

2019



QUARTER



EFL

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

2019



FINALS

In our 13th season and still going strong!
February 16, 2020

EAST



VIRDEN	23	BRUXELLES	41	COWTOWN	28	TORONTO	24
TWIN CITIES	41	IOWA CITY	38	BUDAPEST	22	AURORA	34

NORTH



CENTRAL



COASTAL



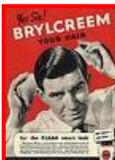
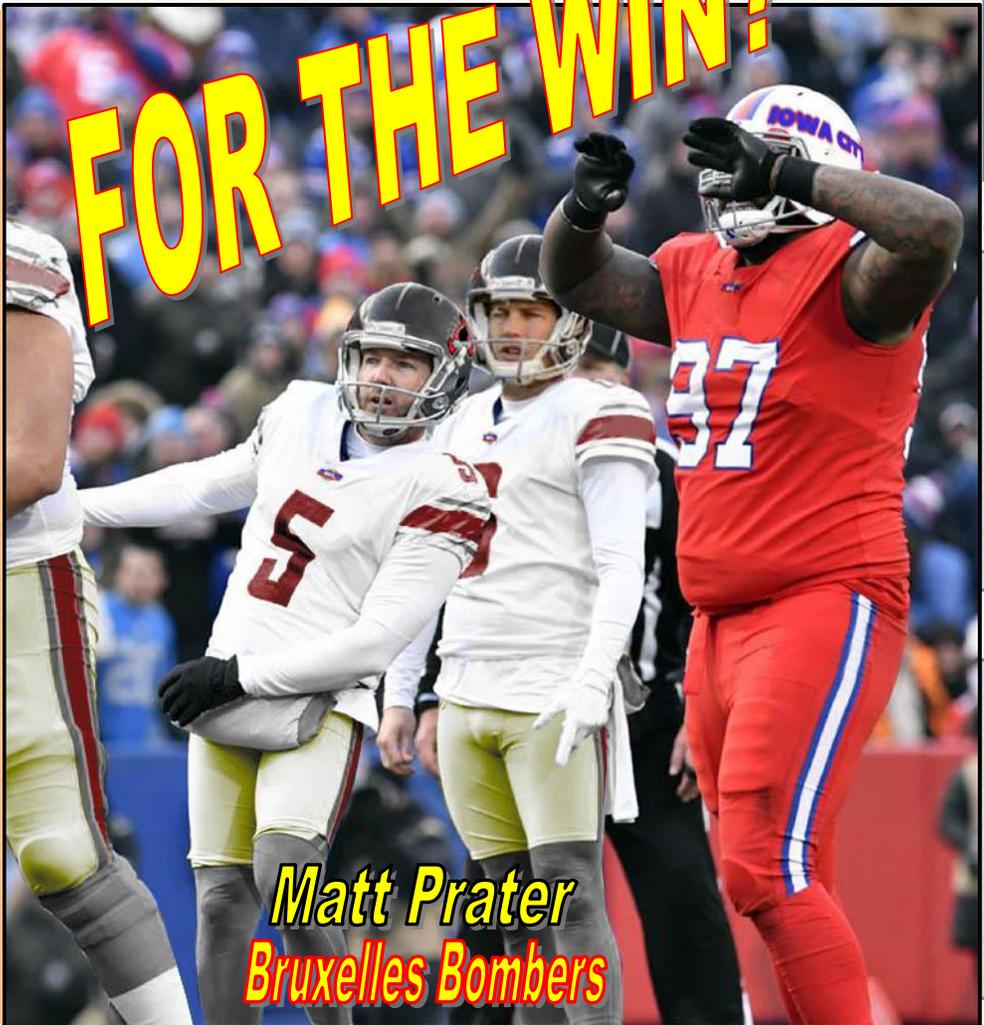
WEST



SOUTH



Bruxelles place-kicker, **Matt Prater** cranes his head as he watches his 56-yard field goal attempt drift right and outside the right upright. It was his second field goal attempt in overtime in the Bombers' 41-38 thriller win over the Cubs. After capping the opening possession of OT with a 54-yard field goal, the Bombers appeared to have won the game after stopping the Cubs on their ensuing possession. But officials directed play to continue, leading to a second field goal attempt that had fans, players and coaches confused about the significance of the kick. Play was ended immediately afterwards and Bruxelles declared the winner. The league had not offered an explanation as of press time. Another game went to O.T.: Cowtown knocked off Budapest 28-22. In other action, Twin Cities walloped Virden and Aurora handled Toronto (see stories inside)



Who was slick
in the Quarter
Finals?

“Brylcreem” THE
EFL’S FIRST SPONSOR



Matt Ryan
QB
Aurora
Mustangs

27 of 40, 378 yds, 4 TDs. Another
clutch performance in 2nd half.



Damon Harrison
DT
Cowtown
Corn Kings

4 T, 2 STF, 1 Sack. Contained run
and made key 4th down sack in 4th.



23

Viriden



41

Twin Cities

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Mahomes	23	38	308	3
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Elliott	22	110	5.0	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Cooper	6	92	15.3	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Viriden	3	0	7	13	-	23
Twin Cities	14	20	7	0	-	41

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Trubisky	23	35	300	5
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Trubisky	4	49	12.3	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Brown	8	126	15.8	0

Play of the Game
 In the 1st Quarter, 5:43 mark, 1st & 10 at Viriden 34, Triumph QB **Mitch Trubisky** can't find open receiver and scrambles 34 yards for the TD to give Triumph 14-0 lead.

TRUBISKY PROVES DOUBTERS WRONG! TRIUMPH QB THROWS 5 TD PASSES AND RUNS FOR ONE IN ROUT OF VIRIDEN!

SUMMARY: Questions about how **Mitch Trubisky** would fare in his first playoff game were answered on the field as the Triumph rolled over the Viriden powerhouse. Trubisky's big day started with a big stop by the Triumph defence on the game's opening possession. The Violators had moved quickly from their own 25 to the Twin Cities' 41, but an off-target check down by **Patrick Mahomes** on 3rd & 3 brought up 4th down and an apparent punt. **Lance Barrate** ordered his offence to stay on the field and it was not for the purpose of bluffing. An attempted short slant to **AJ Green** was perfectly defended, however, and Viriden turned the ball over on downs, giving the Triumph good field position for their first series of the game. They took advantage of it, but not before a nervous moment when **Danny Trevathan** punched the ball out of the arms of a scrambling Trubisky. **Andy Janovich** averted a big set-back by jumping on the ball. From that point the Triumph kicked into high gear. With the help of a 15-yard personal foul on **Melvin Ingram III**, the Triumph made it into the Viriden red zone where Trubisky, standing in a secure pocket, found **Kenny Golladay** in the end one for a 16-yard TD. The next Viriden possession did not make out better than the first. Triumph safety, **Darnell Savage Jr** stripped the ball from tight end **Eric Ebron** after a 10-yard catch-and-run, thwarting the Viriden drive at the Twin Cities 35. Four plays later, Trubisky showed off his legs with a 34-yard scramble for a TD and a 14-0 lead. Viriden got on the board with a field goal and stopped Twin Cities on 4th down at their 43. But on the next play, Triumph corner **Jaire Alexander** punched the ball out of the arms of **Amari Cooper** after a 27-yard gain and the Triumph turned good fortune into another Trubisky-to-Golladay TD hook-up for a 20-3 lead. A Viriden three-and-out led to another Triumph scoring drive ending with a 15-yard pass to Golladay to make it 27-3. Viriden capped off a disastrous first half by going for a 4th & inches at their own 35 only to see **Ezekiel Elliott** stuffed for a loss by **Danielle Hunter** and Trubisky finding Golladay in the end zone for the 4th time in the 1st half. Twin Cities opened the second half with a long TD drive, making the score 41-3. It was a lead not even Mahomes could overcome. The Triumph went into prevent mode, coasting home to victory.

QUOTES: "They are a good team. They played well and the turnovers made it worse for us. I'm still proud of Patrick and the offence for what they brought to the field every week. The offence is in good hands. We'll be back!" – Viriden coach, **Lance Barrate**.
 "Mitch did exactly what was asked of him and the results speak for themselves. But this was a total team effort. AB was held off the scoreboard but he opened up opportunities for Kenny to show what he could do. And our defence is just bad-ass! What can I say?" – Twin Cities coach, **Guy Williams**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



Marquis de Sade @mdsviolate
 Ouch! That felt like a water-boarding.



Lars Odegard @LarsValhalla
 #Violators fans very quiet on @titter.
 #Triumph fans classy as always.
 @guybirdburger rubbing it in a bit, but he earned the right.



Virden 23 Twin Cities 41

	1	2	3	4	F
Virden	3	0	7	13	23
Twin Cities	14	20	7	0	41



* Playoff * 02-16-2020 Wilhalla Stadium Temp:70 Wind: No Line MVP:Trubisky

1	9:06	Twin Cities	TD	Trubisky 16 pass to Golladay (Hopkins) (8-59-3:20)	0-7
1	4:52	Twin Cities	TD	Trubisky 34 run (Hopkins) (5-65-1:52)	0-14
1	0:55	Virden	FG	Santos 40 (7-53-3:51)	3-14
2	9:19	Twin Cities	TD	Trubisky 12 pass to Golladay (no good) (7-67-4:22)	3-20
2	3:13	Twin Cities	TD	Trubisky 15 pass to Golladay (Hopkins) (7-98-4:15)	3-27
2	0:21	Twin Cities	TD	Trubisky 10 pass to Golladay (Hopkins) (6-34-1:09)	3-34
3	8:21	Twin Cities	TD	Trubisky 15 pass to White (Hopkins) (13-75-6:39)	3-41
3	1:53	Virden	TD	Mahomes 3 pass to Blount (Santos) (14-75-6:28)	10-41
4	8:31	Virden	TD	Mahomes 20 pass to Ebron (no good) (12-80-7:17)	16-41
4	1:48	Virden	TD	Mahomes 7 pass to Cooper (Santos) (11-64-4:29)	23-41

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Mahomes	38	23	308	2	0	3	2	112.6
	38	23	308	2	0	3	2	112.6

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Trubisky	35	23	300	1	0	5	0	132.1
	35	23	300	1	0	5	0	132.1

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Elliott	22	110	5.0	8	5	14	0
Mahomes	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	23	110	4.8	8	5	14	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Trubisky	4	49	12.3	3	2	34	1
Gordon III	18	43	2.4	2	0	6	0
White	3	20	6.7	1	1	14	0
Janovich	1	2	2.0	0	0	2	0
	26	114	4.4	6	3	34	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Cooper	6	1	14	92	15.3	5	1	27	1
Smith-Schus	5	0	5	104	20.8	4	1	51	0
Green	5	1	8	62	12.4	2	0	19	0
Ebron	4	0	5	37	9.3	1	0	20	1
Elliott	2	0	4	10	5.0	0	0	7	0
Blount	1	0	2	3	3.0	1	0	3	1
	24	2	38	306	13.4	13	2	51	3

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Brown	8	0	10	126	15.8	7	1	34	0
Golladay	6	0	11	73	12.2	5	0	16	4
White	5	0	6	59	11.8	2	0	15	1
Gordon III	3	1	7	29	9.7	1	0	14	0
Janovich	1	0	1	13	13.0	1	0	13	0
	23	1	35	300	13.0	16	1	34	5

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Elliott	1	0	0
Ebron	1	0	0
Cooper	1	0	0
Humphries	0	1	0
	3	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Trubisky	1	0	0
Alexander,J	0	1	0
Janovich	0	1	0
Savage Jr.	0	1	0
	1	3	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Ervin	1	30	30.0	30	0
	1	30	30.0	30	0

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

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Ervin	1	1	13	13.0	13	0
	1	1	13	13.0	13	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
	0	0	0	0.0	0	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Santos	1-1	40	2-3	5

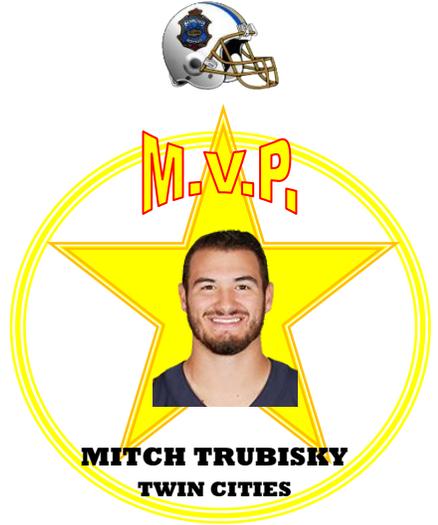
Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Hopkins	0-0	0	5-6	5

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Bosher	1	53	53.0	0	1	0	53

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Wishnowsky	2	100	50.0	0	1	0	50

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Trevalhan	9	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Amukamara	9	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ingram III	5	0	0	1	1	0	0-0
Fuller	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Floyd,L	5	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Barr	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hooker	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Reed	1	0	1	1	1	0	0-0
Hankins	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Van Ginkel	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Berry	0	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
	44	0	4	2	3	1	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Slay	9	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Alexander,J	7	0	2	0	0	1	0-0
Wagner	5	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Casey	4	1	0	0	2	0	0-0
Davis	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Harris Jr.	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Lee	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Savage Jr.	2	0	2	0	0	1	0-0
Hunter	2	0	0	1	2	0	0-0
Hughes	2	0	0	1	0	1	0-0
Crawford	1	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Clark	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Bradham	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Slater	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jenkins	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wormley	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Roby	0	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
	48	2	9	2	6	3	0-0



23 of 35, 300 yards, 5 TD passes, 1 TD run. Dangerous dual-threat dominated.

	Virden	Twin Cities
First Downs	21	26
Rushes	23-110	26-114
Passes	38-23-308	35-23-300
Sacked	2-13	0-0
Fumble	3	1
Penalties	4-30	0-0
Turnovers	2	0
Missed Tackles	6	4
Dropped Passes	2	1
Bad Passes	3	2
Passes 25+	2	1
Runs 10+	5	3
Blitzers	26	6
Time	31:07	28:53
Third Down	4-11	4-10
Fourth Down	3-5	1-2
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/3/0	5/5/0
Net Offense	405	414



41

Bruxelles



GAME CENTER 2019 Pacific Quarter Finals



38

Iowa City

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Mariota	22	33	296	3
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Mack	28	198	7.1	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Kelce	5	75	15.0	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Bruxelles	6	10	8	14	3	41
Iowa City	7	3	7	21	0	38

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Wilson	28	40	322	3
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Mixon	15	86	5.7	2
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Kirk	6	57	9.5	0

Play of the Game
Overtime, 9:45 left, 4th & 13 at Cubs' 36 after 9-yard sack of **Marcus Mariota** on 3rd down. **Matt Prater** makes 54-yard field goal that would eventually win the game.

PRATER NAILS 54-YARD FG TO CAP O.T. WIN! MARLON MACK RUNS FOR 198 YARDS TO LEAD BOMBERS' CHARGE!

SUMMARY: It was predicted to be a low-scoring game in a frigid windchill. Instead, the air was still and the balls were flying around the yard in this classic playoff shootout at Joe Ferguson Stadium. It started with a mistake. **Tremon Smith** fumbled away the opening kickoff to give Iowa City the ball in Bruxelles territory. A penalty and three plays later, **Joe Mixon** was in the end zone on a 7-yard run for a 7-0 Cubs lead. The Bombers responded with a 15-play field goal drive and back-to-back takeaways leading to two more field goals to take a 9-7 lead. The Cubs ground out a 13-play drive to the Bruxelles' 12 but **Jarrad Davis** sacked **Russell Wilson** for a 10-yard loss to reverse the momentum and force the Cubs to settle for a field goal. The Bombers struck deep on the first play of their ensuing possession, completing a 50-yard bomb to **Chris Godwin** to set up a **Marlon Mack** 5-yard run off tackle for a touchdown and a 16-10 Bruxelles lead at half time. **Frank Clark** sacked Wilson on 3rd down to force and three-and-out on the first series of the second half and the Bombers' offence followed up with a 10-play drive featuring a 23-yard scamper by Mack and 22 yards on 5 more carries to set up a 5-yard TD pass to Godwin to make it 24-10. A great individual effort by **A.J. Brown** turn a short hitch into a 40-yard TD to get Iowa back within one score, but a pair of completions for 31 yards to **Travis Kelce** and a 32-yard fly for a TD to Godwin put Bruxelles back in front by two scores. Wilson scrambled to keep the Cubs' next drive alive and set up a 15-yard TD pass to **Tyler Lockett** to pull back within a TD of Bruxelles, but Mack broke loose for a 55-yard run to set up a 15-yard TD pass too Kelce to regain their 14-point cushion. A controversial flag on **Kyle Fuller** for pass interference helped set up Mixon's second TD run of the game. The Cubs got a stop and took over at their own 27 with 1:55 left. Lockett tied the game with 0:51 left on an exhilarating 52-yard catch-and-run TD that brought the Joe Ferguson crowd to its feet. But in overtime, **Matt Prater** salvaged an 11-play opening possession with a 54-yard FG. **Christian Kirk** was stuffed for a 4-yard loss on 3rd down to set up a turnover over on downs for the apparent Bruxelles win. Officials signalled play to continue for another series, creating confusion, before calling the game after a missed field goal.

QUOTES: "I just kept saying to the boss, give me the ball, give me the ball! And they gave me the ball!" – Bruxelles running back, **Marlon Mack**. "I am going to need an explanation from the league on that one." – Bruxelles coach, **Ken Main**, when asked about the strange extended play in OT. "We had been practising that play all week and I liked our chances in that situation. You have to give credit to them; they held their lanes looking for the run and stopped it. They made a play on defence." – Cubs' coach, **Deron Redding**, on calling the disastrous jet sweep on 3rd & 3 in OT.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



Faart van Wijnendaele FVW@BrusselsTimes
#Bombers win by going back to basics.
@MackM truck in high gear on road to Championship game. One more stop in TC.



Archibald Thacker @ArchieDMR
#Cubs season on the line and they send Christian Kirk on a jet sweep! Why am I not surprised! Fans deserve better.

Bruxelles 41 Iowa City 38



	1	2	3	4	5	F
Bruxelles	6	10	8	14	3	41
Iowa City	7	3	7	21	0	38

* Playoff * 02-16-2020 Joe Ferguson Stadium Temp:31 Wind:Calm None No Line MVP:Mack

1	13:03	Iowa City	TD	Mixon 7 run (Tucker,J) (4-40-1:49)	0-7
1	5:41	Bruxelles	FG	Prater 34 (15-59-7:19)	3-7
1	1:38	Bruxelles	FG	Prater 31 (6-16-3:00)	6-7
2	10:28	Bruxelles	FG	Prater 21 (7-42-4:17)	9-7
2	3:31	Iowa City	FG	Tucker 40 (13-71-6:44)	9-10
2	1:50	Bruxelles	TD	Mack 5 run (Prater) (4-67-1:33)	16-10
3	7:48	Bruxelles	TD	Mariota 5 pass to Godwin (2 - Fournette) (10-66-5:59)	24-10
3	1:59	Iowa City	TD	Wilson 40 pass to Brown (Tucker,J) (8-91-5:43)	24-17
4	14:06	Bruxelles	TD	Mariota 32 pass to Godwin (Prater) (6-75-2:53)	31-17
4	8:56	Iowa City	TD	Wilson 14 pass to Lockett (Tucker,J) (10-72-4:57)	31-24
4	6:31	Bruxelles	TD	Mariota 15 pass to Kelce (Prater) (4-75-2:25)	38-24
4	3:17	Iowa City	TD	Mixon 8 run (Tucker,J) (11-81-3:02)	38-31
4	0:51	Iowa City	TD	Wilson 52 pass to Lockett (Tucker,J) (4-73-1:04)	38-38
5	9:45	Bruxelles	FG	Prater 54 (11-53-5:02)	41-38

Player Stats

Passing	All	Cmp	Yds	25	Int	Td	Sk	Rate
Mariota	33	22	296	2	0	3	3	125.3
	33	22	296	2	0	3	3	125.3

Passing	All	Cmp	Yds	25	Int	Td	Sk	Rate
Wilson	40	28	322	2	1	3	3	108.5
	40	28	322	2	1	3	3	108.5

Rushing	All	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Mack	28	198	7.1	13	7	55	1
Valdes-Scan	1	20	20.0	1	1	20	0
Mariota	6	19	3.2	1	0	8	0
Thompson	1	7	7.0	0	0	7	0
Johnson	1	2	2.0	0	0	2	0
Tate	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	38	246	6.3	15	8	55	1

Rushing	All	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Mixon	15	86	5.7	7	3	18	2
Wilson	5	69	13.8	5	5	17	0
Conner	2	11	5.5	0	1	10	0
Kirk	1	-4	-4.0	0	0	0	0
	24	162	7.0	12	9	18	2

Receiving	No	Dp	All	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Thompson	5	0	5	64	12.8	2	0	23	0
Kelce	5	0	9	75	15.0	4	0	16	1
Godwin	3	0	6	87	29.0	3	2	50	2
Herridon	3	0	4	23	7.7	1	0	10	0
Tate	3	0	5	24	8.0	2	0	12	0
Valdes-Scan	1	0	1	12	12.0	1	0	12	0
Johnson	1	0	1	4	4.0	0	0	4	0
Mack	1	0	1	7	7.0	0	0	7	0
Fournette	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	22	0	33	296	13.5	13	2	50	3

Receiving	No	Dp	All	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Mixon	6	0	8	39	6.5	3	0	21	0
Coutee	6	2	9	49	8.2	1	0	11	0
Kirk	6	0	8	57	9.5	3	0	16	0
Brown	3	0	4	68	22.7	2	1	40	1
Hjoku	3	1	4	29	9.7	2	0	10	0
Lockett	3	0	5	81	27.0	3	1	52	2
Armistead	1	0	1	-1	-1.0	0	0	0	0
Conner	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	28	3	40	322	11.5	14	2	52	3

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Kelce	1	0	0
Smith,T	1	0	0
Haden	0	1	0
	2	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Conner	1	0	0
Harrison	0	1	0
Bouye	0	1	0
	1	2	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Smith,T	3	79	26.3	42	0
	3	79	26.3	42	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Lockett	9	159	17.7	28	0
	9	159	17.7	28	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Westbrook	1	1	2	2.0	2	0
	1	1	2	2.0	2	0

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

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Prater	4-5	54	3-3	15

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Tucker	1-1	40	5-5	8

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Kern	1	42	42.0	0	0	0	42

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Finon	2	90	45.0	0	0	0	48

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Haden	10	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Clark	6	1	0	1	2	0	0-0
Davis	6	1	1	1	0	0	0-0
Moreau	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Smith,P	5	0	1	0	2	0	0-0
Gipson	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Suggs	4	0	0	0	3	1	0-0
Smith,H	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jones	3	1	0	1	4	0	0-0
Wilson	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Fuller	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Burns	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Dupree	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Watts	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Smith,T	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
White	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Walker	0	0	0	0	0	0	1-11
Ogbah	0	0	1	0	1	0	0-0
Robinson	0	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
	59	3	6	3	14	1	1-11

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Ogletree	10	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ford	9	1	0	2	2	0	0-0
Graham	6	0	2	0	0	1	0-0
Smith,M	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Cox	5	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hergrave	5	0	0	0	3	0	0-0
HILB	5	0	0	1	2	0	0-0
Hayward,Jr	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Bouye	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Pierre-Paul	3	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Speaks	2	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Jewell	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jenkins	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Glasgow	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Rhodes	0	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
	64	3	5	3	8	2	0-0



He was the engine of the offence with 198 yards and 1 TD on 29 carries.

Team Stats

	Bruxelles	Iowa City
First Downs	28	29
Rushes	38-246	23-162
Passes	33-22-296	40-28-322
Sacked	3-22	3-20
Fumble	2	1
Penalties	7-60	4-38
Turnovers	2	2
Missed Tackles	9	9
Dropped Passes	0	3
Bad Passes	0	4
Passes 25+	2	2
Runs 10+	8	9
Blitzers	34	17
Time	37:58	31:54
Third Down	4-12	4-10
Fourth Down	1-1	0-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	6/3/3	4/3/1
Net Offense	520	464



28

Cowtown



22

Budapest

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Fitzpatrick	18	28	312	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Gurley	17	110	6.5	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Burton	6	81	13.5	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Cowtown	3	10	3	6	6	28
Budapest	3	9	0	10	0	22

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Mayfield	23	29	323	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Johnson	16	68	4.3	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Diggs	8	91	11.4	0

Play of the Game

In the 4th quarter, 0:44 left, game tied at 22, Budapest with ball 1st & 10 at Cowtown 48. **Damon Harrison** sacks **Baker Mayfield** for a 10-yard loss, setting up eventual game-winning FG miss.

CORN KINGS SCRAMBLE FOR O.T. WIN! RYAN FITZPATRICK DELIVERS DAGGER WITH HIS FEET IN O.T.

SUMMARY: The Corn Kings came into Budapest looking to extend a six-game winning streak while the North Stars hoped to build on late season momentum that had carried them past Pickering for the Division title. Something had to give. Both teams notched field goals on their opening drives in a tense, evenly-played opening quarter. The Stars delivered the first big blow when **Baker Mayfield** connected on a long sideline pass to **Sammy Watkins** for a 34-yard TD. It was Mayfield's 7th completion without a miss and it boded well for a big day. **Jason Myers** missed the extra point, however, giving Budapest a 9-3 lead. Cowtown answered with two chunk plays – a 26-yard pass in the flat to **Todd Gurley II** and a 20-yard completion to **Mike Evans** – to set up a 7-yard Gurley TD run. **Matt Bryant's** extra point was good and the visitors led 10-9. Budapest opted for a short field goal on 4th & 1 at the Corn Kings' 12 to regain the lead, but a nifty 100-second drill covering 63 yards, featuring a 20-yard scramble by **Ryan Fitzpatrick**, led to a 30-yard field goal and a 13-12 halftime lead for Cowtown. Budapest opened the 2nd half with a three-and-out and Cowtown increased its lead to 16-12 on a 50-yard FG by Bryant. A red-hot Mayfield wasted no time getting back into scoring position, going three-for-three, including a 22-yard pass to **George Kittle**, to get the Stars quickly to the Cowtown 7-yard line. But **Marcell Dareus** blew through the Budapest line and stripped the ball from the Stars' QB. **Roquan Smith** recovered and the Kings had dodged a bullet. Budapest opened the 4th with a 50-yard field goal by Myers to make it a 1-point game. Fitzpatrick came back with a 39-yard long slant to Evans and a check down to **Trey Burton** for 29 yards and a TD. Bryant missed the extra point, keeping the lead to 7 points, 22-15. Mayfield went to work, hitting Watkins over the middle for a 35-yard TD, his 2nd of the game, to tie it at 22. Cowtown had no immediate answer and soon Budapest was marching into FG range with time running out. But a key 10-yard sack by **Damon Harrison** pushed the Stars back and Myers missed the game-winner from 58 yards out. Cowtown got the ball to start O.T. A 24-yard pass to Evans and a 41-yard run by Gurley put them in FG range, but Fitzpatrick kept the ball out of Mayfield's hands with a 5-yard TD run.

QUOTES: "This was about as even a game as you're going to see. So many pivotal plays but the sack by 'Snacks' came at a big moment! Then Fitz... what can I say? He made sure that kid on the other sideline wasn't going to beat us in overtime today!" – Cowtown coach, **Jim Coghlin**.
 "Hats off to Cowtown and Farmer Brown! They won straight up. Gurley is a beast and Fitzpatrick was mostly flawless. I thought Baker looked good in his first playoff game. I just wish he got a chance at the end there." – Budapest coach, **Darrin Jones**



HAPPY FAN



titter

ANGRY FAN



Orville Smucker @Smuckerscoop
 It is 10:45 pm in Budapest Myrna, past my bed time, but I feel like it is the afternoon. Very strange! Must be the goulash.



Attila Hun@AttilaHunBWGoulash
 Strange name for a great warrior: Gurley. He is, in truth, manly in his prowess.



Cowtown 28 Budapest 22



	1	2	3	4	5	F
Cowtown	3	10	3	6	6	28
Budapest	3	9	0	10	0	22

* Playoff * 02-16-2020 Ferenc Liszt Int'l Temp:41 Wind:0-5 None No Line MVP:Fitzpatric

1	10:56	Cowtown	FG	Bryant 39 (9-54-4:00)	3-0
1	5:14	Budapest	FG	Myers 45 (9-48-5:38)	3-3
2	11:16	Budapest	TD	Mayfield 34 pass to Watkins (no good) (7-80-3:58)	3-9
2	7:10	Cowtown	TD	Gurley II 7 run (Bryant,M) (8-75-4:06)	10-9
2	1:42	Budapest	FG	Myers 30 (10-62-5:15)	10-12
2	0:02	Cowtown	FG	Bryant 30 (8-63-1:37)	13-12
3	8:14	Cowtown	FG	Bryant 50 (9-49-4:59)	16-12
4	14:55	Budapest	FG	Myers 50 (7-31-1:59)	16-15
4	12:27	Cowtown	TD	Fitzpatrick 29 pass to Burton (no good) (4-75-2:28)	22-15
4	7:33	Budapest	TD	Mayfield 35 pass to Watkins (Myers,J) (8-75-4:54)	22-22
5	12:08	Cowtown	TD	Fitzpatrick 5 run	28-22

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Fitzpatrick	28	18	312	4	0	1	4	114.0
	28	18	312	4	0	1	4	114.0

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Mayfield	29	23	323	2	0	2	3	136.1
	29	23	323	2	0	2	3	136.1

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Gurley II	17	110	6.5	4	2	41	1
Fitzpatrick	4	31	7.8	3	1	20	1
Powell	5	27	5.4	0	0	7	0
	26	168	6.5	7	3	41	2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Johnson	16	68	4.3	2	1	11	0
Davis	6	18	3.0	2	0	9	0
Mayfield	2	2	1.0	2	0	1	0
Sproles	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	25	88	3.5	6	1	11	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Burton	6	0	8	81	13.5	5	1	29	1
Humphries	5	0	6	76	15.2	4	0	20	0
Gurley II	4	0	6	72	18.0	2	2	37	0
Evans	3	1	6	83	27.7	3	1	39	0
	18	1	26	312	17.3	14	4	39	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Diggs,S	8	0	10	91	11.4	4	0	16	0
Kittle	6	0	7	89	14.8	5	0	22	0
Johnson	3	0	4	34	11.3	1	0	13	0
Watkins	3	0	4	85	28.3	3	2	35	2
Reed	2	0	2	19	9.5	1	0	10	0
Moncrief	1	0	1	5	5.0	0	0	5	0
Sproles	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	23	0	29	323	14.0	14	2	35	2

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Smith	0	1	0
	0	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Mayfield	1	0	0
	1	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Johnson,D	1	23	23.0	23	0
	1	23	23.0	23	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Thompson	2	41	20.5	21	0
Ozigbo	1	28	28.0	28	0
Sherels	1	3	3.0	3	0
	4	72	18.0	28	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Humphries	0	1	0	0.0	0	0
	0	1	0	0.0	0	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Sherels	2	0	14	7.0	8	0
	2	0	14	7.0	8	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Bryant	3-3	50	1-2	10

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Myers	3-4	50	1-2	10

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Hekker	3	141	47.0	1	1	0	54

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Sanchez	1	49	49.0	0	1	0	49

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Smith	9	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Darby	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Talib	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Watt	5	0	0	2	2	0	0-0
Coleman	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Harrison Sr	4	1	0	2	0	0	0-0
Addae	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Dareus	2	1	0	0	1	1	0-0
Mayowa	2	0	1	1	0	0	0-0
Kerrigan	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Johnson,D	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hand	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Long	1	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Davis III	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Quin	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	56	3	3	5	3	1	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
David	7	1	0	1	0	0	0-0
Jack	7	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Fitzpatrick	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thomas	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
McKinney	4	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Campbell	3	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Diggs,Q	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Desir	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Winovich	2	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jordan	1	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Robey-Coleman	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Pierre	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Kendricks	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Woods	0	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
	47	4	3	2	1	0	0-0



RYAN FITZPATRICK
COWTOWN

18 of 28, 312 yards, 1 TD, 31 rush yds, 1 TD. Scrambled for O.T. win.

Team Stats

	Cowtown	Budapest
First Downs	21	21
Rushes	26-168	25-88
Passes	28-18-312	29-23-323
Sacked	4-26	3-15
Fumble	0	1
Penalties	1-5	0-0
Turnovers	0	1
Missed Tackles	4	7
Dropped Passes	1	0
Bad Passes	1	0
Passes 25+	4	2
Runs 10+	3	1
Blitzers	25	7
Time	31:09	31:43
Third Down	4-10	5-10
Fourth Down	0-0	0-0
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/2/1	2/0/1
Net Offense	454	396



18

Toronto



15

Aurora

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Rodgers	21	28	243	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Barkley	17	49	2.9	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Barkley	9	105	11.7	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Toronto	10	7	7	0	-	24
Aurora	7	10	7	10	-	34

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Ryan	27	40	378	4
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Zenner	8	54	6.8	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Adams	11	158	14.4	2

Play of the Game
 3rd Quarter, 2nd & 10 at Toronto 49 following filed onside kick attempt by Toronto. **Kenyan Drake** snags a screen pass and takes it 49 yards to the house for the tying score.

MUSTANGS' CHARGE CONTINUES!

MATT RYAN THROWS FOR 378 YARDS, DAVANTE ADAMS 2 TD CATCHES

SUMMARY: After winning both in-season contests, the Mustangs aimed to complete the trifecta and avenge getting knocked out last year by knocking out their upstart rivals. Toronto hoped to make up for two very close losses with a big road upset. They got off to a good start. Safety, **Shawn Williams** picked off **Matt Ryan** on the game's opening drive and returned it to the Aurora 30. That set up a daring 4th & 1 21-yard long slant to **Tyreek Hill** for the game's first score. Aurora came back, with Ryan finding **Julian Edelman** open on the sideline for a 29-yard TD to tie it. Toronto put together a scrappy 49-yard drive that earned them a 44-yard **Adam Vinatieri** FG and a 10-7 lead. The Mustangs tested the ground game and went three-and-out. On Toronto's ensuing possession, **Saquon Barkley** snared a first-play medium hitch from **Aaron Rodgers** and scooted for a 65-yard play to the Aurora 2-yard line. Three plays later, Barkley finished it off with a 3-yard TD run for a 17-7 Toronto lead. A holding penalty on the kickoff backed Aurora up at their 7. They busted out and drew closer with a 46-yard FG by **Wil Lutz**. Toronto looked to extend their lead, but after a promising start to the drive ran into penalty trouble and a stout Aurora defensive line and were forced to punt. **Lachlan Edwards** pinned the Mustangs at their 1-yard line. The Mustangs went for broke, throwing deep from their end zone on the first two drop backs and hitting a 22-yard long slant to **Davante Adams** on the second for breathing room. Four plays later they gambled on 4th & 1 at their own 32. **Zach Zenner** somehow broke through a stacked Toronto line for 6 yards to keep the drive alive. From there, the Mustangs could not be stopped. Four straight completions finished with a 13-yard hitch to Adams in the end zone to tie the game at the half. Toronto started the 3rd with the ball and drove 62 yards for a TD on a 5-yard **Latavius Murray** run. But a failed surprise onside kick gave Aurora the ball at mid-field then a 49-yard screen to **Kenyan Drake** tied the game at 24. Two Toronto punts and an Aurora turnover on downs kept the score deadlocked until mid-way through the 4th quarter, when Adams beat a double team to score the game-winning TD on a 16-yard out pass from Ryan. The Aurora D took over from there and stymied the Wolverines the rest of the way.

QUOTES: "You have to go for it against a team like the Mustangs. You have to go for it!" – Toronto coach, **Ryan Preston** when questioned about the surprise onside kick attempt after taking the lead that failed and set up the big Aurora screen pass for the tying TD.

"Hey, I do crazy stuff like that all the time. Sometimes you have to be really bold. I kind of admire it, actually. But yes, I'm glad we got it back and I think it turned the momentum back in our favour." – Aurora coach, **Rich Liotta**, when asked about Toronto's failed surprise onside kick attempt.



HAPPY FAN



titter

ANGRY FAN



Max 'Mini' Dood @M-DTorMoon
 @Preston has explaining to do the MSM, but he doesn't have to explain it to the faithful. We get it and we love the #onside kick try!



James Duthie @efljamesduthie
 Did not feel like a 10-point win. It felt like they gave it back to us. Always a few extra nerves when playing TO.



Toronto 24 Aurora 34



	1	2	3	4	F
Toronto	10	7	7	0	24
Aurora	7	10	7	10	34

* Playoff * 02-16-2020 Magna Park Temp:49 Wind:0-5 None No Line MVP:Ryan HFA:

1	10:02	Toronto	TD	Rodgers 21 pass to Hill (Vinatieri) (4-30-2:09)	7-0
1	7:25	Aurora	TD	Ryan 29 pass to Edelman (Lutz) (4-61-2:30)	7-7
1	2:46	Toronto	FG	Vinatieri 44 (8-49-4:33)	10-7
2	14:53	Toronto	TD	Barkley 3 run (Vinatieri) (4-67-1:10)	17-7
2	9:04	Aurora	FG	Lutz 46 (10-65-5:33)	17-10
2	1:11	Aurora	TD	Ryan 13 pass to Adams (Lutz) (10-99-4:39)	17-17
3	8:39	Toronto	TD	Murray 5 run (Vinatieri) (10-62-6:08)	24-17
3	8:01	Aurora	TD	Ryan 49 pass to Drake (Lutz) (2-49-0:27)	24-24
4	7:11	Aurora	TD	Ryan 16 pass to Adams (Lutz) (9-80-4:41)	24-31
4	1:49	Aurora	FG	Lutz 30 (8-48-3:26)	24-34

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Rodgers	28	21	243	1	0	1	3	112.6
	28	21	243	1	0	1	3	112.6

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Ryan	40	27	378	2	1	4	0	120.6
	40	27	378	2	1	4	0	120.6

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Barkley	17	49	2.9	3	0	9	1
Murray	5	20	4.0	2	1	10	1
Rodgers	1	4	4.0	1	0	4	0
	23	73	3.2	6	1	10	2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Zenner	8	54	6.8	4	2	14	0
Drake	7	41	5.9	3	3	14	0
Collage	3	28	9.3	1	1	28	0
Singletary	1	1	1.0	0	0	1	0
Ryan	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	27	124	4.6	8	6	28	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Barkley	9	0	9	105	11.7	3	1	65	0
Thielen	5	0	8	61	12.2	4	0	16	0
Hill	3	0	6	50	16.7	3	0	21	1
Griffin	2	0	2	13	6.5	0	0	9	0
Murray	1	0	1	6	6.0	0	0	6	0
Roberts	1	0	2	8	8.0	0	0	8	0
	21	0	28	243	11.6	10	1	65	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Adams	11	0	18	158	14.4	9	0	22	2
Edelman	6	0	7	85	14.2	3	1	29	1
Drake	4	0	5	70	17.5	2	1	49	1
Wilson	3	0	5	46	15.3	2	0	23	0
Roelofse	1	0	3	8	8.0	0	0	8	0
Hewitt	1	0	1	1	1.0	0	0	1	0
Williams,T	1	0	1	10	10.0	1	0	10	0
	27	0	40	378	14.6	17	2	49	4

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
	0	0	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
	0	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Harris	4	100	25.0	35	0
	4	100	25.0	35	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Coleman	3	76	25.3	30	0
Singletary	1	38	38.0	38	0
Sowell	1	0	0.0	0	0
	5	114	22.8	38	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Harris	0	1	0	0.0	0	0
	0	1	0	0.0	0	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Edelman	1	0	17	17.0	17	0
	1	0	17	17.0	17	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Vinatieri	1-1	44	3-3	6

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Lutz	2-2	46	4-4	10

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Edwards	5	226	45.2	0	4	0	67

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Koch	1	39	39.0	0	0	0	39

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Williamson	10	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Carr	9	0	5	0	0	0	0-0
Ramsey	7	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Hilton	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Weddle	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Vigil	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Smith	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Williams,K	2	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Barron	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jefferson	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams,S	1	0	1	0	0	0	1-30
Graham	1	0	0	0	3	0	0-0
Allen	1	0	0	1	2	0	0-0
Charlton	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Lawson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	52	0	8	3	7	0	1-30

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Reddick	9	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Woodyard	7	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
McCourty	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Davenport	5	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Watt	3	1	0	1	3	0	0-0
Peterson	3	0	3	0	0	0	0-0
Thompson,S	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams,K	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ward,C	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Roberts	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Oryemata	1	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Norman	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Brown,P	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thompson,T	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Davison	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thomas	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Westbrooks	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Autry	0	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
	49	3	5	4	6	0	0-0



27 of 40, 378 yds, 4 TDs. Delivered tying and game-winning TD passes in 2nd half.

	Toronto	Aurora
First Downs	16	25
Rushes	23-73	20-124
Passes	28-21-243	40-27-378
Sacked	3-28	0-0
Fumble	0	0
Penalties	2-15	1-6
Turnovers	0	1
Missed Tackles	4	5
Dropped Passes	0	0
Bad Passes	2	1
Passes 25+	1	2
Runs 10+	1	6
Blitzers	15	7
Time	29:45	30:15
Third Down	4-12	4-10
Fourth Down	1-1	1-2
Red Att/Td/Fg	2/2/0	4/2/1
Net Offense	288	502



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – I have been a critical S.O.B. over the years when it comes to the preliminary rounds of the EFL playoffs but after this weekend I am putting my sardonic humour on the backburner. We were treated to four gripping contests that each played out to their rightful finishes in different ways. As a bonus, with one notable exception, the referees went entirely unnoticed this weekend.

JOHNSON COUNTY LAW

Football Sunday at Joe Ferguson Stadium: A community tradition that, to all appearances, stretches back much farther than the 13 years of the Cubs' existence to at least the Howard Jones Era of Iowa Hawkeyes football.

A typical wide angle shot of the crowd on a typical game day will show great numbers of men in straw hats, plaid-print shirts and overalls; women wearing floppy sun hats, puffy-sleeved white dresses or high-waisted sailor pants for a more "modern" look; young boys sporting engineer hats, knickers with suspenders and young girls in black Mary Jane shoes dressed a lot like their mothers. It is not uncommon for large families to occupy entire rows, with one or two seats reserved for the giant wicker picnic baskets and gallon-sized Thermos Jumbo Jugs of lemonade for the half time luncheon. Joe Ferguson Stadium is the only EFL park to allow families to bring their own food into the stadium. In keeping with the Prohibition roots of the Iowa family football outing, no alcohol is allowed; however, *Budweiser* – a popular staple of the Iowa football set – is on tap at the concession stands along with a few local brews.

Interspersed with the country folk unchanged by decades of technological progress are the so-called modern Iowans – the "city slickers" from Des Moines, Cedar Rapids and the tiny 21st century enclaves popping up in select neighbourhoods in Iowa City itself. These are the people with smart phones and Apple Air Pods; the hipster pioneers of Des Moines, the techies and artists who are tired of, or who cannot afford, New York and Silicon Valley. Add in guests, curious tourists or traveling fans of the visiting team, and you have a pretty eclectic football game-day crowd for a State like Iowa.

For Saturday's Quarter Finals game between the Cubs and the Bombers, picture all of the above (in appropriate winter wear) and the occasional inappropriately dressed and inebriated Belgian crammed to capacity in sturdy but austere Joe Ferguson Stadium on a cold, sunny and oddly windless afternoon. As far as outdoor winter football goes, it was a perfect day.

The crowd was excited and apparently united. But it was a fragile unity between diverse and opposing groups. The dynamic is easy for an outside to miss. Diversity in Iowa is generational and socio-economic, as opposed to racial, religious or sexual orientation based. With 90% of the population white and 99% Protestant, Catholic or non-practising; age, class and social status are paramount factors in separating Iowans into rival factions that include two distinct Cubs factions. Beat writer **Sparky McGillicuddy** of *The Iowan* speaks primarily for the rural class and Cubs' management; while **Archibald Thacker** of the *Des Moines Register* reflects the view of the majority of the urban, white collar city class, who are impatient for a championship.

In Iowa, county hierarchies are distinct. The state is like a confederation of counties, each with its own strictly-enforced county-based laws. For native Iowans, crossing a county line is not unlike crossing a state or national border. And all native Iowans are acutely aware that when they attend a Cubs game at Joe Ferguson Stadium, they are subject to Johnson County Law. And in Johnson County, Judge **Tiberius Hogg** and Sheriff **Bucephelus Lafayette** rule the roost.

Johnson County Law is the reason I cannot attend a Cubs game in Iowa. The warrant for my arrest, issued 11 years ago by Sheriff Lafayette for breaching the anachronistic *Public Etiquette Act*, remains in force. For those who don't know, I earned the enmity of the Johnson County Sheriff back in Week 13 of 2009 after publishing a scathing criticism of the Cubs' game plan in a 37-17 loss to Florida that same week. The rematch of the Championship Game of 2008 had been hyped to the max and the Cubs fell embarrassingly flat. I called it as I saw it (as usual) and now I am *persona non grata* in Johnson County and most of the State of Iowa. Johnson County has neither forgotten nor forgiven my original transgression. In fact, they monitor my column and keep adding citations to the warrant every time I criticize the Cubs. I am up to well over two-dozen charges now.

Many of my sympathetic readers have encouraged me to go to Iowa City and fight the warrant. "*You are innocent and you have constitutional rights!*" they tell me. Ah, my naïve friends, read on and you will see exactly why I do not dare travel to Johnson County to assert my rights.

My pre-game read on this match-up saw the Cubs winning and going on to face either Twin Cities or Virden in the

Conference Championship; where I fully expected them to fall again, one step away from the Final, against whoever they faced. But the Cubs deprived me of the satisfaction of another accurate prognosis by...well...being the Cubs and losing in overtime, 41-38.

Possibly to add fire to the bellies of his players, at the prompting of his minder and team psychologist, **Dr. Rodney Alberhasky Jr.**, coach **Deron Redding** dressed his team in their rarely-used “third” uniform – an all-red outfit that makes the big linemen look like two-legged tomatoes and the rest of the players like bipedal red hot chilli peppers. The psychological boost seemed to help **Joe Mixon** and **Russell Wilson**, who both put in good days, but had a negligible effect on everyone else. Or perhaps seeing nothing but bright red in front of them turned the Bombers into raging bulls. Whatever the reason, the Bombers held the initiative for the better part of the game.

After fumbling the opening kickoff and surrendering a quick touchdown to the tag-team running duo of Mixon and **James Conner**, the Bombers stabilized by getting **Marlon Mack** into the game and holding the ball for over 7 minutes. The 15-play drive resulted in a simple field goal, but it put a pounding on the Cubs’ defence that they felt for the rest of the game.

A Conner fumble on the Cubs’ next series set a another Bruxelles field goal and an interception of Wilson by linebacker **Anthony Walker** on the first play of the second quarter set up a third to give the Bombers a 9-7 lead. This lowered the noise level in the stadium, as the previously boisterous and confident home fans paused to assess the situation. Back-to-back turnovers had reversed the momentum of their team’s fast start, but at least the Cubs had limited the Bombers to field goals instead of touchdowns.

The Cubs’ offence responded with a possession drive of their own, mixing in hard running by Mixon with a pair of first down scrambles by Wilson to reach the Bruxelles’ 12-yard line. But a 10-yard sack of Wilson by **Jarrad Davis** followed by a holding penalty on **Weston Richburg** pushed the Cubs back and forced them to eventually settle for a 40-yard **Justin Tucker** field goal.

The Cubs had the lead again, but not for long. On the first play of the ensuing possession, Marcus Mariota launched a deep ball on target to **Chris Godwin** for a 50-yard gain. Three plays later, Mack followed a block by right tackle, **Garett Bolles** and cut inside a lurching **B.J. Hill** to find the end zone from 5-yards out. Bruxelles had broken the seal on the Iowa goal line and led 16-10.

The halftime communal picnic revived the sagging spirits of Iowa fans; while the sight of Johnson County Deputies manhandling an intoxicated Bomber fan who had stripped down to his underwear brought hoots of laughter and the occasional flying hotdog from the crowd. The fan – who had a picture of an improvised explosive device tattooed on his forehead – was deemed a “security threat” in addition to being drunk. This was reported by the Sergeant who had overseen the arrest to Sheriff Lafayette, who was sitting next to Judge **Tiberius Hogg** in the front row at the 50-yard line. Hearing this, the portly Judge immediately set aside his platter of jumbo franks and issued a general arrest warrant for all Bombers fans in attendance. He was only held back from issuing warrants for the Bombers players and staff as well by the intervention of Iowa City Mayor, **Jim Throgmorton**.

When the general arrest warrant was announced on the P.A., rowdy Cubs fans joined the Sheriff’s Deputies in rounding up the few hapless Belgians and Samoans in attendance as well as the odd American and native Iowan who, for whatever reason, had decided to cheer for the Bombers and wear their paraphernalia. It wasn’t a large contingent – a county news release later proudly proclaimed, ‘168 terrorists arrested at Cubs game’ – but it was enough of a job for the 200-odd Deputies and Stadium Security to handle that the start of the second half was delayed.

When play resumed, the Cubs took possession and promptly punted after running three shaky-looking plays. Wilson was sacked on third down to push them back inside their own red zone. The Bombers took over with good field position and, behind the churning legs of Mack, ploughed up field for another touchdown. Mariota zipped a ball in to Godwin just over the goal line from 5-yards away and **Leonard Fournette** followed up with 2-yard run for the two-point conversion to make it 24-10. The home fans started to grumble. Scattered boos could be heard. A few Iowa fans began to chant “*lock them up!*” in reference to the Bombers players. Judge Hogg, suddenly aware of the TV cameras trained on him, held back.

The Cubs got the ball back, but deep in their territory at the 9. They responded with more of Mixon; four straight runs and a 21-yard screen to the young running back to put them near mid-field. A 16-yard completion to **Christian Kirk** put them into Bombers’ territory then a great individual play by **A.J. Brown** got them in the end zone. The rookie took a simple short hitch, made a move on **Fabian Moreau**, and turned on the jets for a 40-yard score. It was exactly what the Cubs needed. The fans rose to their feet. Cubs’ super-fan, Iowa Joe blew his red plastic horn while stomping up and down the sidelines, exhorting the fans to be even louder. All was well.

Temporarily well, that is. Mariota went straight back to work, hitting his main man, **Travis Kelce** for gains of 15 and 16 yards. Then two carries by Mack pulled the Cubs out of a pass defence posture and set up a long fly to Godwin for a 32-yard touchdown. The Bombers were back in front by two touchdowns, 31-17 and Judge Hogg could be seen conferring urgently with the Mayor and Sheriff in the front row behind the Cubs’ sideline.

The long TD to Godwin touched off a wild fourth quarter that saw the Cubs strike back with a 14-yard TD pass to **Tyler Lockett**; the Bombers respond with a 55-yard run by Mack to set up a 15-yard TD pass to Kelce; then the Cubs pull back within one touchdown with an 11-play, 81-yard drive, capped off by an 8-yard draw for a TD by Mixon.

Down by 7 points with 3:17 left, the Cubs desperately needed a stop and the Bombers needed a first down. Never one to play it safe, **Kenny Main** opened this critical series with a call for a pass over the middle to his best receiver, Kelce. But the Cubs did not sell out to stop the run as might have been anticipated and Mariota was forced to throw the ball into no man’s land. Then a holding penalty on Kelce backed up the Bombers to their own 15-yard line. The crowd cheered loudly as Mariota set up under center



Ryan the 'mano' **Fitzpatrick** runs through a tackle by **Nickel Robey-Coleman** on his way to the end zone for the game-winning TD in overtime at Budapest's Ferenc-Liszt International Airport Stadium. In a game that drew a great deal of attention in Hungary, the North Stars battled hard but in the end were unable to stop Corn Kings playmakers, Fitzpatrick, **Todd Gurley** and **Mike Evans**.

facing 3rd and 20. A screen to **Chris Thompson** picked up 9 yards, not enough for a first down, and the clock stopped at the two-minute warning. While not the worst-case scenario for Bruxelles, punting away from their own 24 with two minutes and two Iowa timeouts remaining was less than ideal, especially with **Russell Wilson** about to get the ball.

It did not take long for the Cubs to make the most of their opportunity. Starting at their own 27, working out of a four-wide set, Mixon ran for 10 yards and Wilson scrambled for 11. Wilson then tossed the ball to Lockett at around the same 5-yard spot beyond the line of scrimmage where he had thrown Brown's TD pass. With the Bombers doubling Brown on the play, Lockett went man-to-man against Fuller and beat him soundly, racing 52 yards for a touchdown. Tucker came on and made the extra point to tie the game.

The crowd at Joe Ferguson went berserk. The stadium shook. Iowa Joe sprinted up and down the field like a jackrabbit. Judge Hogg and Sheriff Lafayette rose unsteadily to their feet. Not only were both men rather large, they had each devoured no less than a half dozen jumbo franks and downed several 24-oz King-sized *Buds*. They swayed and their florid jowls jiggled as they clapped their hands and grinned in satisfaction.

The only fear remaining on the Cubs' sideline was that they had scored too quickly. They had left 0:51 on the clock and Bruxelles had all of their timeouts. More than enough time to get into field goal range. The crowd indeed went quiet as **Marquez Valdes-Scantling** galloped for 20 yards to the Bombers' 45 on a jet sweep to start the counter-drive. Two incomplete passes followed, but on 3rd and 10 Mariota threaded the needle to Kelce who plucked the ball out of the air between two defenders at the Cubs' 39-yard line and turned upfield. But as he twisted, safety **Corey Graham** punched the ball out and it was picked up by corner **Nate Hairston**, who was promptly smothered at the Cubs' 42-yard line.

Again, the crowd at Joe Ferguson erupted in jubilation. With 0:12 on the clock and two timeouts remaining, it was possible to get into Tucker's field goal range under the gun. With a magician like Wilson at the helm, it even seemed likely. But there would be no more miracles for the Cubs on this day. A check-down to **Keke Coutee** netted 5 yards and forced Iowa to call a timeout with 1-second left. The Hail Mary attempt came up short and the gun sounded to signal the end of regulation.

The Bombers won the toss and elected to take the ball. They started at their own 11 after the now fumble-conscious **Tremon Smith** tiptoed for an 11-yard kickoff return. After two uninspired plays, the Bombers faced 3rd & 9 deep in their own end. They needed a play and they got it. Kelce settled into a hole in the zone and Mariota fired on target for a 13-yard gain. The rattled Cub's defence

looked off balance and confused from that point on. Thompson ripped off an 18-yard gain on a screen pass then he and Mack combined for 24 more yards on three carries to the Iowa City 33. **Kerryon Johnson** came on and added 6 more yards on a run and a catch to bring up 3rd & 4 at the Cubs' 27. Looking to get closer and keep the ball out of Wilson's hands for good. Mariota dropped back to pass, but **Jason Pierre-Paul** put an end to any hope of a first drive touchdown with a 9-yard sack, knocking back the Bombers to the Cubs' 36.

It was by no means an easy decision, but Coach Main did not take long to think about it. He sent **Matt Prater** out to make the 54-yard attempt. With the crowd bellowing at the top of its lungs, Prater stepped into the kick and sent it sailing high and to the right. The crowd in the end zone began to cheer as the kick appeared to be sailing wide. But at the halfway point it started to curl back, sneaking over the bar a few inches inside the right post. For the moment, the Bombers had the lead. But they would have to withstand Russell the Magician in order to escape Johnson County with a win.

Having been burned for two big plays, one of them to tie the game and put them into this mess, the Bruxelles' secondary rallied. Led by **Kyle Fuller**, they blanketed the Cubs' receivers on the next two plays, forcing Wilson to check down for gains of 6 and 1 yards and bringing up 3rd & 3. Seeing that his receivers were struggling, Redding sent in a play that seemed to catch Wilson by surprise. (Wilson can be seen on tape pausing and looking at the sideline before entering the huddle). It may have surprised Wilson, but it did not surprise **Chris Jones**, who sniffed out the jet sweep and knifed through the line to stuff Kirk for a 4-yard loss.

The crowd gasped. The odd boo could be heard coming from the cheap seats. The play had been poorly executed and had been blown up early. But there was no time to dwell on the failure. It was now 4th & Elimination for the Cubs' offence and the crowd quickly turned to rabid cheering again before quieting down so that Wilson's signals could be heard.

Standing in the shotgun, Wilson took the snap and surveyed the field. There was nobody open. He started to tuck it under but caught sight of linebacker **Jarrad Davis** stalking him. Kirk came open for an instant as he came back toward the line. Wilson drilled it to him, complete, but before he could turn up field he was wrapped up and thrown to the ground by **Harrison Smith**, 2 yards short of the first down. The crowd went silent as everyone from the Cubs' trainer to little Billy-Bob Kettle from Adams County in the nose bleed seats searched the field for a yellow flag. But the zebras held firm. It had been textbook coverage and a textbook tackle by the All-Pro, Smith.

The Bombers celebrated. Their fans in holding cells throughout Johnson County celebrated with them – at least those within earshot of the guard's radio. Those who had escaped the dragnet dared not make any sound of joy, for fear of being locked up. It was an eerie scene; so quiet that everyone was able to hear the booming voice of Judge **Tiberius Hogg** as he ambled toward the field of play after having been helped out of his seat by a phalanx of Sheriff's Deputies.

"HOLD ON NOW! NOT SO FAST NOW!" he bellowed in a raspy baritone ravaged by a day of whooping it up for the Cubs. **"WHO'S THE REFEREE IN CHARGE HERE?"** he demanded. **"IDENTIFY YOURSELF IN THE NAME OF JOHNSON COUNTY LAW!"**

Bill Vinovich, the referee, stepped forward and raised his hand. "Bill Vinovich here," he said, unsure of who he was addressing, but certain that the presence of half a dozen burly Deputies escorting him meant that the portly gentleman was an authority of some kind who best be heard out.

"THERE'S JUST OVER SEVEN MINUTES LEFT ON THAT CLOCK, MR. VINICH!" Judge Hogg howled, pointing up at the game clock that read 7:08. **"THE GAME IS NOT OVER!"**

"Pardon me, who are you?" Vinovich asked politely.

"I AM JUDGE TIBERIUS HOGG OF JOHNSON COUNTY AND I AM THE LAW AROUND THESE PARTS!" he roared. **"NOW GET THESE PLAYERS BACK IN ORDER SO THAT WE CAN PUNT THE DAMN BALL BACK TO THOSE SONS-OF-BITCHES TERRORISTS!"**

"But Judge Hogg, according to the rules, the game is officially over," Vinovich protested gently.

The composed and confident manner of the referee's reply infuriated the Judge even more: **"I MAKE THE GOD-DAMNED RULES AROUND HERE, BOY!"** he thundered. **"AND I KNOW WHAT I HEARD. YOU SAID AT THE START THAT THEY WOULD PLAY A 15-MINUTE OVERTIME PERIOD!"**

"Yes, but I also said..." Vinovich began, before he was interrupted.

"YOU ADMIT IT! GOOD! I HEREBY DECLARE A COURT INJUNCTION TO PREVENT THE GAME FROM ENDING!" he proclaimed in his most authoritative tone. **"GET ON WITH THE GAME MR. VINICH, OR I'LL HAVE MY BOYS HERE ARREST YOU AND YOUR ENTIRE CREW FOR DISOBEYING A COURT ORDER!"**

Faced with arrest and not wanting to experience, even for a short period, a Johnson County jail cell, Vinovich directed the players back to their respective sidelines and announced over the P.A. that, in contravention of the rules of the Elite Football League but in compliance with a Court Order, the game would continue until such order was lifted or the time remaining in the overtime period elapsed.

Confusion reigned. CBS had cut way for a long commercial break just before the appearance of Judge Hogg on the field. When coverage returned, play-by-play announcer **Spero Dedes** tried as best he could to update viewers:

"We have a strange development on the field," he explained. "A local judge has, I am told, issued a Court Injunction to keep the game going here at Joe Ferguson Stadium. I don't know what to make of this Boom Boom and I'm sure you don't either," he said

turning to his booth partner, **Boom Boom Sinuson**.

"I'm dumbfounded, Spero," Sinuson replied. "I've never heard of this before."

At first, coach **Kenny Main** refused to order his players back to their sideline. "What f*&king bullsh*t is this?" he was caught by a field mic saying to Referee Vinovich. But following an explanation, that no doubt included a reminder that the Judge had successfully locked up all known Bombers fans at the stadium that day, he acquiesced and called his players back.

A half-hearted series followed, with Mack carrying the ball three times, covering it with both hands and Prater attempting – and missing – a 56-yard field goal. The fans still in the stands cheered the miss and began to gear up for the Cubs' second attempt to tie the game or take the lead. But as the Cubs' offence started to take the field, Sheriff **Bucephelus Lafayette** stepped on to the field and called over Referee Vinovich. After a brief discussion, Vinovich signalled the teams to return to their benches and announced over the PA that the game was indeed over.

It turns out that the Mayor of Iowa City had offered a more sober assessment of the situation to Judge Hogg. He had convinced the Judge to lift the Court Order before somebody got hurt in a game that the league would treat as illegal anyway. Since the league was based on Ohio, and not in Johnson County, the Judge had no jurisdiction over the result of the game. Plus, it would not be the first time the Cubs had been knocked out of the playoffs early and it would not be the last. Why start a big controversy?

And so now you see, my faithful readers, why I do not dare step foot in Johnson County.

So, despite having the deck stacked against them, the Bombers advance to the Conference Finals for the third time in their history. A team that looked dominant, pathetic and everything in-between during the regular season took it to the favoured Cubs on the Cubs' home turf. But, unlike most of the Cubs' losses, I am not ready to dump on the coach here, although **Archibald Thacker** is already howling about the jet sweep to Kirk being another choke moment for the beleaguered **Deron Redding**.

It is hard to pinpoint exactly what went wrong for Iowa City in this game, but a few things stand out to me: First, weakness on the edges of the Cubs' offensive line was glaringly obvious against the Bruxelles pass rush. **Chris Jones** was too much for second-year left tackle **Braden Smith** to handle and the combination of **Kenny Clark** and **Terrell Suggs** made life hell for converted center, **Weston Richburg** at right tackle. **Russell Wilson** was under siege most of the day and a lesser quarterback would have wilted under the pressure. As it stood, Wilson made some mistakes he would not have made had he been given more time to throw.

Second, the lack of depth at wide receiver hampered the offence. Despite making one of the great plays of the game to tie it with 0:52 left, **Tyler Lockett** was not a regular factor in the Cubs' attack going up against **Kyle Fuller**. Wilson was forced to turn to the likes of **Christian Kirk** and **Keke Coutee** (*Keke, who he?*) and, not surprisingly, they couldn't get the job done.

Third, the Cubs defence basically ignored **Marlon Mack**, causing the Bombers' powerful halfback to run over them to the tune of 198 yards and a touchdown. This revival of Bruxelles' running fortunes allowed a team that had been struggling offensively in the last few weeks of the season to post 520 yards of offence and rack up 41 points. Not to take anything away from Mack – he took what was given him and then some – but a commitment to stop the run would have put more pressure on **Marcus Mariota** and possibly forced an error.

So, Johnson County Deputy reading this column to see if another charge is warranted: I am trying to be nice to the Cubs here. I kind of wish they would win one, okay? They've been a good team for too long and deserve better. See? I'm really a nice guy and I promise to write a nice column about your city if I am allowed to visit and finally take in a Cubs' game at Joe Ferguson Stadium. I'm not worse than **Archibald Thacker** and he remains a free man. Come on guys....

MANO Á MAN

Hungarian folklore speaks of the '*mano*' – tiny woodland spirits who live in the trees, eat acorns and care for wounded animals. In English we call them gnomes. We find them appealing mostly for their long beards and pointed red hats. What they do with their time is detailed exhaustively in a best-selling book entitled, '*Gnomes*,' by author, **Wil Huygen** – a coffee table fixture for many families in the mid-seventies and, unbelievably, still available. Nowhere is it noted in the book that gnomes play football.

It was with the above image in mind, however, that the people of Cowtown affectionately dubbed **Ryan Fitzpatrick**, the 'Gnome of Tillman Field.' He had the beard and, with the arrival of winter, a tall pointed toque as well. It was a green & yellow toque, instead of the classic gnome red, but it was enough to make the nickname stick and carry across the ocean to Hungary, where the Budapest TV sports comedy duo of **Balint & Barnat** roughly translated it as '*mano mezo kokurica*,' or "gnome of the corn field." This was shortened to '*mano*' and it caused great hilarity among the tiny group of developing *football cognoscenti* in Budapest.

That Hungarians found the Cowtown quarterback's nickname greatly amusing went straight over the heads of the Corn Kings and the small group of their fans who made the trek to Central Europe to watch their team compete in the quarter finals as a division-winner for the first time since 2011. (The team had made the playoffs five times in the intervening 7 years, always as a wildcard). The bye was a welcome luxury and, for fans, an opportunity to turn the trip into a real vacation. When they heard Hungarians referring to Fitz as '*mano*,' they took it as a sign of respect – the Spanish term for 'Man' – even if they were confused by Hungarians using a Spanish word to describe an English American.

Baker Mayfield had used 2019 to establish himself as "The Man" in the North Stars locker room. His teammates enjoyed propping up the fiery sophomore, who was playing well but still showing signs of being a little wet behind the ears. The unofficial real "Man" in the North Stars' locker room, however, was **Calais Campbell**. His endorsement of Baker as a "winner" had made it easier for the young QB to build his burgeoning leadership credentials. North Stars fans in Budapest and beyond were buying into

the Baker as “The Man” motif.

Eager to legitimize the team’s move to Europe and build a new legacy around a rising star by claiming the ultimate prize, a Gale Sayers Trophy, North Stars’ brass did not discourage the hype around their young quarterback. Baker was delivering and handling pressure well. But how he would perform under the pressure of the playoffs was a question quietly burning in everyone’s minds. The growing, but fragile, wave of support for North American style football in Central Europe could break against the rocks of failure if Baker faltered against a team fans considered to be a weaker opponent in the Corn Kings. That their adversary was led by a ‘*mano*’ just made it seem more of a mismatch. In contrast, Cowtown fans saw this as a true ‘*mano à mano*’ contest between Mayfield and Fitz. Vet vs Rook. And they couldn’t understand why their Hungarian counterparts found it so dang funny.

The all or nothing nature of the playoffs mean there are no moral victories. One team loses and is quickly forgotten. Despite that, this game had plenty of meat for both sides to chew on to satisfy the urge for success. That truth will be small comfort to **Darrin Jones** and his North Stars, who wound up on the losing end of a tight overtime tilt between these former division foes. But the other truth is that, except for that magical finish in *Gale Sayers VI* that saw **Eli Manning** take down **Drew Brees** in Brees’ historic record-setting season, Jones’ North Stars have made honourable losses a franchise trademark. This was another one of those losses.

Honour in victory, however, was no consolation for the small, but rabidly drunk and riotous group of football fans named the ‘*Hun-Stars*,’ the fanatical Budapestians who make up the game-day core of the team’s support. The tension of the contest made their usual excesses that much more excessive and ended up causing Fitz to scramble for his life after scrambling for the game-winning touchdown. But more on that later.

The crowd at Ferenc-Liszt International Airport Stadium was, for the first time in history, crowded to over-capacity. This was due to the team allowing groups of tailgaters to remain on a portion of old tarmac at the south end of the stadium with an open view of the field. It was not a good view by any stretch, but the huge scoreboard at the opposite end of the field and a big screen erected in the middle of the “picnic area” carrying the live TV video stream allowed fans to track the game’s progress while enjoying free-flowing *Dreher*, scoffing down *Lángos*, *Kürtöskalács*, *Goulash* and washing it all down with generous shots of *Unicum*. The network was intrigued by this live tailgate and frequently panned the crowd on the tarmac. The atmosphere appeared convivial despite the copious amounts of beer drinking. It was in the stands, in the section opposite the southside 35-yard line behind the North Stars’ bench where most of the ‘*Hun-Stars*’ sat, where the problems began.

It was a crisp, but sunny day in Budapest with a light breeze having no noticeable effect on the temperature or game play. It was, in fact, a perfect day for football. The players did not disappoint.

Both teams opened with drives that started well, but stalled in enemy territory and ended with tit-for-tat field goals. **Calais Campbell** sacked **Ryan Fitzpatrick** on 3rd & 9 near the end of the 1st quarter. **Baker Mayfield** then ushered in the 2nd quarter with three straight completions, including a bullet deep down the sideline that **Sammy Watkins** hauled in for a 34-yard TD catch. The game’s opening touchdown caused the Budapest fans to celebrate with a gusto rarely seen or heard. When things were going well, the ‘*Hun-Stars*’ could be quite entertaining. Already shirtless, they hugged each other, dangled smaller fans upside down by their feet and poured beer on each other’s heads. This was in line with their typical touchdown celebrations but carried out with much more vigor.

Hardly anyone noticed **Jason Myers** missing the extra point. If they did, few cared. This felt like the beginning of a big victory for the home team. The ‘*mano*’ had been under pressure on every drop back and **Pierre Desir** was holding up well against deep threat **Mike Evans**. **Todd Gurley** had done nothing since breaking a 15-yard run on the game’s opening play. The Budapest defence was one of the best and the ‘*mano*’ was far away from his magic field across the ocean.

The North Stars indeed had the edge in the trenches. But the Corn Kings’ playmakers soon showed their stuff. On the next drive, Fitzpatrick found Gurley open in the flat. He danced away from **Myles Jack** and burst forward for a 26-yard gain. Fitz then fired a high throw on a slant to Evans that only the tall wide receiver could catch. Desir had good coverage but took himself out of the play leaping for the ball and Evans galloped to the sideline for a 20-yard gain. Two power runs by Gurley behind right tackle **Andre Dillard** finished off the 75-yard drive with a touchdown and the extra point by **Matt Bryant** put Cowtown in front 10-9. This silenced the crowd, at least temporarily.

As Baker took the field, the ‘*Hun-Stars*’ began their brutal war chant – a discordant, raw growling of the words “*Támadás! Levágás!*” meaning “attack and slaughter!” It was an attempt to recreate the terrifying war cries of the ancient Huns. Its authenticity was open for debate, but it did succeed in being a close second in fear factor to the *Screech of Terror*, yet to be deciphered, that filled the **TERRORDOME** in Virden when **Pat Mahomes** took the field.

‘*The Man*’ continued to wield a hot hand. He completed three of three on the Stars’ ensuing drive for 44 yards. But the drive was tripped up, literally, when the Corn Kings’ line held firm against what appeared to be a gimme first down scenario. **David Johnson** was stuffed for a loss by **TJ Watt** on 2nd and inches then **Mike Davis** was stoned for no gain on 3rd & 1 to bring up 4th down at the Cowtown 12. The ‘*Hun-Stars*’ clamoured for **Darrin Jones** to gamble. “*Szúrás!*” they bellowed, meaning “thrust forward!” But the **Tom Landry** disciple had seen enough. The Corn King defence was pumped up and, with 1:47 left in the first half, why risk coming up empty when he could grab the half time lead? Myers kicked the 30-yard field goal to give Budapest a 12-10 advantage.

The Corn Kings had used two of their timeouts on the final two plays of the Stars’ field goal drive. Starting at their 25 they needed a chunk play to stand any hope of getting into field goal range before time ticked away. They got what they needed. After

threading the needle to **Trey Burton** for a 17-yard pass play to open the drive, Fitzpatrick dodged the rush and flipped the ball to Gurley, who charged through the second level of the defence for a 37-yard gain to the Budapest 25-yard line. Fitzpatrick called his final timeout with 0:43 left. There was audible gasp from the crowd that, in retrospect, signalled a dawning awareness among the Budapest fans that the '*mano*' had some serious magic up his sleeve. As if to confirm it, Fitzpatrick eluded a charging **Cameron Jordan** on the next play and scampered for a 20-yard gain to the Budapest 5-yard line, where he spiked the ball with 0:24 remaining. On the next play, a blitzing **Lavonte David** almost saved the day with a 7-yard sack, but Fitz somehow managed to get to his feet and line-up the offence in time for a spike with 0:05 left. Bryant came on and drilled the 30-yard field goal for a 13-12 Cowtown lead.

With the game being televised across North America and Europe, Budapest Travel seized the opportunity to promote local culture. The half time show featured a troupe of Hungarian gypsy folk dancers stepping rapidly to a version of Brahms' Hungarian Dance no. 5 played by a traditional Cimbalom Band. I found it interesting, even if most of North America apparently tuned out for it.

When the game resumed, the '*Hun-Stars*,' having recovered their morale after drinking their faces off through half time, led the crowd in a bawling, ragged and incredibly loud singing of what was supposed to be the Hungarian National Anthem. Unlike in North America, there appeared to be no limit to how many beers the stadium authorities in Budapest allowed their patrons to drink or what type of behaviour they would allow. Some of the '*Hun-Stars*' were now pant-less, wearing nothing but bright orange underwear along with pointed fur-lined helmets. The rowdy *300 Spartans* of Thermopylae Stadium looked sober and responsible in comparison.

But the sound and fury of inebriated fanatics was not enough to immediately turn the tide in the home team's favour. The Cowtown defence stuffed another 3rd & 1, with **Damon Harrison** swallowing up Davis behind the line of scrimmage to force a Budapest punt on the opening drive of the second half. A 20-yard completion to **Adam Humphries** put the Corn Kings in North Star territory and three Gurley runs got them close enough for a 50-yard Bryant field goal to make it 16-12 for the visitors.

The stadium buzzed with excitement, however, as Mayfield led an impressive counter-charge, completing three more passes, including a 22-yard sideline pass to **George Kittle** to reach the Cowtown 7-yard line. The North Stars looked certain to draw blood, but then **Marcell Dareus** evoked distant memories of his dominant 2015 season. He knifed through the middle of the Budapest line and jarred the ball loose from Mayfield as he dropped back to pass. **Roquan Smith** recovered to give Cowtown a temporary reprieve.

It was now the turn of the Budapest line to hold. Despite setting up to defend the pass, they managed to hold Gurley to 7 yards in 3 carries and Cowtown was forced to punt. Taking over with great field position at the Cowtown 48, a suddenly shaky Baker – the memory of Dareus still fresh in his young mind – was unable to move the offence far, completing just one pass in five attempts – a 12-yard screen to Johnson. But Myers salvaged the effort to start the 4th quarter with a 50-yard field goal to bring his team within 1.

The final frame brought a quickening of the game. The gloves were now off. On the first play of Cowtown's next possession, Fitzpatrick went deep to Evans, who made a nice catch for a 39-yard gain. Three plays later, the slippery little '*mano*' side-stepped another Budapest pass rush and slung the ball to a wide-open Burton, who sprinted 29 yards for a touchdown. But the extra point was blocked, preventing the visitors from going up by 8 points.

There were still over 12 minutes remaining in the fourth quarter, but a sense of urgency had enveloped the Budapest sideline. **Darrin Jones** pumped his fist in the air at the blocked extra point and barked excitedly at his offence, slapping Mayfield's shoulder pads as he jogged by. Cowtown coach **Jim Coughlin** looked stern, knowing well how big that missed point was. Missed extra points – even in the era of the 33-yard kick – always bring a sense of foreboding to the team that missed. This one was no exception.

As if riding a karmic wave, '*The Man*' took control. After Davis was stuffed for a loss on 1st & 10, Baker completed two of his next three passes to lead his team into Cowtown territory. Two plays later he fired a rocket over the middle to Watkins, who had blown past **Ronald Darby** on a medium slant. **Jahleel Addae** tried to line him up for the big hit, but missed, leaving the end zone undefended. It was Watkins' second 30+ yard TD catch of the game. In that moment, it felt like no catch had been bigger. The crowd roared. The '*Hun-Stars*' surfed the smaller members of their ranks through the crowd. In their intoxication they dropped most of them. But it did not matter. All that mattered was that Myers' extra point was good and the home team was on a roll.

The Corn Kings took over at their own 23-yard line. At first it looked as if the '*mano*' had a lot more magic left. Fitzpatrick completed his first three passes to cross into Budapest territory. But suddenly, he lost the handle. He missed Evans on a high throw then fired a ball in the dirt toward Gurley. On 3rd & 10 he seemed transfixed by the six defensive backs in the North Star secondary and failed to see Jordan coming at him from the back end. He was lucky to hold on to the ball as the stud pass-rusher laid him out for a 6-yard loss. **Johnny Hekker** came on to punt and, with 3:50 remaining in the game, '*The Man*' strutted onto the field for his "legend moment."

Starting at the 10-yard line, Mayfield drove the Stars methodically up the field in the traditional **Darrin Jones** manner, using short passes and off tackle runs to move the chains incrementally. It was the kind of drive that drains a defence while also taking time off the clock. It took them seven plays to cross mid-field before Jones called his first timeout with 0:44 left in regulation. Sitting at the 48, his team had at least 10 more yards to go to give Myers a better than 50-50 shot at a field goal. One first down, and hopefully a little more, did not seem like a daunting task the way the Stars had moved the ball against a tiring Cowtown defence. But time was starting to become a factor, so the North Stars' coach decided to stretch it out...just a bit. Mayfield dropped back to pass and looked toward **Stephon Diggs**, who was running a slant about 10 yards down field, but he was covered well by **Aqib Talib**. Baker turned to his second option and <wham!> **Damon "Snacks" Harrison** blasted him in the grill for a 10-yard loss.

It was a big play by a big guy in a big moment. It forced the Stars to call their second timeout and changed the nature of the

drive. Facing 2nd & 20, Jones smartly did not try to get it all back at once. In fact, he gambled correctly that the Corn Kings would blitz to put pressure on Mayfield. A smartly-executed screen to Johnson went for 13 yards to the Cowtown 45, but he was unable to get out of bounds, forcing the Stars to call their final timeout with 0:21 left. On 3rd & 7, good coverage forced Mayfield to check down to Diggs, who was in turn forced to step out of bounds to preserve the clock after just a 5-yard gain. This set up a 58-yard field goal attempt. Myers' career long in the EFL was 56 yards, a feat he had achieved twice this season, most recently in Week 16 against York. This time there was no wind to help or hinder him – it would be all leg.

With the crowd on its feet, **Harrison Phillips** snapped the ball on the money to holder **Rigoberto Sanchez**. Myers took three steps and laid his foot into the ball. At first it rose straight and true. But at the half way point it suddenly hooked to the left and continued left past the left upright – no good. The frenetic energy that had built up leading to the kick blew back on the fans, leaving them stunned. Despite the length of the attempt, they had expected success. They were accustomed to goalkeeper kicks in the 60-metre range (65 yards) in the game they knew so well, soccer. There was also a sense, perhaps, that destiny had been denied in that moment.

The Corn Kings took over at their 48-yard line with all of their timeouts left, but with 0:10 remaining little more than a miracle required to steal the game away. A check-down of 5-yards to Gurley followed by a *Hail Mary* batted away near the goal line ended regulation and brought the officials on to the field for the coin toss.

Having avoided the disaster and shame of a last second loss from almost half a field away, the crowd at Ferenc-Liszt International Airport Stadium renewed their enthusiastic but jumbled rendition of the Hungarian National Anthem to the background noise of the 'Hun-Stars' growling "*Támadás! Levágás!*" in tattered, dis-jointed rhythm as the team captains took the field, led by their respective quarterbacks. The 'mano' stood directly opposite 'The Man' on top of the huge brown & yellow 'N' – the 'mano' grinning and 'The Man' grimacing. One was clearly enjoying the moment, while the other was clearly steeling himself for a life-and-death struggle. It was quite a picture in contrasts.

It is a shame we will never know what 'The Man' might have delivered in a true sudden-death moment. The Corn Kings won the toss, elected to receive and finished off the North Stars in less than 3 minutes. 'The Man' never saw the field again that day – the 'mano' and the two most important stars on his offence made sure of that.

It all happened faster than it will take you to read this paragraph. **Mike Evans** turned an 8-yard sideline pass into a 24-yard gain by shrugging off a hit by **Pierre Desir**, whose attempt to jolt the ball loose failed to land squarely. Then **Todd Gurley**, following **Trey Burton**, blasted through a hole off right tackle and charged 41-yards to the Budapest 10-yard line, where he was prevented from scoring only by the combined efforts of **Minkah Fitzpatrick** and **Myles Jack**. Gurley went out for a breather and **Bilal Powell** pounded out 5 more yards to bring up 2nd & goal at the 5-yard line. Gurley returned on the next play and the Budapest defence came gunning for him. The sellout left Evans wide open in the end zone. Fitzpatrick fired the ball for what looked to be a certain touchdown, but Evans lost the handle, giving Budapest a reprieve. On 3rd & goal, the Stars finally guessed right. With his receivers covered in the end zone and the pocket collapsing, the 'mano' ducked and weaved away from Jordan and ran right towards the pylon. **Nickel Roby-Coleman** was the first defensive back to notice and break off his coverage, but he did not commit fully to containing the outside. That split-second hesitation cost him and his team. The 'mano' scampered around him and, with surprising deftness and speed, reached the pylon virtually untouched for the game-winning score. The final: Cowtown 28, Budapest 22.

The crowd went silent, staring in disbelief as Fitzpatrick, the funny little 'mano,' raised the football high above his head and did a victory lap around the Budapest end zone as his teammates ran to catch up with him. But rather than slow down to welcome their celebratory embrace, the 'mano' accelerated in the direction of the tunnel to the locker rooms. The reason was a mob of about a dozen 'Hun-Stars,' in various stages of undress, bearing down on him while bellowing something that sounded, in tone, very much like "kill him!" in Hungarian. A skinny and fast barbarian got within range of the 'mano' and dove at his feet. But the Cowtown quarterback easily avoided his would-be assailant, who landed hard, chin-first on the ground.

It took several minutes for stadium security to corral the group of fans that had invaded the field of play and nearly an hour for riot police to disperse the section where the drunken 'Hun-Stars' were making their last stand, refusing to go home until a video review of an apparent hold on the final play by **Andre Dillard** was conducted over the big screen. While these skirmishes were going on, the Cowtown players and coaching staff celebrated in and around their locker room with little formal media coverage, protected by a knot of stadium security. **Darrin Jones** and his North Stars meandered back to their dressing rooms, confounded by the turn of events both on and off the field. The collapse of the defence had been sudden and unexpected. But was the defence fully to blame?

An apoplectic local and national media, who had collectively banked on a Budapest-Aurora Conference Final, thought so. Most were unmerciful in their excoriation of the Budapest defence following the loss. A top-three defence during the regular season that typically gave up ground grudgingly, in small chunks, and stole the ball away with above-average frequency, had not performed to expectations when it mattered most. In this game it had surrendered 454 yards of offence, 4 passes of 25-yards or more, 3 runs of 10-or-more yards, missed 7 tackles and failed to generate a single turnover. And this had happened against the *Corn Kings*!

A more sober analysis shows a different take. In Ryan Fitzpatrick's 8 starts, the Corn Kings averaged 430 yards of offence and 35 points a game. The 'mano' had led this team to 27 points and 459 yards against Aurora, handing the league's top-ranked team one of its two losses on the season. The Cowtown offence under Fitz was obviously capable of exploding on par with the best offences in the league, a marked departure from the style they had become known by over many years under **Joe Flacco**. Yes, having talents of the calibre of **Todd Gurley** and **Mike Evans** helped, but Fitz was the captain of change without a doubt.

While **Attila the Hun** “savaged” the home team in his post-game commentary, **Darrin Jones** was all class at the podium, as usual: “*Hats off to Coach Coghlin, Farmer Brown and the entire Cowtown organization for coming across the ocean to beat us straight up. We have no excuses,*” he declared, looking relaxed but fatigued. Then he sharpened his tone a bit; “*I only wish Baker had had a chance to show his stuff – I thought he played a great game so I don’t want to hear you guys going after the kid,*” he added.

Coach Coghlin’s press conference was brief and relatively quiet, due to the fact that most of the media had been held back from the Cowtown locker area in the post-game melee. **Orville Smucker** of the *Cowtown Plain Dealer* was there and provoked stifled laughter when he prefaced his first question with “*what time is it over there in Budapest coach?*” Poor Orville – it was only in the final four weeks of the season that he had acknowledged that **Ryan Fitzpatrick** had taken over for **Joe Flacco** at quarterback. Before that he had written about Joe’s “lucky beard” helping the team to victory. Notwithstanding his fading faculties, back in his day he was sharper than most. He is the only EFL beat reporter, so far, to make it into the Football Hall of Fame for, somehow, being the first to break the story of the league forming. Orville is a legend. He will get a chance to chronicle the making of another legend if the ‘*mano*’ keeps making magic on the football field.

MAKING HIS MARK

The final game of the regular season between Twin Cities and Virden meant nothing in terms of the playoff rankings, but it meant a lot in other ways. Virden’s emerging superstar, whiz kid **Patrick Mahomes**, went all-out in that final game gunning for the single-season passing yards record. The Triumph, of course, went all-out trying to stop him. The win was incidental, but both wanted that as well.

Needing 394 yards to equal the record of 5,622 set by **Drew Brees** in 2012, Virden’s emerging superstar had exactly 393 heading into the 4th quarter of what was, by that point, a comfortable 35-23 pummelling of the Triumph. A 10-yard pass to **Juju Smith-Schuster** at the 14:33 mark gave him the record and more. But the Violators did not ease up after that. Nor did back-up **Jacob Dolegala** get a chance to see rare game action in the final quarter. Possibly influenced by box office considerations and the screeching of **MAHOMMANIACS** in the stands at **TERRORDOME** demanding more, Virden coach **Lance Barrate** kept his young protégé on the field and continued to call the game as if the Violators were in a dead heat with their opponent. Mahomes finished with a whopping 522 yards passing in the game and 5,750 on the season to blow away the old record and lead his team to 42-23 victory.

Nobody likes to lose less than Triumph coach, **Guy Williams**. But it is remotely possible that he would have let that Week 16 loss pass without comment had the Virden star finished the game on the bench after taking a 42-23 lead mid-way through the 4th quarter. Instead, Mahomes stayed on the field and passed five more times, including a throw with 0:38 left in the game. That final throw, and Mahomes’ comments after the game defending it, was more than Williams’ brittle temper could handle.

“*It’s not often you get a chance to make your mark on the game,*” an excited Mahomes had said after the game. “*I wanted a record that would stand up over time. I wanted to make my mark and I did!*”

Williams did not snap. “**Wee Willie**” Williams did not come out. (Team officials did their part by removing all the bottles of *Maker’s Mark* whiskey from Guy’s stadium office). But he did something much worse; he *stewed* in his own bile.

“*I’m happy for the kid,*” Williams said unconvincingly after the game, his grimace set in stone. “*He made his mark alright. And I know that if we see them again this year, we will make ours.*”

Playing the “respect” card – or lack thereof – Coach Williams got his players worked up into a frenzy in the days leading up to the Quarter Final game against Virden. As game time approached the players started busting up lockers, head-butting walls, thumping their chests and snarling like wild dogs while waiting to take the field. **Antonio Brown** had to be restrained by teammates after taking off all of his clothes and running, screaming toward the tunnel in an effort to take the field in the buff. Brown’s antics of late had become increasingly unhinged. But in this particular instance, his behaviour pleased **Guy Williams**. He watched without saying a word – a grim smile on his face.

It was a look he held for the entire game as his Triumph administered a shocking beating to the Violators. A mere two weeks after **Pat Mahomes** had toyed with passing records at his team’s expense, Williams watched with satisfaction as his defence toyed back, bottling up the kid in the pocket and attacking his receivers with a viciousness not often seen on the gridiron.

Right off the bat it was obvious that both teams were prepared to throw everything they had at each other. The game’s opening drive ended when Mahomes missed **AJ Green** on 4th & 3 at the Twin Cities 41 to turn the ball over on downs. On the play, Mahomes audibled straight into the Triumph coverage, a sign that, for all of his talent and confidence, he is still inexperienced reading opposing defences. That was the beginning of a disastrous first half for Virden – one in which everything that could go wrong went wrong. Some of it was bad luck, some of it was just poor choices, and some of it was the raging Triumph defence.

Two turnovers-on-downs (the second one coming at their own 34) and two actual turnovers – both fumbles by receivers after brutal hits by **Jaire Alexander** and **Darnell Savage Jr** – led to 27 of 34 first half Triumph points. On defence, Virden focused on stopping **Melvin Gordon** and dared **Mitch Trubisky** to throw the ball. The Triumph QB did just that, finding success against the off-footed Virden secondary that was trying to cover **A.B.** and **Kenny Golladay** while keeping one eye on Gordon.

By half time it was 34-3. After the opening possession of the third quarter, it was 41-3 and fans across the country were tuning out by the millions. Ironically, when the Violators actually needed a passing game, it was suddenly in short supply. Instead, they turned to the run game in an attempt to retreat from Wilhalla Stadium with a shred of their dignity intact. Seven carries by **Ezekiel Elliott** on their first touchdown drive represented a white flag. The Triumph offence accepted their surrender and backed off the throttle. But the defence continued to hold the line against the arm of Mahomes, playing 7 defensive backs for the rest of the game,

thus forcing the Violators to run the ball to keep the chains moving.

"You know you've beaten a team in every way when they start to run out the clock for you," Williams is said to have remarked to offensive coordinator, **Davey Seal** as Virden sent Elliott on his 6th straight carry with time ticking away in the 4th quarter.

The most-hyped contest of the Quarter Finals ended as the most lop-sided. Its entertainment value, for those who weren't Triumph fans, lay in the stunning completeness of the victory, the humbling of the "whiz kid," and the astounding sight of Trubisky looking and performing like **Fran Tarkenton**. The "weak link" in the offence finished with 5 TD passes, 4 of those to **Kenny Golladay**, and was deservedly named Game MVP.

The better team won over the better talent. But this is not the end for Mahomes and the Violators. The kid was quick to make that point in the post-game presser. Looking dishevelled, with his trademark head band cocked at an angle across his forehead, he vowed to be back.

"This is a learning experience for us," he fired off rapidly, game adrenaline still pumping through his veins. *"I'm gonna take this experience and grow with it. Grow as a team. My goal is to take us back here and to take us farther."*

There is no reason to think that he won't.

BACK WHERE THEY BELONG

If there is one coach in the league possibly more focused on winning than Triumph strongman, **Guy Williams**, it is 'Gentleman' **Rich Liotta**, head coach and GM of the Mustangs. His results over the years speak for themselves: two Championships, two perfect seasons, just 11 losses in six regular seasons, playoffs in five of six seasons in the league...wait! What was that? Only five of six?

The thought of the Mustangs missing the playoffs doesn't compute for the average fan. But last year they did indeed miss the playoffs. They were knocked out of the winner's circle by a cocksure Wolverine team coached by a teenager, **Ryan Preston**, the first of a "new breed" of Generation Z football geniuses who owe everything they know about calling plays to the *Badden* video game. Preston downplays the influence of *Badden* on his coaching style, but does not entirely refute it.

"The plays are all there in the game if you want it," he once said in reply to a question about the influence of video games on his coaching. *"I learned them all. But in real life you don't have a controller to move your guy around, so I adjusted. I find what I call the 'controller player,' the 'X' guy, for each play and I make sure that guy does his job on that play. Mostly it's the quarterback or running back, but sometimes it's the receiver. Sometimes it's a guard or I'll have the 'X' guy move around with the play. There are times during a real game I want to grab a controller and move everybody around myself. Those guys move around on their own and have their own thoughts. It's my job to stop them from thinking as much as possible, but still have fun."*

Getting **Jay Cutler** to stop thinking under pressure was apparently the key to unlocking his considerable arm talent in 2018. The rest of the Wolverines responded to Preston last year as well, particularly the secondary, which posted the best pass defence numbers in league history. Preston's ability to get the most of Cutler earned him a reputation as a kind of "quarterback guru." Throw in talents like **Tyreek Hill** and **Saquon Barkley** and the team clearly had enough star power to make some noise. Nobody, however, had expected them to make so much noise that they would take down the Mighty Mustangs. Except Preston himself, of course.

"I built that team to beat Aurora," Preston said cockily after his team had clinched the division in Week 14. *"I thought if it was good enough to beat Aurora then it could beat anybody."*

This widely-circulated sound bite coupled with Toronto's surprise division win created a myth around the Wolverines being Mustangs killers. The reality was that they actually dropped both of their head-to-head contests to Aurora in 2018, but beat mostly everyone else. Aurora's tougher schedule, some bad luck in close games and losing a tie-breaker to Cowtown was what knocked them out of the post-season. But the loose perception was that the Wolverines had done-in the Mustangs. It is said in Mustangs' circles that Liotta never forgot, nor forgave, the perceived humiliation of a teenager taking aim at his team and basking in the glow of a success that had more to do how the rest of the league had played Aurora than it had to do with the Wolverines.

Of course, Liotta was impeccable in his presentation to the media when asked if revenge was a motivating factor in preparing for this Quarter Final game against the Wolverines.

"Revenge?" he replied amusedly. *"We're not motivated ever by revenge. We're motivated to be the best professionals every time we take the field, as we always are. This game is no different than any other playoff game. We expect to face a strong opponent in the playoffs and Toronto is a strong opponent. They deserve to be here and have our full attention. My experience is that they always play us hard and we plan to return the favour"*

If anyone was looking for *revenge* – or some kind of redemption – it was Preston. He had watched his team blow a lead in the final minute then lose to a field goal in overtime against Aurora in Week 13. It was a bitter pill to swallow. The 39-36 loss knocked Toronto out of the Division race and raised questions about the make-up of a defence that had dominated everybody just one season ago. Those making the loudest criticisms of the Toronto defence were forgetting that the trio of **Matt Ryan**, **Davante Adams** and **Julian Edelman** had had their way with almost every defence in 2019, especially in the second half of games. This Quarter Final match-up represented Toronto's third attempt to solve the puzzle of Ryan & the Mustangs' offence. The hope for Wolverines' fans was that **Aaron Rodgers**, **Saquon Barkley** and **Tyreek Hill** would take care of the Mustangs' defence.

It was a beautiful day for football in February at Magna Park in Aurora, with the temperature 49° F and only the slightest of breezes to circulate the aroma of Chuck's Chicken and tater tots, one of the popular local features available at the stadium concession stands. The mood of the sellout crowd was upbeat, but not raucous. It never got too crazy in the stands in Aurora – the fanbase was, in comparison with most, a well-heeled one accustomed to winning. They cheered lustily when things were going well and fell into a

passive-aggressive silence when things were not going well. They exhorted their defence with the classic 'D-Fence!' chant when the team needed a stop, but rarely got worked up to support the offence – they simply expected it to perform without their help.

So, it was a pretty silent start to the afternoon when Toronto safety, **Shawn Williams** intercepted **Matt Ryan** on the game's opening drive to set up a daring 4th & 1 long slant of 21 yards to **Tyreek Hill** for the game's opening score. The early 4th down gamble, when his team was in comfortable field goal range, was a clear message from the Toronto coach to the Aurora coach that he was not going to back down as the prohibitive underdog. Toronto had drawn first blood.

But in due course it became clear that without the benefit of big plays and turnovers to flip the field, the Wolverines' offence would struggle to sustain drives. The Aurora defence set itself primarily to contain **Saquon Barkley** in the run game, a luxury they could afford as long as their corners did their part by staying close to game-breaker Hill and premier route-runner, **Adam Thielen**. This they managed to accomplish more often than not and it was only when they momentarily lost Barkley in a scramble to cover a deep zone that Rodgers and Barkley teamed up to burn the Mustangs with a check down in the flat that went for 65 yards. The sparkling play set up Toronto's second touchdown of the first half and gave them a 17-7 2nd quarter lead. That marked the high point for the visitors. It would be mostly downhill from there.

As so often happens with the Mustangs' offence, when they aren't burning a defence with big pass plays, they are bleeding it with pesky runs and precision passing. They did the latter on their ensuing two possessions, mounting two long scoring drives starting from inside their own 10-yard line. The first covered 65 yards and resulted in a 46-yard **Wil Lutz** field goal. The second covered 99 yards and ended after 10 plays with a 13-yard TD pass to **Davante Adams** to tie the score at 17. In the boldest move of the day, **Rich Liotta** kept the drive alive by going for it on 4th & 1 from his team's own 32-yard line after **Kenyan Drake** had been stuffed for a loss on 3rd & inches. No problem – **Zach Zenner** defied a 6-man line that was keying on him to pound out 6 yards for the first down. Ryan took care of the rest, completing 6 of 8 for 94 yards on the drive, including the TD. In retrospect, was the turning point of the game. Despite a slew of big plays from the Wolverines, they remained even with the Mustangs after 30 minutes.

After a deflating end to the first half the Wolverines regrouped in the locker room and came out of the gate determined to regain the initiative. They put together a gritty drive of short passes, check downs and power runs. Rodgers scrambled for a first down on 3rd & 2 at a critical juncture in the middle of the drive. The Mustangs were playing sound defence, but the scrappiness of the Toronto effort eventually prevailed. As if to prove a point, **Latavius Murray** bowled straight forward into the teeth of a defensive key to finish off the drive with a 5-yard TD run. The Wolverines were back on top, 24-17. Magna Park was again silent.

The smell of an upset did not stay in the air for long. Toronto coach, **Ryan Preston** may have reached too far in attempting to build on the momentum of a successful opening drive by following it up with an onside kick. Trying to catch the Mustangs by surprise, **Adam Vinatieri** kicked short, but straight into the ample breadbasket of reserve lineman **Bradley Sowell**, who fell on the ball at the Toronto 49. It did succeed in catching everyone by surprise. But for **Rich Liotta** and the Mustang faithful, being gifted such great field position was a very pleasant surprise.

On the second play from scrimmage, Drake exploded on a screen pass out of the backfield and dashed the distance for a 49-yard touchdown pass. Just like that, the game was again tied.

The momentum hung in equilibrium as the teams arm-wrestled to get the upper hand. Toronto punted; Aurora turned the ball over on downs; then Toronto punted again. With 11:41 remaining, the Mustangs took over at their 20-yard line to begin the long push that would eventually finish the Wolverines off. Tiring of finesse, the Mustangs reverted to what they do best: pass. Ryan threw 9 straight times, connecting on 7 of them. His final pass was a bullet to the sideline into double-coverage that Adams not only caught, but carried into the end zone after ducking a lunging tackle attempt by **Jaylon Smith**. The crowd rose to its feet and applauded with gusto. A bugler near the Mustangs sideline sounded the cavalry charge. With 7:11 remaining in the 4th quarter, Aurora had their first lead of the game, 31-24.

As the energy of the Aurora crowd filled the stadium and the fans chanted 'D-FENCE,' the energy on the Wolverines' sideline waned. Barkley made two hesitant attempts to find a hole in the Mustangs' line, gaining just a total of 4 yards. On 3rd & 6, Rodgers missed an open **Seth Roberts** to cause the punting the unit too take the field for the third consecutive series.

Liotta then delivered the death blow masterfully. Taking advantage of Toronto's focus on Drake, Ryan went to the air twice, completing passes of 8 and 16 yards to start the drive. The Wolverines made a stop on the next play, stuffing Drake for a loss. Toronto then geared up for the pass and went all-in with an all-dawg blitz. But Liotta saw it coming. He called a draw to Drake that went for 14 yards and a first down at the Toronto 20-yard line. From there clock management took over. The Wolverines' defence held, but at the cost of two timeouts and the two-minute warning. Lutz came on to kick a 30-yard field goal to make it a 10-point Aurora lead with just 1:41 remaining. Five plays later, the Wolverines' season ended with **Wesley Woodyard** hauling down Rodgers for a 12-yard loss on the game's final play. Toronto's bold effort had failed. The Mustangs, as usual, had prevailed.

"I would do it again!" **Ryan Preston** declared defiantly, when questioned about the onside kick attempt that failed and which seemed to give the Mustangs a window. *"They were about to break. That would have broken them if it had worked. I am not going to second-guess myself for trying to seize an opportunity."*

Preston does not need to second guess himself when so many others are doing to for him. But I think it is likely that the Mustangs would have come back regardless of who recovered that ill-fated onside kick. In this game, and throughout the regular season, the Mustangs consistently demonstrated that they are fundamentally sounder than this Toronto squad. This win simply puts the Mustangs back where they belong – in the Conference Final game.

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PACIFIC CONFERENCE FINAL

BRUXELLES @ TWIN CITIES (line – TRIUMPH by 5)

INJURIES: **Bruxelles** – Emmanuel Sanders (QUESTIONABLE); **Twin Cities** – Kwon Alexander (OUT).

With both franchises experiencing success making it into the post-season over the past five years it is a bit surprising that they have only faced each other once in the playoffs. That was in 2014 when the Bombers were in Carthage and in the middle of a Cinderella run to the final. When they met this year during the regular season, a 21-point flurry by Bruxelles in the 4th quarter made their 38-28 loss appear respectable, but that was one of those games where the Triumph got off to a quick start and did not clamp down defensively with authority probably because the game seemed so well in hand. Bruxelles was penalized 10 times in that game. Seven of those penalties were on the defence, which could speak to difficulties and frustration in handling Triumph field-stretchers, Antonio Brown and Kenny Golladay while also having to deal with the mobile Mitch Trubisky, who ran for 85 yards and 2 touchdowns. The Bombers had the best pass defence in the league in yards allowed and held opposing quarterbacks to a 77.9 passer rating over the season, good for second best. They are capable of containing the Triumph's flanker and split end, but it will be a long and miserable day at Wilhalla Stadium if their front seven fails to corral Trubisky and force him to throw from the pocket. And then there is also Melvin Gordon III to worry about. Simply put, the Triumph have a dangerous three-dimensional attack that will pose a challenge to the Bruxelles' coaching staff in building a scheme to slow it down and force errors. Bruxelles took the ball away 22 times this year, ranking them fourth overall in that category while the Triumph gave the ball away at a middling rate of once per game. Flipping the field twice in the Bombers' favour could turn this into a very interesting game. The Bruxelles' offence will likely need such a boost. Although Marlon Mack imposed his will on the Cubs last week in the Quarter Final round, their attempts to take the heat off Travis Kelce by getting the ball deep to their wide receivers were not very successful overall, despite a pair of TD catches by Chris Godwin. The Triumph are in a better position than the Cubs were to let Chris Harris Jr and Darius Slay take care of business on the flanks and focus on stopping the Bruxelles rushing and short-range passing games. The Twin Cities defence is not only loaded with talent, it is one of the more balanced units in the league. It is capable of flat-out taking away the opponent's top weapon if it chooses while trusting their personnel to pose resistance to secondary threats from a position of relative weakness. This means Travis Kelce will likely have a quiet day while Marcus Mariota finds a way to advance the ball in the passing game by using backs like Chris Thompson and his scrambling ability to extend plays. The fundamental bottom line is that the Triumph have significant advantages that make them a clear favourite at home. However, the post-season has a way of turning the regular season on its head. The quarterbacks are similar in style and output, with both finishing with 30+ TD passes and 500+ yards rushing while ranking in the top 10 in passer rating. When mobile quarterbacks are let loose, outcomes become less predictable. Left to their own devices, the Bombers' Mariota has the edge in experience and post-season success over his younger counterpart, Trubisky, who will be experiencing his first playoff action. This is a factor that should not be overlooked as it represents the most solid ground for an upset. The Triumph, with their talent edge on both sides of the ball, should be able to write the script for this game. But the moment the game goes off-script, anything can happen. I'll go with the script-writer here while half-expecting a surprise ending. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE FINAL

COWTOWN @ AURORA (line – MUSTANGS by 8)

INJURIES: **Cowtown** – None; **York** – Leon Hall (QUESTIONABLE), Sidney Jones (OUT).

For the second season in a row the Corn Kings are surprise contestants in the Atlantic Conference Final. It is too bad for them that, for the

second year in a row, they have to get past a veteran quarterback with championship pedigree in order to make it the final for the first time in franchise history. But there is hope for Corn Kings fans and neutrals who may be tired of seeing the Mustangs once again trampling all competition on their way to a fourth championship appearance. Cowtown was one of only two teams to beat the Mustangs during the regular season. As a result, you can bet that Aurora coach Rich Liotta has examined the film from that game in detail to determine what went wrong and how to correct it. The fact is that it was a very close game that could have gone either way, but fell in Cowtown's favour largely thanks to an MVP-performance by Todd Gurley II. Without that, the Mustangs could have probably afforded their two turnovers, their lack of run support and weathered the Corn Kings' pass rush that bedevilled Matt Ryan at key moments. Obviously, stopping Gurley will, and should be, the main focus of the Aurora defence. But the emergence of quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick as a minor miracle-worker since that so-so outing against Aurora in Week 9 and a rocky showing against Toronto the week after has added another dimension to the Corn Kings' attack that has led them to where they are now. The better side of the Jekyll & Hyde journeyman has been on prominent display ever since Week 11 when the Corn Kings launched their seven-game win streak that includes an overtime upset of Budapest in Hungary last week. This has allowed the Corn King offence to move away from Gurley when the box is stacked and make effective use of play-makers Mike Evans and, believe it or not, Trey Burton. When they cannot get open, the scrambling ability of Fitzpatrick has been a bonus the offence never enjoyed under the direction of Joe Flacco. While the Cowtown offence has been a powerhouse for the past seven weeks, there is still caution to buy-into it completely. Everyone is waiting for Fitzpatrick's gambling nature to get the better of him and turn hope into disaster. The factors that could contribute to a Fitz meltdown are prominent in this match-up. While everyone talks about Ryan and the Mustangs' offence, the Aurora defence has quietly built-up one of the better resumes in the league, particularly against the pass. They are second in sacks, second in interceptions, and first by a long way in hampering QB efficiency, limiting opponents to a 73.9 passer rating. This is partly due to the offence enabling the defence to play downhill for much of the game, but it is also due to the presence of perennial all-pro, JJ Watt and the shutdown cornerback duo of Patrick Peterson and Jason McCourty. In a record-setting season of offence, the Mustangs' defence remains solid by any historical measure and will make it difficult for the Cowtown passing game to flourish without Gurley drawing a great deal of attention. On the other side, the Corn Kings' defence has been inconsistent all season, but displayed the top end of their capabilities in that regular season victory over Aurora. The pass rush was great, the run defence was solid, the secondary was good enough, and TJ Watt was all over the field in every phase of the game. If they can repeat the same level of engagement here on the road and again limit the otherwise invincible Davante Adams to just 2 catches – his worst game of the year by far – they have a realistic chance of pulling off an upset and a great chance of keeping the margin under the two-point TD spread. But expecting the stars to be perfectly aligned once more against a powerhouse Aurora offence that will be better prepared is likely too much to expect. The Mustangs have a history of trotting out little twists in the playoffs that knock an opponent off balance just enough to enhance their already dangerous passing attack. Witness the unknown Zach Zenner leading the team in rushing last week versus Toronto and picking up key first downs. No doubt they will have another twist in store for this game. But the back-breaker in many Aurora victories is not its ability to deceive the defence. It is the diabolical ability of Matt Ryan and Davante Adams to rise up in the clutch and defy every defensive scheme designed to stop them. This elite level of skill is the insurance policy when things don't go according to plan. Expect it to pay up here. **PICK: AURORA**



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This Week in EFL History
 With Professor
Sterling Smitherman

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – The Quarter Final round of the 2013 EFL season went pretty much as the experts predicted, including the predicted “upset” of the Cubs by the visiting Convicts.

It was a game the Cubs should have won. They controlled play in the first half to post a 20-7 lead after two. But a mishandled two-minute drill at the end of the 2nd quarter would come back to haunt them. The Convicts recovered, thanks in large part to one of *Cam Newton*'s finest moments in a Chino uniform. In a two-minute span he led the Convicts 66 yards, converting two 4th downs on the way with

deft footwork and confident throws, to give his team a 24-23 lead on a 17-yard TD pass to *Jason Avant* with 1:15 left in the game. The Cubs rallied, only to see *Greg Zuerlein* miss the game-winning FG attempt from 45 yards to end the game.

The predicted blowout of York by the Pats went without a hitch. *Adrian Peterson* rushed for 165 yards and 3 TDs. *Jacoby Jones* added a 103-yard kickoff return for a TD and *Peyton Manning* threw a TD pass for good measure. At one point in the 4th Charleswood led 38-3 before *Tom Brady* managed a pair of TD passes in garbage time for a 38-17 final.

The first playoff game in Garland Mustangs history was a tense 10-10 affair through three quarters before the floodgates opened in the 4th. Garland stunned the visiting Thunder Lizards with 33-yard pick-six by *Eric Weddle* sandwiched between two *Matt Forte* touchdown runs enroute to a 28-point 4th quarter and a 38-17 win.

The defending Champion North Stars hosted their first home playoff game (they were road warriors in their 2012 Gale Sayers run) against surprise wildcard entry Pickering and sent the fans home happy with an easy 38-13 win. Markham simply dominated and there is no more to say about it.