – presumably enough to stake a claim in a professional football team – uncertain at best. My attempts to reach Hammond, through the team’s corporate head office, to set up an interview were ignored.

My inability to develop more than a thumbnail sketch of York and its owner made me exceptionally curious and eager to get on a plane to Canada to engage in some old-world, on-the-ground sleuthing. I was determined to arrive well in advance, prior to Media Week, to snoop around the place and solve the mystery.

Of course, it was quite possible that there was no “mystery” to be solved. Perhaps the denizens of York and the team did not feel compelled to update Wikipedia or put more than a bare bones effort into their team’s home page. It true, that would be strange in this day and age. It could be that Hammond was simply a private type of guy. He certainly did not look very comfortable giving post-game interviews and had a penchant for telling reporters to “*f&*k off*” when they asked tough questions. But my gut told me different. The Excaliburs, after all, would not be the first team to suddenly appear on the EFL scene under enigmatic circumstances.

SWORD POINT

I secured my ticket to the game and Press Card from the Syndicate but waived the accommodation arrangements. They had booked a block of rooms for freelancers at the Bradford Motel, the cheapest place available within a 20-mile radius of the general vicinity of the stadium. I did not want a repeat of my Knights Inn experience in Canton last year and I wanted to be closer to the action. Since I had the personal means to upgrade I decided to splurge and book a room at the Pendragon Palace at Sword Point – a five-star facility newly built to accommodate the increasing number of football tourists and families looking to explore the attractions of the medieval theme park on the island of Avalon. This was situated somewhere on Lake Simcoe but, I would later learn, curiously not visible from its

shores.

My flight was comfortable and uneventful; the vehicular traffic in Toronto was another matter entirely.

I had not visited the city since Durham had hosted the 2010 Championship. This despite no less than six Greater Toronto Area teams and the recent addition of the Wolverines in the city's center. I was amazed and more than a little envious that this sprawling area of close to seven million people was able to support – and support well – that many pro football franchises, while fans in the Big Apple were forced to turn south to Stone Pony Shore in New Jersey to find a pro football venue to call home. The Wrecking Balls were a disaster in so many ways, but they were all we had. It was a sad situation and I think this fact of football life had grated on me enough to have kept me away from Great White North out of sheer spite.

It took me nearly 90 minutes by cab to travel 55 miles via the jam-packed Highway 401 to the place called Sword Point – the jumping off point for everything Excaliburs. As the journey neared its end – via a straight, unadorned country road, pretentiously named Highway 8 – I worried that the taxi driver had brought me to the wrong place, as it seemed beyond belief that a professional football franchise, one of the “elite 24” that formed the core of the world's football talent pool, would be located in such a pastoral setting. The lack of people and the prevalence of farmer's fields was somewhat reminiscent of Cow County, home of the Corn Kings. But in Cow County there was Baxter City, Cowtown proper, and a myriad of small towns and villages along the main highway to give the impression of population. Here, on the edge of Lake Simcoe, north of a non-descript backwater named Keswick, it seemed impossible that football could thrive in such a setting.

The taxi turned left onto a country sideroad and we passed a neglected-looking business called ‘Georgina Rent-All.’ I finally broke my tense silence and asked the cab driver if we were on the right road to Sword Point, home of the Excaliburs.

“The football team?” he asked in a thick, East Indian-sounding accent. Before I could clarify, he continued: “Yes, this is the way to the stadium. It is the quickest way, I promise. No game today so it take small time to get here.”

I still wasn't convinced, but what choice did I have? I could not demand to be let off in the middle of nowhere. Eventually we reached an intersection that brought us onto Metro Road. This is where I saw the first signs that more than farm traffic needed to be accommodated. Metro Road was wider, well-kept and led to an off-ramp called Excalibur Parkway, an elevated divided highway that arched over a small beachfront community dotted by large homes. A sign read: ‘Ferry to Stadium 5 km.’ I started to relax in the knowledge that we were on the right path. But my curiosity began to build.

I could see the shape of something in the distance that looked like a destination. A grand, shining, ghost white edifice framed by emerald-gilded towers visible through the spruce and pine trees that lined the roadway. Its spires jutted above the foliage as we got closer, tops adorned with triangular pennants flapping gently in the breeze.

“You see – the hotel is there. It is nice,” the taxi driver said, evidently eager to alleviate any concerns I might have had that he was taking me for a ride to bump up the fare.

Indeed, Pendragon Palace was very nice; more impressive in real-life than in the photos I had perused on the web – and I had been impressed by those. The most obvious contrast was in its size – much larger than I had expected, an impression amplified by the lack of anything of significance around it. It stood out in way that an old medieval castle might have in a lush green English countryside sparsely dotted by cattle and thatched farm houses; except here the green was replaced by the grey asphalt of a seemingly endless parking lot sprawling around the outer edge of a narrow moat surrounding the hotel, while the cattle were cars and SUVs. A two-lane service road stretched along the narrow peninsula that knifed out into the lake and ended at a dock, where a fleet of green and white ferry boats rested. That, I assumed, was Sword Point. A large street sign read ‘Sword Point Ferry Ahead 500 m.’

No doubt about it, I was in Excalibur Land. But the reality made it more surreal, since it looked decidedly out of place. I was no closer to understanding how a pro football team came to be *here*, in a place that appeared to be one step away from nowhere. I pondered the as yet unanswerable questions as my taxi drove across the moat, entered a roundabout and exited at the hotel entrance gate. The car came to a stop. The trunk popped, the locks disengaged and my door opened. A bellhop wearing a bright green tunic with shiny silver buttons and a floppy feathered hat stood at the ready. As I exited the cab, he directed me toward the front doors.

“This way m'Lord,” he said in a crisp voice. Another bellhop, more modestly dressed in a brown jerkin and wearing what looked like a sock on his head, followed with my luggage already stacked on a wheeled trolley cart.

Arriving on a Saturday afternoon, before the official opening of the league's Gale Sayers Week events, had its advantages. There were few guests in the hotel, apart from the networks' technical crews, some mid-level league officials, the Managers of Operations for the Mustangs and Bombers and their support staff. The relative emptiness breathed an eerie stillness into the atmosphere, allowing one to contemplate the subtle, ethereal tinkle of chimes and trilling of flutes playing in the background over hidden speakers. It was like I had arrived at a concert six-hours before showtime.

The front desk clerk was dressed in wizard's garb. This would have been amusing, except that his countenance was grave and his gaze penetrating. His voice was deep, soft and formal. He looked like he might actually be a wizard, annoyed that he had been reduced to working in a hotel, but determined to maintain his dignity. His name tag read ‘MENW.’ What kind of a name was that? I thought. Or were they initials? I felt I should not ask.

The bellhop was similarly formal, but less grave. He adopted a thin and rigid smile, in-between clipped and brisk sentences. I told him to call me Spats, but he kept calling me “*m'Lord*.”

He escorted me to the elevator and up to my room, with the other bellhop pushing my luggage in tow, while filling me in on the amenities of the hotel. There were three swimming pools; two gyms; a spa; a movie theatre; a selection of conference rooms; complimentary hi-speed internet, 15-minute room service, etc. The ground floor featured the Dragon's Lair – a bar; Merlin's Morning Magic Café – a coffee shop; and the Crystal Ball – a magazine and souvenir shop. On the second floor was Uther's if I was interested in a fine dining experience. Outside the hotel, the Sword & Stone Pub down the road was the only destination of interest in the area, apart from Camelot, of course.

My room was very nice. I had ordered a 'Knight's' lodging – in the middle of the price range. I was suitably impressed. I suppose if I had gone for 'Wizard' or 'King' I might have been gobsmacked. I offered my bellhop a Canadian \$20 bill for his assistance, a tip at the top end of my generosity scale. I found it refreshing that he had not fawned over me obsequiously, as many staff in high end hotels are prone to do. To my surprise, he respectfully refused my offering, explaining that accepting tips was against hotel policy. When I slyly remarked that I wouldn't tell anyone he looked mildly offended, but forced a smile, thanked me for the offer, and turned on his heel and went out the door. *Well, that's a first*, I thought.

After the flight and the long drive from Toronto I felt the need to clean up. I had a shower, put on my finest mock neck sweater and designer slacks, and went out to explore the hotel. I was on a reconnaissance mission. In spite of its size, it did not take me long to check out all of the services and facilities. The hotel was geared to packing in as many football fans as possible, which meant lots of guest rooms and only the necessary and standard amenities. The movie theatre was unusual, but I later learned that it doubled as a movie theatre for the local community.

Eventually, I found my way to the bar, the Dragon's Lair, a dimly lit catacomb of semi-private rooms with lots of small fireplaces and a glittering central bar with faux-gold filigree and jewel-encrusted fixtures. Soft techno-style music pulsed inconspicuously in the background. I walked around, looking for a good place to sit. The place was not very busy, just a few patrons clustered in small groups here and there. I did not feel like socializing, but since I was on a fact-finding mission, I decided to take a spot at the corner of the bar, sufficiently distant from the next customer to make striking up a conversation difficult but giving me strategic access to the bartender, who would have to pass me on his way to and from serving drinks to the dozen-or-so bar flies that occupied the near half of the bar. I put on a pensive scowl and poured over the drink menu.

The bartender was dressed like a cross between a pirate and a medieval peasant. His puffy white shirt billowed out at the sleeves but was pressed close to his frame by a tightly-laced leather jerkin. He wore a floppy hat with a burgundy feather that brushed up against the rims of the inverted wine glasses hanging from the stemware rack above his head. His moustache was long and curled and his goatee sharpened to a menacing point. He spoke clearly, but with an accent that I could not place.

"What's your pleasure, kind sir?" he asked.

"What do you have on tap?" I asked in turn. Yes, I had read the drink menu and, yes, I had scanned the spigots behind the bar. But I often ask this question anyway, in case the bar has new offerings not on the menu and to gauge the quality of my server.

He seemed to sense that I was a veteran bar fly and was sizing him up. He rattled off about a dozen brands in a clear, confident and brisk cadence, adding the occasional remark about the beer he had just named. He was, in turn, sizing me up. Would I be able to absorb the verbal menu in the limited time allotted to me and make an intelligent, stylish choice?

I keyed in on the brands I had not heard of before, which happened to be most of them. While this made picking one more challenging, my server made it a little easier by noting something particular about most of the obscure ones. I filtered those out and pegged one I did not recognize that had been named without an accompanying tasting note; *Lancelot Lager*.

"Ah yes, one of our best-selling local microbrews," he smiled, a touch too broadly. I realized in that instant that I had fallen into his trap. "It's a German Pilsner styled lager, slightly hoppy but crisp and lighter bodied. Would you like to try a sample?"

This guy is good, I thought. I could not backtrack now. "Yes, certainly," I replied, with feigned enthusiasm. I was, of course, interested in trying something new, but I was smarting about having been outmanoeuvred into "choosing" what was obviously the house lager. Perhaps sensing that he had drawn first blood, he made up for it by pouring me a generous sample.

It was a good beer – hoppy like a pilsner, but lighter-bodied and very quenchable. I liked it and it was probably very obvious to the bartender that I did. I really had no choice but to order it now and concede one to the bartender. "This is quite good and exactly what I was looking for to start the night," I declared boldly to save face and make it appear that it was my choice, not his.

He knew better but allowed me my dignity by replying, "excellent choice, sir." He glided to the tap and started to pour. I scanned the bar and the surrounding room with the eye of a writer looking for a story. There is always a story somewhere in a bar; it is just a matter of finding the one your readers will be interested in. It being Day One of my sojourn in York, I did not need to find a story right now, but it did not hurt to try. Unfortunately, a preliminary perusal of the clientele was not promising. The vast majority of the patrons looked to be low-level team or media employees and behaved as if they had to get up early for work. There were a few fans, of course, but fans who aren't actively involved in watching a game and behaving like maniacs aren't usually very interesting.

After two *Lancelots* and a plate of seasoned hard-boiled eggs served with a plum garnish – medieval-style Hartes according to the menu – I thought I had found my "story" for the night. He was a sturdily-built bald guy with black horn-rimmed glasses and a tight-fitting black t-shirt with the Belgian flag on the front. He possessed a strong voice that was clearly audible over the music and ambient noise, enhanced in its resonance by a thick and strange accent that sounded part English, part German, part horking phlegm. He had captivated a non-descript group of patrons on the other side of the bar with his exorbitantly strong opinions about the sport of

cycling. I could only hear his side of the conversation. Nevertheless, it was clear that whatever was being said back to him was not budging his opinion. I decided to make my move.

“You’re wasting your breath, my good man,” I declared boldly as I strode over to the other side of the bar and knifed toward an open stool cross corner from where the boisterous Belgian was extolling the merits of cycling.

He turned his head to face me, a startled look on his face that quickly turned to curiosity. “I think I *do*, really, but why do you say so?” He asked.

“North America is in love with the car, not the bicycle,” I replied. “We rode bicycles as children only because we couldn’t drive cars. 90% of North Americans don’t know who Eddie Merckx is!”

This last sentence got his attention but appeared to have possibly offended him. He was a sturdy-looking fellow and the reddening of his complexion at the suggestion of **Eddie Merckx**’ irrelevance in America put me on guard against a physical assault. But suddenly he broke out in a big grin and he began to laugh loudly.

“You are right, of course!” he chortled. “The ignorance of the average American is huge! Look at their President!”

The fact that we were in Canada did not deter him from taking a jab at **Donald Trump** early in the conversation. Since the last election it had become a social convention, when people met for the first time, to determine which side of the Trump-Clinton divide the other stood on. The matter had to be settled early, for it would determine whether or not the other person was worth talking to. I had found out the hard way that my official position of neutrality was untenable, for there was no middle ground for either side. The divide in American society had become that severe.

“Ah yes, but he is not typical of all Americans, just the angry ones,” I replied, implying a socially-acceptable distaste for The Donald while not committing to any position regarding whether those Angry Americans had a right to be angry or not. This Belgian fellow, like most Europeans presumably, viewed Trump with a mixture of fear and loathing. Why muddy the waters with a lengthy discourse on how the matter of Trump’s election was extremely complicated and not necessarily illogical? Some day, tomes will be written about the Trump Presidency by scholars who will, through the passage of time, come to a consensus on its historical implications and impact. But living in the moment blinds most of us to the larger forces at work. Under no circumstances, however, did I want this encounter to devolve into a political discussion, so I moved on to formalities before he could respond:

“I’m Spats,” I said, offering my hand. “I’m a freelance sports writer here to cover the Gale Sayers Game.”

My knowledge of a Belgian sports cycling legend and apparent distaste for the current President of the United States had lowered his guard. He extended his hand in turn and introduced himself.

“I’m Fart,” he replied, “Fart von wahlnyaal<~!*>dawl,” he continued, in case he might be confused with some other Fart.

His pronunciation of his last name was gibberish to me, but the first name prompted a hazy recollection. I had heard that name before. It had made me laugh once, as much as I struggled to keep from laughing at it now.

“I write about the Bombers for the *Brussels Times*,” he continued.

Of course! I thought. **Faart von Wijnendaele** – the pro-Flemish Nationalist who had followed in his great uncle, **Karel von Wijnendaele**’s footsteps and had made a career of covering Belgian sports cycling and the Tours of Flanders. Faart was a prominent Belgian sports writer and one of the strongest local promoters of the American football game in Bruxelles.

As might be expected, when two beer enthusiasts who share a common interest and profession get together in a hotel bar, Faart and I carried on drinking and talking late into the night as, one-by-one, the bar flies around us retired to their hotel rooms. Most of them had to work early on Sunday since the players and the rest of the media were due to arrive then. But many in the room seemed, as well, to lack the constitution to endure the steady verbal barrage of Faart debating loudly with himself over who was the best Belgian sports cyclist of all time and cringed at his repeated challenges to name a sport that was more enthralling and dramatic than professional cycling. They had taken up his challenge initially, only to find themselves shouted down and rudely interrupted. It was pointless to argue with him about cycling. But his opinions about the Bombers, **Ken Main** and American football were quite fascinating.

“Belgium needs a violent team sport!” he declared, reaching for another *Shock Top*, a local orange-flavoured *Weiss* beer. He had ordered us three beers each for last call and was now on his second of those. “Why, you say? Cycling is a test of endurance for the individual.” He dragged out the word “*in-di-vi-du-al*,” enunciating each syllable as if revealing a great and elusive truth. “There is no stronger individual than a Belgian cyclist from Flanders. But, alas, Belgians are not strong team players. We suffer from too close exposure to the French. The French are cowards and very sneaky. They have – how you say – deleted our culture.”

“Diluted, you mean?” I offered.

“Yes, *diluted!*” he boomed. “Our national pride is wounded by rich and powerful Frenchmen pushing their language and effeminate ways on us. I think having American football in Belgium gives an opportunity for the Flemish nation to fight back. I feel Ken Main knows what it is like for us. He comes from a small island that is under rule of America, but not really part of America. That is why, when he first came here, he spoke to us in Dutch first, before French. He did not speak well, but that was not the point. It was a signal to us that he understood and he was telling us that he was bringing us the tools to regain our Flemish nation.”

I realized suddenly Faart was very drunk. I too had had my share, but he had had at least a three-hour head start on me. He was now a florid faced, glassy-eyed mess who held me prisoner with his unwavering gaze and bombastic oratory.

“American football is built on violence, like American culture. It is very militaristic! American football is War! The coach is

the general; the quarterback, the captain,” he seemed proud of his military analogy. He smiled broadly and took a swallow of beer, an invitation for me to say something.

“I hadn’t looked at it that way, but I can see your point,” I said, giving him the verbal pat on the head he was looking for. He grinned, evidently pleased with himself, and continued.

“Ken Main brought us a winner in war!” he declared. “And with the coming victory of the Bombers over the Mustangs, the mission to restore Flanders to its former greatness will begin!”

I did not know enough about Belgian history to know if Flanders had ever been particularly great. I struggled to think of something noteworthy about Belgium but could only think of chocolate, beer and frites. I vaguely recalled reading that Nazi Germany had rolled through Belgium without much effort in order to break the Maginot Line in France at the start of WWII. I decided not to add potential fuel to the conversation by mentioning any of this and simply shook my head in agreement.

“You are a good man, Spats!” Faart reached out and clapped my shoulder. “*Proost!*” he said in Dutch and raised his glass.

A PLACE OUT OF PLACE

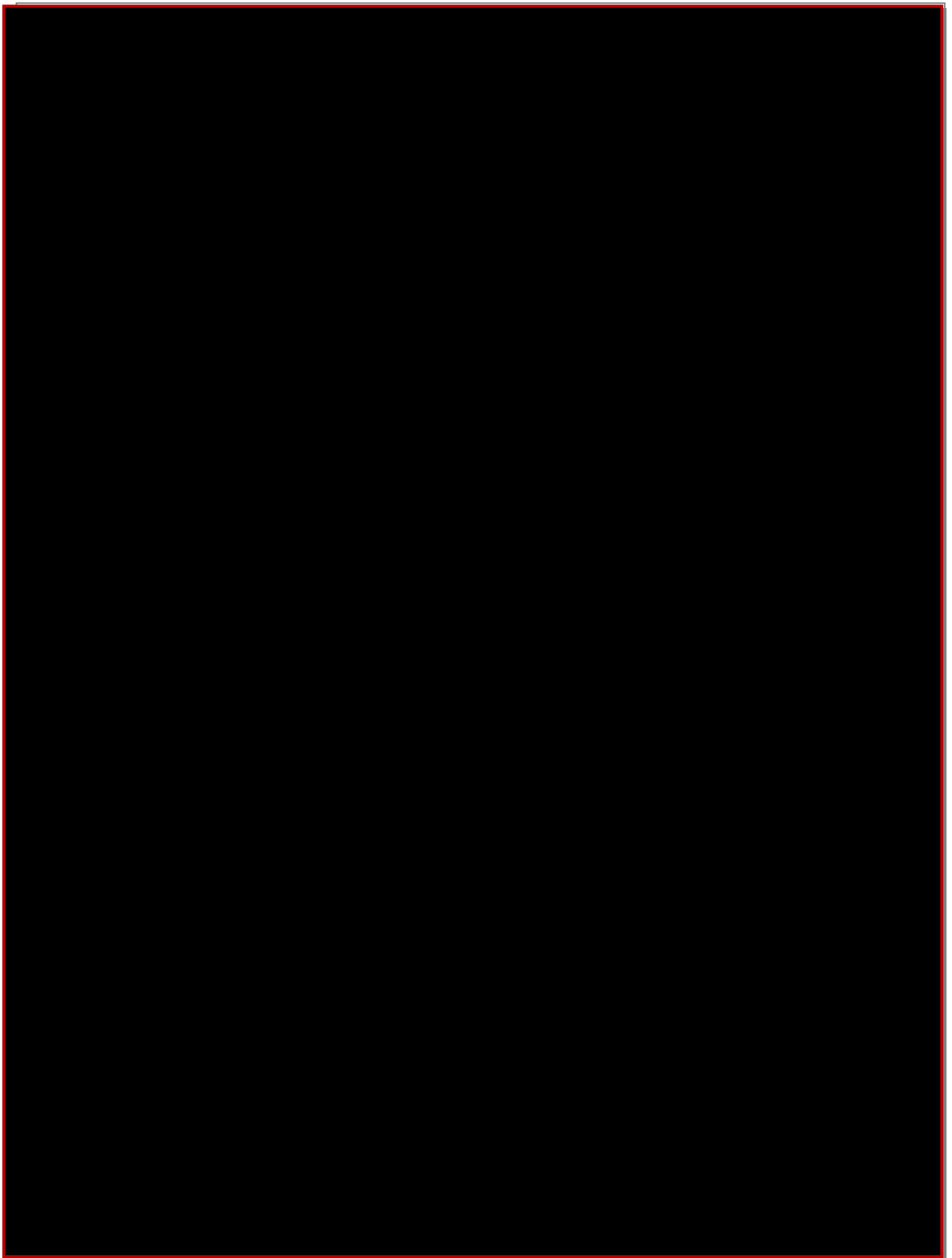
I imagined that the Keswick/Georgina area and the historic lakeshore communities of the South Lake Simcoe shoreline would make an idyllic landscape in the summer and fall months. But in the dead of a cold Ontario winter it looked desolate. Apart from

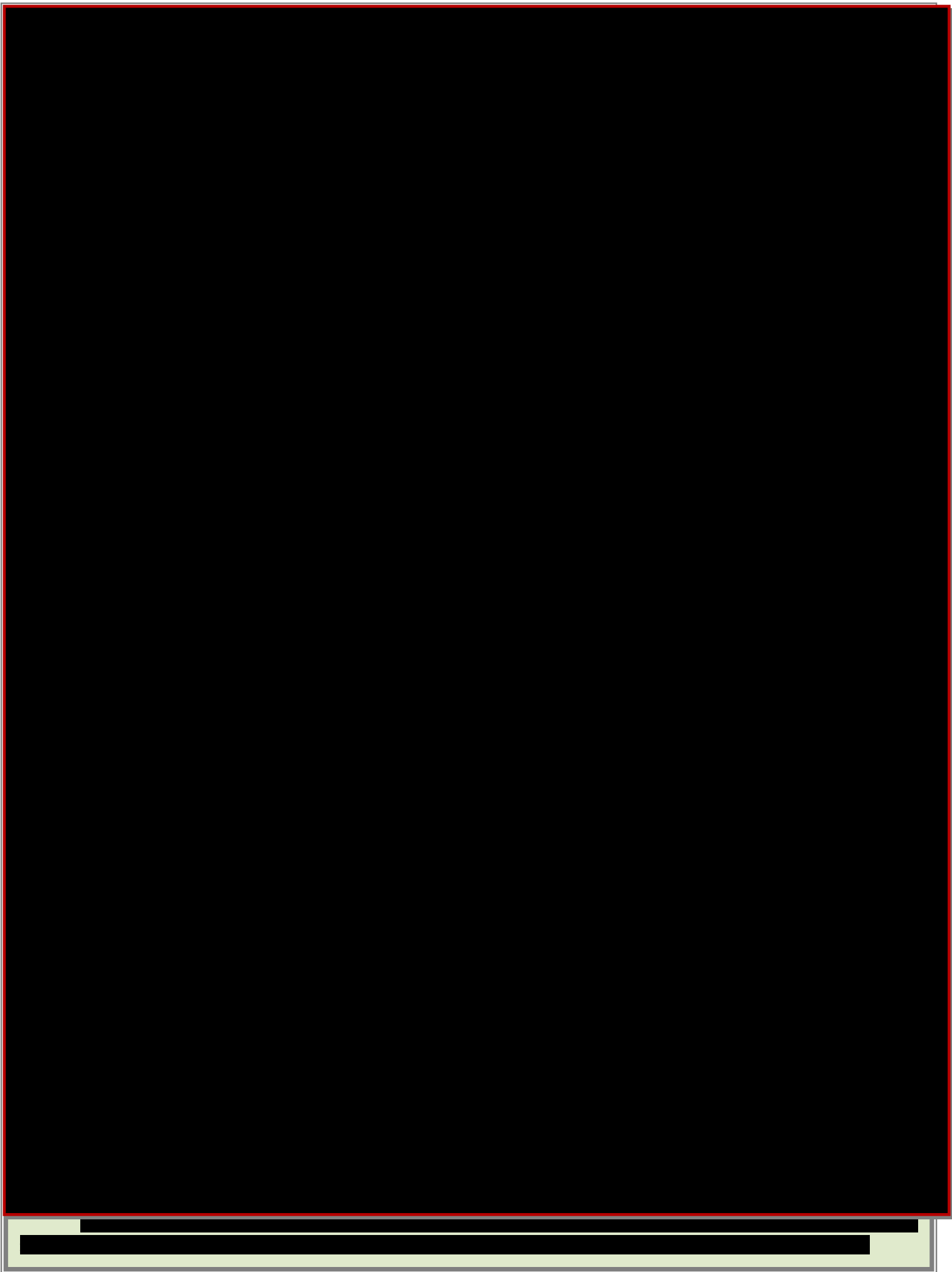
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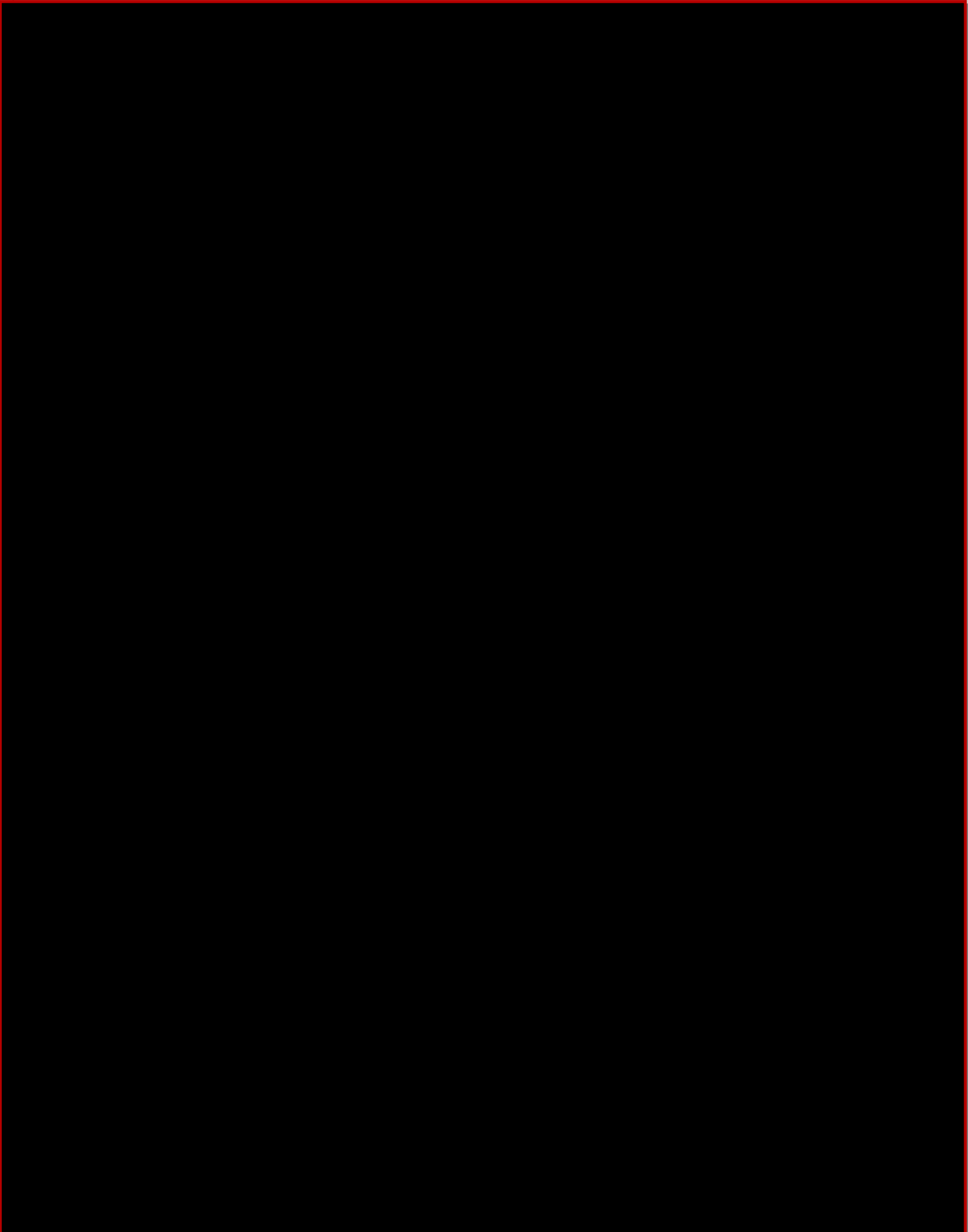
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[BECOME A PATRON](#)

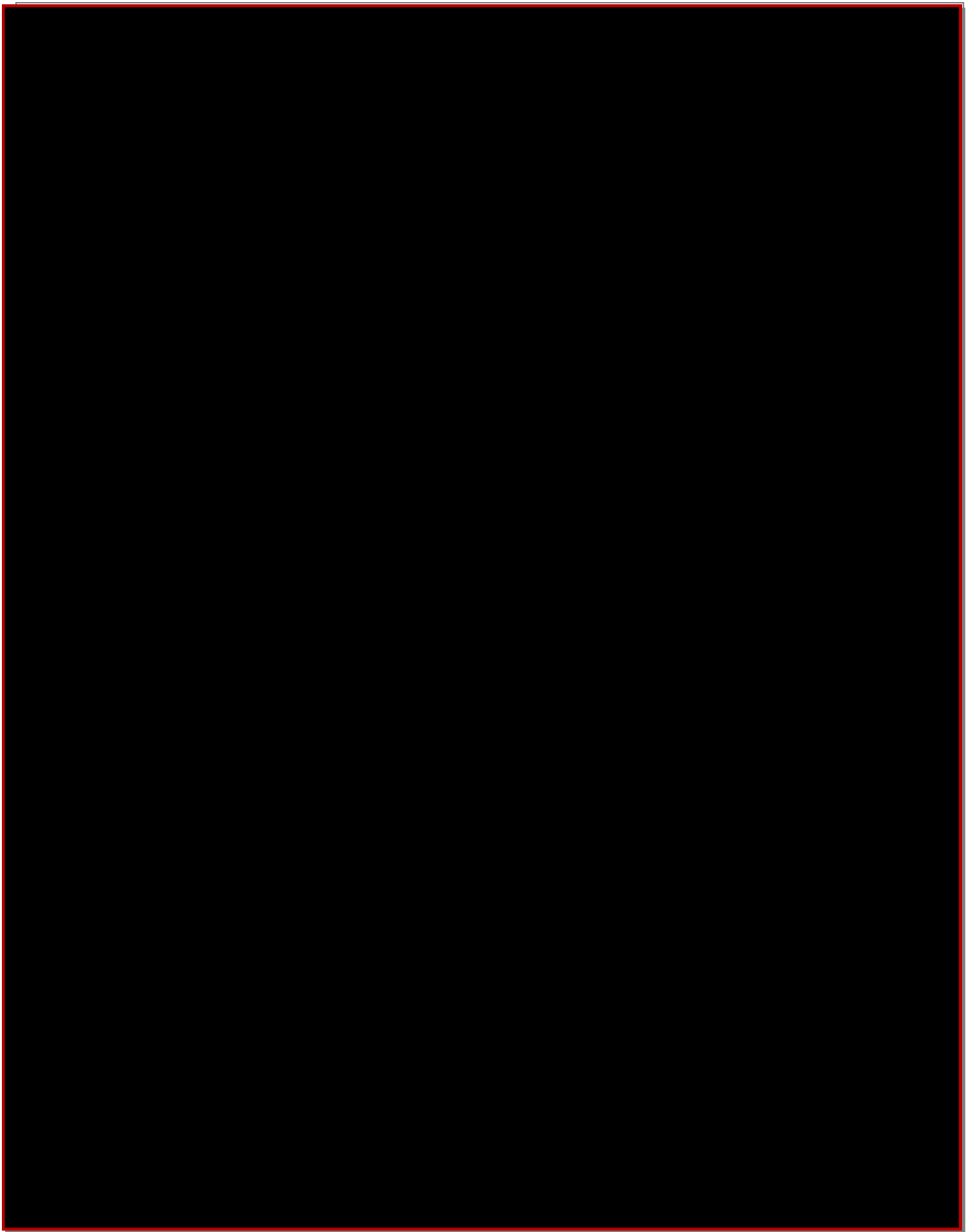
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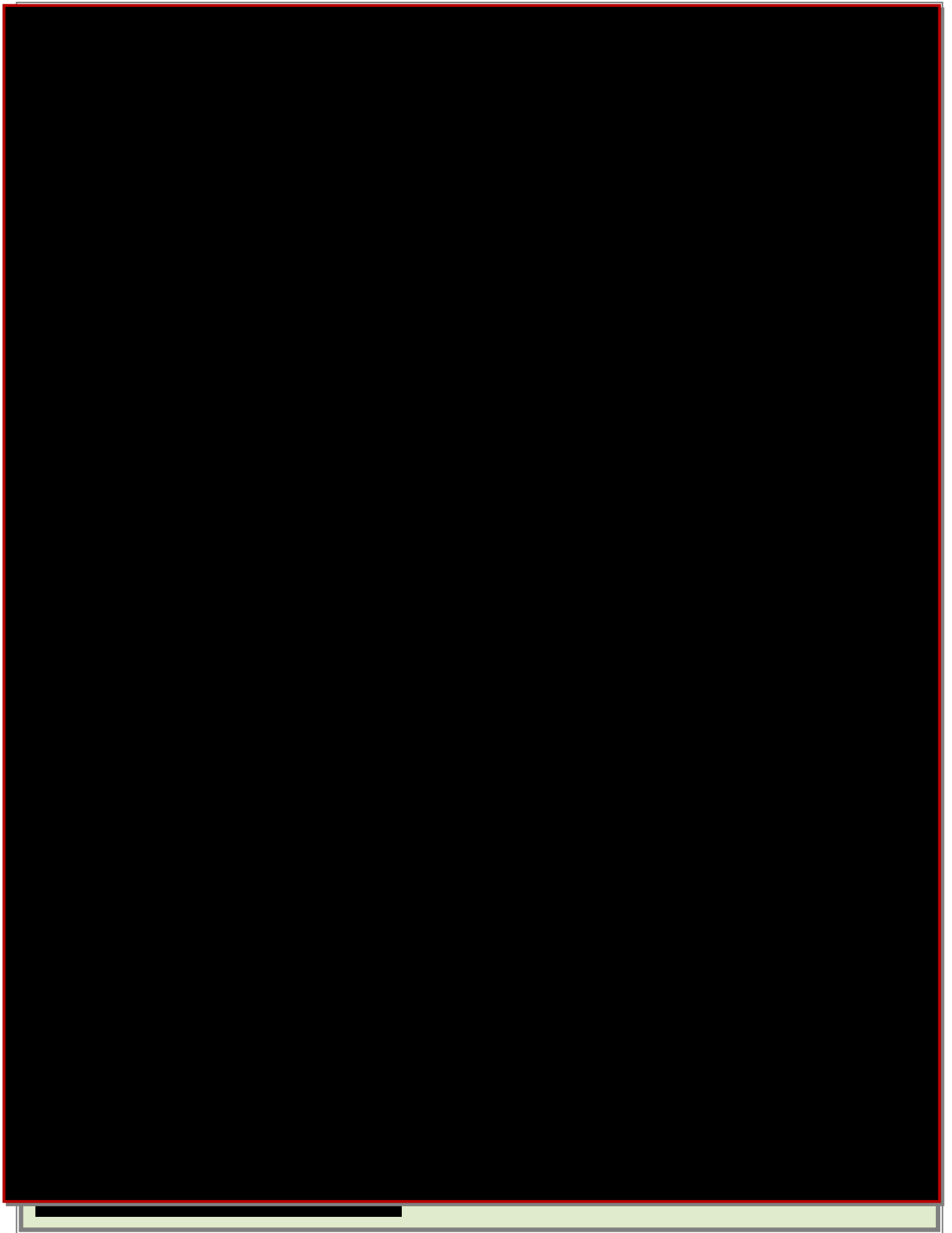


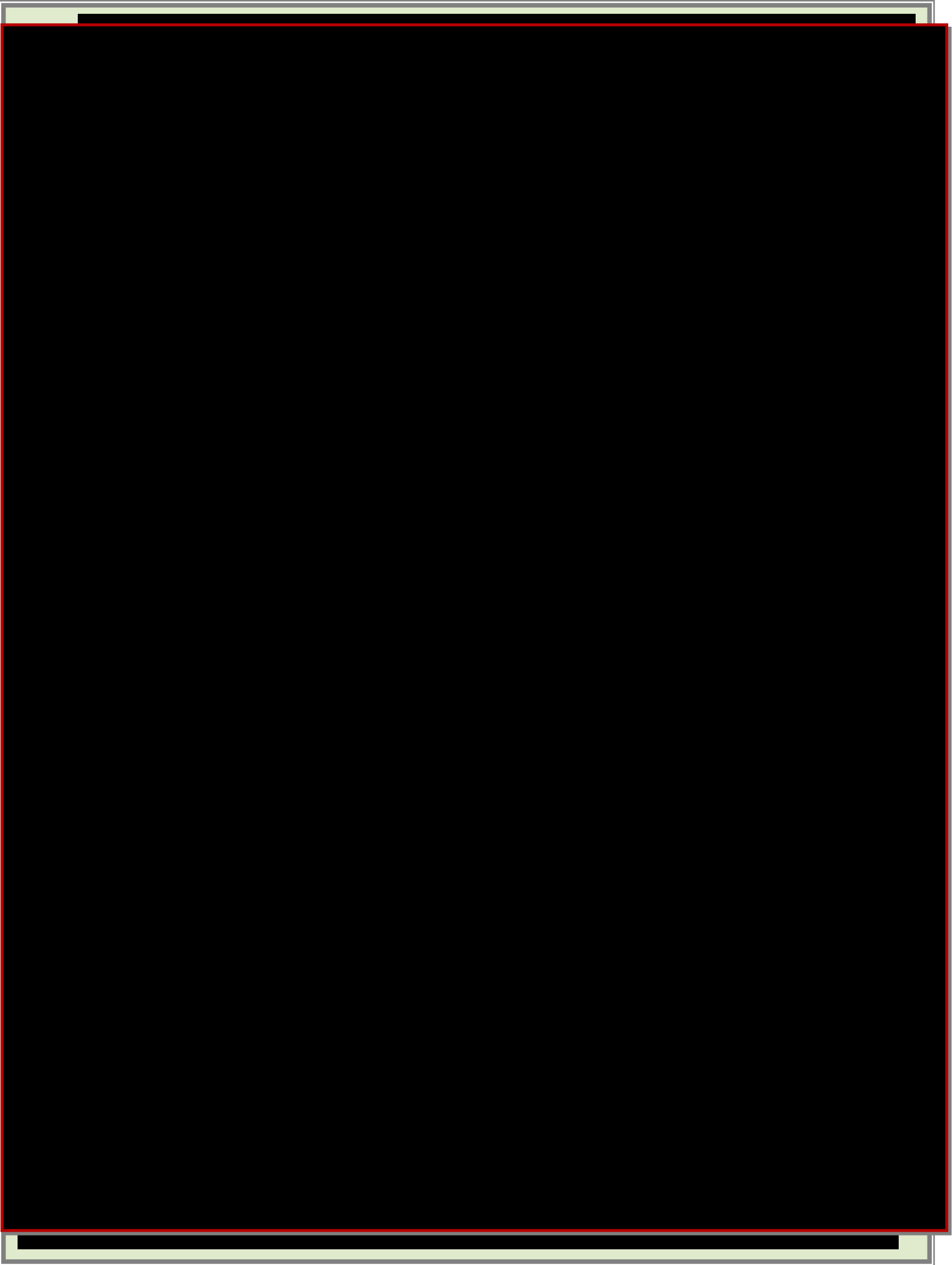


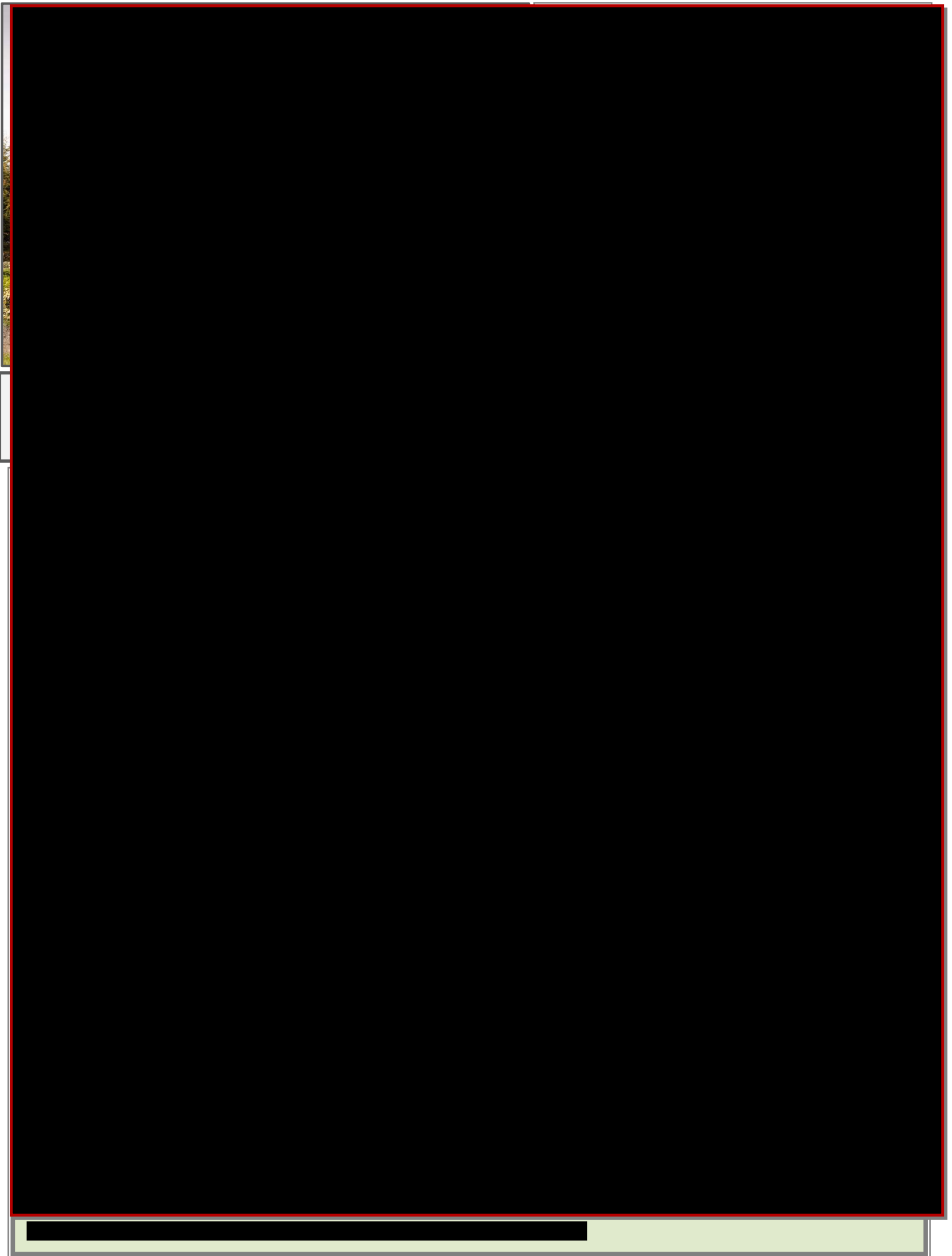


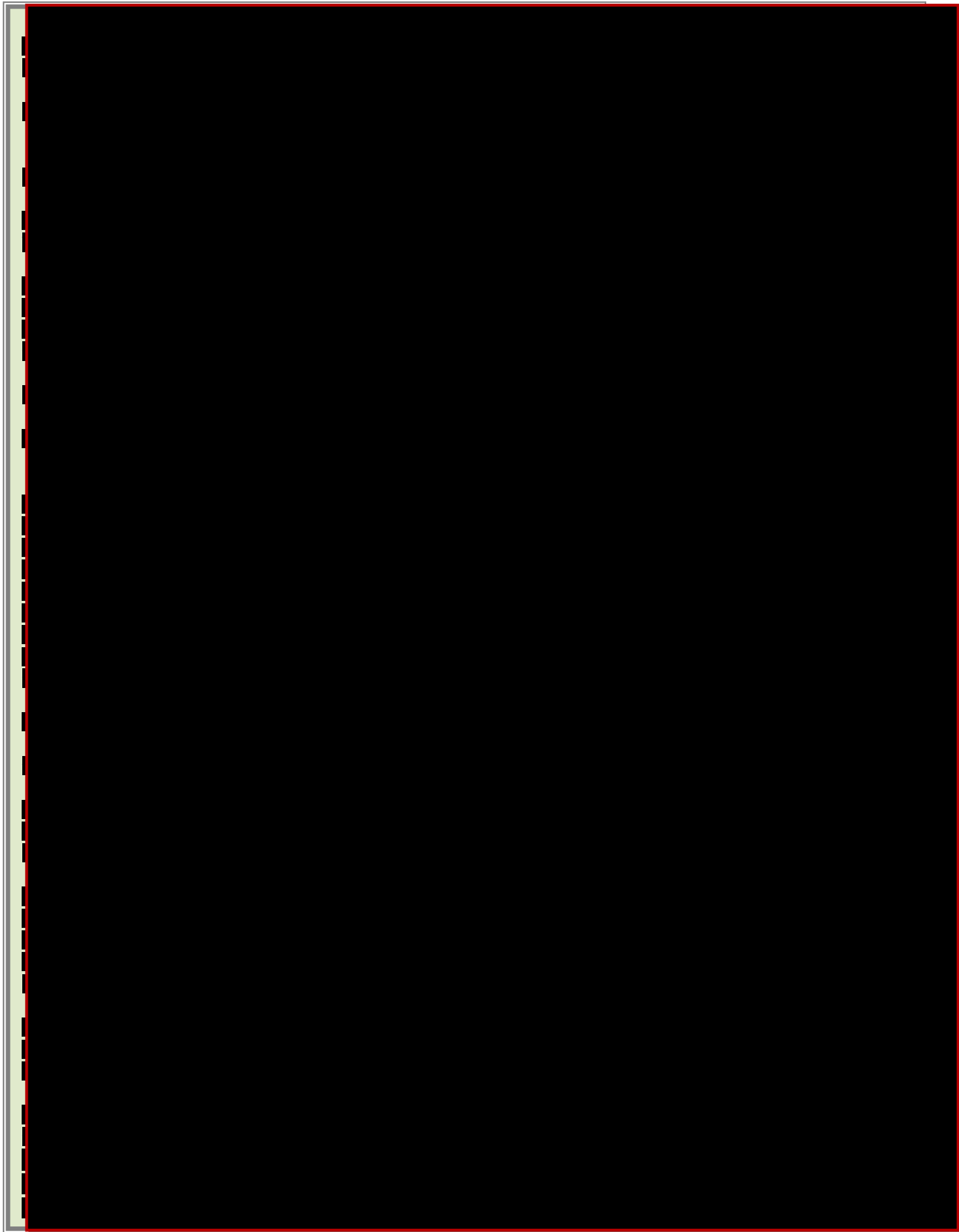
note of what appeared from a safe distance to be a lively debate – the only one of its kind going on – and decided to wander over.

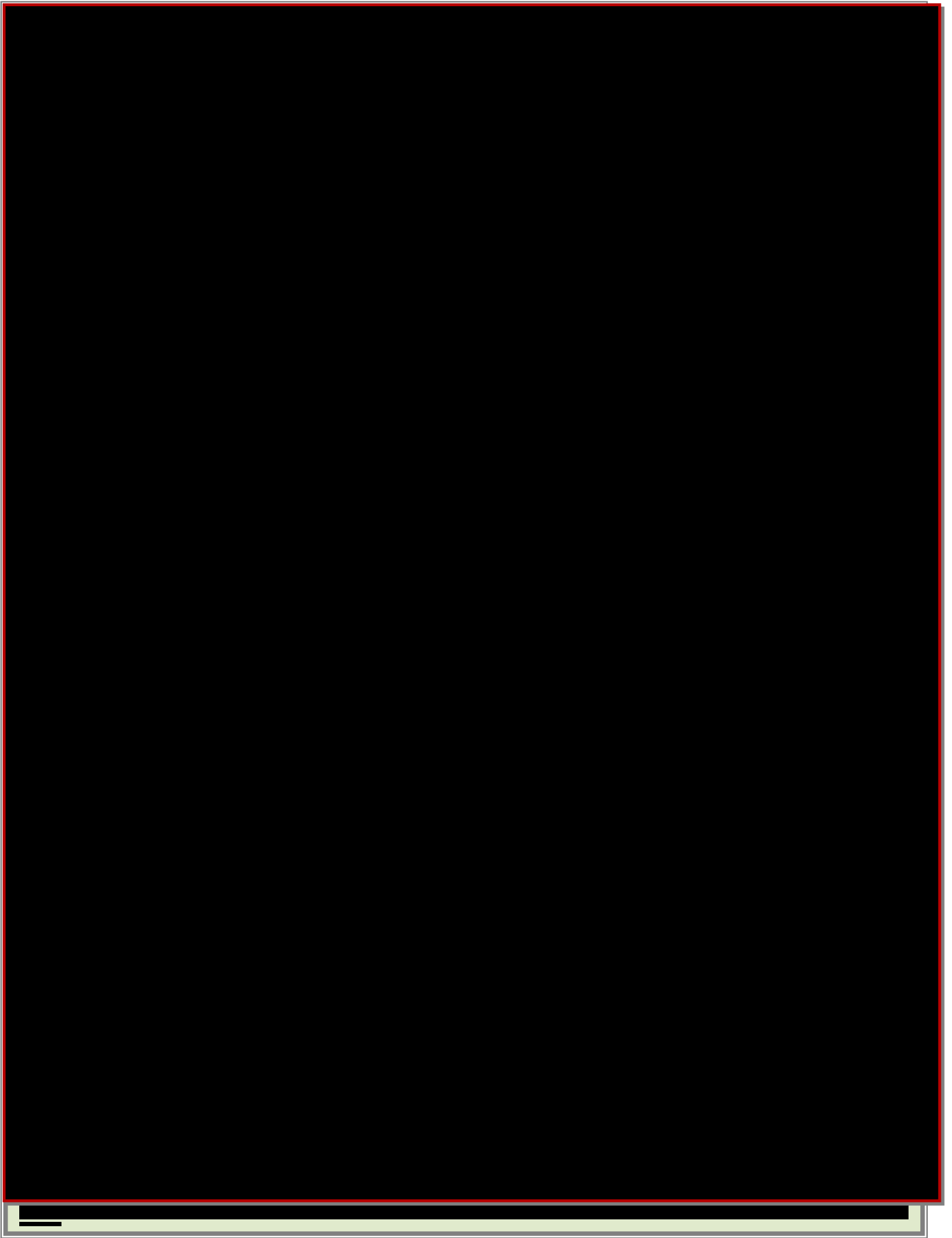


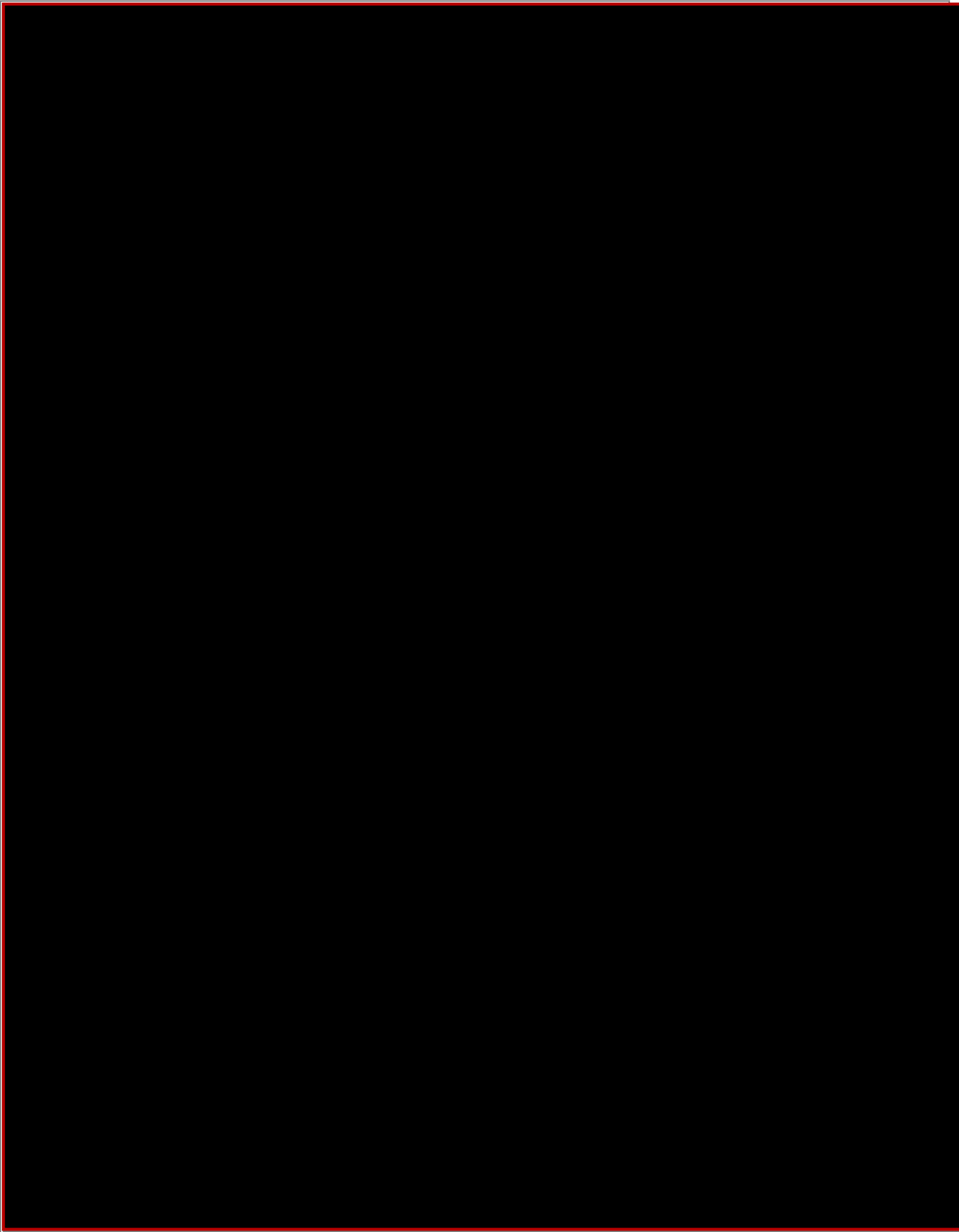


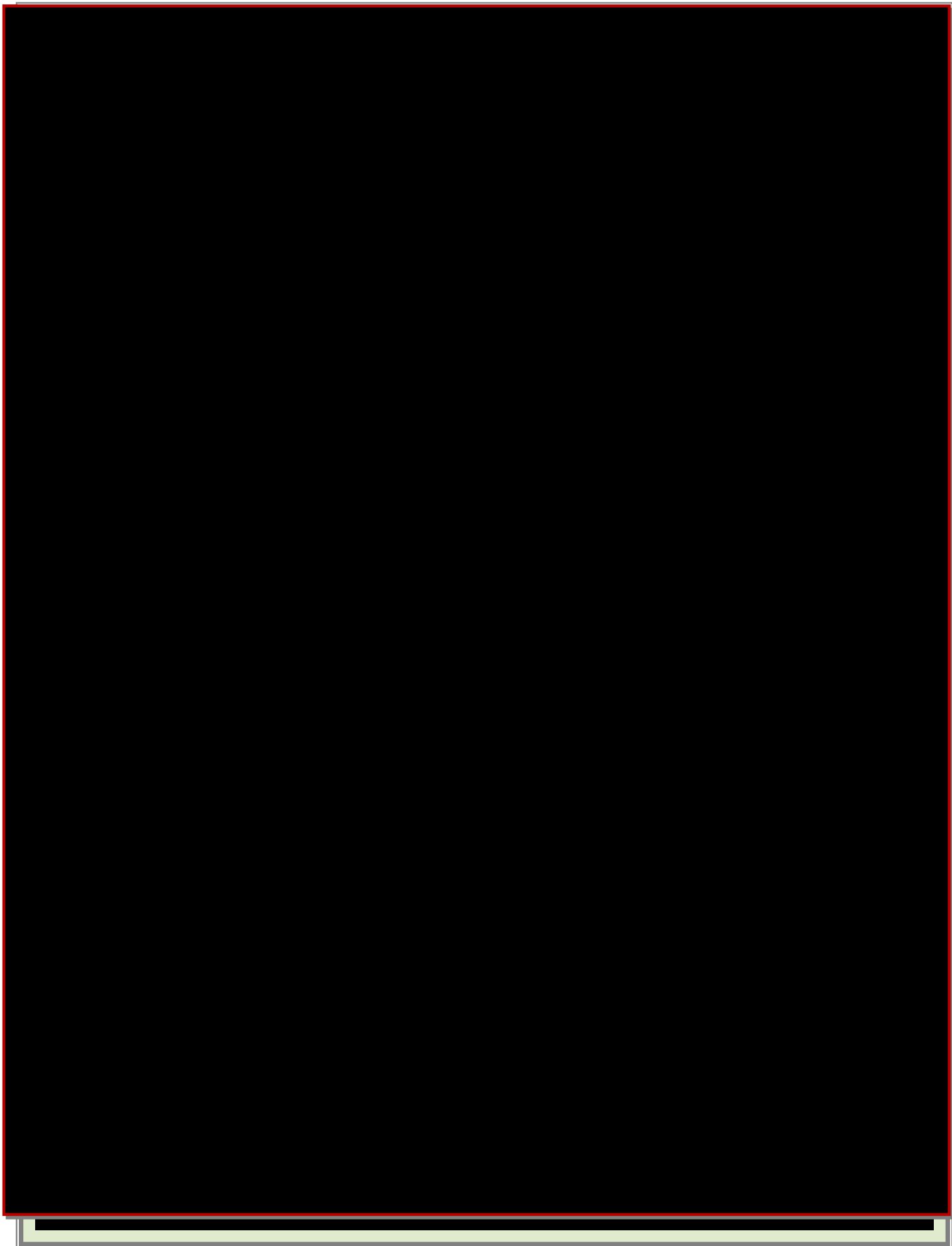


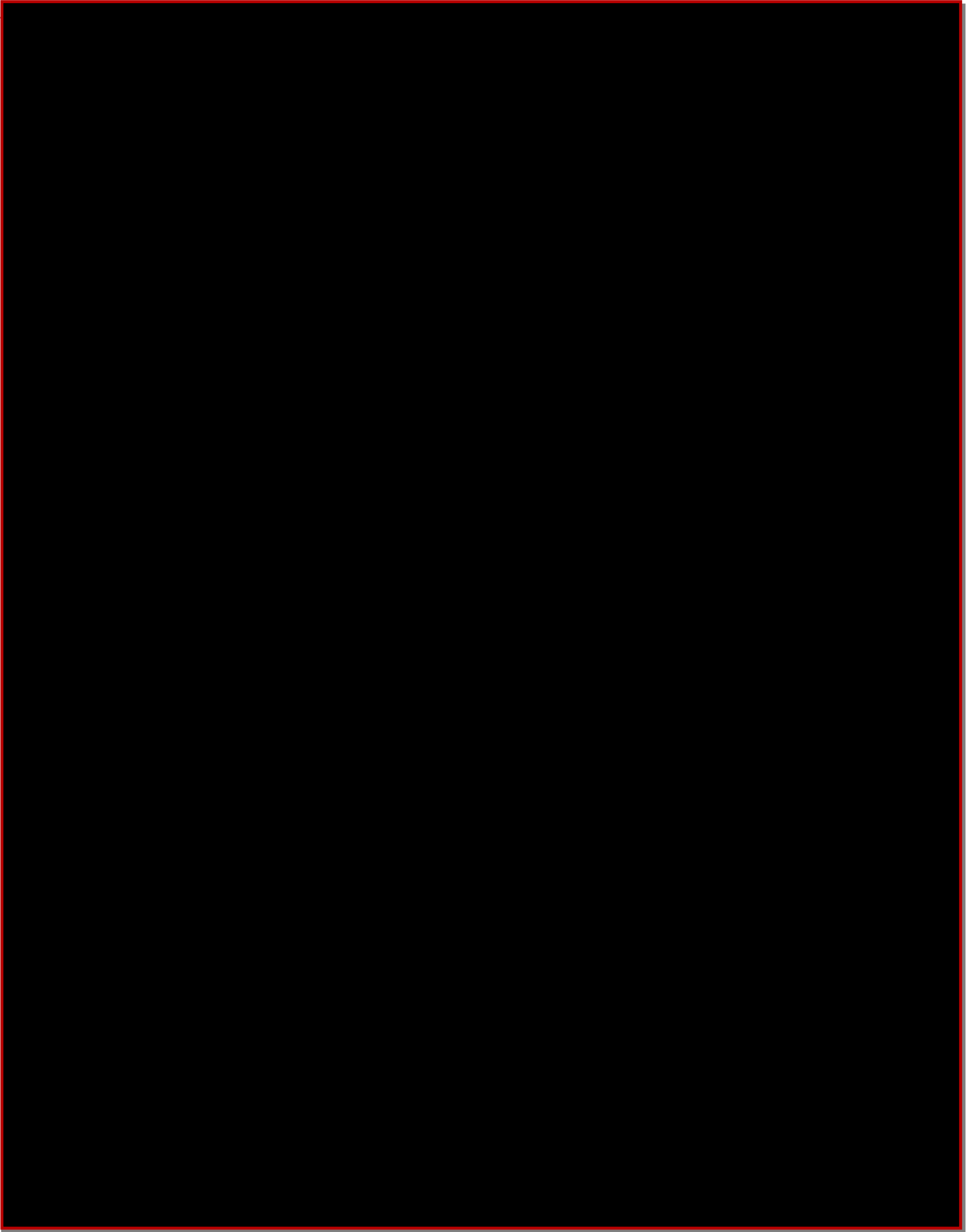


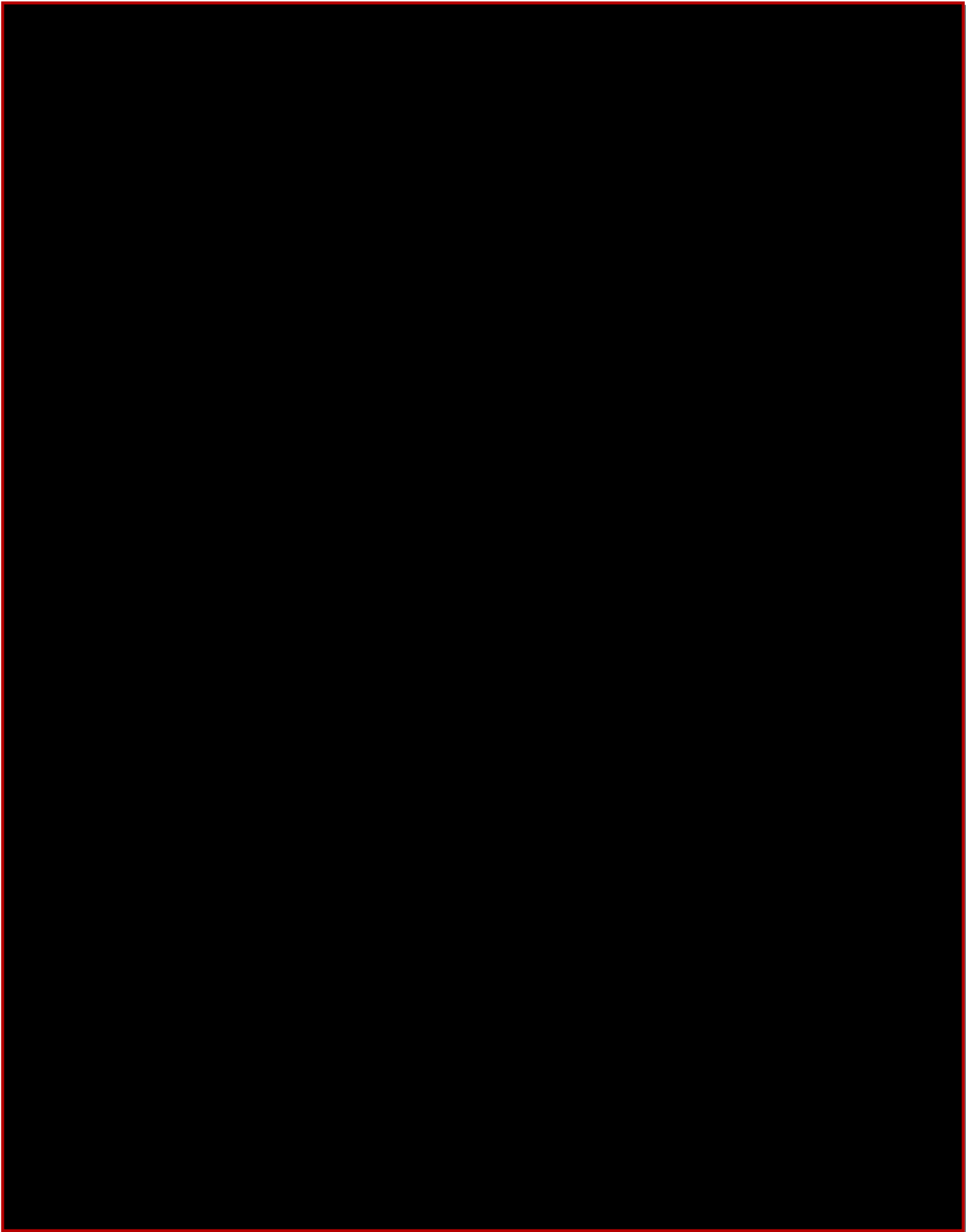


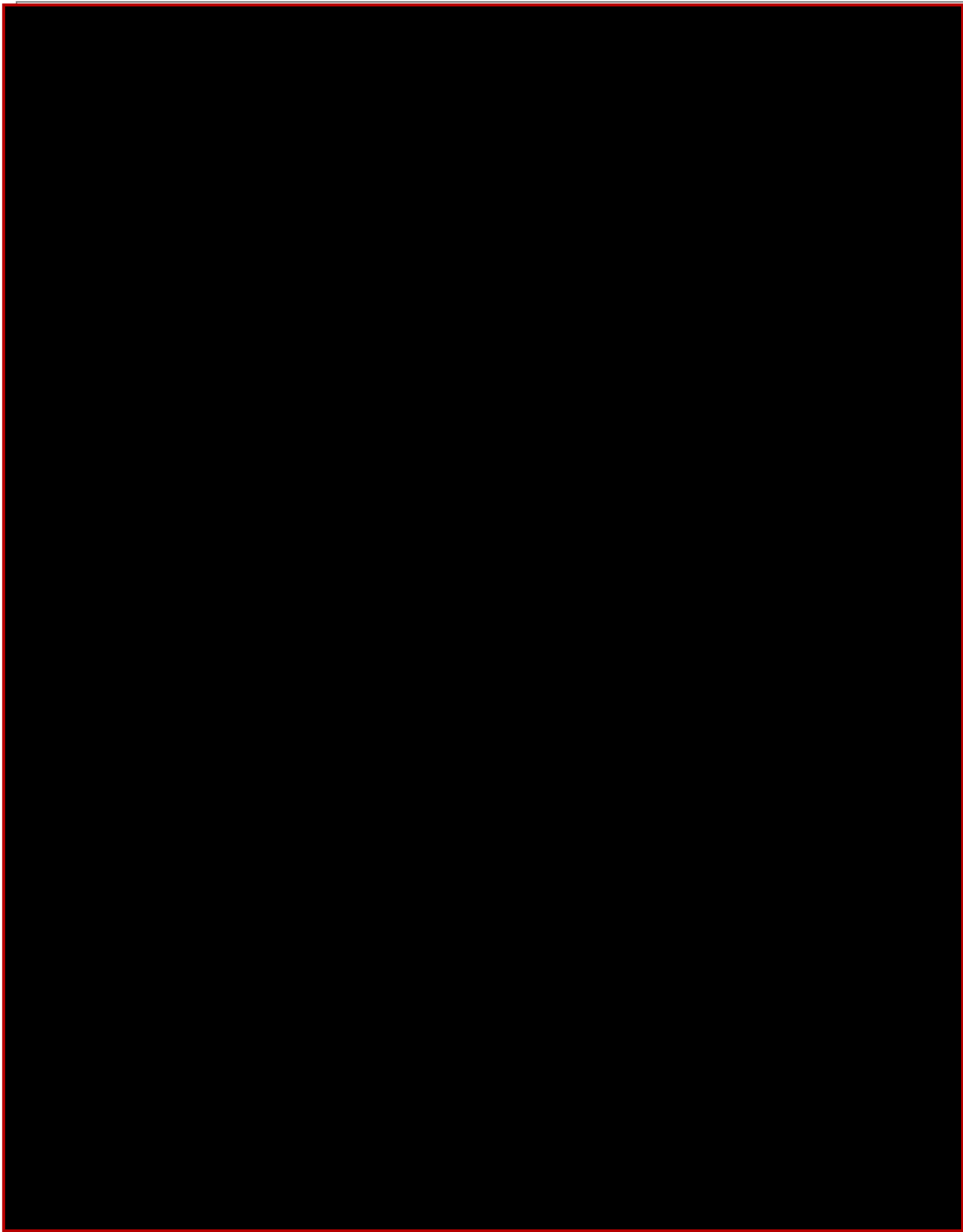


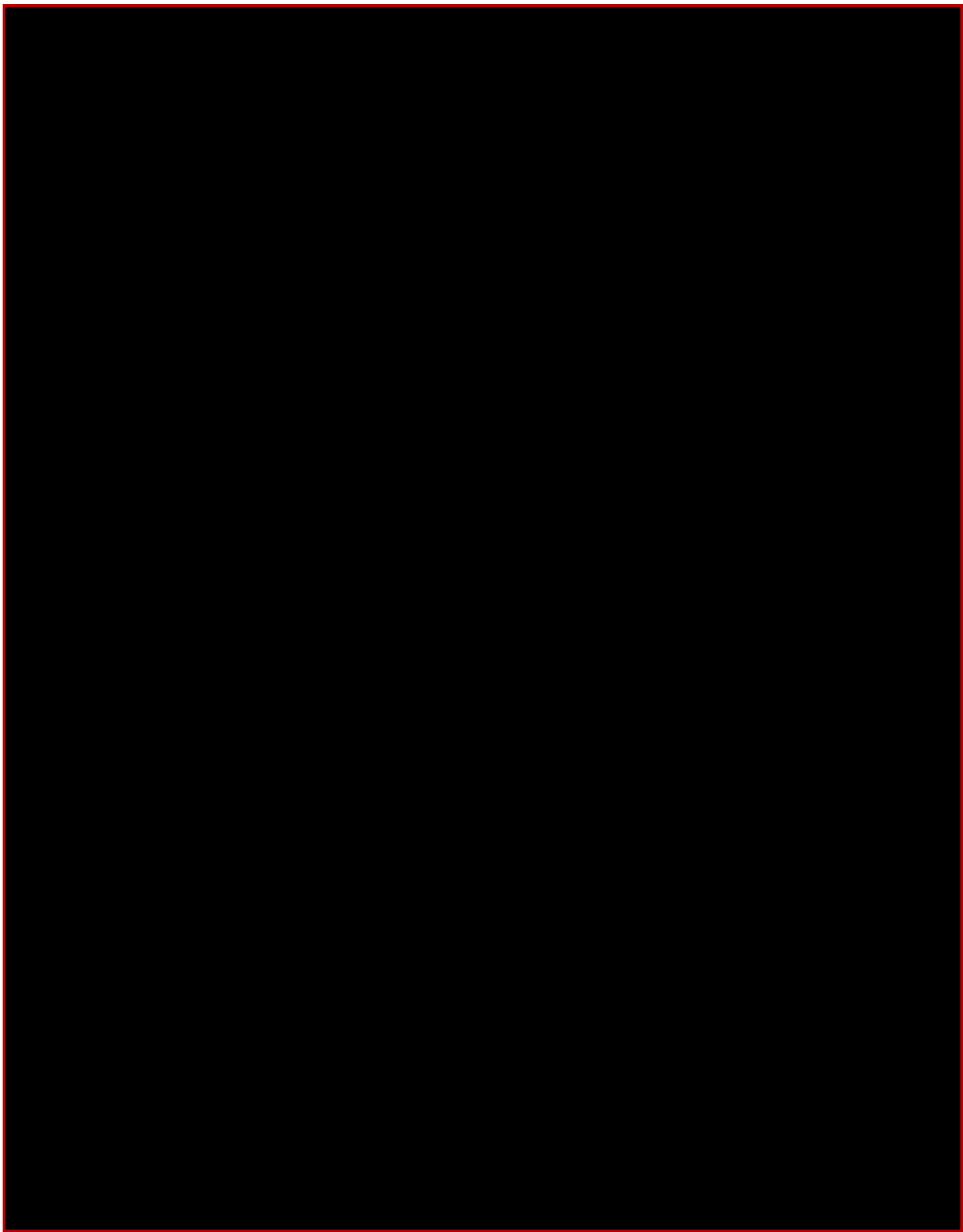


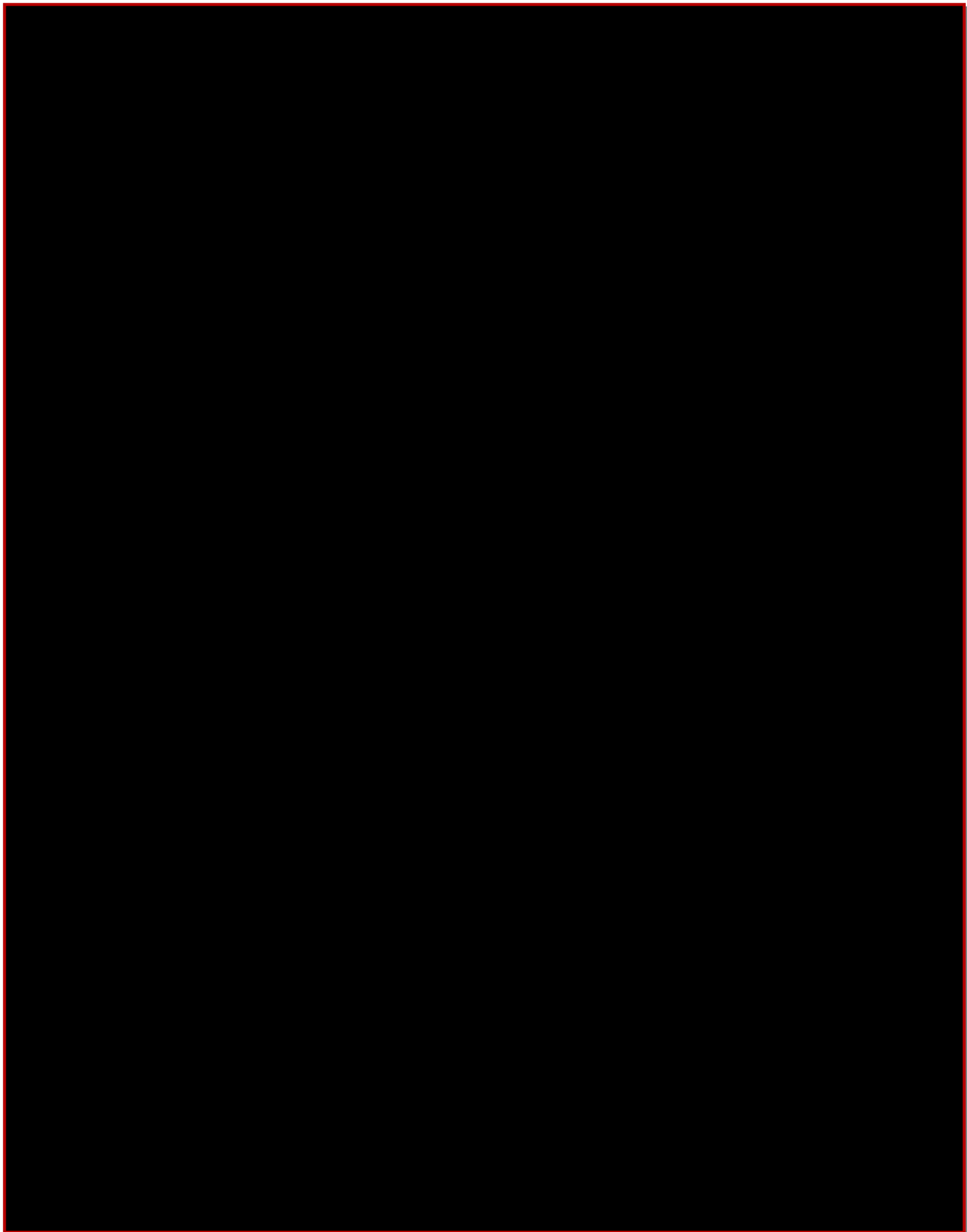


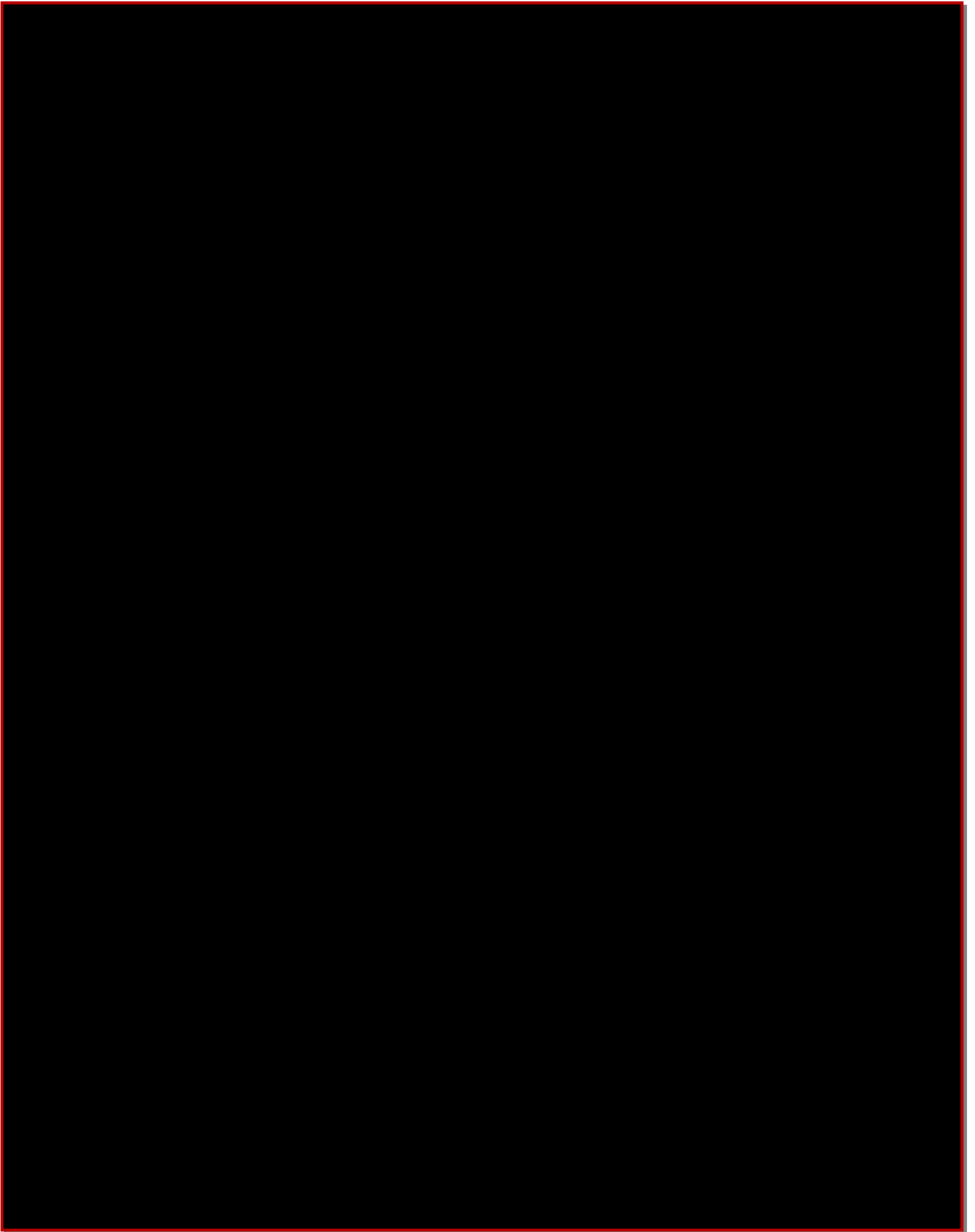


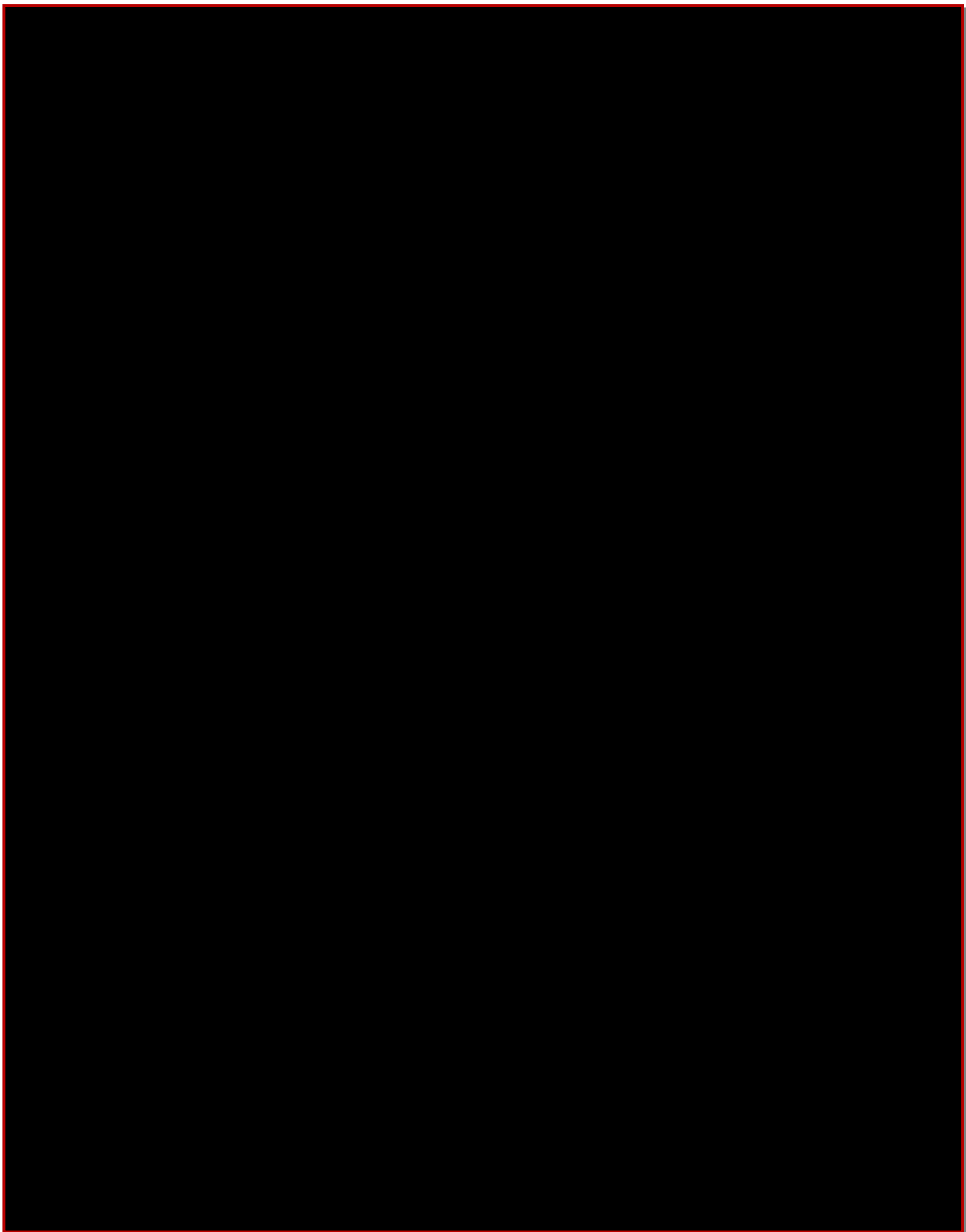


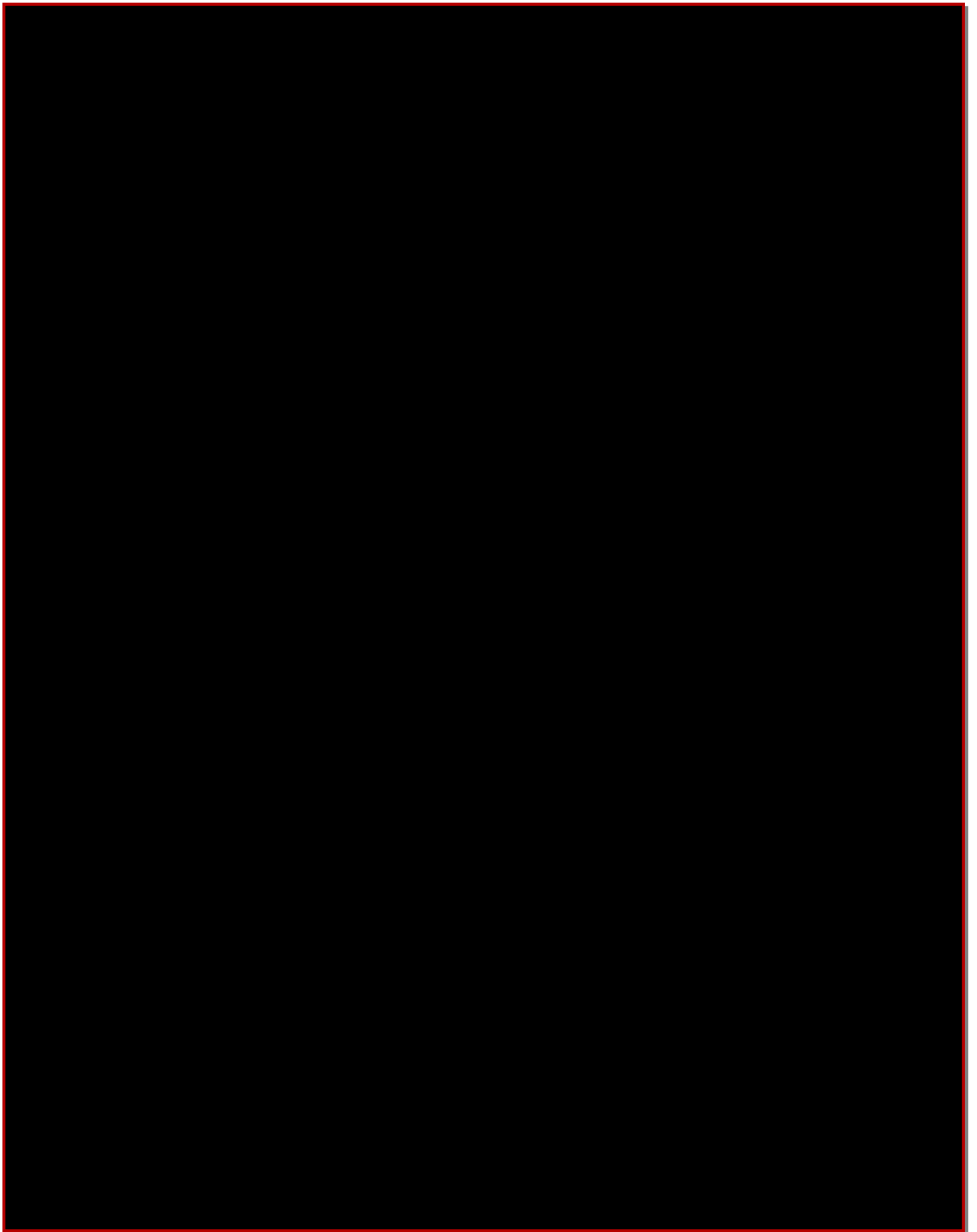


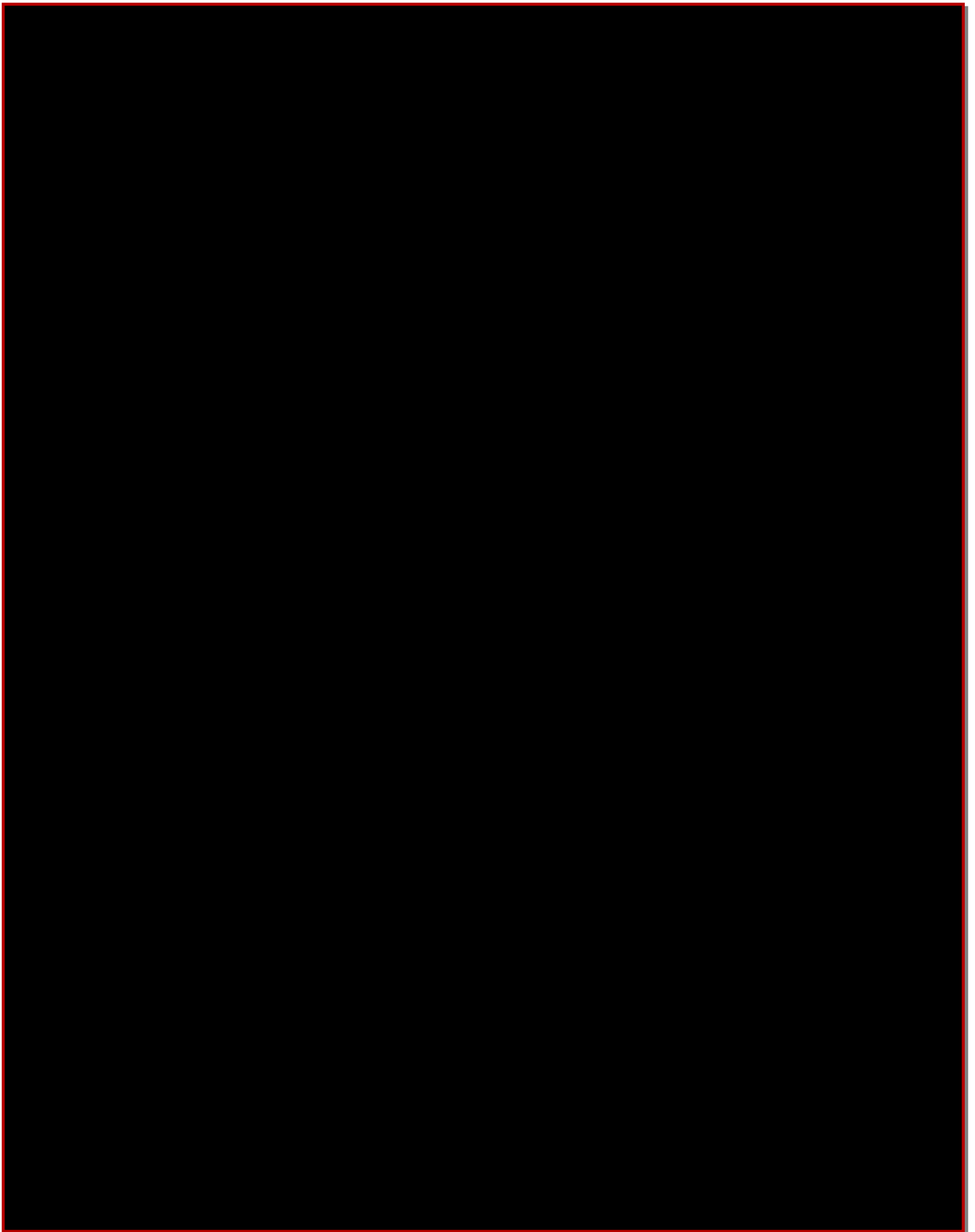












BUG THE BOOKIE!

JIMMY THE GEEK WRAPS UP ANOTHER SEASON OF SUCCESS

Your source for fantasy and on-line betting solutions



RECORD VS THE SPREAD AFTER CONFERENCE FINALS: 119-73-9

Jimmy's SEASON WRAP UP

BRUXELLES @ AURORA (line – MUSTANGS by 7)

INJURIES: Bruxelles – None; Aurora – None.

MY PICK: Bruxelles

So, I ended the season with a push as the Mustangs and Bombers tied against the spread. That does not change the bottom line: if you stuck with me throughout the good times and the bad this season you would have had more good times than bad. A .614 winning percentage is the best you are likely going to get in the industry – although I have had better seasons. I think the Bombers could have pulled it out in the final except for the unsung performance of the Aurora secondary. A little-publicized stat: Marcus Mariota went 1 for 4 targeting the Aurora secondary. What that means is that their corners and safeties blanketed the Bombers' receivers enough to force a lot of check-downs underneath. Mariota clearly did not feel he could challenge them. Had there been more room in the defensive backfield it would have changed the complexion of the Bruxelles attack and put more pressure on the Aurora offence to keep pace. It would have been interesting to see how the Mustangs' offence reacted to that pressure. They stuck to a relatively (for them) conservative game plan on offence. Perhaps the Bombers' blitz would have drawn more blood if Matt Ryan had been forced to go deep more often. At some point, we who study the game have to stop speculating on the possibilities that did not materialize. The Mustangs proved with this win that they are in a class of their own as a franchise. Will they be able to keep it going in 2018? Stick around with me next year and find out!

EFL ANNOUNCES MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS



OFFENSIVE M.V.P.



MATT RYAN
AURORA MUSTANGS

It was not unanimous, but it was not close. Matt Ryan was the standout performer on a standout team. Ryan was the main factor in another remarkable undefeated season for the Mustangs. He led the league in TD passes (49), yards passing (4,985), completion rate (63.1%) and passer rating (109.1). He had help from an excellent receiving corps, but his play elevated the running game rather the other way around.



DEFENSIVE M.V.P.



MELVIN INGRAM
VIRDEN VIOLATORS

Defensive performance is difficult to evaluate. Not everyone agreed with this choice, but in the end his record pace won over a majority of writers. 21 sacks in the final 8 weeks catapulted Melvin Ingram into a hall-of-fame performance in 2017. His 28 total sacks shattered the single season record set by former teammate, DeMarcus Ware. He showed up in the playoffs too, even if he team did not.



ANCIENT HISTORY CHANNEL PRESENTS

This Week in EFL History
With Professor Sterling Smitherman

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – The 2011 EFL Championship – Gale Sayers V – featured two teams and two quarterbacks that few observers expected to see face each other in a final. Rumours that **Ben Roethlisberger** would return to the starting role for the big game turned out to be false. **Dave Birdsall** decided to go with the guy credited with rescuing the Gladiators' season, **Vince Young**. It was a controversial, but logical decision, given Ben's erratic performances in 2011 and Young's hot hand. There were no similar doubts on the LA sideline. **Josh Freeman** had been the man for the Knights all year – the finest QB in the short

history of the franchise so far.

Despite a clear disparity in offensive efficiency, the game was a competitive classic on the scoreboard. LA controlled both sides of the ball in the first half, finishing off two long TD drives against the highly-ranked Gwinnett defence, thanks mainly to Freeman's versatility and poise in running it in for a TD and throwing for another. On the other side, Young struggled. But a 70-yard kick return by Leon Washington to set up the Glads' first TD and a FG with no time left on the clock in the 2nd quarter kept Gwinnett too close for comfort as far as LA was concerned, trailing 14-10.

Gwinnett picked up the pace in the second half, sparked by a 57-yard TD pass from Young to **Jeremy Maclin** to give them their first lead. The Knights managed to tie it on a 23-yard **James Carpenter** FG, but with 4:58 remaining in the 4th, **Josh Brown** gave Gwinnett a 20-17 lead on a 31-yard FG, set up by a 23-yard pass interference penalty. But **Jamaal Charles** finished off a 70-yard LA drive with a 15-yard TD run behind the famous crushing block by **Joe Thomas** on linebacker **Daryl Smith**. The 'Blue Shield' held off the late Gwinnett rally to give LA a 24-20 win and its first EFL title.