

# 2022

# Quarter Finals



February 13, 2022

EAST



BRUXELLES

7



BILLTOWN

24



BUDAPEST

9



ERIEAU

16



VIRDEN

41



NEW JERSEY

22



DURHAM

16



PICKERING

33

NORTH



CENTRAL



WEST



COASTAL



SOUTH



# BATS ARE COOKIN'!



## Dalvin Cook Billtown Bats

Billtown running back, **Dalvin Cook** breaks across the plane of the goal line as a Wrecking Ball defender tries to pull him down, finishing a 10-yard TD run in third quarter action in New Jersey. The score revived the Bats' struggling offence and brought them within 2 points of the Wrecking Balls at the time. Cook would bust loose for a 60-yard TD run on his team's next possession to help lead Billtown eventually to a 24-22 upset of the no.1 conference seed New Jersey. The Bats' win was the only surprise outcome in the Quarter Finals, as Virden, Durham and Pickering each took care of business to advance to the Conference Finals. (full playoff coverage inside)



Who was slick  
in the Quarter  
Finals?

"Brylcreem" THE  
EFL'S FIRST SPONSOR



OFFENCE



Patrick Mahomes  
QB  
Virden  
Violators

21 of 31, 287 yds, 3 TDs, 1 INT. Made the throws and rushed for 74 yards



DEFENCE



Pat Surtain II  
CB  
Billtown  
Bats

8 T, 1 FF, 1 INT (60yd-TD). His pick-six in 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter started comeback



7

Bruxelles

GAME CENTER  
2022  
Pacific Quarter Finals

41

Viriden

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Fields	7	13	101	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Mitchell	16	67	3.9	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Claypool	3	64	21.3	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Bruxelles	0	0	7	0	-	7
Viriden	7	10	10	14	-	41

## Play of the Game

In the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter, 10:33 on the clock, **Pat Mahomes** after being sacked on the previous play, rifled a pass to **Ja'Marr Chase**, hitting him in stride for a 54-yard TD to open the scoring.

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Mahomes	21	31	287	3
Rushing	Car	Yd	Avg	TD
Elliott	20	87	4.4	2
Receiving	Rec	Yd	Avg	TD
Metcalf	6	11	19.2	2

## NO DOUBTER!

3 MAHOMES TD PASSES AND 3 BOMBERS TURNOVERS REMOVE ALL SUSPENSE!

**SUMMARY:** Viriden came in rested after a bye while Bruxelles arrived at **TERRODOME** on a high after a notching a thrilling victory over Peg City in the wild card game. The Bombers got the ball first, but soon punted after and three-and-out. Viriden took over at their own 35 and wasted little time finding the end zone. **Patrick Mahomes** bounced back from two sacks by **Robert Quinn** to find **Ja'Marr Chase** over the middle for a 54-yard TD pass on the fifth play of the drive. The Violators held on to their 7-0 lead by thwarting **Justin Fields'** attempts to move the ball, but a **Harrison Smith** red zone interception of Mahomes kept it a one-score game until late in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter, when Mahomes broke free for a 41-yard run on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 1 then followed that with a 23-yard TD pass to **DK Metcalf** to make it 14-0. Another Bomber three-and-out set up the final drive of the half that ended with **Michael Badgley** connecting on a chip shot 21-yard field goal as time expired to give the home team a 17-0 lead. Hope rose for the Bombers in the second half after the Violators' opening drive ended suddenly with a Mahomes' short hitch pass into double coverage sailing away from **TJ Hockenson** on 4<sup>th</sup> & 3 for a turnover on downs. Fields took over and caught the Viriden defence crowding the box with back-to-back long completions to **Chris Godwin** and **Chase Claypool**, the latter sprinting behind the secondary for a 29-yard TD. Buoyed by the quick offensive strike, the Bomber D swarmed the pocket around Mahomes and forced a Viriden three-and-out. The Bruxelles' bubble burst, however, when dangerous kick returner **Andre Roberts** had the ball knocked loose by **Nasir Adderley** on the return and the Viriden recovered at the Bomber 17. **Ezekiel Elliott** swept into the end zone from 7 yards out four plays later, to give Viriden a daunting 24-7 lead. Misfortune piled on the Bombers on the next series when Fields fumbled the snap and gave up the ball at his team's own 16. That set up an easy field goal and the teams entered the final quarter with Viriden in front 27-7. Playing in desperation the Bombers turned the ball over twice in the 4<sup>th</sup>, the first time on downs and the second on a **Trevon Moehrig** interception. This enabled Viriden to add a 35-yard TD pass to Metcalf for Mahomes' third TD pass of the day, and a 23-yard run by Elliott and turn the game into a rout.

**QUOTES:** "It's never good to lose, but when you give it your all and it's still not good enough, you have to tip your hat to your opponent. The Violators were all they're cracked up to be in this one!" – Bruxelles coach, **Ken Main**.

"I am pleased with the effort we gave today. All the hard work during the bye week paid off. This was not as easy as most of you probably think. They were motivated and they threw everything they had at us. It's a good thing we were ready" – Viriden coach, **Lance Barrate**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



**Faart van Wijnendaele** FVW@BrusselsTimes  
#Bombers exit on a loosing note but end season as winners of Belgian hearts. The finest days of The Champs @justnfields are in front of him.



**Marquis de Sade** @mdsviolate  
To my taste I prefer a more drawn-out suffering, but execution most brutal and swift also has its place on the menu.



## Bruxelles 7 Virden 41

	1	2	3	4	F
Bruxelles	0	0	7	0	7
Virden	7	10	10	14	41



\* Playoff \* 02-19-2023 TERRORDOME Temp:65 Wind:Calm None No Line MVP:Mahomes HFA:

1	10:33	Virden	TD	Mahomes 54 pass to Chase (Badgley) (5-65-2:54)	0-7
2	6:11	Virden	TD	Mahomes 23 pass to Metcalf (Badgley) (7-97-2:57)	0-14
2	0:00	Virden	FG	Badgley 21 (13-54-5:08)	0-17
3	7:49	Bruxelles	TD	Fields 29 pass to Claypool (Prater) (4-67-1:46)	7-17
3	5:08	Virden	TD	Elliott 7 run (Badgley) (4-17-1:48)	7-24
3	1:54	Virden	FG	Badgley 28 (4-6-1:40)	7-27
4	7:08	Virden	TD	Mahomes 35 pass to Metcalf (Badgley) (7-84-4:50)	7-34
4	1:51	Virden	TD	Elliott 23 run (Badgley) (2-28-0:30)	7-41

## Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Fields	13	7	101	3	1	1	0	72.9
Goff	6	3	30	0	0	0	0	64.6
	19	10	131	3	1	1	0	70.3

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Mitchell	17	67	3.9	4	2	14	0
Fournette	10	31	3.1	0	0	7	0
Fields	7	18	2.6	2	1	11	0
	34	116	3.4	6	3	14	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Claypool	3	0	4	64	21.3	3	2	29	1
Godwin	3	0	8	56	18.7	2	1	30	0
Mitchell	2	0	3	2	1.0	0	0	1	0
Juszczak	1	0	2	5	5.0	0	0	5	0
Fournette	1	0	1	4	4.0	0	0	4	0
Wilson,G	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	10	0	19	131	13.1	5	3	30	1

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Roberts	1	0	0
Fields	1	0	0
	2	0	0

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

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Roberts	2	0	0	0.0	0	0
	2	0	0	0.0	0	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Prater	0-0	0	1-1	1

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Johnston	5	252	50.4	0	2	0	53

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Smith	7	0	1	0	0	0	1-0
Cunningham	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Quinn	6	2	0	1	1	0	0-0
Walker	6	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Slay	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Molden	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Grant	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ebukam	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Whitehead	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Moreau	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Wilson,L	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Karafiis	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Woods	1	0	1	0	1	0	0-0
Robinson	1	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
	51	2	7	2	2	0	1-0

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Mahomes	31	21	287	3	1	3	2	115.9
	31	21	287	3	1	3	2	115.9

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Elliott	20	87	4.4	3	2	23	2
Mahomes	6	74	12.3	4	3	41	0
Penny	1	4	4.0	1	0	4	0
	27	165	6.1	8	5	41	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Metcalf	6	0	11	115	19.2	6	1	35	2
Hockenson	6	0	8	37	6.2	1	0	8	0
Chase	4	0	6	106	26.5	4	2	54	1
Olave	3	0	3	20	6.7	1	0	8	0
Elliott	2	0	3	9	4.5	0	0	6	0
	21	0	31	287	13.7	12	3	54	3

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Johnson	0	1	0
Clark	0	1	0
	0	2	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Smith-Marse	1	23	23.0	23	0
	1	23	23.0	23	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Erickson	3	0	45	15.0	20	0
	3	0	45	15.0	20	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Badgley	2-2	28	5-5	11

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Lee	2	106	53.0	0	1	0	55

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Mosley	12	0	1	2	0	0	0-0
Ogbah	5	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Barr	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams	4	0	0	2	1	1	0-0
Hayward Jr.	3	0	3	0	0	0	0-0
Clark	3	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Bolton	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
James	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Moehrig	2	0	0	0	0	0	1-33
Adderley	2	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Bradberry	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Hargrave	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	45	0	5	4	3	2	1-33



21 of 31, 287 yds, 3 TDs, 1 INT. Made the needed throws and rushed for 74 yards.

	Bruxelles	Virden
First Downs	12	22
Rushes	34-116	27-165
Passes	19-10-131	31-21-287
Sacked	0-0	2-8
Fumble	2	0
Penalties	7-57	2-10
Turnovers	3	1
Missed Tackles	5	6
Dropped Passes	0	0
Bad Passes	2	2
Passes 25+	3	3
Runs 10+	3	5
Blitzers	28	0
Time	28:09	31:51
Third Down	4-13	8-13
Fourth Down	1-2	0-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	1/0/0	4/1/2
Net Offense	247	444



24

Billtown

GAME CENTER  
2022  
Pacific Quarter Finals

22

New Jersey

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Herbert	18	26	185	0
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Cook	13	114	8.8	2
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Hardman	4	54	13.5	0

## Team

Billtown

1

2

3

4

OT

Total

0

7

14

3

-

24

New Jersey

10

6

0

6

-

22

## Play of the Game

3:40 left in 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter, Bats trailing 16-0 and NJ driving, **Xavier Rhodes** deflected a pass from **Matt Stafford** and **Pat Surtain II** picked it off, returning it 60 yards for a TD.

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Stafford	21	38	282	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Montgomery	20	96	4.8	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Allen	9	77	8.6	0

## BATS WRECK BALLS SEASON!

THREE STAFFORD PICKS, 2 COOK TDs CARRY BILTOWN TO VICTORY

**SUMMARY:** The heavily favoured host Wrecking Balls had been perfect at home during the season, but one of its three losses on the year had come against the underdog Bats. Few thought that history would repeat itself in this game and they were reassured of their judgement early when **Chidobe Awuzie** picked off a tipped pass thrown by Bats' QB, **Justin Herbert** on the game's first play and returned it 39 yards for a TD and an instant 7-0 lead. The Bats got the ball back but had to punt after four plays, setting up a grueling 20-play, 91-yard Wrecking Ball drive that took 10 minutes and ended with a 24-yard **Chris Boswell** FG to make it 10-0. The Bats' attempt to answer was cut short by an **Anthony Firkser** fumble inside the New Jersey red zone, setting up another long drive that ended with a **Brian Robinson** 3-yard TD run to make it 16-0. The only good thing that had happened to Billtown to that point was the missed extra point on the second New Jersey TD. Fortune took a sudden turn late in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter when Billtown corner **Pat Surtain II** leaped in front of a **Matt Stafford** pass and returned it 60 yards for a TD to put them on the board, trailing 16-7 at half time. The Bats' defence asserted itself in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half, paving the way for a comeback. New Jersey's opening drive was stymied then the Bats' offence finally made its mark with a 10-play, 61-yard drive that ended with a 10-yard TD run by **Dalvin Cook**. The next NJ drive stalled after just six plays and the Bats took over at their 14, closing the 86-yard distance in two plays; a 26-yard pass to **Mecole Hardman** followed by a 60-yard TD run by Cook, to give the Bats their first lead of the game, 21-16. The Wrecking Balls rallied on their ensuing series. A 32-yard catch-and-run by **Austin Hooper** set up a 16-yard TD pass from Stafford to **Terry McLaurin** to regain the lead, which stayed at 22-21 after the two-point conversion failed. The Bats drove back into NJ territory, but **Antoine Winfield Jr.** slammed the door with an interception, only to witness Stafford give it back to the Bats two plays later, on an interception and return by **Marcus Williams** to the 11, setting up a 20-yard FG by **Ka'imi Fairbairn** for the 24-22 lead. NJ ground out a tough survival drive to the Bats' 15, only to see Boswell miss the 33-yard FG attempt. Billtown held on over the remaining 2:24 to preserve the upset win.

**QUOTES:** "We are disappointed we were unable to claim our first playoff victory in our first playoff game as a franchise. It looked to be in our favour, until all the mistakes happened. We make no excuses – that's football. Still, 33 yards is not very long!" – New Jersey co-owner, **Jeff "JC" Cohen**.  
 "I guess that makes me a winner in more ways than one! We won the game, and I won my bet that I could walk in off the street and coach an EFL team to the playoffs. It is harder than it looks, I admit, but it's not too hard! On to the Championship!" – Billtown coach, **Stephen Michael**.



HAPPY FAN



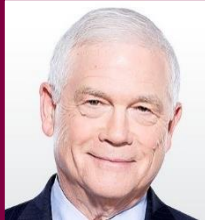
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ANGRY FAN



Steve Cyprinidae Cyo@LVRJ

The defence that **@AnthonyHolguin** built won the day. Kudos too to **@dalvincook** for being the offence and saving coach.



Dave Hodge @davehodge20

This is not the outcome the #Wrecking Balls hoped for, but losing tragically can be an important step in achieving long term success.



# Billtown 24 New Jersey 22

	1	2	3	4	F
Billtown	0	7	14	3	24
New Jersey	10	6	0	6	22



\* Playoff \* 02-19-2023 Stone Pony Shore Temp:51 Wind:0-5 None No Line MVP:Surtain II

1	14:51	New Jersey	TD	Awuzie 39 interception return (Boswell)	0-7
1	1:56	New Jersey	FG	Boswell 24 (20-91-9:54)	0-10
2	6:40	New Jersey	TD	Robinson 3 run (no good) (8-81-3:57)	0-16
2	3:40	Billtown	TD	Surtain II 60 interception return (Fairbairn)	7-16
3	7:54	Billtown	TD	Cook 10 run (Fairbairn) (10-61-5:16)	14-16
3	3:49	Billtown	TD	Cook 60 run (Fairbairn) (2-86-0:55)	21-16
4	14:52	New Jersey	TD	Stafford 16 pass to McLaurin (2 - failed) (9-75-4:04)	21-22
4	6:08	Billtown	FG	Fairbairn 20 (5-9-2:44)	24-22

Player Stats									
Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate	
Herbert	26	18	185	1	3	0	0	49.8	
	26	18	185	1	3	0	0	49.8	

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Cook	13	114	8.8	5	4	60	2
Hardman	1	19	19.0	1	1	19	0
Herbert	1	14	14.0	1	1	14	0
Conner	9	3	0.3	0	0	2	0
Harris	5	2	0.4	1	0	1	0
	29	152	5.2	8	6	60	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Hardman	4	0	5	54	13.5	1	1	26	0
Firkser	4	0	6	50	12.5	3	0	24	0
Humphries	2	0	2	21	10.5	1	0	11	0
Cook	2	0	5	8	4.0	0	0	6	0
Watkins	2	0	3	22	11.0	1	0	15	0
Conner	2	0	3	13	6.5	2	0	7	0
Beasley	2	0	2	17	8.5	1	0	11	0
	18	0	26	185	10.3	9	1	26	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Firkser	2	0	0
Beasley	0	1	0
	2	1	0

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

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Hardman	2	0	30	15.0	17	0
	2	0	30	15.0	17	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Fairbairn	1-1	20	3-3	6

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Anger	3	154	51.3	0	2	0	56

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Surtain II	8	0	0	0	0	1	1-60
Ngakoue	7	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Davis	6	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Williams.M	5	0	0	0	0	0	1-15
Judon	5	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Leonard	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Cox	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Fuller	4	0	1	0	0	0	1-25
Griffin	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Vea	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Dulin	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Heyward	1	0	1	1	0	0	0-0
Rhodes	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Humphries	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Sprinkle	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	57	1	3	3	1	1	3-100

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Stafford	38	21	282	3	3	1	1	54.9
	38	21	282	3	3	1	1	54.9

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Montgomery	20	96	4.8	5	2	24	0
Robinson	5	7	1.4	2	0	3	1
Samuel	5	7	1.4	0	0	4	0
McKissic	1	4	4.0	0	0	4	0
Stafford	2	-1	-0.5	0	0	0	0
	33	113	3.4	7	2	24	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Allen	9	0	14	77	8.6	5	0	13	0
Samuel	4	4	10	43	10.8	4	0	16	0
McLaurin	4	0	8	71	17.8	3	1	33	1
McKissic	2	0	3	52	26.0	2	1	46	0
Hooper	2	0	3	39	19.5	1	1	32	0
	21	4	38	282	13.4	15	3	46	1

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Allen	1	0	0
Newsome II	0	1	0
McKissic	0	1	0
	1	2	0

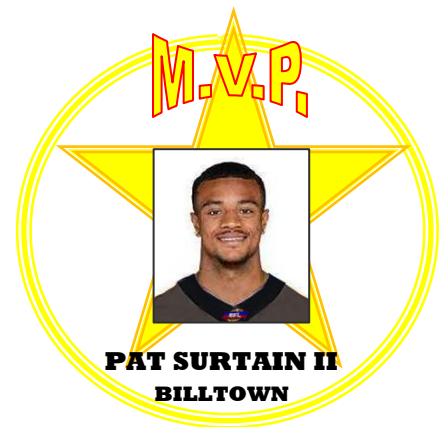
Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Spencer	1	18	18.0	18	0
	1	18	18.0	18	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Spencer	3	0	5	1.7	4	0
	3	0	5	1.7	4	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Boswell	1-2	24	1-2	4

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
O'Donnell	2	105	52.5	0	1	0	55

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Winfield Jr	9	0	0	0	0	2	1-1
Stewart	8	0	0	1	1	0	0-0
Adams	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Campbell	4	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Awuzie	3	0	0	0	0	0	1-39
Newsome II	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Milano	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Alexander	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Stokes	2	0	0	0	0	0	1-0
Armstead	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Floyd	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hughes	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
	47	0	3	2	2	2	3-40



8 T, 1 FF, 1 INT (60yd-TD). His pick-six in 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter started comeback win.

	Billtown	New Jersey
First Downs	19	23
Rushes	29-152	33-113
Passes	26-18-185	38-21-282
Sacked	0-0	1-4
Fumble	2	1
Penalties	6-35	6-28
Turnovers	4	3
Missed Tackles	7	4
Dropped Passe	0	4
Bad Passes	2	4
Passes 25+	1	3
Runs 10+	6	2
Blitzers	12	32
Time	27:27	32:33
Third Down	4-10	7-13
Fourth Down	2-2	2-2
Red Att/Td/Fg	6/1/1	5/2/1
Net Offense	337	391



9

Budapest



16

Durham

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Rodgers	18	37	157	0
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Reynolds	14	67	4.8	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Jefferson	6	95	15.8	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Budapest	0	6	0	3	-	9
Durham	0	3	0	13	-	16

## Play of the Game

4<sup>th</sup> quarter, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4, OPP 37, 1:30 remaining, **Josh Allen** slings a short slant to **Cooper Kupp**, who races the distance for the game's only TD, giving Durham a 16-9 lead.

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Allen	13	29	170	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Penny	16	78	4.9	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Kupp	5	95	19.0	1

## THUNDER LIZARDS END BUDAPEST'S REIGN!

### 37-YARD TD PASS TO COOPER KUPP IN FINAL MINUTE SECURES HARD WIN!

**SUMMARY:** The home Thunder Lizards entered the playoffs as the no.1 seed and on top of the league power rankings, but the visiting North Stars brought the weight of back-to-back championships and a glow of confidence to the field at Jurassic Park, after dispatching Cowtown with ease in the wildcard round. The football world expected a close contest and got it in an unexpected form. Throughout a grinding, scoreless 1<sup>st</sup> quarter that witnessed three punts and the sole sustained drive of the period ending fruitlessly in a stone-cold 4<sup>th</sup> down stop of Durham's **Rashaad Penny** at the Budapest 21-yard line, the defences on both sides put their mettle on display for all to see. The league's top two offences, led by the league's top two quarterbacks, looked confused and unsteady against swarming defenders on both sides who seemed to be in the huddle with them. It took a **Quandre Diggs** interception of **Josh Allen** and 35-yard return to set up the game's first points – a 39-yard **Brandon McManus** field goal with 5:53 left in the 1<sup>st</sup> half. His counterpart, **Cade York**, salvaged a Durham drive that faltered at the 30 with a 48-yard equalizer with 1:22 left in the half. **Aaron Rodgers** stepped up in the two-minute drill by drilling a deep out to **Justin Jefferson** for 44 yards, which set up a chip shot FG in the dying seconds of the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter, to give the visitors a narrow 6-3 halftime lead. The 2<sup>nd</sup> half started much as the 1<sup>st</sup> half had, with both offences struggling. The Lizards failed to capitalize on a **Justin Simmons** interception when York missed a 36-yard FG attempt. This was the closest either team came to scoring in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter. Both teams entered the final frame needing a break. Durham was the first to strike, with Allen connecting with **Cooper Kupp** for a 24-yard gain and Penny ripping off 27 yards on a check down. That set up a York 41-yard FG to tie it at 6. Budapest drove back from their 25, but as they tried to cross mid-field, **Devin McCourty** picked off Rodgers, setting up York's 48-yard go-ahead FG. With points at a premium and time running out, the Stars went for it on 4<sup>th</sup> & 7 from their own 40 but came up well short, giving Durham the chance to run out the clock. On 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4 at the 37, with 1:30 left and Budapest keying on the run, Allen threw to Kupp, who went the distance for the game's only TD and the game-clinching score.

**QUOTES:** "We gave everything we had in this game, but it wasn't enough. They have a great defence. It was well-rested and they had a good game plan. That put pressure on our defence and they rose to the occasion, but that pass to Kupp was a dagger." – Budapest coach, **Darrin Jones**.  
 "I knew something had to give in the fourth quarter and it was good for us that it gave way in our favour. We missed a lot of chance, but we made the plays when it mattered most and that's what counts against a team like theirs." – Durham coach, **Georgeo Kaldis**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



**Attila Hun** @AttilaHunBWGoulash  
 We fight as great warriors and died like  
 great warriors against great warriors!  
 We will always fight!



**Sir Reginald** @RMClapham  
 'Twas a near run thing in the Durham  
 cock pit. Clouded over appeared  
 @ThunderLizardsDurham for a time.  
 @CooperKupp is a red-hot treat.



## Budapest 9 Durham 16

	1	2	3	4	F
Budapest	0	6	0	3	9
Durham	0	3	0	13	16



\* Playoff \* 02-19-2023 Jurassic Park Temp:64 Wind:Calm None No Line MVP:Kupp H

2	5:53	Budapest	FG	McManus 39 (7-19-3:39)	3-0
2	1:22	Durham	FG	York 48 (10-45-4:27)	3-3
2	0:16	Budapest	FG	McManus 21 (8-72-1:02)	6-3
4	8:44	Durham	FG	York 41 (11-67-5:55)	6-6
4	3:56	Durham	FG	York 56 (4-5-1:28)	6-9
4	1:30	Durham	TD	Allen 37 pass to Kupp (York) (3-43-0:24)	6-16
4	0:33	Budapest	FG	McManus 51 (7-35-0:43)	9-16

### Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Rodgers.A	37	18	157	1	2	0	2	37.8
	37	18	157	1	2	0	2	37.8

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Reynolds	14	67	4.8	3	1	12	0
Patterson.C	11	30	2.7	3	1	11	0
Rodgers.A	4	26	6.5	2	1	14	0
McNichols	1	5	5.0	0	0	5	0
Vaughn	1	4	4.0	0	0	4	0
	31	132	4.3	8	3	14	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Jefferson	6	2	13	95	15.8	5	1	44	0
Patterson.C	3	0	4	4	1.3	0	0	4	0
Diggs.S	2	0	8	15	7.5	1	0	9	0
Kittle	2	0	2	16	8.0	1	0	9	0
Reynolds	1	1	3	3	3.0	0	0	3	0
Brown	1	0	1	2	2.0	0	0	2	0
Thornton	1	0	1	3	3.0	0	0	3	0
Agholor	1	0	4	7	7.0	1	0	7	0
McNichols	1	0	1	12	12.0	1	0	12	0
	18	3	37	157	8.7	9	1	44	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Rodgers.A	1	1	0
	1	1	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Ford	1	40	40.0	40	0
	1	40	40.0	40	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Rodgers.A	0	1	0	0.0	0	0
	0	1	0	0.0	0	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
McManus	3-3	51	0-0	9

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Sanchez	6	262	43.7	0	3	0	50

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Harris.S	7	1	0	2	1	0	0-0
Fitzpatrick	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Golden	5	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
David	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Luvu	5	0	0	2	0	0	0-0
Diggs.Q	4	0	1	0	0	0	1-35
Dean	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Haden	3	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Carter	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Phillips	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Nichols	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams.S	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Settle	0	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Jordan	0	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
	49	2	5	5	3	0	1-35

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Allen.J	29	13	170	2	1	1	2	61.0
	29	13	170	2	1	1	2	61.0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Penny	16	78	4.9	4	1	17	0
Gibson	5	45	9.0	3	2	16	0
Allen.J	7	10	1.4	0	0	9	0
Hill	1	6	6.0	0	0	6	0
	29	139	4.8	7	3	17	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Kupp	5	0	11	95	19.0	4	1	37	1
Boyd	2	0	7	19	9.5	2	0	12	0
Knox	2	0	2	7	3.5	0	0	4	0
Waller	2	0	3	9	4.5	0	0	6	0
Penny	1	1	2	27	27.0	1	1	27	0
Hilton	1	1	3	13	13.0	0	0	13	0
Ruckert	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	13	2	29	170	13.1	7	2	37	1

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
	0	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Powers	1	0	0.0	0	0
	1	0	0.0	0	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Gray	3	1	20	6.7	12	0
Kupp	2	0	1	0.5	1	0
	5	1	21	4.2	12	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
York	3-4	56	1-1	10

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Huber	4	185	46.3	0	1	0	52

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Warner	10	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Simmons	8	0	1	0	0	0	1-27
Burns	8	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Campbell	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Harris Jr.	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
McCourty	2	0	0	0	0	0	1-18
Moore II	2	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Oliver	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Davis	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Pitre	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hendrickson	1	1	0	0	1	1	0-0
Reader	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Barton	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Reed	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Young	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mathieu	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Werner	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Holmes	0	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
	56	2	5	1	2	1	2-45



5 Rec., 95 Yds, 1 TD. 37-yard TD catch only TD of the game for either team.

	Budapest	Durham
First Downs	18	15
Rushes	31-132	29-139
Passes	37-18-157	29-13-170
Sacked	2-8	2-12
Fumble	1	0
Penalties	3-19	6-52
Turnovers	2	1
Missed Tackles	8	7
Dropped Passes	3	2
Bad Passes	2	8
Passes 25+	1	2
Runs 10+	3	3
Blitzers	5	4
Time	30:37	29:23
Third Down	5-16	5-14
Fourth Down	0-1	0-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	2/0/2	2/0/1
Net Offense	281	297



16

Erieau



33

Pickering

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Murray	17	35	170	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Harris	14	87	6.2	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Andrews	5	73	14.6	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Erieau	10	0	0	6	-	16
Pickering	3	16	14	0	-	33

## Play of the Game

2<sup>nd</sup> quarter, 9:30, Erieau ball at OWN 30, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 5, leading 10-9, **Kyler Murray's** pass was high and picked off by **Denzel Ward**, who took it back 49 yards for a TD to give the Spartans the lead.

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Hurts	6	12	87	0
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Sanders	18	134	7.4	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Brown	1	28	28.0	0

## SPARTANS WIN BY A MILES!

MILES SANDERS LEADS WAY WITH 134 YARDS RUSHING, TD!

**SUMMARY:** The Spartans were the surprise winners of the Coastal Division, earning the no.2 seed and a home date to begin the post-season. The Cadillac had won the South Division but had lost four of their last six games to drop them to the no.3 seed and force a road trip for the first playoff game in Erieau franchise history. The opening frame appeared propitious for the visitors. **Desmond King II** intercepted **Jalen Hurts** on his first pass attempt, setting up an efficient 57-yard drive on just four plays, the first being a 47-yard cross to **Mark Andrews** and the last a 7-yard TD pass from **Kyler Murray** to **Hunter Henry** for a 7-0 Erieau lead. The teams traded field goals to round out the first 15 minutes, with the Caddies possessing the ball for over 7 minutes prior to kicking theirs with just 2 seconds left. The 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter witnessed a Spartans breakout that would shift the momentum in their favour permanently. **Miles Sanders** carried the ball five straight times on the first drive of the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter, gaining more than 10 yards on each of the first four, before **D'Andre Swift** finished off the drive with a 3-yard TD run to pull with one, 10-9, after the missed extra point. Then on the ensuing Erieau series, **Denzel Ward** picked off Murray and returned it 49 yards for a TD to give Pickering a sudden 16-10 lead. It looked like the Caddies would get something back when **Maxx Crosby** intercepted a Hurts pass in Pickering territory, but the Erieau offence could go no further, and **Jason Myers** missed the 38-yard FG attempt. The Spartans rode a conservative game plan to round off the first half scoring with another field goal to make it 19-10. The 2<sup>nd</sup> half began with an exchange of punts before the Spartans got rolling once more with a 3-yard Sanders TD run, set up by a 28-yard pass to **Marques Brown**, only the fifth completed pass of the game for Hurts to that point. Erieau responded with a three-and-out, with the "out" a devastating 75-yard punt return for a TD by **Vellus Jones Jr.** With the score 33-10 for Pickering, the Caddies were forced into a pass-only posture on offence, which the strong Pickering secondary frustrated with ease. At the 1:27 mark of the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter, **Najee Harris** finally found the end zone, but by then it was too late for the Caddies. The Spartans back-up QB, **Zach Wilson** came in to run out the clock on Pickering's first playoff win in 12 years.

**QUOTES:** "We lost on the score board, but we won the respect of the football community today. At least, I strongly believe we did. This wasn't a typical Cadillac loss – it was a playoff loss. That's a whole other ball game as they say in baseball." – Erieau owner, **Jamie Rilett**.

"This playoff win has been too long coming, but now that its here and under our belts, it brings me right back to that 2010 run as if it was yesterday." – Pickering coach, **Gus Kontantakos**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN

**Fergie Jenkins** @fergieajenkins

One high throw that @K1 would love back and one slightly low punt that @mdcksn wants a do-over for, made the difference in this game.

**Aristedes** @AristedesKalogiannis

This is glory! Glory for the #Spartans, Glory for Gus, Glory for spirit of Sparta! No mere mortal host can defeat they who the Gods favor!



# Erieau 16 Pickering 33

	1	2	3	4	F
Erieau	10	0	0	6	16
Pickering	3	16	14	0	33



\* Playoff \* 02-19-2023 Thermopylae Stadium Temp:20 Wind:0-10 None No Line MVP:Sanders

1	10:10	Erieau	TD	Murray 7 pass to Henry (Myers) (4-57-1:34)	7-0
1	7:40	Pickering	FG	Zuerlein 44 (7-49-2:26)	7-3
1	0:02	Erieau	FG	Myers 44 (13-49-7:26)	10-3
2	10:30	Pickering	TD	Swift 3 run (no good) (7-74-4:30)	10-9
2	9:29	Pickering	TD	Ward 49 interception return (Zuerlein)	10-16
2	1:55	Pickering	FG	Zuerlein 39 (8-51-4:14)	10-19
3	3:37	Pickering	TD	Sanders 3 run (Zuerlein) (8-76-4:51)	10-26
3	1:49	Pickering	TD	Jones Jr. 75 punt return (Zuerlein)	10-33
4	1:27	Erieau	TD	Harris 1 run (no good) (16-77-4:59)	16-33

## Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Murray.K	35	17	170	2	1	1	1	60.4
Bridgewater	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	39.6
	36	17	170	2	1	1	1	58.8

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Hurts	12	6	87	1	2	0	0	34.4
	12	6	87	1	2	0	0	34.4

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Harris	14	87	6.2	5	3	18	1
Pierce.D	11	34	3.1	1	0	6	0
Murray.K	4	14	3.5	1	0	8	0
Hines	1	6	6.0	1	0	6	0
	30	141	4.7	8	3	18	1

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Sanders.M	18	134	7.4	8	7	19	1
Carson	2	25	12.5	1	1	24	0
Hurts	4	23	5.8	2	2	12	0
White	4	7	1.8	0	0	6	0
Wilson.Z	5	6	1.2	0	0	7	0
Swift	1	3	3.0	1	0	3	1
Williams.D	1	-2	-2.0	0	0	0	0
	35	196	5.6	12	10	24	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Andrews	5	0	10	73	14.6	1	1	47	0
Pierce.D	3	0	5	14	4.7	1	0	12	0
Waddle	2	0	6	19	9.5	1	0	10	0
Higgins	2	0	6	24	12.0	2	0	12	0
Ruggs	2	0	4	33	16.5	1	1	28	0
Harris	1	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Hines	1	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Henry	1	0	2	7	7.0	1	0	7	1
Perriman	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	17	0	36	170	10.0	7	2	47	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Sanders.M	2	0	3	9	4.5	0	0	5	0
Smith.D	1	0	1	16	16.0	1	0	16	0
Brown	1	0	1	28	28.0	1	1	28	0
Ricard	1	0	1	22	22.0	1	0	22	0
Frelemuth	1	0	1	12	12.0	1	0	12	0
Shepard	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Pickens	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Swift	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Ridley	0	0	2	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	6	0	12	87	14.5	4	1	28	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
	0	0	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
	0	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Ruggs	3	66	22.0	28	0
Hines	1	23	23.0	23	0
	4	89	22.3	28	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
White	2	39	19.5	22	0
Pickens	1	0	0.0	0	0
	3	39	13.0	22	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
King II	3	0	37	12.3	14	0
	3	0	37	12.3	14	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Jones Jr.	2	3	87	43.5	75	1
	2	3	87	43.5	75	1

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Myers	1-2	44	1-2	4

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Zuerlein	2-2	44	3-4	9

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Dickson	6	274	45.7	0	2	0	55

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Pox	3	148	49.3	0	0	0	50

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Str	Hur	FF	Int
Hewitt	10	0	0	2	0	0	0-0
Smith.M	7	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Garrett	4	0	0	0	3	0	0-0
McLeod	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Bosa	4	0	1	1	0	0	0-0
Diggs	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Van Noy	2	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Houston	2	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Hamilton	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Gilmore	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Pierce.M	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Crosby	1	0	0	0	1	0	1-0
Domann	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Adeniyi	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jones	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
King II	0	0	1	0	0	0	1-0
	46	0	3	4	6	0	2-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Str	Hur	FF	Int
Hyde	8	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Dunlap	5	0	1	0	2	0	0-0
Kearse	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Wilson.D	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ward	3	0	1	0	0	0	1-49
Clowney	3	1	0	0	2	0	0-0
Dugger	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Howard	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson.M	3	0	1	1	0	0	0-0
Bethel	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Carter II	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Okwara	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson.D	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Harris	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Autry	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Woolen	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Kinlaw	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	53	1	8	1	5	0	1-49



18 Car., 134 Yds, 1 TD. Moved the chains 8 times and found the zone.

	Erieau	Pickering
First Downs	16	18
Rushes	30-141	35-196
Passes	36-17-170	12-6-87
Sacked	1-11	0-0
Fumble	0	0
Penalties	6-69	3-25
Turnovers	1	2
Missed Tackles	9	9
Dropped Passes	0	0
Bad Passes	4	1
Passes 25+	2	1
Runs 10+	3	10
Blitzers	4	4
Time	31:11	28:49
Third Down	6-17	2-8
Fourth Down	1-2	0-0
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/2/0	5/2/1
Net Offense	300	283



# AROUND THE



## With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – I am in trouble:

*“McChad! Your bloviating tripe is no longer tolerable. It was only tolerable before because enough geeks read it to make putting up with it profitable. But times are changing. Artful blowhards with a penchant for elaborate Victorian prose have no place in today’s market. Your cult-like following is dwindling, and new readers have no time for you. Your sources won’t save you. Today’s sports media market is like a tidal wave sweeping away navel-gazing dawdlers like you. Readers want quick hits. There is too much information out there to waste time trying to understand what it all means. They want words that make them feel like they know something – and the fewer words the better so they can move on and not miss anything. You need to change your approach. Fix it now – or I’ll fix it for you!”* - Finch

The telltale sign that I am real trouble with my editor, **Mr. Finchley**, is that he addresses me in the message by my surname. Even in our worst moments together, he never addressed me by my last name. It was always ‘Spats!’ (The exclamation mark indicating that he was serious). This wicked e-mail was intended to be my notice. No more writing in the third person omniscient in attempt to dramatize facts from my sources. No more editorializing at length on subsidiary matters. No more attempts to understand the deeper meaning of life and humanity through the gut-wrenching battles on the gridiron. Get to the point – make it funny, shocking, controversial or salacious if you can, then for f\*#k’s sake, move on!

I get it. But a part of me delights in defying it. There should be more writers like me, not less! If my cult of hardcore followers is “dwindling,” as Mr. Finchley says, taking me out of the game means they will disappear, and that is not a good thing for reading standards in today’s semi-literate, emoji-plastered world. Am I a dinosaur? Perhaps, but I am a literate dinosaur.

There is another angle to consider: The War for the Human Soul. If I were to lose my semi-mainstream platform entirely and be forced into blogging on substack, what would become of football literacy and fan critical thinking? Although his English is indeed impeccable, corporate hack **Peter Prince** is a master of the obvious and an artful manipulator. His corporate message, designed to dumb you down and ultimately steer your hand toward your wallet, would rule the mediascape unopposed. I stand as a leader of a tiny fellowship of resistance sports writers, struggling to maintain the purest standards of journalism ethics: *Truth. Independence. Fairness. Humanity. Accountability.* Show me where you can find a media space today that embodies all five of these ideals. You will be hard-pressed, so set aside a weekend – to be safe, a long one – for your search.

And yet...when the Devil has you by the balls and threatens to squeeze, there is some merit in tending first to yours and your unborn progeny’s survival, by giving in – albeit reluctantly and at least temporarily – to his demands. I therefore offer you this: a shockingly modern and direct-to-the-point, “Spatsian” summary of the Quarter Finals weekend.

### **BORN TO LOSE**

If you want a definition of “loser” look no further than the Wrecking Balls. The 2022 edition was not only the most potent in franchise history, but it was also arguably the most potent in the Pacific Conference. Co-owner and GM **Jeff “JC” Cohen**, the Seller of False Hope since his team’s inception in 2016, appeared to finally have a winner on his hands. And for the first eight weeks of the season his team backed up the cautious hype by taking out the league’s trash through an 8-0 start. But when they began to face decent competition in Week Nine, cracks in the façade began to appear. Every game in the final half of the regular season was an adventure for New Jersey. They scored what seemed to be a franchise-defining win against Durham in Week Eleven only to follow that up four weeks later with a humiliating, equally franchise-defining loss to Georgia. Heading into their franchise-first playoff appearance against the Billtown Bats, the warning signs were there for the discerning eye to see.

The most obvious warning sign of an impending upset was the fact that the Bats had already beaten New Jersey this year. While the Billtown offence had struggled weekly to overcome their neophyte coach’s bumbling play-calling through a tormented 9-8 campaign, the defence had had no problems strangling opposition and had laughed in the face of **Matt Stafford**’s “big arm” in their 20-17 Week Ten victory. The question would come down to whether the Billtown offence could make enough plays against a Wrecking Balls’ defence that had been statistically dominant overall but had surrendered 37% of its points in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter – not all of it in so-called “garbage time.”

Full disclosure before I proceed: I am a Wrecking Balls fan when not wearing my analyst’s hat. They are the closest thing to a bona fide New York EFL team since the Meadowlands Swamp Dawgs and have an endearing ineptness that reminds me of most New York Giants squads I once followed. This makes me both biased and bitter. There were plenty of opportunities for them to put

this game away. They were the better team – at least they *should* have been. But because they are, culturally, psychologically, and institutionally, *losers*, they let the Bats beat them on their home turf. Am I a “loser” for following them? Probably. But I am in good company when it comes to the most celebrated franchise that has never won a playoff game. New Jersey has no shortage of supporters, and that will not change just because they lost another game they should have won, on the biggest stage in their tragi-comical history to date.

Losing is one thing. It happens to the best (as Darrin Jones’ North Stars discovered this week). It is the way of the loss that determines whether one is a true “loser.” And this game had all the criteria needed to certify the Wrecking Balls, their owner/GM, their coach **Sean McDermott**, and their vaunted and vastly overrated quarterback, “true losers.”

First, the Wrecking Balls dominated this game defensively and offensively for 26 minutes and 20 seconds before a tipped pass from Stafford fell fortuitously into the arms of Bats’ corner, **Pat Surtain II**, who ran it back 60 yards for a touchdown. Up until that point in the game, it had looked as if the only way the Bats could score would be on defence. Stafford obliged by attempting to thread the needle on a crossing pattern – a pass he need not have attempted – and, as always, overestimated the power of his “cannon,” leading to the tip and the pick. Stafford’s defenders say he was unlucky in trying to “make a play” against an elite Bats defence. My answer: he was up 16-0, forced the throw when he didn’t need to, *against an elite Bats defence*. That’s just dumb. You try to “make a play” when you are behind, or trying to go ahead, not when you and your defence are in command. That let Billtown back in the game and shifted the momentum.

The quarter could have been worse. Stafford threw another pick on a terrible throw with 1:31 left in the half, setting up the moribund Bats’ offence in New Jersey territory. Fortunately for the Balls, the certifiably inept four-wide set the Bats’ like to employ telegraphed a pass from **Justin Herbert** into the end zone from just 5 yards out that **Eric Stokes** picked off to temporarily save the day. The Wrecking Balls led 16-7 at half time, giving them plenty of space and time to settle the f&\*k down. Who knows what was said in the New Jersey locker room at half time. I didn’t bother to ask my sources, because it didn’t matter. Whatever it was, was not enough to instill the fortitude needed to finish off the begging-to-be-beaten Bats.

While the Wrecking Balls struggled to execute their second-half offensive game plan, through a combination of sloppiness and Billtown defensive stoutness, the Bats’ secret weapon on offence, **Dalvin Cook**, went to work. Cook should be anything but secret. He and backfield mate, **Damien Harris**, were set up by former management to be the one-two punch of this offence, setting up Herbert for play-action glory. Under the guiding hand of billionaire industrialist and football hobbyist **Stephen Michael**, these two supporting pillars of the offence had become change-of-pace backs supporting a farcical version of ‘Air Coryell,’ that looked more like the Wright Brothers. Cook had finished the season with less than 200 carries while Harris had been relegated to third string behind “The Finisher,” **James Conner**, who had shown that he could indeed finish, but was not very adept at starting anything.

Regardless of it all, talent has a way of rising to the top, despite any coach, and that is what happened on the Bats’ two possessions of the third quarter. Cook finished off the Bats’ best sustained drive of the day with a 10-yard TD run, bringing his team to within 2 points, trailing 16-14. Then he got the call to start the Bats’ next possession, boldly turning the corner on a stretch play and jetting to a 60-yard TD run to give Billtown a 21-16 lead with 3:49 remaining in the 3<sup>rd</sup>. It was as if Cook had said to himself, “*enough of this sh%t! I’m scoring.*” Those two carries were essentially their entire offence in this game.

Had the Wrecking Balls simply collapsed at this point, it would have been disappointing but less painful than what followed. Stafford worked the team back into the lead, hitting a key third & ten conversion on the same crossing pattern that had resulted in the earlier pick-six, and completing key passes to **Austin Hooper** for 32 yards and, finally, **Terry McLaurin** for a 16-yard touchdown. Leading 22-21, they went for two points, but **David Montgomery** ran into the back of tackle **Taylor Lewan** and was subsequently dropped short of the goal line. It was symbolic: The Wrecking Balls could not get out of their own way.

This set up another classic Ballsian tragedy. The Bats stitched together a decent drive, hitting on short and medium passes out of a more conventional three-wide set to reach the New Jersey 36. Emboldened by this modest success, Herbert went deep, looking for...well, I’m not sure who. It could have been **Quez Watkins**, or it could have been **Mecole Hardman** – both were visible at the edge of the picture frame when **Antoine Winfield Jr** jumped into the center to pick off Herbert’s errant pass inside the red zone. It was a bad throw of the severely demoralizing kind. For a “winner,” the pick would have marked the final turning point in a hard-fought victory against a tough and plucky opponent. But for a “loser,” this was the perfect set up to prove just how much of a loser the Wrecking Balls were.

It didn’t take long. On the second play from scrimmage, Stafford forced another throw over the middle that was tipped and picked off by safety **Marcus Williams**, who returned it 15 yards to the New Jersey 11. That set the Bats up in field goal range. After straining forward 9 yards on four carries and a penalty, the Bats settled for a 20-yard field goal to take a 24-22 lead with six minutes left. For New Jersey, it was more than enough time to stage a comeback, but Wrecking Balls fans, accustomed to failure, were tense. With good reason.

New Jersey took over at their 25 and pushed forward against the stingy Billtown defence. After a hard-fought first down they caught a break when Stafford checked down to an uncovered **J.D. McKissic**, who darted 46 yards to the Bats’ 17. With the two-minute warning approaching, New Jersey had options. They could play for the field goal by running the ball and burning some time off the clock. Or they could go for the big score through the air and make it harder for their opponent to come back. They opted for both; first running then attempting to pass the ball. Neither worked.

With still 2:24 left on the clock, **Chris Boswell** came on for the easy field goal try from 33 yards. Talk in the TV broadcast booth was already turning to the Bats’ next drive and whether Herbert could pull off a late playoff comeback. Nobody, even the most jaded Wrecking Balls fan, expected Boswell to miss the kick, which amounted to an extra point in terms of difficulty. But then the unthinkable happened. Boswell missed. He flat out *missed!* Wind was not a factor. Neither was the turf. The snap and hold were both clean. Boswell

simply pushed it to the right, failing to follow through on his kicking motion.

I feel pity for Boswell. This miss will most likely be his legacy, whether the Wrecking Balls keep him or cut him. Yet, it was not his fault. He just happened to be playing for a franchise that was born to lose, one way or the other, and the *Football Gods* (yes, they exist!) saw fit to pin the big ‘L’ on him. Because what says “loser” more emphatically than missing a 33-yard field goal in perfect weather conditions to deprive a team of the lead in the final two minutes on a day when the offences on both sides were more of a danger to themselves than the defences that opposed them?

New Jersey eventually got the ball back at their own 7-yard line with 20 seconds left. Stafford’s desperation passes were fruitless, and his frantic execution only served to underscore the helplessness of his situation. The Wrecking Balls failed to even reach “Hail Mary” range before the clock ran out on them. Now we’re talking “Loser” with a capital ‘L.’

The sold-out crowd at Stone Pony Shore hardly heckled or jeered as the sound of the final gun put a bullet in the head of the Wrecking Balls’ most promising season. Deep down in their hearts, fans knew that a 14-3 record, a division title and no.2 seed in the playoffs were all too good to be true. The season was bound to fail ignominiously and so it did, in one of the more painful ways possible. Even co-owner and GM **Jeff Cohen** seemed to know and understand that truth when he addressed the media post-game.

“We’re disappointed but nobody can take victory for granted in this league, least of all, us,” Cohen said sporting a wry smile. “The opponent always has a say. Sometimes we have a say as well. I know Chris can make that kick in his sleep, so it was a surprise to all of us when he missed it. But that’s not why we lost this game. We shouldn’t have been in that position to start with, but it is what it is. We’ll get through this misfortune, as we always do, and come back ready to compete next year.”

At this point, picking himself up off the mat has become a reflex for Cohen. No so much for the new kid on the block, **Stephen Michael**, who was beaming like a little kid with a brand-new bike after his first playoff win.

“I see this as the start of a great era in Bats football,” Michael announced with a straight face. “We proved the haters wrong today. I don’t see anything that this team isn’t capable of. We came together as a team, and it paid off as it should – in victory!”

While the Bats under their rawest of rookie coaches may be starting to figure things just in time to make the run many pre-season pundits had expected them to make, I chalk their “win” up to a New Jersey own goal. Certainly, the Bats’ defence exerted enough pressure to leave Stafford and the offence no room for error and Cook deserves full credit for making the offensive play of the game, but most professional football people will tell you, off the record if they say anything at all, that New Jersey – particularly their quarterback – choked in the clutch. Expect the Violators to burst the Bats’ bubble next week.

### **THE PARTY**

Coming off their personal “super bowl” wildcard win over the Crusaders and having to fly over 4,000 miles across the Atlantic and through 7 time zones the next day, it is both unfair and naïve to have expected Bruxelles to offer more than token resistance against the red-hot Violators in the Quarter Finals. “Kenny Magic,” the charm of *‘The Champs,’* and a great 70’s-style run game all have their limits against a modern juggernaut. But in the front of my mind, I thought the adrenaline would last a little longer than it did for the Bombers.

The simple reason the Violators were able to methodically demolish the Bombers with the thoroughness of a controlled demolition, is because the Bombers, on a good day, did not belong on the same playoff field with Virden. Bruxelles earned its way onto that field by beating (barely) another team that did not belong on the playoff field with Virden. As I discussed in detail last week, Bruxelles and Peg City making the post-season *at all* was a big win for both teams. Their “super bowl” was last week. And it looks like the Bombers suffered a severe super bowl hangover against the Violators this Sunday. The jet lag made it worse.

The tremulous Wrecking Balls, given the opportunity, would have likely found a way to lose closely to these same Bombers. The Violators, however, are a different animal – more like a reptile than an animal. Their iguana green outfits aptly reflect their cold-blooded killer instinct. When the Violators fall short, it is not due to a lack of confidence. It is often more to do with overconfidence, or a lack of inspiration brought on by a lack of human empathy and emotion. **Patrick Mahomes** and his wing men, **DK Metcalf** and **Ja’Marr Chase** look human, but they aren’t. They prey or they don’t. They eat, or they don’t. And when they don’t eat, they get hungry and become more dangerous.

Unsubduable in spirit, Bombers’ coach, GM and part owner **Kenny Main** would never have debarked from the team plane, under the bright Tuesday morning sun at Winnipeg Richardson International Airport, thinking his team was incapable of winning the game. Fearlessness was always part of the plan. Yet, few outside observers thought it possible and the Football Gods (yes, they exist!) agreed.

The Gods sent plenty of augural signs to prepare the subconscious of Bombers’ fans for the worst. Some of these were obvious; like the dark cloud that hovered directly over the Bombers’ hotel in Virden that dropped snow within a two-block radius while the rest of the town enjoyed a sunny, crisp and cool dryness. Other signs were quite obscure and subtle. For example, in an inconceivable coincidence, Main arrived in Winnipeg sporting a tan-coloured two-piece suit with a red tie and deeply tanned skin, caused by reportedly spending too much time in a tanning salon in Bruxelles on Monday trying to “recharge” his batteries. For those of us who remember our parents’ belly-laughing at the 60’s movie *‘The Party,’* Main’s resemblance to **Peter Sellers’** character, Hrundi V. Bakshi, was stark and uncanny. For those who don’t know the movie, it consists entirely of a series of comical mishaps caused by Sellers’ bumbling character as he navigates a Hollywood party that he was accidentally invited to and where he does not belong. The parallels between the movie and the Bombers’ experience on the field at **TERRORDOME** are impossible to ignore; once you make the connection, of course.

While Main spent the week playing the role of the plucky, energized underdog-with-a-secret-to-keep in front of the media, his opposite number, **Lance Barrate** presented dryly in his usual matter-of-fact manner. He had apparently already done the calculations, factoring in the Bombers’ fatigue and his own players’ need to eat, while waiting through a bye week having to endure the national

media harping on his team's playoff failures. He knew how many passes Mahomes would attempt and how many he would complete. He knew how often *Ezekiel Elliott* would carry the ball to keep the Bombers' line honest and tired. He knew the Bombers would run, run, run, to set up the attempted big shot from *Justin Fields* to *Chase Claypool*. He also knew that, occasionally, the Bombers would lead with the big shot when they sensed the defence was vulnerable. That was all the Bruxelles offence could do; try to catch an opponent off guard.

If there was any worry in the Virden camp, it was hard to detect from the outside. Looking at it after the fact, the Virden coach was clearly wary about challenging the Bombers secondary deep –only one pass that carried more than 20 yards in the air was attempted. The stickiness of *Darius Slay*, the pressure of *Robert Quinn* and the vigilance of *Harrison Smith* were enough to adjust the risk-appetite of the most cold-blooded reptile. Unfortunately for the party-going Bombers, none of their star defensive players can play offence.

I'll give this to Main's Bombers: the game was not as lop-sided as the 41-7 final indicates. They probably deserved to lose by 24 points, not 34 points. Still, it likely could have been worse if the Violators' offence had not felt such self satisfaction at opening with a 54-yard touchdown pass to their no.1, *Ja'Marr Chase* after Mahomes had been sacked *twice* by Quinn on the same possession. Virden did not find the end zone again until the second part of the second quarter due to a stiffening of the Bombers' defence (remember, if you did not already know, that Bruxelles had an effective pass defence during the regular season) and a noticeably cavalier approach by Mahomes, betrayed by a smarmy "it's alright" smile that followed his end-zone interception late in the first quarter and his other off-target throws.

The Bomber defence brought it hard for the remainder of the first half, holding Virden to 10 points in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter and keeping the damage to a three-score deficit heading into halftime. It was a survivalist effort by the defence. The Bomber offence had been going nowhere and had looked incapable of going anywhere in the future. An impatient and already desperate **Kenny Main** had even inserted *Jared Goff* into the game at quarterback for Bruxelles' third series, trying to light a spark. Instead, the move seemed to pour cold water on the 'The Champs' confidence and exposed Goff as again unready to play the platoon role.

On a day when almost nothing went right for the Bombers, there was still a moment in the game when it seemed that "Kenny Magic" might work its wonders on the cold, hard reality of their hopeless situation. That moment came over the course of the first eight minutes of the second half, during which the Bruxelles defence, at their own 33-yard line, held Virden on 4<sup>th</sup> & 3. "The Champs' followed that stop with long completions to *Chris Godwin* for 30 yards and *Chase Claypool* for 29 yards and a touchdown. That put the offence on



Bruxelles' coach, **Ken Main**, debarks from a red-eye flight from Belgium to Virden Manitoba sporting an unseasonal outfit and facial tan reminiscent, if not exactly like, that of **Peter Sellers'** character in the 1960's movie, 'The Party.' Whether an unlikely coincidence or by some inscrutable and pointless design, Main's outfit presaged an equally slapstick loss by the Bombers to the Virden football machine.

the board, finally, and the spark stirred up a shutdown effort by the Bomber defence that forced a Virden three-and-out on the next series.

As the Violators lined up to punt, diehard Bombers' fans across three continents and others (like me) who had lost their senses from drinking too much, might have thought *Could it be?*

And herein lies the genius of the Football Gods: Having created, when all had seemed lost, this glimmering beam of hope for the Bombers and all of those in the football world who hated Mahomes, they abruptly closed the door, shut off the lights and laughed maniacally as Bruxelles return ace and prolific fumbler, **Andre Roberts** bobbled the punt from **Andy Lee** and gave it up after taking a forceful hit from **Nasir Adderley**. The Violators took over inside the Bruxelles red zone and scored three plays later on a 7-yard run by Elliott to re-establish their three-score lead, 24-7.

Having played their little prank, the Football Gods retired from action and let nature take its course. The Bombers collapsed. A fumbled snap by 'The Champs' led to a gift-wrapped Virden field goal to end the third quarter. In the final frame, Mahomes notched his obligatory TD "hat trick" with a 35-yard touchdown pass to **D.K. Metcalf**, the pair's second scoring hook-up of the day. This secured Virden's young signal caller his rightful Game MVP status. The scoring ended in garbage time with Elliott bursting through an exhausted Bomber defence for a 23-yard touchdown run with under two minutes remaining. Crazy Virden fans in the end zone mosh pits at **TERRORDOME** wanted more, but a defeated yet defiant Main did the one thing still in his power and refused to give them anything more to cheer about. He uncharacteristically ran out the clock on himself to preserve what little was left of his team's dignity.

Despite being able to "cap" the damage at 41 points, the slapstick continued post game, with Main losing a shoe while crossing the field to congratulate his counterpart, Barrate. After scrambling to find it amidst the crush of players and reporters, Main retreated to a open area near the tunnel to put it back on, where he accidentally set off the irrigation sprinklers, sending everyone clambering for cover. Later, he stumbled while ascending the stage to address the media and fell face first into the podium, causing the tip of the gooseneck CBS microphone to lodge in his left nostril. It was an ignoble way to end a thoroughly humiliating day.

**Lance Barrate** took the victory in stride. Clearly, he had expected nothing less than a decisive win, although he was careful to pay lip service to his scuffling opponent's third quarter determination. "I thought they played better than the final score would say," Barrate said between lauding Mahomes and his defence. "That defence of theirs is pretty tough. It forced us to make some difficult plays to get in front. Our defence did the rest."

Fate seems to have paved a way for Virden suddenly. With the Wrecking Balls choking at home, eminently beatable Billtown is the only obstacle standing between them and a second Gale Sayers Game appearance in three years. Mahomes has stated he won't feel he has accomplished anything without winning a championship. Could this be the year?

### **PAINT DRYING**

The case for a Virden championship got a little stronger in wake of the two Atlantic Conference results. Not so much the end results themselves – Budapest was vulnerable on the road versus Durham and the Spartans remain the Cinderella of 2022 – but the way in which those results were achieved.

At Durham, the anticipated showdown between rising star **Josh Allen** and North Star veteran **Aaron Rodgers** turned into a game of first-big-play-wins. On a day when the normally humid sweat box of Jurassic Park yielded uncommonly optimal conditions for the offence with a dry field and temperate climate, the defences on both sides stood up and defiantly slammed a lid on any thought of a big play by either side.

One had to be over sixty, or a devotee of defence and football history, to have appreciated the slow, creeping drama of this game. For the average Joe Football Fan of recent generations, weaned on progressively more efficient aerial dominance and lots of scoring, it was like watching paint dry. It was even more confounding and frustrating for such fans because the quarterbacks running the offensive show on both sides were among the most accomplished in the game, even if one did not yet have the established championship pedigree of the other. I guess it is pertinent to restate here that tired old axiom, "defence wins championships."

When the top two scoring offences in the league are unable to *combine* for as many points as the no.2 offence averaged per game in the regular season you know it had to be either raining hard in Jurassic Park, or the defences came to play and knew exactly what they were doing.

The Thunder Lizards dared the North Stars to run the ball, knowing they could not. Yes, in the end Budapest rushed for 132 yards, which is a respectable number on its face, but one that turned out to be inconsequential. The Lizards defenders did not respect any of the individual members of the running back committee to make a splash on any given play. They let them have their 4 yards a carry and simply waited for Rodgers to eventually go to the air, something the North Stars quarterback had to do for both practical and reputational reasons. This was not the first time the North Stars had faced such a strategy, but the difference this time was that their opponent had both a fearsome pass rush and a great secondary. The result was not **Aaron Rodgers'** finest hour.

The North Stars' defence took a similar approach at the beginning but proved less committed to their initial doctrine. While largely wary of **Cooper Kupp** and the scrambling threat of Allen, they sporadically turned their full attention to **Antonio Gibson** and **Rashaad Penny** when the one or the other were in the backfield, especially later in the game when it became clear that Allen was having another bad playoff day controlling his accuracy. Eventually, the Stars were reduced to guessing, leaning toward the run, and that provided the opening that gave viewers their only offensive eye-candy of the day with just 1:30 left to play.

That this match failed to emerge from the sparring phase until the sudden late knockout is not too surprising. These were both evenly matched teams on a mission with everything on the line. Durham, as the top team by far in the regular season, was heavily favoured. Most felt they were too heavily favoured, given their abysmal performance against the North Stars in last year's Conference

Final. The thought that the North Stars, the two-time reigning champs, were being imprudently disrespected dominated the mediascape. Who, exactly, apart from the Vegas bookmakers, was disrespecting the North Stars was hard to discern, despite the prevailing mainstream narrative. Even the Durham media couched coverage of their team in “underdog” terms.

The “analytics” people saw a clear favourite in the Lizards – but many simple football fans who had witnessed the humbling of Allen in the Conference Finals last year and the hoisting of two Budapest trophies in two years saw the Lizards as having something to prove. They were not wrong – the emotional pressure was on the home team.

The details of this game are fascinating, but well beyond the appreciation of 95% of football fandom (the demographic that matters according to my editor). Therefore, I will not bore you with a detailed blow-by-blow description of how the two best offences in the league were suffocated to the point where it was a 6-6 tie with 8:44 remaining in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter. The contest leading up to its defining final eight minutes can be summarized thusly in two paragraphs:

The North Stars tried establishing air dominance early, but the Lizards’ secondary was prepared. The Stars then pivoted to the run but gained little headway. They then attempted short series of runs followed by series of passes. Nothing worked. They punted on their first four possessions. Their six points came in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter on two field goals, the first set up by a **Quandre Diggs** interception of Allen in Durham territory and the second by a 44-yard long out to **Justin Jefferson** in the final minute of the second half – a pretty play indeed, but the only certifiable offensive highlight of the day for Budapest.

The Lizards looked a touch stronger in the trenches initially. After an opening three-and-out they put together the most enduring drive of the first half, an 11-play effort covering 68 yards. But Coach Kaldis’ decision to run **Rashaad Penny** into the middle of the line on 4<sup>th</sup> & 3 at the Budapest 21-yard line turned out to be an inauspicious roll of the dice. The Stars saw the play coming and stoned Penny cold. (This decision to forego a good chance at three points would become ever more scrutinized as the game plodded along and it became apparent that field goals had become the equivalent of touchdowns on a day when the defences were in full control). After Allen’s interception the Lizards scraped together a 45-yard drive that set up a 48-yard field goal, but in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter Durham’s offence fell into a total funk. Allen looked discombobulated. Fortunately for the hard-pressed quarterback, the Lizards’ defence froze the scoreboard at 6-3 through the third quarter until finally, early in the fourth, the Durham offence showed signs of life. Allen connected on a 24-yard pass to **Cooper Kupp** then a 27-yard run by Penny set up the game-tying 41-yard field goal with 8:44 left in regulation.

And here we are – the moment of truth! 8:44 is an eternity in the modern era – enough time for an entirely new game. But on this day, when the clock seemed irrevocably turned back to an era of punts and field goals that few living people can remember, 8:44 looked more like 2:44. As the North Stars’ offence took to the field, there was a palpable feeling of “next score wins.”

This unfamiliar distension of his internal time clock may have affected Rodgers’ perception of real time on one of the game’s critical plays: On third & 7 at mid-field Rodgers dropped back to pass, facing a Durham secondary swarming with six defensive backs. Although he had four receivers and a sure-handed running back as targets, he focused on **Stefon Diggs**, who was well-covered by **Kenny Moore II**. Seeing the coverage, he hesitated a split-second before firing a “trust” throw to his “1-A.” Moore tipped the ball into the arms of **Devin McCourty**, who returned it 18 yards to the North Stars’ 43-yard line. In retrospect, watching from afar, it was a badly forced throw, especially given that **Tyquan Thornton** was wide open on the other side of the field two yards past the first down marker. *Who the hell is Tyquan Thornton?* You ask. On an offence with Jefferson, Diggs, and big-play specialist **Nelson Agholor**, Thornton is a nobody. Still, I expect a vet like Rodgers to know who he is and to see him in a critical moment. But the lauded and celebrated vet, in a moment of duress, seemed to see only Diggs (having missed to Jefferson the play before). He even admitted it afterwards.

“In those big moments you have to trust in your big guys,” Rodgers explained afterwards. “There was no question who I was going to. I underthrew it a bit, but the corner made a great play and Devin made an even greater play to haul it in. Sometimes you gotta tip your hat to other guys. They played great.”

Whether the intent was justifiable or not, the pick caused a crack in the frozen ice of this conflict. It was all the Lizards could do to move the ball five yards after such a big break, but those yards were enough to put **Cade York** in range for a 56-yard field goal. How ironic that the coach who had eschewed a much easier field goal try on fourth down in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter, had become after 56 minutes and 4 seconds of offensive hell all too eager to get his field goal kicker on the field to attempt a real longshot.

Trailing 9-6, with 3:56 left in regulation, the North Stars considered themselves in four-down territory, although a sober analysis could have determined otherwise. After managing a single first down, Budapest faced 4<sup>th</sup> & 7 at their own 40 with 1:54 left. With all three of their timeouts, the option to punt and hope for a stop was a viable one – on this day that might have been the better option. However, not willing to surrender the ball under any circumstances, the North Stars went for it, hoping for a change of fortune. Seeing only one choice on 4<sup>th</sup> & long, Durham flooded the secondary with seven defensive backs and Rodgers, seeing his primaries covered and with the interception the series before perhaps fresh in his mind, unexpectedly checked down to his “number four,” Thornton, who this time was shadowed and tackled immediately by nickel corner **Chris Harris Jr.** after gaining 3 yards. Not even close.

The Thunder Lizards took over at the Budapest 43 to thundering applause and delirium at Jurassic Park. The subtle and slow-acting magic of a 15-point game was having its effect on the sellout crowd of 61,700. It is a magic that does not act as well on impartial observers of a broadcast. Anyone without a betting or fan interest in this game would likely have turned off the TV after the third quarter. But for a true fan, or somebody with a betting problem, the extremely slow build up created a reservoir of tension that began to overflow and flood the field with an energy potent enough to inspire the only great offensive highlight of the day:

After two dives by Penny, Durham faced 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4 at the Budapest 37, leading 9-6 with 1:39 remaining. This was not “classic” four-down territory. The analytics set would likely argue it was, citing the fact that a long-distance field goal, even if made, would give

the Lizards a mere 6-point lead – an erasable advantage – while a first down would effectively clinch the game. I will not argue with the analytics crowd on this point. I see this scenario as a true coach’s call favouring one of two approaches. The first: Play it safe, hope for a break, but if you don’t get the first down, trust your kicker to make another long kick and your defence to hold, as they have all day. The second: Open the playbook, knowing that if you fail on third down you will go for it on fourth down and the possible win. Which approach Coach Kaldis would choose was important, but equally important was what Coach Jones *thought* Coach Kaldis would choose.

Oh...to be the chess-master himself in that situation! I imagine Jones weighing the options thusly: If Kaldis was in a four-down mindset, he could afford to run the ball for whatever he could get. Penny had already ground out 6 yards against run-oriented defensive sets. Taking a deep shot was possible, but too risky, because if it didn’t work the resultant 4<sup>th</sup> & 4 would be less manageable for the offence. If Kaldis was in a more conservative three-down mindset, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4 would likely be a passing down. *But wait!* Coach Kaldis could be in a three-down mindset and still trust his big-play running back to bust a four-yard gain, especially if the defence played the pass. Kaldis could also try a deep shot in that situation, but if he was indeed playing it safe for the field goal, he would want to get a few yards closer while avoiding the risk of a sack. Allen had been erratic passing the ball, to say the least. Running Penny made a bit more sense in both scenarios, and given Allen’s mis-firing tendencies that day, carried the least risk for the offence. And so, under Jones’ direction, the North Stars brought their linebackers and safeties in tight, shored up the middle of the line and sold-out to stop the run.

We will never know whether Coach Kaldis would have gone for it on 4<sup>th</sup> down. On the fateful play, the Lizards did not run with Penny, nor attempt a medium to long pass on play-action. Instead, Allen took the snap under center, crisply dropped back, and before the defence could react fired a quick bullet on a tight line to Kupp as he slanted toward the left hash a half-yard before the line of gain. The pass hit Kupp in full stride, enabling him to escape a diving **Jamel Dean** and cut through what was left of the secondary – two safeties caught flat-footed by their aggressive movement on the snap toward the line. 61,700 ecstatic fans at Jurassic Park could see the play develop well before the viewers at home. The swelling roar of the crowd hit its crescendo when Kupp reached the 25-yard line and the dancing in the stands began before he reached the 10. *Touchdown Durham!*

In a rare display of emotion, Coach Kaldis fired a fist pump in the direction of the end zone, where Kupp was spiking the ball as Allen ran to embrace him. He then turned and gave his offensive coordinator, **Professor George Challenger**, a big hug. The Thunder Lizards’ official mascot, *Raptorius Blaster*, the world’s only dinosaur cyborg, bounded playfully and terrifyingly behind the Durham bench. These moments of fan fever in Jurassic Park were when *Raptorius Blaster*’s predatory nature was most stimulated, threatening to override the remote-controlled robotic governance suppressing the lizard portion of its brain and preventing it from running amok.

In a display of no-emotion, Coach Jones turned away from the field and motioned for his quarterback. Both he and Rodgers appeared remarkably composed and they exchanged words on the sideline, as if everything was under control. With 1:30 remaining, down two scores, was it possible that Durham had scored too early?

*Nahhhh!* On this day, a 10-point lead with less than two minutes remaining was all but insurmountable. I give the Stars credit, though. They did not surrender. A 40-yard kickoff return by **Jerome Ford** and a pass interference call on Durham’s **Darnay Holmes** helped set up a 51-yard **Brandon McManus** field goal to bring Budapest within one score with 0:31 left. But guard **Ben Powers** recovered the onside kick attempt to make it official: The Durham Thunder Lizards were advancing to the Atlantic Conference Final.

*All’s well that ends well*, the saying goes. That has never been truer than it was in Durham after this excruciating game. The questions about **Josh Allen**’s ability in the clutch were set aside for the moment. It was not his best game, to put it mildly, but he had helped deliver the killing blow in the dying minutes. The Thunder Lizards, mostly thanks to their defence, had ended the two-year Championship Reign of the **Aaron Rodgers**-led North Stars. They were now one step away from making it to the Gale Sayers Game for the first time in franchise history.

On the other side, awareness of the loss of a chance at making history soured the sombre mood even more. In his post-game presser, **Darrin Jones** presented a brave face, and said the right things, but his eyes betrayed his bitterness.

“We lost to a great defence today,” Jones declared matter-of-factly. He paused then continued. “We come into every game expecting to win, that’s the mindset that brought us back-to-back championships. Today was no exception. We knew it would not be easy, but we believe in ourselves. In the end, they made one more play – a big play – and it cost us a chance at a third ring. I know we’ll be back, and I’ll be talking to you again next year at this time. Hats off to them – they played a little better than us. But we’ll be back!”

My final take: This kind of paint-drying game is one where a Jones-led North Star team typically prevails. A tactician like Jones excels in the “small game.” That the Lizards came out on top in this type of contest against the master of small ball, when their quarterback was annoyingly off, speaks to how good this Durham team is. Allen must be better going forward, of course, if he is to conquer what remains to be conquered. But the supporting cast in Lizard land has never been better.

### ***I KNEW IT!***

I was hoping for a different outcome, but in my heart and head, I knew the Caddies would be no match for the Spartans. Truth be told, many Erieau fans knew it as well deep down in a doggedly suppressed corner of their brains. How could they not know?

The Cadillac engine, that had been sputtering since driving the team to an 8-3 peak in the first 11 weeks, finally ran out of gas on the road to the South Division title in Week 17 in a *should-win* game against the Gladiators. Fortunately, roadside assistance in the unlikely form of the Oshawa Pink Panthers and their back-up quarterback, **Kyle Rudolph** showed up and towed them to the podium left vacant by the Irish, who lay drunk and insensate on the field of GM Megadome after fumbling and bumbling away their shot at the division in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of a *must-win* 17-14 loss. A division title is a division title, but claiming it through the backdoor after the only

challenger and front-runner choked did not speak well for the quality of the division. How well would any rep from the South Division do against the hottest team in the conference coming from the strongest division in the conference?

In theory, based solely on the roster talent, Erieau stood a chance. The ceilings of both its offence and defence were high. If **Kyler Murray** could bottle his MVP-grade performance against Budapest in Week 9 and the defence replicate its full-service shutdown showing against the Swordfish in Week 10, then the Spartans would have their helmets full. The problem with Erieau was always consistency. For every Week 9 for Murray, there was a Week 13, when he picked the wrong times to run and the wrong times to stand in the pocket in a bitter loss to East Elmhurst. For every Week 10 for the defence, there was a Week 15, when stars like **Myles Garrett** and **Trevon Diggs** would disappear, rendered impotent by a Bruxelles strategy of run, run and run again. The Caddies had proven to be vulnerable against the run all year, and the Spartans were a run-first outfit.

Although they had finished with a strong 14 wins, stealing the division crown from Budapest in the process, the Spartans were not without warts and weaknesses on their roster. Those had been well-concealed by a clever, yet brutally straightforward offensive game plan devised by the smart, yet brutish **Gus Konstantakos**. **Jalen Hurts** was statistically the most proficient quarterback in the league because he had not been asked to carry the offence and had been put in the best position to succeed when called upon to execute. The defence, patchy at first glance, had been bendy in giving up ground, but ruthlessly efficient at stealing the ball, finishing with an amazing 32 takeaways, second-most in the league. The thought was that if a defence could force Hurts to the air more often, and an offence could be more mindful of ball security, take what the Spartans would inevitably give them, and refrain from forcing the ball in risky areas, Pickering would be brought down to earth. The Caddies, in theory, could accomplish this.

In actuality, the Cadillac came close to realizing an upset, or at least posting a much closer game than the 33-16 final in favour of Pickering suggests it was. **Dirk Koetter**, the latest in a long line of unremarkable Erieau head coaches, devised a balanced offensive game plan that seemed to be working well initially. A 7-yard TD from Murray to **Hunter Henry** following an early pick of Hurts by **Desmond King II**, then a 13-play field goal drive on their next series had the Caddies in front 10-3 after one period.

Even after the Caddie defence allowed Pickering's bread-and-butter back, **Miles Sanders** to rip off four consecutive carries of ten yards or more, leading to a touchdown run by **D'Andre Swift** to close the gap to 10-9, the knowledge they could move the ball lent the Erieau coach confidence in his play-calling. That is, until the inevitable execution error by his maddeningly erratic quarterback popped the slowly inflating confidence balloon.

Murray's height, or lack of it, has been a recurring theme of criticism, but one that supporters of the *Kyle Murray Fan Club* dismiss as exaggerated. Yet, there is no hiding the fact that it played a crucial role in the interception that turned the game around. Unable to get a clear line of sight to his receiver behind towering guard **Graham Glasgow**, Murray sailed a high throw in the direction of **Tee Higgins** that sailed away from him and into the hands of **Denzel Ward**, who took it back all the way, 49 yards, for a touchdown. That play was the beginning of the end for the Cadillac.

I am not telling any real football fans anything they don't already know by repeating the truism that football is an emotional game. The analytics crowd, locked in their blinkered world of abstraction, place their faith in "the numbers," forgetting that those numbers were created by emotional human beings in the moment. Thus, a crestfallen Murray retreated to the sideline, his pique boiling over into a debilitating frustration that created some very uninspiring numbers the rest of the way: He completed just 10 of 23 pass attempts for 86 yards and no touchdowns from that point on, most of those yards coming in so-called garbage time.

The Cadillac defence, as good defences that feel cheated by their offences generally do, stepped up knowing such an effort was needed to keep it close. Thus, the numbers created by the Spartans' offence were not up to their season par, and Hurts looked as inefficient as inefficient quarterbacks come. **Maxx Crosby** intercepted Hurts on the first play after the Ward pick-six, gift-wrapping a field goal chance that **Jason Myers** shanked from 38 yards away. The Cadillac's self-image of inadequacy, well-earned through six years of losing football played in a wooden stadium in an Ontario backwater, had infected the kicker. Eventually that image would also infect the special teams unit. **Velus Jones Jr.**, a fringe wide receiver but talented returner, exploded through a gaping hole in punt coverage for a 75-yard punt return TD late in the third quarter to make the score 33-10. That would finish off any hope that defensive heroics by the Erieau defence would reclaim the momentum. The fourth quarter played out with a sense of inevitability.

Take away the Spartans' pick-six and special teams' touchdown, tack on a 38-yard field goal for Erieau that Myers should have made, and we have a 19-19 score. I know we can't do that – football is a total team effort – but that score is much more reflective of the actual balance of play between the four principal units on both sides. Erieau came to play, exposing Hurts as a product of his team's system and supporting the unverifiable but persistent claim that the Spartans were a "lucky dice" squad in 2022. The Spartans, with the fans at their back and a brimming confidence from nine straight wins, made the most of their big plays and exploited the inferiority complex of their opponent. Still, the Spartans should be worried heading into the Conference Championship.

#### **SO, WHAT NOW?**

With both Virden and Durham taking care of business in the Quarter Finals, the Conference Championships on both oceans are shaping up not quite as coronations of anointed ones, but rigged elections in favour of powerful parties. The Bats' front seven is as intimidating and solid as any in the league, but Virden's Mahomes works his magic deeper downfield, where Billtown is more vulnerable. The Spartans are opportunistic on defence and play within their limits on offence, but that in itself tells me they are the clear underdog against a team with a fundamentally stronger roster in Durham. Still, the "Greek Civil War" was and is volatile. Emotion can easily take over and when happens, anything is possible. I am looking forward to a great semi-final round.

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#### PACIFIC CONFERENCE FINAL

##### **BILLTOWN @ VIRDEN (line – VIOLATORS by \_7)**

**INJURIES:** Billtown – Andrew Beck (OUT); Virden– Darius Phillips (PROBABLE).

This was not the Pacific Conference Final match-up most analysts were expecting heading into the post-season. The West Division-winning Bats had rarely impressed the national punditry throughout a rocky and tenuous 9-8 regular season. They seemed to emerge from the muddy middle of the Pacific playoff race by default – a weak division winner in what had proven to be a weak division. At no.15 in the national power rankings, they were in fact one of the least powerful teams to make the playoffs since the earliest years of the EFL, when the nascent 12-team and 16-team league thrust forth midgets like the Cubs (2007) and the Spartans (2008) into the post-season. Yet this dim, some claim realistic, view of the Bats was not always the perception in the national media. They had been once pre-season favourites to be here. Some had even pegged them for a trip to Peg City for the Gale Sayers Game. The gap between early perception and later performance had widened greatly over a 17-game schedule, but that gap had narrowed following the Bats' stunning come-from-behind upset of the no.2-seeded Wrecking Balls last week. It was a typically ugly win for Billtown. They survived another shaky outing by their hotshot young QB and were fortunate that Dalvin Cook was able to compensate with a pair of game-breaking runs for touchdowns. The defence won the game, scoring on a pick-six and stifling Matthew Stafford and the New Jersey offence, especially in the second half. It is because of that star-studded defence that the Bats have a chance to repeat the magic this week. The Violators certainly looked like the no.1 seed in the conference in the quarter finals against an audacious Bombers squad. They pounded Bruxelles on the scoreboard, exposing their opponent's one-dimensionality on offence and exploiting the demoralization of the defence. It was the most convincing win by any team in the post-season so far. The result heavily influenced the line in this game, which has Virden favoured by a converted touchdown – a wide spread for this late in the post-season. Virden will be going up against a highly capable defence geared to stop the very strengths of their pass-happy offence. Opponents combined for only 411 rushing attempts against the Bats during the regular season – the lowest total in the league – while they dropped back to pass against them over 600 times. This is strange, as the Billtown defence is highly competent defending the pass, limiting opposing quarterbacks to a 78.6 passer rating, 5.7 points below the league average, and the lowest passing touchdown percentage in the league. Had this unit been more adept at taking the ball away, they could have ranked no.1 overall. If the Violators have a weakness on offence, it is that they can be predictable at times. They rely on Patrick Mahomes to make plays, regardless of the defence's scheme, and do not shy away from throwing against saturated secondaries. This has resulted in a few more interceptions than the coach would like, as well as a surprisingly inefficient 59.1% pass completion rate. All the same, Mahomes finished as the league's most prolific passer in terms of gross yards (4,771) and touchdown passes (40). Do not expect things to change in this game: Virden will pass the ball when it suits them and the Bats will be ready for it. – may the best playmakers win. On the other side behind center, young Justin Herbert has struggled in all but a handful of games this season. He has had trouble finishing off drives, throwing just 11 TD passes, which is the lowest number of any regular starting quarterback. In fairness to Herbert, he finds himself in the middle of a classic conflict between the GM, who built the team to run, and the new offensive coordinator, who favours four-wide sets and a vertical passing game. Herbert does not have the right weapons to make the play-calling philosophy work, so the offence continues to mis-fire, even while the team somehow keeps its head above water and manages to knock off heavily-favoured New Jersey. While the Violators' defence is far from attaining a customary playoff grade, it has looked excellent the past two weeks and had one of its best performances of the year when these teams faced each other in Week 13 of the regular season. The Bats went to the air heavily in that game and found the end zone only once. I think the Bat's defence will show up, but the sputtering offence will keep them on the field too long and eventually Mahomes will unravel them. **PICK: VIRDEN**

## ATLANTIC CONFERENCE FINAL

### PICKERING @ DURHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 5)

**INJURIES:** Pickering – None; Durham – None.

The networks are salivating over this re-match between the two teams that gave the league one of its historic and most exciting shootouts in Week Eight. Not that I expect this game to be a repetition of that enchanted day, but the reference back to it in the context of expected new strategies by both sides to rein in their opponent's offence will keep the action on the field and the chatter in the broadcast booth interesting. Defending each other might not be that much of a challenge, however, judging from how both teams performed in their quarter finals victories. Jalen Hurts was put on such a tight leash and performed so poorly that it is a miracle the Spartans survived the Cadillac. They can thank a defensive pick-six, a special teams touchdown, and an unready, scatterbrained Kyler Murray for enabling them to advance. The Lizards came out on the better end of the most improbably stilted, feeble and tedious offensive affair imaginable between two quarterbacks ostensibly in the running for league MVP. Many of my fellows are writing it off to great defence on both sides, but to me it looked like a lot of choking and pant-wetting on the big stage by two of the league's premier talents at the game's most important position. The moment appeared to be too big for both Josh Allen (second year in a row) and Aaron Rodgers (evoking memories of his Blue Eagle days), and almost (but not quite) too big for elite receiver Cooper Kupp, who finally shook off a sticky Jamel Dean to make the offensive play of the game with under two minutes remaining to all but seal the win. Having narrowly escaped the quarter finals, both teams are likely to benefit from that sense of relief and feeling of lightness that follows a near-death experience. Of course, for one of these teams, it was only a temporary deferral. Durham is rightly favoured, as the Atlantic Conference's no.1 seed and the better built team playing at home. The Spartans, as impressive as they have been since they fell to York back in Week Two, are hobbled by the lack of a full suite of pass plays and the willingness to use them. Their defence is a lop-sided one, pairing an efficient and ball-hawking secondary with the least efficient run defence in the league. In the end, however, that defence is better than average at keeping opponents out of the end zone. On the other side, the Thunder Lizards have no glaring weaknesses on paper, but in practice would like to see more consistent passing accuracy from their quarterback, who is prone to sailing or turfing the ball without warning. Ironically, Allen is both the high-powered engine of the offence as well its Achilles Heel. The frightening thing for Durham coaches, fans, and those who enjoy laying the occasional wager, is that there is no way to predict if and when the "bad" Allen will show up. Against the no.2-ranked takeaway team in the league, the Durham pivot cannot afford an off day. This would apply even more to Hurts here going up against the team ranked no.1 in the league in interceptions, except that the Spartans' already pass the ball at a 1930's pace and make no secret of their intention to run the ball more than 30 times a game regardless of who they are playing. Expect Hurts to be handled with great caution and only "let loose" if the Spartans fall behind by more than two scores. Even then, running the ball is always an option. In the end, expect a much less rollicking game than we saw from these teams in Week Eight. This is no tomorrow for either squad and much danger in airing it out for both teams. Expect a lot run-pass options, favouring the run, and the better quarterback to eventually define a rather decisive win for the home team. **PICK: DURHAM**



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FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – The Quarter Finals round of the 2016 EFL season had just enough surprises and just enough covers against the spread to reinforce both notions that the oddsmakers know what they are doing and anything can happen on any given Sunday.

The big upset of the weekend came at Joe Ferguson Stadium, where the opportunistic survivor of the Pacific Conference's weakest division, the Brooklin Hawks, dodged a trademark **Russell Wilson** 4<sup>th</sup> quarter comeback bid to overcome the heavily favoured Iowa City Cubs, 28-27. The Hawks' accomplished offence recovered from a slow start

to take a 28-27 lead with 1:09 left to play. With all three of their timeouts and Wilson at the controls facing a historically porous defence for a playoff team, a field goal drive looked probable. But after reaching field goal range, the most egregious time-management gaffe in history resulted in the Cubs running out of time to kick the field goal. Coach **Deron Redding** somehow survived the debacle, but the Cubs' season didn't.

At Candlestick Park in Aurora, the prohibitive favourite Aurora Mustangs eked out a 23-20 win against a Markham North Stars team hell-bent on lulling their opponent to sleep with ball control. The strategy worked, but only up to a point. In the end, the Mustangs were just too good and made the plays that needed to be made – just enough.

The bookend games around these two did not reveal anything new. The young talent of the Swordfish overcame the ageing stalwarts of the Gladiators on the strength of **Andy Dalton**'s 367 yards a 4 TD passes, leading to a 35-18 blowout. The Triumph kept their perfect season intact by using trickery on 4<sup>th</sup> down, ball security, and a 73-yard punt return TD by **Antonio Brown Jr.** to overcome a plucky and unexpectedly strong output from the LA Knights' offence. Twin Cities got a Game MVP effort from RB, **Doug Martin** in a 31-20 win.