



PREVIEW 2021

WHO HAS THE BEST SHOT??



DeSHAUN WATSON
CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

JOSH ALLEN
DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS



RYAN TANNEHILL
COBB COUNTY COYOTES

MATT RYAN
OSHAWA PINK PANTHERS

TO TAKE OUT AARON RODGERS

2021



2021



While many citizens of North America welcome the arrival of the COVID-19 vaccines, many EFL players are less enthusiastic. They are concerned about the effect the emergency-approved vaccines will have on their finely-tuned bodies.

CANTON (AP) – There will be a target on the back of **Aaron Rodgers** in 2021 after his North Stars took home the Gale Sayers Trophy in 2020. The question is: who has the best shot at taking out the rejuvenated veteran? Which one of a growing fraternity of young, up-and-coming dual threat signal-callers has the firepower and steadiness of hand to bump off the now certain future hall-of-famer? Or will it take another battle-scarred future hall-of-famer like **Matt Ryan** to get the job done?

While analysts pour over the tape, the off-season moves and training camp reports, in an attempt to predict how the battlefield will change in 2021, the answer could very well be influenced by another kind of event off the field.

The team with the best shot at thwarting a Budapest repeat may ultimately be decided by which team gets the most “shots.” As the league and governments move away from empty stadiums and physical lockdowns and move toward mass vaccination as a strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the pressure on players to flip up those shoulder pads and take the jab will be immense. And the pressure won’t be solely on the players – the coaching and

training staff as well all employees with access a team’s training facility will also face the choice of getting vaccinated or losing access to that facility. That means no jobs.

“The goal is 100% vaccination among players, coaches and support staff,” **Dr. Karl Kevorkian**, newly hired chief medical advisor to the EFL, announced in July of this year. “The vaccine is safe and effective. There is no reason not to take the vaccine and many reasons to do so. I am confident that together we can reach our goal.”

Dr. Kevorkian, not to be confused with **Dr. Jack Kevorkian** (who was dubbed ‘Dr. Death’ by the media due to his work in promoting and executing assisted suicide), recently left the board of Pfizer to join the league at the solicitation of the EFL Committee. This was due to the league’s concerns about ‘amulet hesitancy’ among the ranks of its players heading into the second year of the pandemic.

“Although the data shows that the EFL experienced lower-than-average COVID-19 case counts throughout 2020 and early 2021 compared with other sports leagues, many players expressed a reluctance to wear the amulet for a second season,” **Cogswell Cogs II**, co-Chair of the EFL Committee of

13 explained in an off-season press conference to introduce the league's new hire. "We believe that players will be less hesitant to take a vaccine that has proven safe and effective than they are to continue to wear the amulet in public."

The amulet Cogs II is referring to is the controversial scarab and goat's head protective amulet that the league issued to every player and staff member last year at the height of the pandemic. While it is hard to argue with the amulet's alleged 99% rate of effectiveness in preventing COVID-19 infection, many players nevertheless complained that its strange and ugly appearance brought on public embarrassment, especially at parties and other social gatherings.

"Who wants to wear a bug on their chest when they go out?" former NFL cornerback and EFL Network analyst **Deion Sanders** asked rhetorically during a recent episode of *Out of Bounds* – the network's edgy new talk show. "I wouldn't! And I know a lot of players don't either but are too afraid to speak up because the league will fine them!"

Critics of the amulet point to the lack of studies showing that the EFL's scarab and goat's head amulet is effective at preventing or treating COVID-19. "There is no scientific evidence that it works," stated one CDC official to *EFL Magazine* off the record. "It's all anecdotal. You can't base a policy on the placebo effect."

Defenders of the amulet point to its cheap cost to produce and its perfect safety record. "Nobody has experienced an adverse reaction to wearing the amulet," claims Reverend **Bryan Smote**, a Magister of the Church of Satan and designer of the amulet's goat's head. "The sole identified risk comes after death with a miniscule risk of forfeiture of the soul."

While some less fashion-conscious players will continue to wear the amulet as double-protection, the league has joined the rest of society and gone all-in with the vaccine in order to protect its industry. But that commitment falls short of making the vaccine mandatory.

"A player, coach or staff member may choose to not take the vaccine. But if they do so they will be making the wrong choice," Kevorkian stated flatly when announcing the league's vaccine protocols. "Making the wrong choice will bring unhappy consequences for all, but especially for the person making the wrong choice."

In early August of 2021 the league released a complex table in support of its vaccine policy showing exactly how vaccination rates will affect teams. The perks for teams with high vaccination rates begin at 75% of team members, including coaching staff and peak at 100%. A team achieving 100% will enjoy very few restrictions while a team that is unable to meet the 75% mark will be subject to even more restrictions than during the height of the pandemic, before vaccines were available.

"Travel, training, use of facilities, practice, testing, quarantine rules, even personal activities will be affected by a team's vaccination rate," explains Dr. Kevorkian. "We know the vaccine works and we know that the highly infectious 'delta' variant is sweeping across the country. We cannot take chances with safety. If you thought restrictions were bad last year wait until you see the restrictions that we will enforce this year for teams that do no bend to our will – ah! – I mean make the right choice."

The list of limitations for teams unable to achieve a 75% vaccination rate is extensive and severe. Critics have called them draconian and unworkable but these critics are quickly silenced and shunned for the greater good.

'The league's COVID-19 vaccination policy reads like a North Korean Tour Guide's Handbook' tweeted **John Maximillian Ginsberg**, sports satirist and *Football Unplugged* mainstay, in his last message before his account was temporarily disabled for violating Twitter's policies in relation to violent extremism.

While comparing the league's efforts to combat spread of the virus to totalitarian North Korea is obviously extremist, league restrictions such as prohibiting airplane travel for teams with vaccination rates *under* 75% do raise legitimate questions of basic practicality.

"Don't you think being unable to fly to games will create too much of a competitive disadvantage for the unvaccinated team?" **Jim Miller** of *Sirius XM EFL Network* asked **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* in an interview on *Movin' the Chains*.

"Potentially it could," Prince replied laconically. "But the question people should be asking is: why do these players who choose not to be vaccinated care so little about football? The league is simply trying to weather the second wave while keeping players safe. Do the unvaccinated players really want to win? That is the question."

At 75%, teams are allowed to fly, but only in segregated airplanes – one for vaccinated players and one for unvaccinated players. Unvaccinated players cannot stay in the same hotel as vaccinated players and cannot share the locker room on game day. The list of restrictions for unvaccinated players is long and some, such as the directive that unvaccinated players must wear masks *while* eating in common areas, can come across as strange and punitive. But the league rejects any suggestion that it is coercing and punishing players who choose not to take the vaccine.

"While it is the player's choice whether or not to take the vaccine, most players don't really understand the science behind the vaccine," Dr. Kevorkian states in response to such allegations. "Think of the CDC as the Church of Science and Dr. Fauci as its Pope. Those who choose not to be vaccinated are like lost souls, who it is our duty to lead back to the light. The restrictions turn up the brightness of that light. Far from punitive, they are both preventative and potentially curative."

Whatever they may appear to different people, if the protocols remain in effect throughout the regular season, they

will have competitive implications. Coaches, general managers and owners across the league are united in watching their team's compliance rates with trepidation. But they are not united in their approaches toward the vaccine.

Wrecking Balls' part-owner and GM, **Jeff Cohen** went on the record early in the off-season that he would simply trade or cut players who did not get the jab. "This is not the time for games," Cohen said at press conference in early August. "This is a matter of life and death. Sure, I would give my left arm for my team to win something... anything at all. But in the end football is just a game and I'm not giving up my life to win a football game and neither should any of my players."

Cohen's hardline stance contrasts with a far more *laissez-faire* attitude in Cowtown, where owner **Farmer Brown** remains unperturbed about vaccine hesitancy. "The young'uns can decide to take it if they want," Brown responded when asked about his view of the league's vaccine policy following his announcement of the signing of ex-SFL cornerback, **Darius Williams**. "I'm not going to force 'em to take it. Heck, my grand-pappy beat the Spanish Flu with whisky and my great uncle Walt with aspirin. In those days, doctors prescribed all sorts of stuff and you took what suited you. I reckon it's the same thing here with this COVID. For me, I take a little rye with cream at night and chew on some Ivermectin during the day. I got it for the cows but it ain't poison and the taste kinda grows on ya."

In between those two extremes fall all of the other owners and GMs of the EFL's 24 franchises, who must now consider vaccine uptakes along with the byzantine salary cap rules when putting together their 53-man rosters for the 2021 season. This calculus is also something football analysts are struggling to catch up with, as rules about medical privacy get in the way of obtaining an accurate count of teams' vaccination status.

"We have the league's vaccination protocols factored into our predictive algorithm but it's mostly guesswork based on rumours and leaks as to where each team falls in the vaccination rankings," explained **Harry Schultz** of Football

[Outriders.Org](#) to *Sirius XM EFL Network*, when announcing the release of this year's *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*. "The other thing we have to consider but cannot predict is how the pandemic might change over the course of the season. Is it going to get better or worse and how will that affect league policy – who knows?"

It may be guesswork before the season starts for predictive analysts like Schultz but it will soon become obvious who the unvaccinated players are when the season begins and the protocols kick-in full force.

"Players, like all of us, have a right to privacy. But it's going to be hard to miss those guys wearing the pink armbands, masks and face shields filing into the two-star hotel on the outskirts of town," observed **Cowan Bullherd**, host of the syndicated talk show, *Morning Bull*. "They might as well put dunce caps on these guys as well!"

Bullherd has a point. With almost every movement and activity off the football field modulated by vaccination status, the players who have chosen not to get the vaccine will stand out. Efforts by the league to extend the protocols to game day restrictions on the field of play were resisted by the EFL Players Association, however. That means the game you watch on TV will look the same as any other game.

"The EFLPA grew a spine at the last minute and told Dr. Kevorkian that actual play on the field was off-limits for his new rules," CBS colour commentator **Phil Mimms** noted wryly. "Imagine telling an unvaccinated defender that he has to maintain six-foot distance from a ball carrier or receiver at all times! And what is an unvaccinated ball carrier supposed to do when he's tackled by a vaccinated player? Are you going to fine him for breaking 6-foot rule? It's ridiculous!"

Mimms is one of the very few to speak out in such strong terms in the mainstream media about certain rules



A mask-less **Jeff Cohen** of the Wrecking Balls wears a belt of vaccines around his waist on the sideline at a pre-season game. "I've got all three brands: Pfizer, Moderna, J&J," says Cohen. "When I feel a little off, I pull one from my belt and get a trainer to jab it in. Never felt safer since the pandemic started!"



Scenes like this will be returning to EFL stadiums in 2021 as the arrival of the vaccine gives authorities confidence to allow fans back into stadiums. These Blue Eagles fans will get a chance to try out the Wolverine's Den in Toronto, renamed the Eagle's Nest for this year, as the team and city officials in Scarborough plan to build a new stadium for the 2023 season.

being decreed by Dr. Kevorkian. Mimms has a reputation for being outspoken. But he tempers his criticism of the league's protocols with high praise for the vaccine itself.

"Should everyone be vaccinated? Of course! The vaccine is a miracle!" Mimms declared. "But let's get real about some of these measures and call them what they are: punishment. And it's more obvious because most of them don't make any sense at all. We made it through the height of the pandemic with players in the league wearing a bizarre necklace around their neck and a mask on their face. Now they can't even fly, eat or train together if they aren't all vaccinated? Frankly it's idiotic."

While the vaccine was the dominant, trending topic in mainstream sports media outlets in the off-season, there was certainly a lot going on in conventional player movement as well to keep analysts on their toes. This included an unprecedented bidding war in free agency and a

red hot trade market that saw 362 players and draft picks exchange hands in 86 team-to-team transactions. And in a bullish trade market, no team was more active than the reigning champions.

"*Budapest made 19 trades this off-season, more than any other team,*" writes **Peter Prince** in North America Today. "*With the exception of the Calais Campbell deal to New Jersey, none of these trades, individually, could be called major moves. But taken together they had the effect of calibrating and fine-tuning a high-performance engine that Aaron Rodgers will hope to drive to his second consecutive Gale Sayers Game.*"

The North Stars were active on all fronts in the off-season after winning their second championship in 9 years. A \$6 million five-year deal and \$4 million signing bonus for an obscure CFL fullback named **Pharaoh Brown** is one of many clear indicators that **Darrin Jones** is serious about becoming only the second team in EFL history to win back-to-back championships.

"*A Moose Jaw Mountie fan would know who Pharaoh Brown is, but barely,*" notes **Caleb Cogger** of *EFL Magazine* in his article, 'A Star is Reborn.' "*He was a great blocking fullback and occasional tight end in the CFL, where they don't do a lot of power running. That the North Stars knew about him at all and were willing to pay a large premium to lure him away from a number of casual suitors says something about their scouting department and Jones' attention to detail and desire to win.*"

The essential core of the 2020 North Stars remains mostly intact heading into 2021 but there a few interesting changes. In addition to Campbell, notable losses include hard-nosed middle linebacker **Benardrick McKinney**; low-profile but high impact member of the running back-by-committee, **Jamaal Williams**; pro bowl guard **Brandon Books**; and wide receiver **Sammy Watkins**. Williams' spot on the running back committee will be taken by another low profile but high cost, free agent, ex-Mississippi Rebels running back, **Jeff Wilson Jr**, signed from the SFL. Former Wrecking Balls' tackle, **Brian Bulaga** will move over to guard to replace Brooks while **BJ Goodson** will take over McKinney's inside linebacker assignment. The underperforming Watkins was deemed expendable on a receiver-strapped team due to the emergence of sophomore **Justin Jefferson** in training camp, a fully healthy **Stefon Diggs** (who we are told battled through minor injuries in 2020) and the acquisition of deep threat **Nelson Agholor** from Virden. Some analysts see all this as a significant upgrade over the 2020 team.

"The wide receiver position was a point of weakness last year but expect it to be one of the North Stars' strengths in 2021," noted **Kris Hortenson** of ESPN's Sports Central in the network's two-hour EFL preview special roundtable, '*Forecasting Fifteen!*' "*Stefon Diggs is having an amazing camp as is second-year pro Justin Jefferson. Reports out of Budapest claim Aaron Rodgers has never looked happier. If that's the case, look out! If a first-class offence emerges in Budapest to go with that world class defence, the Stars will be very tough to beat!*"

"I agree," the peppery and out-spoken **Will Simons** jumped in, showing unusual agreeableness. "But let's not forget about coach **Darrin Jones** and his ability to get the most out of any roster. He made a conscious effort to stand tall rather than stand pat in the off-season and now he has the best roster in football to work with. Opponents will need to bring their A+ game to the field and that may not even be enough!"

Analysts, commentators and talk show hosts are falling over each other looking for new and interesting ways to praise the North Stars and somehow set themselves apart from the herd while arriving at the same conclusion as all the smart people.

And while a reborn, confident **Aaron Rodgers** heading a revamped Budapest roster, with the scratches in last year's championship outfit buffed out, looks no less imposing than the perfect Mustangs of 2014, there are still 16 regular season games and a post-season tournament to play before the North Stars can lay claim to another title.

"Hey guys, I get it! Rodgers is playing with a full deck this year," interjected ESPN's **Skope Boylezz**. "And we haven't even really covered **Minkah Fitzpatrick** and that Budapest defence yet. But anything can happen on the field of play – that's why they play the games – and Durham is a team with the talent to go toe-to-toe with this Budapest squad on any given Sunday. I am going to say their defence will be better than the North Stars' this year, as hard as that it to believe!"

"I believe it!" cut in the ruddy, swollen-faced **Russ Flont**. "You look at that pass rush led by **Trey Hendrickson**; you look at that group of linebackers led by **Fred Warner**; you look at that secondary led by **Tyrann Mathieu**; you look at all that and if you *don't* see a Defence-of-the-Ages you are blind as a bat! We may be looking at the best defence of *all time* in Durham. And you know what they say about defences...they *win* championships!"

It was a rare mic drop moment for the hyperbolic Flont. The stunned panel paused ever so briefly to consider his sensational statement before releasing a general murmur of agreement. Much attention had been paid to the North Stars' advances on offence and less attention on its defence, as it was assumed it would be at least as great as it had been in 2020. However, of the Stars' core defensive stars of the previous year, only **Minkah Fitzpatrick** was deemed to be hitting his prime. **Calais Campbell** was gone and **Cameron Jordan**, now in his 30's, would be hard-pressed to maintain the top All-Pro form he had displayed over his past five years. On the other hand, the Thunder Lizards had many up-and-comers. It was hard to discount Durham's potential to displace Budapest as the league's no.1 defensive unit.

"Durham has a young blood defence," writes **Lazor Ponk** of Scouts Ltd in his 2021 edition of 'Guide to EFL Talent.' "*Contrary to some wild and premature claims, I do not view it as a historic defence on par with the great defences: the Dragons' or Convicts' defences of 2009, the Mustangs' defence of 2014, or the supremely talented but outrageously underperforming Banana Sluggs' defence of 2014. But it is definitely the most talented and dangerous defense – from a pressure and takeaway perspective – that will take the field this year.*"

"When a hyper-talent like **Brian Burns** is a rotational end in your system, you know your pass rush is stacked to the max," observes **Sheff Plonderon** of *Fourth Dimension Fantasy*, a 'deep fantasy' service for fantasy football players who desire 'full immersion' into the complexities of Fantasy Football. "So, 4-D Fantasy players need to be mindful of the player's situation before making a draft pick. Burns would normally be a mid-first round, PR-1 selection in our defensive segment, but since he is sharing time on the Thunder Lizards with **Chase Young** and **Trey Hendrickson**, owners are wise to defer to the second round and go with a more established starter in the first round."

Mainstream analyses overwhelmingly assess the Durham defence as providing the entry point for the Lizards to finally attain their ever-elusive goal of making it to a Gale Sayers Game. But **Harry Schultz**, head guru of the well-established projection service, FootballOutriders.Org, takes a slightly different view of the Dinosaurs' prospects in his 2021 *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*:

"Durham will be neck-and-neck with Budapest this year because of **Josh Allen** and the offence," Schultz writes. "*Their offensive line is something nobody talks about but it is one of the best in the league. There is no Bell Cow in the backfield but the running back room is stocked with undeclared talent. Cooper Kupp may be the best route runner in football today and Darren Waller has the potential to be an All Pro now that he will emerge from the shadow of Travis Kelce in Bruxelles. The Lizards have a legitimate shot at beating Budapest down the stretch. If they don't succeed it will be most probably due to the corners on the edge not being able to keep up with Stefon Diggs and Justin Jefferson.*"

On ESPN's 'Forecasting Fifteen,' **Will Simons** recovered quickly from Flont's diatribe about the Durham defence and inserted this caution: "Hey Russ, I agree with you for once: the Durham defence could surpass the Budapest's this year if it performs to expectations. But isn't that the problem with the Thunder Lizards in general? That they don't perform to expectations. We've been here before, at the start of the season, forecasting great things for Durham and by the end of the season we're talking about other teams. Until they show they can play up to their talent level consistently, I think you have to rank them second, or even third, in the Atlantic Conference!"

"Third in the conference?" **Kris Hortenson** interjected, his eyebrows raising in intrigue. "I can see maybe third in the league – when you start looking at teams like Charleswood and possibly the Cubs – but who do you think is going to challenge Durham for number two in the Atlantic?"

"Aurora...er... Oshawa of course!" Simons responded, to audible skepticism from the table. "Hey, these past two years we've underestimated the Mustangs and all they've done is win their third Gale Sayers Trophy and lose by 3 points to the current reigning champs in the Conference Final. When they moved and changed their name, they took **Matt Ryan** with them and he's only won more MVP awards than any other quarterback. All I'm saying guys is; don't sleep on Oshawa just because they have a new name – what is it? Pink Tigers? That group of players knows how to win on Sunday!"

This other team in the mix to finish on top in the Atlantic Conference has been a familiar and regular competitor

at the league's highest level of competition since 2014. However, many fans will not recognize them at first glance this year. The Aurora Mustangs – the greatest franchise in EFL history in the eyes of many – experienced several shocking and sudden off-season developments. The result is that the Mustangs are in name no more and uprooted from their former Aurora home. They are now the Pink Panthers and will play their home games at the GM Megadome in Oshawa, Ontario in 2021.

It all started one week after the Gale Sayers Game with the unexpected resignation of Head Coach, **Rich Liotta**. The sure-fire hall-of-famer appeared as the only speaker at a hastily convened press conference to announce that he was



Tyrann Mathieu of the Thunder Lizards (left) and **Minkah Fitzpatrick** of the North Stars (right) are expected to lead their defences to the top of the rankings this year. Will one of them make the difference when Durham and Budapest clash in the playoffs?

leaving football to spend more time with his family and mistress before seeking “other challenges.”

“Football has been very rewarding professionally. The Mustangs have been like family to me. But now is the time to spend more time with my real family and my mistress,” Liotta announced somberly to the stunned gathering. “I will never forget and will always treasure my time with the franchise and with the people of Aurora. The years I spent here, our success as well as our failures (not that we had many of those), are irreplaceable in my heart.”

The press conference lasted less than 10 minutes and Liotta answered few questions. He did admit that “at some point in the future” he would be “seeking other challenges” but they would be unrelated to football. In the meantime, his young mistress would keep him “busy” while he considered his options.

Three days after Liotta announced his departure the Mustangs announced the sale of the team to a group of businesses in Oshawa, headed up by General Motors. News of the sale was publicly communicated through a terse press release. Mustangs’ owner **Haus Beauregard**, a Texas oilman with ties to futurist tech companies, did not appear in public to deliver the news, nor did his office return calls for an interview. His *Twitter* account posted a simple message: [‘Thank you Aurora! Farewell!’](#)

The strange and sudden events caught the EFL, the players and the fans off guard. After the North Stars had eliminated the Mustangs in the Conference Final last year in a bitterly tight defensive struggle, there had been no outward signs of discontent nor dysfunction on the team in the wake of that loss. Under Liotta, the Mustangs had always bounced back after failing to win a championship. Mustangs’ fans and local writers had already been calling for 2021 to be the Mustangs’ year even before Virden and Budapest had kicked off in the Championship in Las Vegas to begin the end of the 2020 campaign.

Official reaction from mainstream outlets and reporters tried to paper over the move as ultimately a good thing for the league. Typical of the corporate media reaction was this paragraph from *North America Today* columnist, **Peter Prince**:

“All good things must come to an end. The abrupt move from Aurora to Oshawa is a change few of us expected to see at this time, but change is inevitable in all things, including football,” stated the beginning of Prince’s article, ‘End of an Era.’ *“Over the coming months we will learn more details about what prompted the sale of the Mustangs to the vibrant and exciting City of Oshawa, but for now let us look back with admiration and appreciation for all that the Aurora Mustangs and their excellent coach, Rich Liotta, did for the EFL and for the game of football.”*

With sparse information from official and mainstream sources available to bewildered and angry fans, the Internet and secondary outlets, such as the hard-hitting, *Deathspun*, are filling in the gaps in trying to make sense of the stunning developments. Investigative reporter, **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** has a reputation earned over many years as an unofficial “expert” on behind-the-scenes matters involving the Mustangs. He has this to say:

“This move is merely a reaction to the next step in the upcoming conflict between the United States and China,” writes Smith-Abdullah in the article, ‘Football Player 2.0.’ *“The experiments of Project Adam on the Mustangs players were declared a success, yielding functioning prototypes in the Watt™ and Ryan™ technologies, resulting in three EFL Championships over*

7 years. It turns out that Project Adam was a sub-contractor for DARPA and is no longer being funded by the agency. The other factor at play is what I wrote about last year at the beginning of the pandemic: the scarcity of rare minerals like Superstronium and Element-99 due to the trade war with China. That trade war is on the verge of becoming a real war and the few of these precious resources available to the US need to be funneled into so-called Super Soldiers and cannot be squandered on Football Player 2.0.”

Provided all or some of this is true, the question that jumps to mind is: Why would **Haus Beauregard**, a lifelong passionate football fan, would sell his team? Smith-Abdullah has an answer to this question:

“Mustang’s owner **Haus Beauregard** is a transhumanist who has invested his oil fortune in neuromorphic technologies and human-machine biology. Football is just a hobby for him. His team was a testing ground for cyborg technologies. Now that this test phase is complete, he has no more use for the team except as a personal diversion. He has decided to focus on a project to colonize Mars with cyborgs instead and plans to have **Rich Liotta** organize the expedition.”

Smith-Abdullah bases the majority of his material on confidential sources. His verifiable sources are scarce, but there are two that seem to corroborate at least some of the story. The most telling are the actual patents on file with the United States Patent Office for Project Adam, covering a “human machine interface using cell implants and magnetic nano-circuitry to enhance strength and endurance in athletes, PA231202099” and a “system of electronic analog circuits replicating neurobiological architectures encoded in an organic brain chip to enhance cognitive function and physical perception, PA182511402.” These patent summaries sound straightforward, if somewhat technical, but as Smith-Abdullah points out:

“If one views the catalogue numbers for each of the processes described as a cipher using the alphabet as the key, one gets the following: **PA** [Project Adam] **23[W]1[A]20[T]20[T]99**[uniform number of TJ Watt], or **WATT99**; and **18[R]25[Y]1[A]14[N]02**[uniform number of Matt Ryan], or **RYAN02**. This is pretty much in plain sight but the EFL continues to turn a blind eye.”

Whether or not General Motors is purchasing damaged goods in players previously enhanced by, but no longer supported by, cyborg technology will probably reveal itself on the field in 2021. But since there is no direct evidence that the two principal stars of the Mustang Dynasty are, or ever have been, cyborgs, most analysts see the core of this team, now called the Pink Panthers, as the same group that almost knocked off the 2020 Champion North Stars in the Conference Final.

In his 2021 Scouts Ltd ‘Guide to EFL Talent,’ **Lazor Ponk** examines the Oshawa roster: “The heart of the offence,



Matt Ryan and **Davante Adams**, are back, and we know what they can do. The running backs are the same and we all know that **Kenyan Drake** is explosive. The offensive line got stronger at guard with the drafting of **Alijah Vera-Tucker** and the vets, led by center **Jason Kelce**, are capable of keeping the pocket clean against most of the pass rush units in the league. The defence looks strong this year, particularly up front with a healthy **JJ Watt** reporting to camp in top shape and the rapid growth of young interior linemen **David Onyemata** and **Jeffery Simmons**. Look for **Haason Reddick** to have a breakout year in 2021 and give Oshawa the attack off the edge they lacked last year. The secondary is downgraded slightly from last year as depth may be a concern. Overall, however, this is a better defence in 2021 than it was in 2020.”

While most of the players are back, the coach who molded and guided them for 7 years is now gone. He will be replaced by a virtual unknown, local Oshawa-an, **Scott Dennis**. A mechanical engineer by trade, Dennis left GM after 20 years to pursue a career in coaching. He progressed to the job of offensive coordinator of the Toronto Boatmen of the CFL, a position he held for five years before falling victim to the “great purge” of 2018 after the

In an off-season of profligate free agent spending, former Long Beach Sharks WR, **Robbie Anderson**, cashed in with a 4-year, \$33,620,000 contract from the Pilots, including a league-high \$15,800,000 signing bonus. Now he needs someone to throw to him.

Boatmen's disastrous 1-17 campaign. Dennis joined the Racing Point F1 team in 2019 but had to leave England and return to Canada in 2020 when the pandemic hit. When the Mustangs were purchased, the GM-led business group that bought the franchise was determined to make its new acquisition a "community-based team" along the lines of the Markham North Stars, prior to their move to Budapest. They envisioned an organization that would provide employment for local citizens who were laid off in the thousands when GM temporarily stopped manufacturing automobiles at their Oshawa plant. The GM Executive who chaired the new 'Oshawa Football Club Corporation' remembered Dennis from his days with the company and hand-picked him to lead the team into the 2021 season.

How the new coach will affect the performance of the Mustangs' old stable of stars is the big question mark hanging over the team and one currently confounding sports analysts.

"Dennis was a proponent of the vertical passing game when he was with Toronto, a trait he has in common with Rich Liotta," writes **Severin Handfottner Jr.** of 'Coaches Call.' *"We*



Can a team ride a running back to victory in a passing league? The York Excaliburs will certainly try. One of the last true "work horses" of the ground game, **Derrick Henry**, gets ready to punish defenders in 2021.

know the players he inherited can execute deep verticals. What we don't know yet is what schemes Dennis will put in place to open up the vertical opportunities. We also need to see how he will adjust his game plan to suit opponents. There is a steep learning curve ahead of him and until we see how his game plan transitions onto the field, it is not safe to assume that the Pink Panthers will perform at the level the Mustangs did."

The origin of the name 'Pink Panthers' is another common question greeting the move of the Mustangs to Oshawa. When Canadians think of Oshawa they think of "Canada's Motor City," not the animated character that debuted in the opening sequence of the 1963 film, *The Pink Panther*, that later morphed into a famous media franchise and cartoon show. The actual reference behind the name is to a Formula One race car, according to **Scott Dennis**:

"Pink Panther is actually the nickname given by racing fans to the VJM10, a race car built by a Formula One racing team named Force India," Dennis explained in an interview with **Jim Miller** of *EFL Network*. "In 2017 the team signed with a new sponsor and the car was painted pink. It really stood out on the track. I actually worked on a Pink Panther for a bit when I was with Racing Point in 2019; that's the team that took up for Force India when it went bankrupt. I've always had a fondness for that car. We thought of a bunch of names for the team – Oshawa Motors, Oshawa Generals, Oshawa Pistons – but they were too predictable or had already been done. Pink Panther is a clever way of introducing the motor theme, without being too obvious about it."

Based on the initial reactions of fans and media to the team's new nickname, its connection to a race car is so *unobvious* that virtually everybody outside of the team's management sees it as a reference to the cartoon character and is struggling to understand the connection with Oshawa. Even the team's marketing department was confused, having gone ahead and purchased rights to the cartoon character's image for the team's logo and promotional materials before realizing the truth.

"Somebody in marketing didn't get the memo apparently," quipped **Cowan Bullherd** on his radio talk show, *Morning Bull* when talking about the move. "So, you've got this supposed race car that looks exactly like the cartoon character, Pink Panther on the player's helmets. And they're wearing sandy pink jerseys with baby blue pants at home! Not exactly an intimidating colour scheme. Hey, nothing wrong with pink – my daughter's bed room was pink and it looked nice – but not everybody sees pink the same way. I don't know what more to say – and it takes a lot to take words out of my mouth!"

The people of Oshawa and the communities east of them along Highway 401 are expected to come out and support the Pink Panthers, regardless of the colours they wear or the logo they display. Having a professional football franchise in their community is too prestigious to risk losing. However, the team's marketing fumble may have inadvertently sparked even broader interest, as LGBTQ Community activists from across the province, particularly Toronto, rally to support the team.

"We see this as a progressive move toward eliminating heterosexism and homophobia in professional sports," declared

Rod Stukenbut of the Toronto-based LGBTQ athletic support group, *Ride the Rainbow*. “Young male gay and bi athletes are still afraid to come out and be their natural selves in sports. A lot of people say the right things when it comes to acceptance, but there is still a hidden stigma that says, if you’re a gay athlete, you are less of an athlete. We see the Pink Panthers erasing that stigma and freeing thousands of young men to be themselves.”

While acceptance of many shades of sexuality once considered taboo is growing rapidly as society comes to understand the nature of sexuality and gender identity, the team may not be entirely comfortable being a lightning rod for LGBTQ activism.

“It’s a car, not a political statement for or against any lifestyle choice,” stated Team President, **Marty Bell**, a GM executive and resident of Oshawa. “We appreciate the support of all groups, including groups that identify with the LGBTQ community, and hope to reward everybody by bringing a championship to Oshawa this year.”

Despite the best efforts of Bell and others connected with the team, the “*it’s a car*” mantra is hopelessly lost in the noise created by the prevailing legacy of the Pink Panther cartoon franchise and LGBTQ activism. The “cat” is out of the bag and running all over the furniture. Already, a faction within the LGBTQ, ‘Pink Panther Support Club’ is threatening to boycott the team if it doesn’t immediately trade for **Carl Nassib**, a defensive end currently on the Las Vegas Assassins’ roster who came out as gay at the start of training camp. The same group is calling on Pink Panther players who identify as gay or bi to come out and declare their sexuality. ‘WE ARE ALL CARL!’ read the banner at a recent protest in front of the team’s head office.

The key to Oshawa’s success in 2021 will be avoiding the distractions created by their choice of nickname and ignoring the pressure of following in the footsteps of an already legendary Liotta Legacy.

“*The new coach is going to have to focus on football and nothing else,*” concludes **Severin Handfottner Jr.** of ‘Coach’s Call.’ “*It is tough enough to win in this league when you aren’t carrying the weight of following a legend on your shoulders, or having to defend your team’s new image. If Scott Dennis focuses on defending the red zone and attacking opponents instead, he will get the most he can out of his team.*”

There is general agreement that Budapest, Durham and Oshawa (if they adjust to the new scenery) are the teams destined to be at the top of the Atlantic Conference come season’s end. Is there another team in the Conference with the potential to surprise enough to crack this elite group? This is where the gap between football analysts becomes canyon-sized. **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org summarizes the situation with, what he calls, the “middle teams” in the Atlantic:

“*There are half a dozen teams in the Atlantic with enough talent on their rosters to replace Oshawa in the top 3 and, if lucky enough, could even take a run at Budapest or Durham. The problem we see in our simulations is that these middle or upper-middle teams usually beat each other up over the course of the season and end up at or near 500,*” explains Schultz. “*Occasionally, one will emerge. Some will be surprised, given their disheartening record in 2020, that the Pickering Spartans*



Pink Panther fans make a show for the TV cameras prior to the team’s first pre-season game at the *GM Megadome* in Oshawa. The traditional football fan demographic east of the GTA has been bolstered by thousands of self-identified members of the LGBTQ+ community in Toronto, who see the team’s adoption of the colour pink as a sign of acceptance.

appear due for a resurgence if **Philip Rivers** can rediscover some of his lost mojo.”

Schultz’s analysis makes sense when considering that **Philip Rivers**, who was ranked 17th overall in passer rating in 2020, laboured behind a leaky offensive line, was inadequately supported by a stop-and-start running game and had to deal with a banged up receiving corps that suffered absences through a horrendous 7-game losing streak in the second half of the season. The 2021 edition of the venerable Spartans promises to be in better form, at least initially.

“We haven’t talked about **Philip Rivers** and what is quietly taking shape in Pickering,” segued **Kris Hortenson**, on ESPN Sports Central’s *Forecasting Fifteen!* “Although they picked up **Zach Wilson** with the 8th pick of the draft, **Gus Konstantakos** has declared Rivers the starter and I have to think that is good news for another rookie, **DaVonta Smith**.”

“There should be no question that the Spartans will compete for a wildcard spot with the talent they will be putting on the field. But we *are* talking about Philip Rivers here, guys, a known risk-taker who’s lost some zip on his fastball as he approaches 40,” snickered **Skope Boylezz**, a mocking smirk on his face. “And then you have their coach who flips his lid, literally, stirring up commotion on his own sideline. For me, the Spartans are wait-and-see. I’m not banking on them.”

This comment caused **Russ Flont** to flip his lid. Face beaming red he jumped in: “Skope, I can’t believe you said that about one of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play the game!” a fleck of foam jetted from his mouth through the air as he pronounced the word ‘play.’ “Philip Rivers was nothing less than a warrior last year fighting through a bad situation with all those injuries and a struggling offensive line. Granted, he may have tried to do too much. But you can’t blame him for trying whatever he could to lead that team out of the wilderness. With **Calvin Ridley** back healthy as ever and **DeVonta Smith** on the other side I predict Rivers to do great things. We could be looking at an MVP year for him.”

The supporting cast around Rivers is definitely improved over 2020, with rookie **Trey Sermon** joining a shifty backfield that includes **Miles Sanders** and **D’Andre Swift** and veteran left tackle **Trent Williams** returning to stabilize the blindside. On the defensive side of the ball, corner **Xavien Howard** is in the best shape he has ever been in and has vowed to have a “breakout year.” If he is able to follow through, it will bring a big boost to a defence that fought valiantly but eventually became demoralized in 2020.

If Pickering fails to compete with the big boys, there are plenty of other middling candidates that could fill the void.

“If the Pink Panthers collapse or struggle under new management, the team most likely to benefit will be the Cadillac,” Schultz continues in the Outriders Pro Football Almanac. “The twin edge rush combo of **Joey Bosa** and **Myles Garrett** can partially compensate for relative mediocrity in the secondary and flanks of the linebacking corps; while **Neville Hewitt** and **Kenneth Murray** are solid stop gaps behind the center of the Erieau d-line. The defence remains the Cadillac’s main strength, but if **Kyler Murray** can show growth in 2021, this team could finally be a factor in the playoff race.”

The idea that the Cadillac may finally be able to make the drive through a full season without a serious breakdown is catching on with sports pundits at all levels of media. Even **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* devoted some rare space in his season-opening column to the squad local Erieau scribes lament as “the forgotten team of the 2016 expansion.”

“Nothing is a given in sport,” writes Prince. “So, if the Pink Panthers take a step back this year some team has to step up. **Kyler Murray** checks all the boxes a coach is looking for in a modern quarterback: mobility, arm strength, creativity and leadership. He has the talent to make a gain when the play breaks down. Murray is an X-Factor in the equation in the South Division and offers the possibility that the Cadillac will end their playoff drought this year.”

Another team not being discounted as a prospective dark horse is in the discussion due to its history of hanging around and sneaking into the post-season almost by stealth.

“York finished with a disappointing 6 wins in 2020 after making it to the final just two years before, but a closer look at the outcome of their games in 2020 shows that they could have just as easily flipped that record around,” writes **Caleb Cogger** in his *EFL Magazine* article, ‘Who Will Fight the Power?’ “An average of slightly more than 3 points per game separated them from Budapest and Brooklin in 4 crucial division losses and a **Jakeem Grant** kick return for a touchdown was the difference in a game that all but eliminated them heading into the final two weeks. It goes almost without saying that any team with **Tom Brady** at QB stands a chance of over-achieving. However, when taking into consideration **Derrick Henry** running behind that good offensive line and the deep threat posed by **Mike Williams** and **Corey Davis** off play action, it is more than merely possible the Excaliburs will surprise opponents yet again.”

In the North Division, where the Thunder Lizards are king, the three teams behind them tend to be viewed through a similar lens by analysts across the continent: any one of Sebastian, Cowtown or Scarborough could finish in a playoff spot or in last place in the division. More than likely, all three will finish in neither, according to Jimmy the Geek:

“Looking strictly at the odds in individual transactions, none of the three teams behind Durham in the North Division are good bets to make the post-season and none of them are good bets to finish last in the division,” joked **Jimmy the Geek** on his cable TV show, *Odds ‘n Suds*. “But I wouldn’t discount any of the three to finish in either position, if that makes sense. In other words, it’s a total crap shoot! When looking at these teams, a hunch is the best you might get when deciding whether or not to wager on where they will finish. If I had to bet, I’d put my money on none of them making it to



Coach, **Stephen Katopodis** watches first-round pick, **Mac Jones** practice hand-off drills at the Crusaders' practice facility outside Winnipeg. Who he will hand-off the ball to most is one of many questions for the suddenly rebuilding and talent-starved Crusaders.

the playoffs and all of them finishing with the same record. Tie-breakers will end up deciding the draft order.”

Harry Schultz delves into more detail when rounding out his North Division prognosis:

“The finish behind Durham in the North could ultimately be decided by the respective vaccination status of the three teams,” writes Schultz. *“There are things to like and things to be concerned about with all three. Cowtown has had the most recent success and they have an interesting and generally underrated defence that should keep them in most games. On the downside, the offence has only one star on it now that **Todd Gurley II** is running like **Todd Gurley Sr.**, but **Mike Evans** cannot carry the offence by himself. Then there is the question of who will settle in as the starter at **QB** now that **Ryan Fitzpatrick** is back with the*

team. Uncertainty at the most important position on the field could hurt them.”

On the subject of Internet dark horse favourite, Sebastian, Schultz is more upbeat:

“The Swordfish are intriguing,” begins Schultz. *“They tend to finish slightly better than Scarborough or Cowtown in our straight up simulations, usually at, or one game on either side of 500. When we plug **Russ Lemmon**’s aggressiveness factor into the model the results vary wildly – anywhere from 11 wins to as little as 2. **Kirk Cousins** is underrated and we see him fitting in quite well in Florida with the targets he has available. The running tandem of **Nick Chubb** and **Jonathan Taylor** is unparalleled and adds a dimension largely missing from past Swordfish teams. The defence is not to be discounted but it will probably be their Achilles Heel as the season progresses and injuries take their toll on a light defensive line. But if any team other than Durham has a chance to barge into playoffs from the North, we like the Swordfish to be that team.”*

How analysts see the Blue Eagles faring depends entirely on how each one views **Joe Burrow**. Some pundits are taking a wait-and-see approach to last year’s no.1 pick in the draft; while others are predicting bold advancement or the inevitable sophomore slump. **Harry Schultz** and his team of mathematicians at FootballOutriders.Org weigh in with a science-based evaluation of Burrow and the Blue Eagles:

*“The progress of **Joe Burrow** will dictate Scarborough’s success in 2021,”* begins Schultz, echoing a common view. *“Although there is a possibility this could vault Scarborough up the standings, it is more realistic to expect another year of gradual growth with all the usual ups and downs. This is not a linear progression upwards, as last year showed when he did not throw an interception in his first 7 games and went on to throw 14 in his last 9. We project him relying too much on **Allen Robinson II**, because he has to. As a result, expect the young quarterback to sometimes take two steps back for each step forward and sometimes two forward for each step back. The end result will be a team that flashes high potential from time-to-time but in the end falls back under 500 and out of the playoffs.”*

A trio of longshots round out the field in the Atlantic Conference. Neither Brooklin, nor East Elmhurst, nor Georgia is considered a clear basement-dweller, but none are expected to be factors in the playoff race, except as spoilers. In the case of the Hawks, this is somewhat surprising given their 10-6 record and appearance in the quarter finals in 2020.

*“The Hawks masked some warts in 2020 with the play of the offence and a career year from **Derek Carr**, who cut down his interceptions from 14 in 2019 to just 3 last year,”* notes **Mumbar Thakar** of Pro Football Focal-Point (PFFP) in his ‘Pre-Season Power Rankings.’ *“The concern we have is that his protection will not be as robust this year from both his offensive line and his running game. The team paid a large sum to sign **Austin Ekeler** of the Rio Rancho Renegades, who was injury-prone in the relatively light-hitting Tex-Mex League. We have doubts that he and an ageing **Carlos Hyde** will be able to carry the load. After **DeAndre Hopkins** and **Evan Engram** there are no reliable targets in the passing game. While we grade the defence overall slightly better than last year, it is not sufficiently improved to make up the difference. Carr and Hopkins will not be able to prevent the Hawks taking a swan dive in the standings.”*

When it comes to the East Elmhurst Irish, opinion is sharply divided. The general consensus is that they will battle Georgia to stay out of the South basement. However, a small coterie of adherents sees the team in a starkly different light. This includes maverick football analyst, **Sperl Sponefritter** of *Sperl’s World of Sports*. Flush with the rare success of having successfully predicted a Hawks playoff run in 2020 when most writers were leaning in the opposite direction, Sperl spouted

the following nonsensical scenario in 2021:

“*God favours the Irish,*” he boldly proclaimed in his piece, entitled, ‘Football Armageddon.’ “*The God who has been invisible throughout the pandemic will show His face to the world through a miracle – not one but several. In the first, **Baker Mayfield** will be transformed into a shining winged archer with an un-erring aim. In the second, **Aaron Jones** will run like a Pegasus by and over the waving arms of his foes. In the third, **Brandon Graham** will be as a Leviathan to captains of the opposition a force to smite them. In the fourth, **Eric Weddle** will play as a man 10 years younger. Of course, **Tyreek Hill** will race through defenders on his way to the end zone two times a game; **Adam Thielen** will catch everything thrown his way and **Jalen Ramsey** will smother the opponent’s best receiver and get in on tackles against the run as well. No miracles required for the last three predictions to come true. In the end, whether God really had anything to do with it or not, experts will be baffled when the Irish win the South Division.*”

This time, Sperl is not out on an island by himself. No less than **Will Simons** of ESPN echoed some of Sperl’s points on Sports Central’s ‘*Forecasting Fifteen!*’ while sounding like less of a lunatic doing so: “Now, I know I said that Oshawa could challenge Durham for the number two spot in the Atlantic, but don’t think for a second that I think any less of the Irish because of it,” he stated emphatically as the round table wound down their discussion of the Atlantic Conference. “This is a team with some bombs to detonate on the field of play and I expect guys like **Jalen Ramsey**, **Tyreek Hill**, **Adam Thielen** and yes, even **Baker Mayfield**, to ruin the calculations writers, fans and coaches are making about this team!”

This statement caused **Russ Flont** to burst into scornful laughter. However, both **Skope Boylezz** and **Kris Hortenson** paused to consider the points.

“Well, when you think of it, this goes to show that there are no real pushovers in the Atlantic Conference,” Hortenson weighed in soberly. “I have no trouble picturing the Irish beating just about anybody on any given Sunday. The question is can they win consistently?”

“If you want to use that logic, Kris, you could say the same thing about the Gladiators! I say that’s also a team that can also beat anybody on any given Sunday,” sneered **Russ Flont**. “**Ben Roethlisberger** is back and he brings veteran leadership to a team with outstanding receivers and a great, young running back in **James Robinson**. You can’t put a price on veteran leadership guiding that young talent on Georgia, and you can bet he’ll be more consistent than **Baker Mayfield!**”

“Hold on there, Russ!” broke in **Will Simons**. “Nothing against Big Ben, but he isn’t exactly known for his consistency. But let’s say for argument’s sake that he has a great year. Do you think the defence in Georgia will be able to stop anybody consistently?”

In the pause following the question, as Flont fumbled an attempt to answer, **Kris Hortenson** broke in: “Well, I don’t think anybody thinks the young talent on the Georgia defence is quite ready yet, but we’ll see. The question I have is: Are we allowed to call them Georgia anymore now that they will be playing in Pittsburgh this year?”

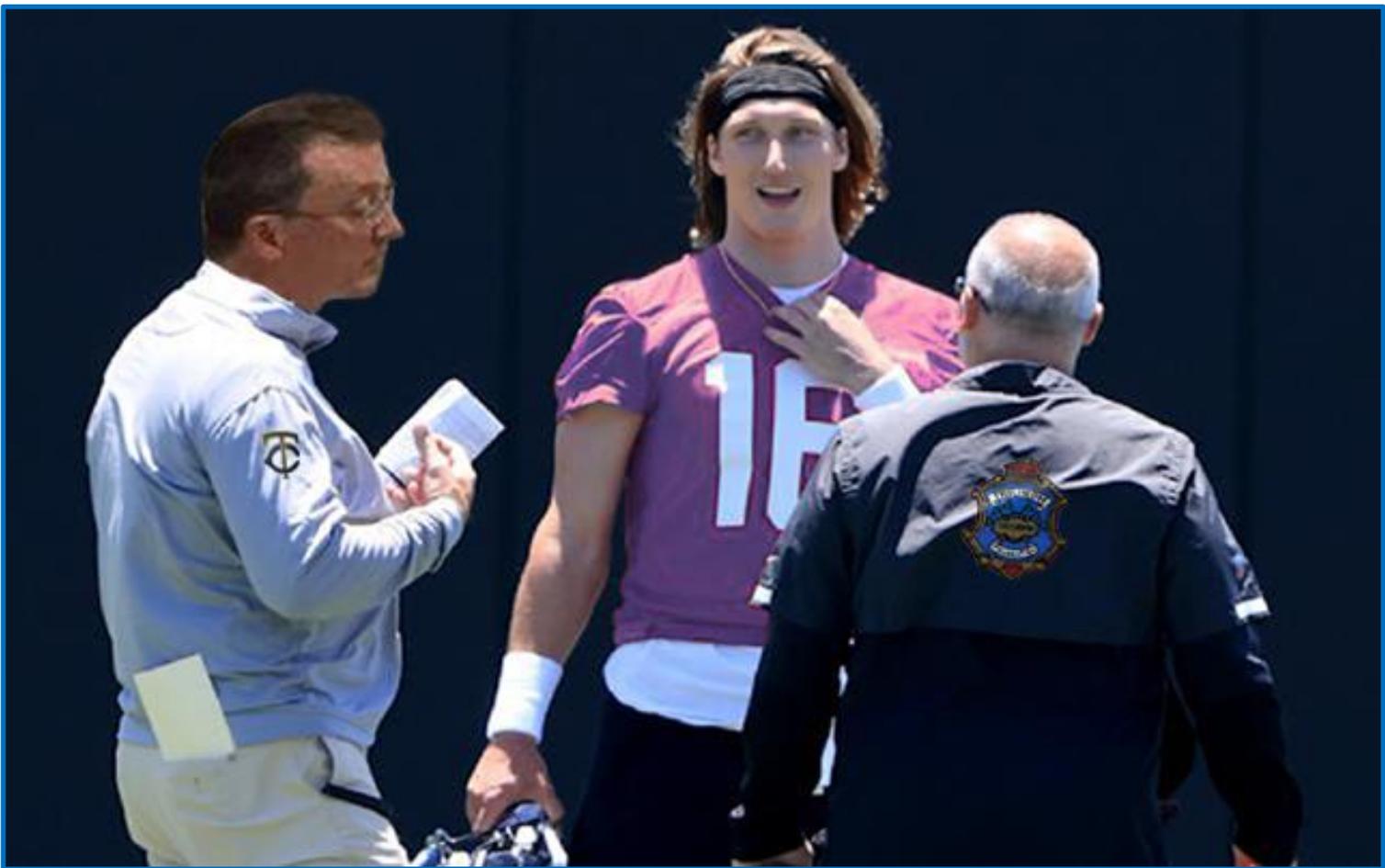
The question prompted general laughter as the panel shifted to discussion of the strange off-season power play by the Coyotes to become Georgia’s official ‘State Team.’ The Representative for Marietta in the Georgia House of Representatives, **John Carson**, tabled a Bill proposing to legally designate the Cobb County Coyotes as “Georgia’s Team” and legislate a corresponding name change for the Gladiators’ and Georgia Stadium at Lake Oconee. Purportedly at the urging of Cobb County residents, the Bill seeks to “*redress a travesty, in that the reputation of the State of Georgia is sullied by its association to the inadequate, non-competitive, Gladiators football team*” declares the Bill’s preamble. The proposed remedy is to officially downgrade the stature of the Gladiators from a State Team to a County Team, rename their stadium after a local landmark, prohibit them from using ‘Georgia’ in their name and revoke their incorporation in the State.

The move by the Marietta Representative is being greeted with outrage by Georgians in Greensboro, near Lake Oconee, the seat of Gladiator fandom. They have pressured their Representative, **Trey Rhodes**, to table a Bill called the *Countering Marietta Acts of Aggression Act*. However, political observers in Georgia say that Carson’s highly unusual and shockingly hostile Bill likely has some powerful backers, which will make it difficult for Rhodes and others to counter it.

“It is almost certain that John Carson’s Bill was formulated by the Gridiron Secret Society, not the residents of Cobb County,” opines Professor **Delmore Haywood** of Georgia State University. “Governor Kemp is a member of Gridiron and will likely not stand in the way of the Bill if it makes it through third reading and onto the floor of the House.”

As to what all of this means, Professor Haywood speculates darkly: “If the Bill is, in fact, secretly sponsored by the Secret Society, it can only be viewed as an attempt by the owners of the Coyotes, many of whom are believed to belong to the Gridiron Secret Society, to capture the Georgia market and force the Gladiators into neighbouring Alabama, or perhaps even farther away. Rapid developments not in line with a traditional citizen’s Bill suggest this is so.”

While Carson’s Bill, called *Reclaiming the Honour of Georgia Act*, goes through the process of becoming law, a successful Court Injunction, filed by a powerful law firm in Athens, GA (so powerful that it has a permanent State injunction protecting its public identification in court) has frozen the use of Georgia Stadium while the fate of the Bill to have it



Twin Cities coach, **Guy Williams** and offensive coordinator, **Davey Seal** go over a two-minute drill sequence with no.1 overall rookie pick, **Trevor Lawrence**. A “generational talent” by consensus, Triumph fans hope Lawrence will bring them to the Football Promised Land and solve, for the next decade and hopefully longer, a chronic deficiency of the franchise.

renamed and properly upgraded to reflect “Georgia’s highest standards of construction” is debated. As a result, the Gladiators have been forced to sign an emergency one-year lease with *Heinz Field* in Pittsburgh for the 2021 season.

The murky machinations of Georgia politics may be inscrutable to the outsider but no more so than understanding the reasons for the phenomenal and unexpected success of Coyotes in 2020, a subject that analysts are struggling with. The team that came within a **Zane Gonzalez** field goal of making it to the Gale Sayers Game in their first season in Cobb County might feel entitled to claim an entire State in the afterglow of what a couple of national pundits, in their enthusiasm, hastily proclaimed to be *The Greatest Game Ever Played*. However, the aftermath of that dramatic loss to Virden in the 2020 Pacific Conference Final created two disparate views of the Coyotes heading into 2021.

“I admit, I underestimated Ryan Tannehill and the Coyotes last year after the Lamar Jackson trade,” announced **Skope Boylezz** as the panel of ESPN Sports Central’s *‘Forecasting Fifteen!’* turned its attention to the Pacific Conference. “Kudos to coach Eron Osman for scheming to Tannehill’s strengths and putting the players around him to succeed. But this year the 35-year-old Adrian Peterson is one year older, which for a running back in his 30’s is like being 10-years older; Raheem Mostert is gone and Julio Jones is more and more relying on smarts. But this is what is most important: *Teams will be ready for the Coyotes this year. They ambushed the competition last year. This year, teams will be prepared!*”

“That is a sour-grapes take if I ever heard one!” **Will Simons** jumped in. “Blaming their opponents for the Coyotes’ success is a total cop-out and completely unrealistic. This is pro football, Skope! You can’t ambush professionals 14 times in a season, which is how many wins they had last year. You had it right on your first take: You underestimated them, whereas I didn’t. I am just going to remind everyone that I called them to win the East last year. There you go!”

“So, that opens up the question that I will pose to you, Will,” **Kris Hortenson** took the reins. “Being the ‘Coyote Whisperer’ at the table, what do you see in their future in 2021?”

Once the guffaws at the term ‘Coyote Whisperer’ subsided, Simons replied confidently: “I see them winning the East Division again this year! But I don’t see them dominating as much as last year – Eron Osman did not make any significant moves to upgrade losses due to attrition and age. They will feel the loss of Geno Atkins on defence. They had ten draft picks but only two in the top three rounds and it looks like top pick, Travis Etienne will be gone for the season. Their crop of young talent will need time to develop and in order to do that they will need roster spots. So, you’re going to see a

mix of ageing veterans and green talent in Cobb County this year. But I am confident that Eron Osman can get the best out of this group...and it is still an impressive bunch when put up against the rest of the East.”

This last comment brought a loud chortle from **Russ Flont**, whose eyes lit up as he seized the opening. “That just shows you’re not really looking at the rest of the East, Will! I like the look of New Jersey heading into the season! They finally have their quarterback in Matt Stafford, who we know has a phenomenal arm. Now that he is fully recovered from his injury and has a real supporting cast around him, I think he will light-up the opponent’s secondary. We could be looking at a hall-of-fame year for the Wrecking Balls QB!”

Flont’s exaggerative tendencies notwithstanding, a growing number of EFL analysts tend to agree with his assessment. No less than **Jon Claytown**, senior writer at *ESPN.com*, lends support to idea that the Wrecking Balls are poised to wreck a few teams’ seasons in 2021:

“People ask: Is this the year that the Wrecking Balls finally break through? I think so,” Claytown opines in his piece, ‘Wreck ‘n Roll.’ *“The Wrecking Balls have been beset by bad luck in the past. GM Jeff Cohen is determined to take luck out of the equation. He added key weapons to an already respectable arsenal. Acquiring Keen Allen from Peg City for 10 slots of draft position in the first round and a 10-position drop from the third to the fourth round was one of the most underrated moves of the entire off-season. Allen is a premier wide receiver in this league and will give Stafford a reliable target to complement deep threats in Terry McLaurin and DJ Chark Jr. Talented running back David Montgomery enters the season with something to prove. This is an electrifying offence that will carry this team to the playoffs.”*

The New Jersey offence might live up to its expectations but doing so will not be enough to ultimately carry this team to success against the league’s best competition if the defence cannot hold the line. The Wrecking Balls sought to plug holes created by a flurry of trades- that saw them deal away key defenders like **Matt Judon** and **Harold Landry** – by signing free agents **Kerry Hyder** and ex-Virden star **Aldon Smith** to bolster the pass rush. If Smith can resurrect his career at Stone Pony Shore and Hyder can flash the inside penetration he did in the Tex-Mex League, those investments might well pay off. But the history is against them, as one notable institution points out:

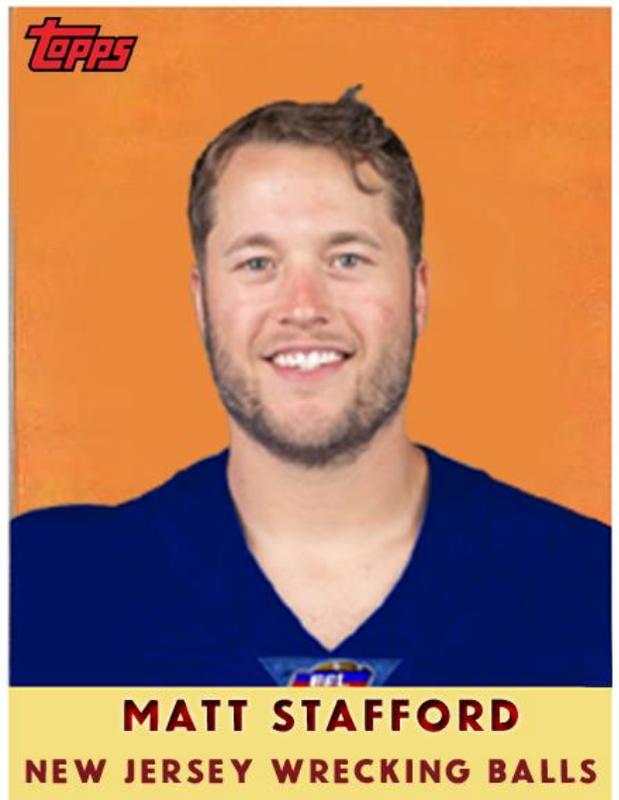
“The Wrecking Balls’ defence in 2020 fell far below our projections,” writes **Harry Schultz** in his ‘2021 Outriders Pro Football Almanac.’ *“It was one of the best defences on paper according to our calculations, but finished 19th in league*

rankings at the end of the season. This year our assessment downgrades them against the run. We cannot project with confidence how Aldon Smith and Kerry Hyder will ultimately perform, so we downgraded their pass rush slightly. It still should be a good defence but whether due to scheme or personnel or both, New Jersey has a track record of not living up to expectations on the defensive side of the ball.”

Schultz goes on to validate the general consensus across the media sphere that New Jersey and Cobb County will battle for the top spot in the East Division, while Bruxelles and Buffalo cope with uncertainty and rebuilds.

“The biggest asset on the Bombers is the offensive line manned by an All-Pro left tackle and Pro Bowlers at left guard and center,” notes Schultz. *“They will help, but that group cannot catch or carry the ball. Who will do those things with reliability is a big question mark. The team dealt away two of the best tight ends in the game then handed first team reps to Adam Shaheen. That essentially takes away most of the middle passing game. This was reflected in our simulations. We saw a very mediocre passing attack that even Drew Brees was unable to fully redeem. The Bombers get full marks for intangibles though and will likely hover around .500 this season.”*

The perception of **Lamar Jackson** as ‘Superman’ and **Aaron Donald** as “game-wrecker” keeps the Derailers in the discussion as a possible dark horse division-winner. However, this type of discussion takes place most often on fan-contributor sites like *Bleacher Feature*, rather than mainstream outlets like



Will this bubble gum card become a collector’s item some day? The New Jersey QB is healthy and hoping for a career year with a new set of weapons at his side.

ESPN Sports Central, where self-proclaimed East Division specialist **Will Simons** throws cold water on the idea that the Derailers' investment in Jackson will pay off any time soon.

"I predict the Derailers will derail quickly after a flashy start. The owner's insistence on coaching the team guarantees that outcome," sneered Simons after **Russ Flont** redirected the conversation to 'X-Factor,' Jackson. "Lamar is an incredible athlete – nobody can dispute that – but he is only one man. He will get beaten down eventually in what pretends to be a 'system' in Buffalo. We've seen it before and we'll see it again as Daryl Brothers doubles down on over-features his prize player to that player's detriment."

Moving to the Central Division, controversy swirls around what appears to be a purposely designed changing of the guard in Manitoba. At the root of the controversy are two off-season trades involving proven talent moving from the Violators to the Patriots in exchange for prospects and injured super-talent **Derwin James**. As a result, one season after appearing in the Gale Sayers Game the Violators seem content to risk missing a chance to return to the final. They dealt five high quality starters to their division rival who had, just the previous season, finished third in the division with only 4 wins. These deals largely mirrored similar exchanges in talent, but in reverse, between the same two teams in the lead-up to the 2020 season. Virden followed up those trades with Charleswood by moving veteran starters to other teams for draft picks, leaving their starting line-up, especially on defence, with glaring holes.

"I don't know what the Violators thought they were doing in the off-season, but if they were trying to give their provincial neighbour a boost they succeeded," **Skope Boylezz** noted with sarcasm as the roundtable discussion, *'Forecasting Fifteen!'* moved westward from the East to the Central. "They either have supreme confidence that Patrick Mahomes can simply outscore opponents with a rookie at wide-receiver-one, or they are content to take a step back this year and retool for 2022 or beyond. Of course, this leaves the door wide open for a much-improved Pats team."

The other side of this *quid pro quo* – the Patriots – seem prompted to make a push this year to take advantage of what their coaching staff believes will be a breakout year for quarterback **DeShaun Watson**. The second-round pick (no.32 overall) of the Pats in 2017 has not performed up to the lofty expectations fans and people in the organization had of him. However, this year he entered training camp in the best shape of his career and has looked sharp in the pre-season.

"I have watched DeShaun Watson now through five pre-seasons and this is the best he has looked," wrote local Pats' beat writer, **Charlie Wood** of the *Charleswood Banner*. *"He is poised, confident, relaxed and accurate in every drill. He dominates the scrimmages and he has yet to throw an interception in the pre-season. If 2019 gave us a glimpse of what he is capable of, his camp performance tells me that he is about to exceed that this year, if he can stay healthy."*

Watson credits his new off-season fitness program with the improvements in his on-field execution. He refers to his new regimen as a 'total fitness experience' that includes post-workout, intense massage therapy.

"There always seemed to be something missing from my program," Watson explained in an interview with **Jim Miller** of *Sirius XM EFL Network*. "My trainer said I was too tense, so she arranged for these special massages after workouts and practice. They've made a huge difference. I feel they've improved me physically and mentally. And they're, you know, kind of like a reward at the end, so I'm more eager to workout and practice hard."

Watson's discovery of his new 'total workout experience' is good news for receivers **Juju Smith-Schuster**, **Amari Cooper** and **DK Metcalf**, and tight end **Travis Kelce**. These four are in line to be the top four targets in the Patriot offence. When mixed with the running of **Alvin Kamara** and **JK Dobbins**, it is hard to imagine any Pacific Conference defence being able to hold them off. This line-up has fantasy football players drooling on one hand, but cautious on the other.

"Owners of Travis Kelce and any one of the top three Patriots wide receivers have to be happy that DeShaun Watson is the quarterback getting them the ball," declares **Arpin Plunderflunder** of the blog, *'Fantasy Freakz,'* one of the leading fantasy services on the web. "But as an owner, I would be concerned about the competition created by having four legitimate number one targets on the same roster. There are only so many passing plays in a game. The challenge for Watson and the concern for fantasy owners will be keeping all of those 'Number Ones' happy. One of them will likely emerge as the favourite, whether due to chemistry or defenders' schemes, but guessing who that will be before your draft is tough."

With an offence that looks to be unstoppable and a defence that has just enough going for it to slow down most of the offences they will face, the Patriots are the understandable favourite to represent the Pacific Conference in the Gale Sayers Game. However, one notable national authority on all things EFL thinks the Pats will have to work particularly hard to earn that privilege, due to an emerging threat from the west.

"The EFL always packs a surprise into every season," reads the opening line of **Peter Prince's** North America Today article, 'Fear the EFL's New Reaper.' *"Last year it was the Coyotes. This year it will be a much more sinister force. Most fans will not like them but that will make their rise that much more entertaining. Expect Anthony Holguin and the Las Vegas Assassins to emerge from mediocrity and make a strong case for nice guys finishing last."*

For Prince, the rise of the Assassins will be attributable to the blossoming of second-year quarterback **Justin Herbert** and the play of a defence led by All-Pro linebacker **Demario Davis** and Pro Bowlers **Darius Leonard** and **Cameron**

Heyward. Although he presents it as a “surprise,” Prince is certainly not alone in seeing a challenge to hegemony of the ‘Good Guy’ Cubs and the ‘Bad Boy’ Convicts coming from the upstart in the desert.

“*The movement away from Carson Wentz and the handing of the torch to the young kid from Oregon will pay dividends for the Assassins’ offence,*” writes **Caleb Cogger** in his *EFL Magazine* article, ‘Who Will Fight the Power?’ “*There were rumoured to be tensions between Wentz and his coach. There is likely truth to those rumours as the first move Anthony Holguin made in the off-season was to trade him away for running back, Aaron Jones – a good player but no household name. The Assassins are officially Justin Herbert’s team now and the news out of camp says that is a good thing.*”

While Herbert is apparently killing it in camp, the main offensive force of the offence, now that **Michael Thomas** looks to be fighting a foot injury, is running back **Dalvin Cook**. The Assassins and Herbert will rely on him to keep opposing defences honest, opening up deep passing opportunities to long threat **Jerry Jeudy**. If Jeudy is not open, Herbert can rely on two accomplished veterans, **Larry Fitzgerald** and **Jimmy Graham**, to give him an outlet. On the subject of Herbert’s coming of age and the threat posed by the Assassins to the established western powers, the roundtable at ESPN is divided:

“Before we anoint Justin Herbert as the next Tom Brady, need I remind you all that the kid is going to have to climb over a future hall-of-famer and another rising star with a lot more experience under his belt than Herbert!” pontificated **Russ Flont**, his cheeks and neck reddening through the thick studio make-up. “Of course, I’m talking about ‘The Magician,’ Russell Wilson and Dak Prescott. Why am I always the one bringing this table back to reality? Come on guys!”

“Oh...here we go again with the Russell Wilson trumps all argument!” **Will Simons** jumped in mockingly. “Granted, the Cubs are always in a game with Wilson at quarterback but even Wilson is not going to hit on every fourth quarter comeback, especially if they are down by more than a score! And I expect that to be the case a lot this year with that defence. On paper it is the worst in their division and we know from history that the Cubs’ defence never exceeds expectations.”

“As long as we are bringing each other back to reality, Russ,” broke in **Skope Boylezz**, “Need I remind people here that every year at this time we tend to sideline the Convicts yet every year, somehow, they are playing meaningful games late in the season and usually make the playoffs. Dak Prescott is no slouch. He has Pro Bowl qualities that we can all see.”

A survey of articles and videos from across the nation reveals no national consensus among pundits on a definitive favorite in the West, despite the bold proclamation from the influential **Peter Prince**. Turning to the objective arbiter of such disputes, the oddsmakers in the desert, does not offer much more than confirmation that it is far too early to call the West.

“About the only thing everyone agrees on in Vegas is that the Pilots are a real long shot. Other than that, it’s wide open,” declares **Jimmy the Geek** on his cable TV show, *Odds ‘n Suds*. “The Cubs are the book favourite right now, at +150, but that has more to do with reputation and the fact that the Cubs have won the West the past five years, ever since the league expanded to the six-division structure. That’s a powerful history that cannot be ignored. But there are enough bookies who feel the Cubs might be nearing the end of their rule of the west. That’s why you have the Convicts and the Assassin right on their heels, both sitting right now at +175. These odds are very sensitive at the moment. They will move dramatically with on-field developments or a key injury.”

Kevin Kolb, former Gladiator quarterback and current host of ‘Sunday Signals’ on ESPN, dissects the West from a quarterback perspective and, in the end, is no closer to revealing an insight that might inspire a large wager on any team.

“Russell Wilson is obviously the key to the Cubs’ success,” Kolb begins, ranking the Cubs’ QB at the top of the West rankings. “He has all of the physical tools, smarts and experience required to lead this team to their sixth division title in six years. He also has weapons around him, including an underrated deep threat in A.J. Brown. Defences will focus on Tyler Lockett and Wilson will make them pay the price for that. But my concern with Russell and the Cubs’ offence is that they will be chasing that defence of theirs, which has not improved over last year and will be tested by a tough schedule.”

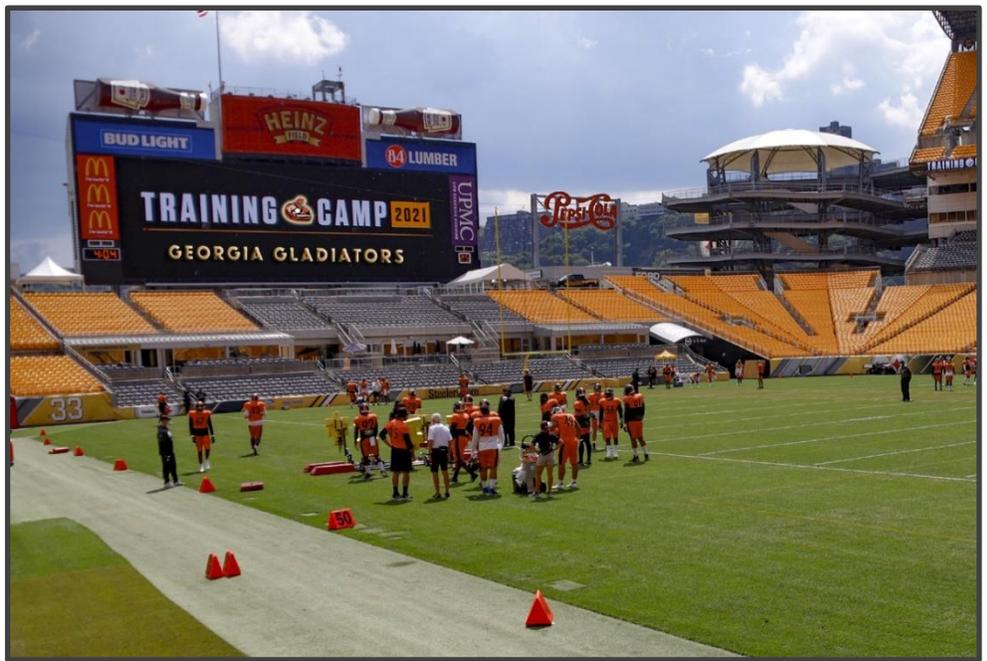
Moving on to the Cubs’ challengers, Kolb goes out on a limb with his assessment: “I’ve watched a lot of Justin Herbert this training camp and his college film. He has the big arm and the physical stature to stand in the pocket and deliver. He also has the ability to throw accurately on the run, a quality that was overlooked by many scouts heading into the draft. But what has impressed me and his coaches most is how quickly he is grasping the offence and reading defences. Yes, sometimes he just misses a throw. Sometimes he locks on to a target when he thinks he sees something. But those are rookie flaws that I think he will quickly overcome. If he can, I expect him to nudge out Dak for second in the division.”

“Wow! I didn’t see that one coming, Kevin!” exclaimed Sunday Signals co-host, **Mina Chimes**. “I think there are some Dak Prescott fans in Chino who would strongly disagree with that assessment!”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to get on the bad side of Convicts’ fans,” Kolb chuckled. “And I have said it before that Dak has all of the tools to lead a team into the playoffs and be a top five quarterback in this league. But the fact is that he is dealing with a number of nagging injuries at the moment, including a shoulder issue that he apparently aggravated while showboating his deep throws after practice. I am waiting to see a bit more maturity from Dak before going all-in on him as the next Russell Wilson. And, of course, if he can’t stay on the field, he isn’t much use to the Convicts.”

“So, what about Seattle, Kevin?” Chimes asked. “Is there a quarterback on the roster there, like a Trey Lance, who might surprise us and change the calculus in the West?”

“I don’t think so, Mina,” Kolb replied flatly. “First, we don’t know who is getting the starting call in Seattle. At the moment it looks like Sam Darnold, only because he is the most experienced. But he didn’t accomplish much last year and there are clear signs his future is not in Seattle. Second, they drafted Trey no.8 overall. You expect when a team goes that high for a quarterback, they plan on starting him. But Lance is very raw and only played one game last year in the COVID year. Third, they paid over \$5 million to entice Gardner Minshew away from Pickering. So, maybe Gardner is the stop-gap to give Trey time to develop. Then again, he did not look overly impressive playing in seven games for the Spartans, with the exception of that nice outing against Chino. All three come with question marks and flags. This is a shame



Heinz Field in Pittsburgh, the new, temporary home of the Georgia Gladiators. **Dave Birdsall's** team, the original Georgia team, found itself the target of a hostile State takeover by the Coyotes and now await the outcome of a court case.

because the Pilots have a defence that looks to be on par with that of the Assassins.”

The final word on the West Division goes to **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org, whose team of mathematicians devoted many hours building algorithms to solve the mystery of which team will prevail in the end. He spoke with **Alex Marvez** of *Sirius XM EFL Network*:

“The situation in the West is a toss-up, where the variables are many and uncertain,” Schultz said. “On balance, the Cubs have a slight upper hand due to their clear advantage at quarterback. But in most other areas the Assassins have the edge. They also have the easiest schedule. The Convicts occasionally break through in our simulations due to homefield advantage and other intangibles, such as what we call in the room, ‘Coach Rob Nazar’s *game-day fanaticism*,’ which has been established as a reliable predictor of success over 14 years of studying the EFL. I am confident my team has the best system short of a crystal ball but I would not personally wager the mortgage on predicting the winner in the West based on our projections.”

No discussion of the coming fifteenth EFL campaign would be complete, of course, without touching on the story that dominated news in Twin Cities, Charleswood, and Georgia in the final weeks of the 2020 season and took over the national dialogue leading up to the 2021 EFL draft. That, of course, is the entry into the league of a top rookie quarterback prospect among an exceptional group of top rookie quarterback prospects: **Trevor Lawrence**.

Widely touted as the most impressive, “can’t miss” rookie signal-caller to enter the draft since **Andrew Luck**, it seemed that Lawrence’s stature grew to almost mythical proportions by the time April 24, 2021 arrived. The hype was humorously captured by football satirist, **John Maximilian Ginsberg**, of *Football Unplugged* in his poem, ‘The Legend of Lawrence.’

He came from Clemson on a pale horse / To restore the Twin Cities and purge remorse / Sent by the Football Gods on high / To save the soul of the sinner Guy.

“Don’t expect miracles from Trevor Lawrence this year!” proclaims **Cowan Bullherd**, host of the syndicated talk show, *Morning Bull*. “Unless it’s turning upbeat fan chatter into whine. *W-h-i-n-e*...get it? Chatter – *water*, get it? Geez, I’m so clever! Seriously, the Triumph as a team are not ready to compete. There is only so much Trevor will be able to do. But fans will expect him to shine anyway. There will be pressure. But at least, for his sake, he isn’t facing a situation like fellow rookie Mac Jones is facing in Peg City. That poor guy will be asked to start immediately on a team in total tear down mode!”

The Crusaders took their fans by surprise and burned it all down after a promising 8-8, second-place finish in 2020. GM/Coach **Stephen Katopodis** will have a lot to answer for from the owner if he ruins Jones in the process of throwing him in the deep end. For this year, there is no chance his team will compete for anything other than the first pick in the 2022 EFL draft; for which they are the pre-season favourites. And, according to most analysts, there is a good chance they will go winless.

However, if a team were to tear everything down prematurely because they don’t feel they have enough horses to win the race, this is the year to do it. While anything can happen in this crazy game of football, the pervasive mood among the experts is that all this discussion is just a distraction from the reality that Budapest is the undisputed King of the EFL Hill. Does anyone have a shot at the Stars and **Aaron Rodgers**? We’ll see...



It is written

The Football Oracle

The fate of your team is written. Look, if you dare, at the future....

BROUGHT TO YOU FROM THE OTHER SIDE BY **-Jimmy the Geek**

Hello EFL Fans. Welcome to the Football Oracle App. This interactive platform allows you to keep up with my visions and ask questions. Just tap on the '?' icon to ask about your favourite team or player. The spirits know all, but sometimes they like to play tricks. So, I cannot guarantee that everything I see will actually happen. But I'm pretty good at sniffing out a capricious spirit. Access is by subscription as I have to pay to have somebody mind my corporeal form. One of the finalists in 2021 will be Budapest. For the Pacific Conference finalist, access the red 'A' on my app. - The Football Oracle

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

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

PACIFIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



11-5

COBB COUNTY COYOTES
 COACH: **Eron Osman**
 OFFENCE: **A-** DEFENCE: **B**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **B+**

Ryan Tannehill will step up in a well-protected pocket to find his new no.1 target, **Brandin Cooks**. **Julio Jones** still has juice left. **Adrian Peterson** looks for help from sophomore **Damien Harris** in the run game. **Blake Martinez** is now the anchor of a defence that needs **Tre'Davious White** more than ever. Improved return game props up so-so special teams



10-6

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

Plenty of targets for **Matt Stafford**, with **Keenan Allen** moving the chains and **Terry McLaurin** and **DJ Chark** taking the top off defences. **Eric Fisher** brings credibility to an average offensive line. **Jamal Adams** & **James Bradberry** key a good secondary hoping to compensate for a depleted linebacker corps. Kicking, ST coverage and returns all solid.



7-9

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

Drew Brees will be asked to perform HOF-grade miracles with no tight end to throw to and an 8th-round rookie starting at running back. **Garrett Bolles**, **Joel Bitonio** and **Frank Ragnow** will ensure he has a fighting chance. **Harrison Smith** and **Emmanuel Ogbah** are the most attractive pieces of an ugly defence. KR ace, **Andre Roberts** boosts the ST.



5-11

BUFFALO DERAILERS
 COACH: **Daryl Brothers**
 OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **A-**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **C+**

Lamar Jackson is starting QB and starting RB on Derailers depth chart, so expect more miles on his odometer. Security blanket, **Robert Woods** is joined by **Justin Gage** and **Noah Fant**. They will help if Jackson can get the ball to them. Rookie **Jaycee Horn** joins a solid defence led by **Aaron Donald**. Kicker **Jake Elliott** looked shaky in the pre-season.

CENTRAL DIVISION



14-2

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS
 COACH: **Jason Findlay**
 OFFENCE: **A+** DEFENCE: **B**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C** TOT: **A**

DeShaun Watson has it all, with pass targets **Travis Kelce**, **Juju Smith-Schuster**, **Amari Cooper** and **DK Metcalf** to go with a pair of dynamos at RB. No-name offensive line can get the job done. The defence, led by **Montez Sweat**, is just good enough. **Wil Lutz** is solid. The team saved cash on a punter unlikely to see much action. Still no PR specialist.



9-7

VIRDEN VIOLATORS
 COACH: **Lance Barrate**
 OFFENCE: **A-** DEFENCE: **C-**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B**

Pat Mahomes will have to carry this team on his back team with the help of rookie **Ja'Marr Chase** and **Ezekiel Elliott**. **DJ Humphries** rescues the grade of a mediocre O-line that Mahomes doesn't need much anyway. **Leonard Williams** anchors a defence cast adrift by lack of depth and talent. Good returners but Kicker **Michael Badgley** is suspect.



3-13

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH
 COACH: **Guy Williams**
 OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **C**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C** TOT: **C**

The improved O-line won't be enough to make much difference to the bottom line with a rookie at QB. **Trevor Lawrence** cannot fix an offence with no TE and only one good WR. **Melvin Gordon** and **Clyde Edwards-Helaire** will see plenty of action trying to keep **Bobby Wagner** and **Jaire Alexander** rested. Durability of P, **Mitch Wishnowsky** will be tested.



1-15

PEG CITY CRUSADERS
 COACH: **Stephen Katopodis**
 OFFENCE: **D-** DEFENCE: **C**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **D**

Poor **Mac Jones** is thrown into the fire on an offence featuring center **Ryan Kelly** as its best player. **Kyle Pitts** and **Brandon Aiyuk** will have targets on their backs due to lack of a run threat. **Chris Jones** is the defensive leader of a unit bound to tire from prolonged exposure. A fine set of gunners will see plenty of action vs PRs. Tough to see even 1 win.

WEST DIVISION



9-7

IOWA CITY CUBS

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

Expect **Russell Wilson** to take advantage of a fine WR trio in **Tyler Lockett**, **Cole Beasley** and **AJ Brown**. **Quenton Nelson** spearheads an offensive line that will make **James Conner** and **Michael Carter** the best they can be. **Fletcher Cox** is the tired star of an ageing defence that ranks last in the division. **Justin Tucker** boosts a solid ST unit.



9-7

LAS VEGAS ASSASSINS

COACH: **Anthony Holguin**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **A**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B+**

Dalvin Cook will be the crutch on which **Justin Herbert** leans as he learns how to navigate the pros behind a questionable offensive line. **Larry Fitzgerald** and **Jimmy Graham** lend a stabilizing veteran presence and that's it. **Demario Davis** and **Cameron Heyward** lead a fine defence that will put the offence in good spots. Kick coverage could be a problem.



7-9

CHINO CONVICTS

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

Ronald Jones II hopes to fill the shoes of injured **Christian McCaffrey** at RB. **Teddy Bridgewater** is a downgrade at QB1 if **Dak Prescott** misses time due to injury. An average set of WRs round off an offence as likely to sputter as produce. The defence is more dangerous with **Za'Darius Smith**. **Jakeem Grant** and **Tess Way** star for a solid ST squad.



6-10

SEATTLE PILOTS

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

Questions at QB could scuttle their overall prospects and squander the opportunities presented by the signing of WR, **Robbie Anderson** and the development of **Ceedee Lamb**. This is a top-notch defence, led by **Khalil Mack** and super-charged by **Myles Jack** and **KJ Wright**, which should keep them in games anyway. **Jamal Agnew** is an All-Pro PR.

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



14-2

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

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

Josh Allen is poised for a breakout season with **Cooper Kupp** and **Darren Waller** as his main targets and **Jack Conklin** protecting his blind side. A talented running-back-by-committee completes a full-service offence. The defence, led by **Tryann Mathieu** and a deadly pass rush, is the best in the league. Kick coverage is elite and the rest of ST good.



8-8

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

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

The two-headed ground monster of **Jonathan Taylor** and **Nick Chubb** guarantees great looks for **Kirk Cousins** and **TY Hilton** through the air and will paper over the deficiencies of the offensive line. **Budda Baker** is the sole impact player on a defence with little or no impact. **Daniel Carlson** is close to money in the bank and kick coverage is exemplary.



7-9

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

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

Questions at QB coupled with an ageing backfield will put pressure on **Mike Evans** and a below-average offensive line to keep the team within striking distance in closely contested games. **TJ Watt**, **Roquan Smith** and **Darius Williams** lead a deceptively strong defence that will keep them competitive. **Joey Slye** is exciting in the wrong way.



6-10

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

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

The offence is riding its chips on **Joe Burrow** and his sole legitimate passing target, **Allen Robinson II**. With **Corey Linsley** and **Zack Martin** protecting him, he may have just enough time. **Adrian Amos** and **Deion Jones** are bright spots on a dim defence that will be gashed badly on the ground. **Mason Crosby** and **Ty Long** will be difference-makers.

COASTAL DIVISION



15-1

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

Aaron Rodgers has the best 2-WR duo in the league in **Justin Jefferson** and **Stefon Diggs**, and his no.3 is a deep threat who will exact a steep price for ignoring him. **Minkah Fitzpatrick** and **Cameron Jordan** lead a defence that doesn't need to be All-World anymore but is still elite. **Cordarell Patterson** and **Jason Myers** star for a top-notch ST.



9-7

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

The Spartans will run the ball principally with **Miles Sanders** to set up the play action pass from **Philip Rivers** to **Calvin Ridley** or **Marquise Brown**. It's simple but workable behind a competent blocking scheme. **Xavien Howard** is an elite corner but he cannot be everywhere on a patchy defence. **Justin Bethel** stands out on average ST squad.



8-8

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

The Excaliburs hope to be a successful throwback team with bell cow **Derrick Henry** paving the way to success behind the pinpoint accuracy of **Tom Brady**. **DeForest Buckner** injects a rare inside rush that can blow up the pocket and induce errant throws to star safety **Jordan Poyer**. **Robbie Gould** is a reliable kicker but the return game is pathetic.



6-10

BROOKLIN HAWKS
 COACH: **Tom Jones**
 OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **B-**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-** TOT: **C+**

A defiant **Derek Carr** will make the most of a shaky situation as **DeAndre Hopkins** is likely to face constant double teams. **Austin Ekeler** shoulders the running duties but his durability is questionable. **Jessie Bates III** and **Stephon Tuitt** are rocks in a defence full of sand. **Randy Bullock** is the best thing about a ST unit with no PR and just one gunner.

SOUTH DIVISION



10-6

OSHAWA PINK PANTHERS
 COACH: **Scott Dennis**
 OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **A**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **B+**

The **Matt Ryan** to **Davante Adams** connection will keep safeties away from the line and open up lanes for **Kenyon Drake** and **Devin Singletary** to run through behind a quality O-line. **JJ Watt** is back and will wreak havoc in the backfield with **David Onyemata** and **Haason Reddick** to boost a weaker secondary. Kicker **Zane Gonzalez** is a shaky option.



8-8

EAST ELMHURST
 COACH: **Chris Ferraro**
 OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **A-**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **B**

It's boom or bust time for the Irish with **Baker Mayfield** at the helm. **Aaron Jones**, **Adam Thielen** and **Tyreek Hill** give Baker a fighting chance to overcome a fairly wobbly offensive line. **Jalen Ramsey** at CB, **Brandon Graham** at DE, and a superb linebacker corps make this one of the better defences around. No weaknesses in a solid ST cadre.



7-9

ERIEAU CADILLAC
 COACH: **Jamie Rilett**
 OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **B**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **B-**

Rookie RB, **Najee Harris** arrives to take some of the pressure off **Kyler Murray**. **Jaylen Waddle** at WR and pass-catching TEs **Mark Andrews** and **Hunter Henry** should do the rest...but it is Erieau. **Myles Garrett** and **Joey Bosa** give the defence instant street cred, but it won't matter if the offence cannot click. **Nyheim Hines** is lone bright spot on ST.



3-13

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

Big Ben is back and with him the best chance for a Gladiator miracle run to the playoffs. It's not impossible. **James Robinson** will carry the load ably at RB while **Deonte Johnson** will get open and make plays even if he drops the ball a lot. The secondary is too weak to survive, however, making for a lot of blown leads. Weak return group lowers ST grade.

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Jimmy's WEEK ONE PICKS

BUFFALO @ NEW JERSEY (line – WRECKING BALLS by 4)

The Wrecking Balls have a legitimate shot at the division if their defence can hold up but I feel like I say that every year in Week One and end up wishing in Week 16 that I could scrub the internet of any record of the idea. On paper the Balls promise to wreck opponents with a solid running and passing combo that will eat up the clock and wear down opponents. But at some point, the opponent will get the ball and that is what makes New Jersey fans nervous – especially late in the game. It is not that the defence lacks talent. It's that the talent often ends up being far away from the ball due to dubious schemes. Fortunately, they get to start the 2021 campaign against another underperforming squad from Buffalo. Lamar Jackson leads an offence that has improved at the skill positions but will miss pro bowl tackle Mitchell Schwartz. Lamar is capable of doing it on his own if necessary but when he gets in that mode, he is error-prone. Aaron Donald is a game-wrecker on defence and the Balls will have to account for him. But like New Jersey, the Derailers' defence often looks like its playing in zero gravity. I know I'll regret it but take the Balls in their home opener. **PICK: NEW JERSEY**

BRUXELLES @ COBB COUNTY (line – COYOTES by 3)

Last year taught us not to underestimate the Coyotes. That means they will not sneak up on any opponent in 2021, especially the Bombers. Although deprived of the tactical ambush, Cobb County is still equipped to face opponents head-on and come out a winner despite some diminished support at the skill positions. Ryan Tannehill remains deadly in the pocket and his elite twin tackles will buy him plenty of time against a Bombers' pass rush that underwent a sex change during the off-season and will struggle to penetrate. Bruxelles thinks it has a chance to reassert itself thanks to the acquisition of Drew Brees, who may be in for his last hurrah and would love to win a Gale Sayers Trophy. He will be operating behind probably the top offensive line in football and that will allow him to get the most out of a mediocre supporting cast of skill players. Expect the Bombers to try and keep their offence on the field with long drives to wear down the Coyote defence while protecting their own. The Coyotes will likely go airborne here and will be successful if Tannehill gets the expected time to throw. It will be a close game, but expect the homefield to prevail. **PICK: COBB COUNTY**

CHARLESWOOD @ VIRDEN (line – PATRIOTS by 4)

When the schedule-makers attempted to re-ignite this Manitoba rivalry by slotting it in for Week One Sunday Night Football they no doubt envisioned an up-and-coming, hungry Patriots team challenging a strong and proud reigning Pacific Conference champs. Instead, they will get DeShaun Watson leading ex-Violators against Patrick Mahomes and a gaggle of ex-Patriots, with the advantage going to Charleswood by design. With Amari Cooper and Leonard Floyd going from Virden to Charleswood at the 11th hour, the Violators signalled that they are in deconstruction mode one year after making it to and almost winning the final. The main beneficiary of this deconstruction is a team that coincidentally deconstructed itself last year to the benefit of the Violators. It is hard not to see this an intra-squad game – with Pat Mahomes leading the scout team. Nevertheless, Mahomes and the boys in khaki will be giving it their all, even if their all isn't as "all" as much as it was one year ago. Mahomes will keep this game from getting out of hand but, with more weapons than the arsenal at Fort Hood, expect DeShaun Watson to begin his bid for MVP here. **PICK: CHARLESWOOD**

PEG CITY @ TWIN CITIES (line – TRIUMPH by 7)

This is not the space to delve into all of the Crusaders' off-season moves but the net result of all of them put together is likely to be the no.1 pick in the 2022 rookie draft. So, it is ironic that the projected worst team in 2021 is facing the worst team of 2020 to open the season. But if the Pegs were hoping to get a glimpse of how a no.1 overall pick performs in the first week of the season, they will be disappointed. It appears that Mitch Trubisky will get the start over rookie Trevor Lawrence as coach Guy Williams looks to preserve the confidence of his draft stud in a season that is likely to go not much farther than last year's went. The Triumph have their future franchise quarterback and a veteran All-Pro linebacker to keep the locker room from degenerating into an unregulated daycare but

not much else. The little “else” that they have is an accomplished running back in Melvin Gordon III, who will carry the team to a lacklustre victory over a Crusaders team that has nothing to stop him and little motivation to do so. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

CHINO @ SEATTLE (line – CONVICTS by 3)

The Pilots have some dark horse qualities that make winning no sure thing for a reputedly superior opponent facing them on their home turf. While the Convicts continue to field a capable offence when commanded by Dak Prescott, they face an underrated but talented defence in Seattle. In a league dominated by offence this is not on its own a game-changer going the other way, as the Seattle offence will likely have to put at least 24 points on the board in order to win. But it decreases the margin for error for Rob Nazar’s bandits and calls out the Chino defence to play the equalizer by doing a better job than it did last year. The Convicts have not noticeably upgraded on the back end of the ball, so expect them to make Gardner Minshew II look more competent than he is. If Kareem Hunt gets his legs churning and Robby Anderson wins the battle against Donte Jackson, this game could get very interesting indeed. It’s a coin flip. Expect the coin to land on its edge and the home team to beat the spread. **PICK: SEATTLE**

LAS VEGAS @ IOWA CITY (line – CUBS by 3)

The Assassins are for real if you think that first-year starter Justin Herbert will fulfill the promise of his pre-season performance and improve on the team’s quarterback clown show of 2020. At this point it is a guess. But not in doubt is the formidableness of the Las Vegas defence, which is anchored by the best linebacking corps in the league. This is a defence that needs to be worn down in order to beat it but in order to wear it down you have to beat it. That is conundrum few offences will be able to solve. Fortunately for the Cubs they have the offensive line and the running backs to pull it off. If that approach doesn’t work, Russell Wilson and his famous 30+ yard checkdowns and 20+ scrambles could salvage the day. But if Herbert plays as advertised, the Cubs and their increasingly leaky defence could be in trouble. The Cubs are the favourites by reputation but are traditionally slow starters. The Assassins will want to make a bold statement to start the season and there could be nothing bolder than knocking off the historical gatekeeper to the West. Week One picks are the toughest but I have a feeling the Assassins are going in for the kill. **PICK: LAS VEGAS**

COWTOWN @ SEBASTIAN (line – SWORDFISH by 1)

The Swordfish cut bait in the off-season with The Big One, Drew Brees and invested in Kirk Cousins. It is a good move from a long-term perspective but not likely to bear much fruit in Week One of the 2021 season. Sebastian’s new pivot will be working in a new system hampered by a lack of weapons at wide receiver. Bolstered by a pair of elite running backs, the ground game setting up play-action will be the key to Swordfish success on offence here. The Corn Kings have a good defence but it is somewhat vulnerable to the run. It will be to Sebastian’s advantage to move the chains on the ground in order to blunt a much more effective Corn King pass rush and pass defence. The Swordfish cannot afford a shootout but the good news for them is that the Corn Kings are likely to run out of ammo in a gun fight. Uncertainty at quarterback, ageing running backs and only one game-breaker at wide receiver will keep the Corn Kings from getting more than one score ahead in a game that will go down to the wire. **PICK: SEBASTSIAN**

SCARBOROUGH @ DURHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 10)

The Blue Eagles have some attractive pieces on both sides of the ball but also a few ugly holes. In the end, it will boil down to whether or not sophomore QB, Joe Burrow can carry this team to a playoff berth. He begins the season with a tough test. The Thunder Lizards are unquestionably the team to beat in the North Division and a top contender to appear in the championship. The defence is the most talented in the league and the offence under Josh Allen is capable of posting big numbers on any given Sunday. On top of all this they will be charged up, with fans back after playing to empty seats during the pandemic. The Eagles will have to play a near-perfect game and hope to catch Durham looking ahead to their Week 13 match against Budapest to stand a chance. Durham can attack Scarborough both ways but expect Allen to air it out early to set up a veritable Sunday stroll. **PICK: DURHAM**

BROOKLIN @ BUDAPEST (line – NORTH STARS by 8)

The Hawks were the Stars’ regular season nemesis in 2020, handing Budapest two of their three losses. But Darrin Jones’ crew threw that monkey off their backs and snuffed it out with a strangulating performance against Brooklin in the playoffs. Since that day, the Stars have gotten only better due to an injection of confidence after defeating the league’s brightest emerging star in the championship. Do not expect the Stars to sit on their laurels or be slow out of the gate this season. An active off-season and a strict camp have resulted in a refitted powerhouse with few weaknesses and unmatched strength in the passing attack, with Aaron Rodgers expected by many to finally emerge as a dominant passer. Brooklin enters the season with familiar concerns about their secondary. Those concerns are not going to be alleviated by having to go against Stefon Diggs and Justin Jefferson. **PICK: BUDAPEST**

YORK @ PICKERING (line – SPARTANS by 2)

After a flat 2020 campaign and a quiet off-season the Spartans enter the season as one of the league's forgotten teams. Don't expect that to last long. Pickering may not be ready to unseat Budapest in the Coastal Division but they are capable once more of making noise and possibly the playoffs thanks to a combination of veteran experience and developing young talent around Philip Rivers. The Excaliburs enter the season somewhat improved over last year but still looking to Tom Brady to perform miracles in the passing game when workhorse Derrick Henry is taking oxygen on the sideline. It would be miraculous indeed if Brady was able to turn Corey Davis into a factor against shutdown corner Xavien Howard. With their top receiver locked up York will turn to Henry and hope that he wears down the Spartan line before the game gets out of hand. The Spartans will look to shock the York secondary and get an early lead to take Henry out of the game. This could backfire, but if it works it will work big. **PICK: PICKERING**

ERIEAU @ OSHAWA (line – PINK PANTHERS by 4)

The Pink Panthers are the Mustangs in drag after making no major off-season roster moves. Of course, the biggest move of all occurred at the very top, with future HOF coach Rich Liotta moving on and the franchise moving to Oshawa. It will be interesting to see how the team responds to a new coach and hot pink uniforms playing in front of a working-class crowd. The Cadillac enter the season hopeful that the drafting of Najee Harris and Jaylen Waddle will round out a modest but effective arsenal for their young QB, Kyler Murray. While the defence is the traditional strength of this team, with the secondary questionable due to nagging injuries the Caddies will be pinning their hopes on the offence reaching a new gear in 2021. Although easy to do, don't sleep on Erieau in this game. If they can get the running game on track, it will keep Matt Ryan off the field and their formidable pass rush rested. On the other side, expect the Panthers to challenge Erieau to find a solution for Davante Adams. **PICK: OSHAWA**

EAST ELMHURST @ GEORGIA (line – IRISH by 1)

The Irish were very active on all fronts during the off-season and the net result is an improved defence and cautious optimism that the offence has enough talent at the skill positions to get more out of Baker Mayfield. Whether this will translate into success on the field remains to be seen. All the same, their fans expect this revamped outfit to handle a young and still-rebuilding Gladiators squad temporarily uprooted from its Georgia home. The good news for Glads fans is that Ben Roethlisberger will re-take the reins from the not-yet-ready Tua and won't need to throw the ball 50 times a game. The running tandem of James Robinson and Josh Jacobs should afford plenty of opportunity to sting the Irish with the play action pass and wear down their defensive front four. If the game devolves into a shootout, the Glads have enough targets to keep things interesting – Jaylen Ramsey can't cover all of them. This game will be unexpectedly entertaining and high-scoring with Big Ben looking ten years younger. **PICK: GEORGIA**



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