

2021

Conference Finals



EFL

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE



Shooting for the Stars in our 15th Season!

February 20, 2022

EAST



COBB COUNTY COYOTES	38
CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS	35



DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS	14
BUDAPEST NORTH STARS	27

NORTH



CENTRAL



COASTAL



WEST



SOUTH



COYOTES STUN PATS!



Julio Jones Cobb County Coyotes

Cobb County wide receiver, **Julio Jones** back-pedals to the rear of the end zone to spike the ball through the uprights after snaring a 44-yard bomb from **Ryan Tannehill** with no time remaining on the clock in first half action in Charleswood. **Ronald Darby**, beat on the coverage, moves in to break up the celebration, causing an on-field fracas.



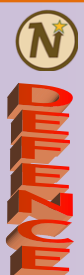
Who was slick in the Conference Finals?

"Brylcreem" THE EFL'S FIRST SPONSOR



Ryan Tannehill
QB
Cobb County Coyotes

24 of 37, 377 yds, 5 TDs, 0 INTs. Connection with Jones carried offence.



Shelby Harris
DT
Budapest North Stars

7 T, 2 Sk, 1 FF. Was a presence up front harassing QB and holding the line.



38

Cobb County



GAME CENTER
2021
Pacific Conference Final



35

Charleswood

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Tannehill	24	37	377	5
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Harris	14	101	7.2	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Jones	9	170	18.9	3

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Cobb County	7	14	14	3	-	38
Charleswood	14	7	0	14	-	35

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cm	Att	Yds	TD
Watson	23	31	274	4
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Kamara	16	71	4.4	0
Receiving	Re	Yds	Avg	TD
Metcalf	7	91	13.0	0

Play of the Game

In the 2nd quarter, clock running with 0:13 left, **Ryan Tannehill** launched a deep post to **Julio Jones** for a 44-yard TD to tie the game at 21-21 as time expired in the 1st half.

COYOTES BITE PATS!

TANNEHILL 5 TD PASSES KNOCKS OFF THE TOP SEED!

SUMMARY: **Amari Rodgers** returned the opening kick 48 yards to set up the Pats at their own 46. From there they took 8 plays to cross the Coyotes' goal line on an 8-yard TD pass from **DeShaun Watson** to **Amari Cooper**. The Coyotes responded with a 9-play, 75-yard drive, keyed by **Ryan Tannehill** passes of 22 yards to **Dalvin Cooks** and 23 yards to **Julio Jones** for a TD to tie it at 7. The Pats shot back with a snappy drive covering 65 yards in 7 plays on a 5 of 5 string for Watson, who drilled a 6-yarder to **Travis Kelce** for the TD to make it 14-7. Again, the Coyotes responded. Kick-started by runs of 10 and 11 yards by **Damien Harris**, they drove 75 yards in 7 plays, surviving a sack to knot it up at 14 on a 12-yard TD pass to Jones. The Pats' offence continued to shear through the Cobb County defenders, with Watson completing 3 passes for 53 yards, including a 21-yard slant to Kelce for a TD to make it 21-14. The Pats' defence registered the first stop of the game, holding the Coyotes to a three-and-out. Charleswood got the ball back at their 21 and drove steadily up the field until they reached the 16, where Watson's 3rd down pass was knocked down at the line by **Daron Payne** to bring on the field goal unit. **Wil Lutz** missed the 34-yard attempt, giving the Coyotes the ball at their own 24 with 1:46 left and no timeouts. Tannehill converted a 3rd & 20 with a 26-yard pass to Jones and brought his team past mid-field as the clock ticked away. With 0:13 left he launched a bomb to **Julio Jones**, who broke a tackle and stepped into the end zone for the game-tying TD as time expired. Buoyed by their 1st half finish, the Coyotes got the ball to start the 2nd half and scored on their next three possessions, with Tannehill slinging TD passes of 19 yards to Cooks and 28 yards to **DeVante Parker** then **Brandon McManus** cashing in a 23-yard chip shot to make it 38-21. Meanwhile, the Pats' once unstoppable offence was held to a three-and-out and turned the ball over on downs at the Coyote 32, but the Pats recovered with a Rodgers 97-yard kickoff return TD to pull within 10. Then a Coyote fumble at the Pats' 8-yard line allowed Charleswood to drive back 92 yards, scoring with 0:30 left to pull within a FG. They recovered the onside kick at their own 48 with 0:15 left, but a sack by Payne on 1st down and a 5-yard Watson scramble ended the drama.

QUOTES: "I thought this would be our year, but the Coyotes were the better team today. I don't have anything else constructive to say except to congratulate Coach Osman and the Gridiron Society on their victory. Best of luck in the final – you'll need it." – Charleswood owner, **Jason Findlay**.
 "Great win for us today! That pass to Julio at the end of the half was what turned this team around. We almost let them back in it, though. We have to be a more emphatic in our finishes." – Cobb County coach, **Eron Osman**.



HAPPY FAN



titter

ANGRY FAN



William E Cotoye @Wile-E
 @ryantannehill1 for Playoff MVP so far. 9 TD passes in 2 games! Where are the haters now?



Charlie Wood @Cwoodbannersun
 Microcosm of the Patriots season, sad to say. So much promise, so little delivery.





Cobb County 38 Charleswood 35

	1	2	3	4	F
Cobb County	7	14	14	3	38
Charleswood	14	7	0	14	35



* Playoff * 02-20-2022 Patriot Place Temp:75 Wind:Calms No Line MVP:Tannehill H

1	10:17	Charleswood	TD	Watson 8 pass to Cooper (Lutz) (8-54-4:38)	0-7
1	6:32	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 23 pass to Jones (McManus) (9-75-3:45)	7-7
1	1:43	Charleswood	TD	Watson 6 pass to Kelce (Lutz) (7-65-4:35)	7-14
2	12:30	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 12 pass to Jones (McManus) (7-75-4:13)	14-14
2	8:16	Charleswood	TD	Watson 21 pass to Kelce (Lutz) (6-65-4:02)	14-21
2	0:00	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 44 pass to Jones (McManus) (8-76-1:46)	21-21
3	10:02	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 19 pass to Cooks (McManus) (9-75-4:58)	28-21
3	4:16	Cobb County	TD	Tannehill 28 pass to Parker (McManus) (5-51-3:11)	35-21
4	9:15	Cobb County	FG	McManus 23 (12-63-7:55)	38-21
4	9:05	Charleswood	TD	Rodgers 97 kick return (Lutz)	38-28
4	0:30	Charleswood	TD	Watson 12 pass to Kamara (Lutz) (13-92-2:13)	38-35

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Tannehill	37	24	377	3	0	5	1	138.2
	37	24	377	3	0	5	1	138.2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Harris	14	101	7.2	5	4	41	0
Breida	6	15	2.5	1	1	13	0
Tannehill	2	7	3.5	0	0	5	0
Wirfs	1	-3	-3.0	0	0	0	0
	23	120	5.2	6	5	41	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Jones,J	9	1	16	170	18.9	7	2	44	3
Cooks	8	0	12	110	13.8	7	0	22	1
Parker	4	0	5	72	18.0	3	1	28	1
Cook	2	0	3	15	7.5	1	0	10	0
Harris	1	0	1	10	10.0	0	0	10	0
	24	1	37	377	15.7	18	3	44	5

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Jones,J	1	1	0
Harris	1	0	0
	2	1	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Johnson	1	22	22.0	22	0
Hasty	1	0	0.0	0	0
	2	22	11.0	22	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Raymond	1	0	10	10.0	10	0
	1	0	10	10.0	10	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
McManus	1-1	23	5-5	8

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Berry	1	51	51.0	0	0	0	51

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Sf	Hur	FF	Int
White	8	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Payne	5	1	2	1	0	0	0-0
Nelson	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Jenkins	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Reed	4	0	0	0	4	0	0-0
Golden	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Martinez	3	0	0	1	0	1	0-0
Clark	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mitchell	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Oweh	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mullen	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Johnson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Lawrence	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Basham	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	47	1	7	2	4	1	0-0

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Watson	31	23	274	0	0	4	1	140.3
	31	23	274	0	0	4	1	140.3

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Kamara	16	71	4.4	3	2	14	0
Watson	5	7	1.4	0	0	5	0
	21	78	3.7	3	2	14	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Kelce	7	0	8	80	11.4	6	0	21	2
Metcalfe	7	0	8	91	13.0	5	0	19	0
Cooper	5	0	8	63	12.6	4	0	23	1
Smith-Schus	2	0	5	24	12.0	2	0	15	0
Kamara	2	0	2	16	8.0	1	0	12	1
	28	0	34	274	11.9	18	0	23	4

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Watson	1	0	0
Collins Sr.	0	1	0
Linder	0	1	0
	1	2	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Rodgers	5	246	49.2	97	1
Kamara	1	27	27.0	27	0
	6	273	45.5	97	1

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

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Lutz	0-1	0	5-5	5

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Dixon	1	43	43.0	0	0	0	43

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Sf	Hur	FF	Int
Fuller	10	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Lawson	6	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Darby	6	0	1	0	0	1	0-0
Landry III	6	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Edmunds	4	0	1	1	0	0	0-0
Richardson	4	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Floyd	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Samuel Jr.	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mills	1	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Brown	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wade	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Lewis	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Trufant	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Sweat	0	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
	45	1	3	3	0	2	0-0



24 of 37, 377 yds, 5 TDs. His 44-yard bomb to Jones to end half won over the voters.

Cobb County Charleswood

First Downs	25	22
Rushes	23-120	21-78
Passes	37-24-377	31-23-274
Sacked	1-7	1-6
Fumble	2	1
Penalties	4-42	4-22
Turnovers	1	0
Missed Tackles	2	5
Dropped Passes	1	0
Bad Passes	0	3
Passes 25+	3	0
Runs 10+	5	2
Blitzers	2	11
Time	33:44	26:16
Third Down	6-9	5-8
Fourth Down	1-1	0-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	4/2/1	4/3/0
Net Offense	490	346



14



27

Durham

Budapest

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Allen	7	22	71	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Gibson	17	109	6.4	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Kupp	2	23	11.5	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Durham	7	0	0	7	-	14
Budapest	7	6	0	14	-	27

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Rodgers	27	41	325	3
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Johnson	9	60	6.7	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Jefferson	9	134	14.9	2

Play of the Game

Early 4th quarter, Durham trailing 20-7 with the ball 2nd & 19 at their own 29, Budapest's Jason Verrett intercepts a Josh Allen checkdown and returns it to the 20 to set up the decisive TD.

NORTH STARS LEAVE NO DOUBT!

RODGERS THROWS 2 TDs TO JEFFERSON / STARS' DEFENCE DOMINATES

SUMMARY: Both offences made statements on their opening drives. The North Stars covered 60 yards in 5 plays, sparked by a check down from Aaron Rodgers to Stefon Diggs for 33 yards that set up an 11-yard TD pass to Justin Jefferson. The Lizards responded with an 8-play, 75-yard drive, jump-started by chunk runs of 19 and 11 yards by Antonio Gibson and Alexander Mattison, that ended with a 15-yard TD pass from Josh Allen to Cooper Kupp to tie the game at 7. It was then the turn of the defences. After a Cordarrelle Patterson 47-yard kickoff return to the Budapest 46, the Thunder Lizards forced a three-and-out to thwart the opportunity. However, punter Chris Jones pinned Durham in a hole at their own 5. The Lizards dug themselves out by crossing mid-field but were pushed back by a holding penalty and forced to punt. Starting inside their own 20, the North Stars drove 72 yards in 12 plays, but were stopped at the Durham 10 where, on 4th & 3, they elected to take the points as Jason Myers made it 10-7. Durham started in good field position at their own 40 after a kick-off out of bounds but handed the ball back after a three-and-out. The Stars put together another long drive but again settled for a FG after being stalled by a sack of Rodgers by Chase Young. Durham got the ball back but went nowhere, ending the first half trailing 13-7. Durham's opening drive looked promising, reaching mid-field, until back-to-back penalties pushed them back to their own 35 and they missed a bomb attempt on 3rd & 23. Budapest punted after gaining a 1st down and Durham punted after three straight incomplete passes to ensure that the 3rd quarter would remain scoreless. The North Stars drove back, spurred on by a 4th & 1 conversion by David Johnson at the 36 and another opportunistic check down to Diggs that went for 26 yards to the Lizard' 9-yard line. Two plays slater, Rodgers fired a pass into Jefferson's breadbasket for the duo's second scoring hook-up of the game and a 20-7 Budapest lead. The contest was soon put out of reach when Jason Verrett picked off Allen and returned it to the Durham 20. Two plays later, Rodgers tossed it to George Kittle for a 10-yard TD to make it 27-7. Durham added a TD with 5:33 left but were unable to get the ball again in time to challenge, giving Budapest the Atlantic Conference crown.

QUOTES: "What's there to say? We didn't execute when we had the opportunities and they did. They are too good a team to miss chances against. All the best to them in the final. It won't even be close." – Durham coach, George Kaldis.

"We feel fortunate to have been able to do what we wanted for most of the game. This could have very well been a different outcome if we don't keep our foot on the gas through 60 minutes. We'll take it and look forward to facing the Coyotes in the final." – Budapest coach, Darrin Jones.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



Sir Reginald @RMClapham

No question: @JoshAllenQB cut a finger on the field today. Played like a dying duck in a thunderstorm.



Attila Hun @AttilaHunBWGoulash

There is no stopping us now!



Durham 14 Budapest 27



	1	2	3	4	F
Durham	7	0	0	7	14
Budapest	7	6	0	14	27

* Playoff * 02-20-2022 Ferenc-Liszt Intl Temp:34 Wind:5-15 None No Line MVP:Rodgers

1	12:25	Budapest	TD	Rodgers 11 pass to Jefferson (Myers,J) (5-60-2:28)	0-7
1	7:36	Durham	TD	Allen 15 pass to Kupp (Santos) (8-75-4:49)	7-7
2	7:44	Budapest	FG	Myers 28 (12-73-6:59)	7-10
2	1:33	Budapest	FG	Myers 36 (14-62-4:31)	7-13
4	14:46	Budapest	TD	Rodgers 9 pass to Jefferson (Myers,J) (10-64-5:16)	7-20
4	12:38	Budapest	TD	Rodgers 10 pass to Kittle (Myers,J) (2-20-0:55)	7-27
4	5:33	Durham	TD	Allen 4 pass to Waller (Santos) (14-70-7:05)	14-27

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Allen,J	22	7	71	0	1	2	2	53.4
	22	7	71	0	1	2	2	53.4

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Rodgers,A	41	27	325	2	0	3	1	114.4
	41	27	325	2	0	3	1	114.4

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Gibson	17	109	6.4	5	4	19	0
Edmonds	6	31	5.2	5	1	12	0
Allen,J	5	16	3.2	1	1	12	0
Mattison	2	11	5.5	1	1	11	0
	30	167	5.6	12	7	19	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Johnson,D	9	60	6.7	5	3	12	0
Rodgers,A	3	6	2.0	0	0	3	0
Patterson,C	3	5	1.7	0	0	5	0
Wilson Jr.	3	2	0.7	0	0	3	0
	18	73	4.1	5	3	12	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Samuel	2	0	4	22	11.0	2	0	13	0
Kupp	2	0	8	23	11.5	2	0	15	1
Boyd	1	0	2	12	12.0	1	0	12	0
Waller	1	0	3	4	4.0	1	0	4	1
Knox	1	0	2	10	10.0	0	0	10	0
Edmonds	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Gibson	0	1	2	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	7	1	22	71	10.1	6	0	15	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Jefferson	9	0	17	134	14.9	8	0	24	2
Diggs,S	8	1	13	106	13.3	5	2	33	0
Kittle	4	0	4	34	8.5	3	0	11	1
Johnson,D	3	0	4	16	5.3	0	0	9	0
Agholor	3	0	3	35	11.7	2	0	16	0
	27	1	41	325	12.0	18	2	33	3

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Allen,J	1	1	0
Knox	1	0	0
Samuel	0	1	0
	2	2	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
	0	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Hill	1	14	14.0	14	0
	1	14	14.0	14	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Patterson,C	3	95	31.7	47	0
	3	95	31.7	47	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Proche	1	0	11	11.0	11	0
	1	0	11	11.0	11	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Rodgers,A	5	0	38	7.6	12	0
	5	0	38	7.6	12	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Santos	0-0	0	2-2	2

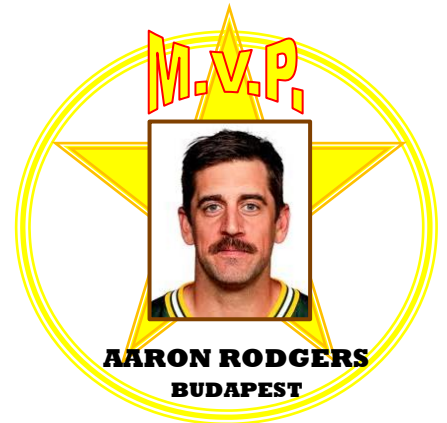
Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Myers	2-2	36	3-3	9

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Huber	5	265	53.0	0	2	0	58

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Jones	3	122	40.7	0	3	0	43

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Mathieu	10	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Moore II	9	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Sherman	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
McCourty	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Burns	3	0	1	0	1	0	0-0
Armstead,A	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Reader	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wamer	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Hendrickson	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Werner	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Young	1	1	1	0	1	0	0-0
Dupree	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
Rochell	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Simmons	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	50	1	3	1	3	0	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
David	8	0	0	2	0	1	0-0
Harris	7	2	0	0	0	1	0-0
Goodson	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Haden	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Suh	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Diggs,Q	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Dean	2	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Jordan	1	0	1	0	1	0	0-0
Winovich	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Nichols	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Fackrell	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Alexander	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Carter	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Settle	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Sutton	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Johnson,D	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Verrett	0	0	0	0	0	0	1-16
Fitzpatrick	0	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
	41	2	4	2	2	2	1-16



325 yards passing and 3 TD passes against league's best pass defence.

	Durham	Budapest
First Downs	18	23
Rushes	30-167	18-73
Passes	22-7-71	41-27-325
Sacked	2-10	1-5
Fumble	2	0
Penalties	7-53	6-30
Turnovers	1	0
Missed Tackles	7	9
Dropped Passes	1	1
Bad Passes	2	0
Passes 25+	0	2
Runs 10+	7	3
Blitzers	7	5
Time	27:51	32:09
Third Down	4-10	4-10
Fourth Down	1-1	1-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	2/2/0	5/3/2
Net Offense	228	393



AROUND THE EFL With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – Last year’s Conference Finals’ Sunday was one for the Ages. This year’s was one for...well...2021. There is no special adjective I am able to conjure that properly captures where this Sunday’s games stand in relation to all other Conference Final Sundays in EFL history. It was what it was; more of a let down than a pick-me-up, but flashing some fascinating moments.

The games did not deliver the energy and excitement one might have expected if you had bought the intense week-long build-up around them in social and mainstream media. The first half slugfest in Charleswood was the exception. However, the combative energy of that game dissipated dramatically in the second half as the Patriots reeled from a disastrous final 114 seconds of the first half. As for what many pundits, including me, liked to term “the *real* Championship;” what was set to be a Clash of Titans was set back by the poor showing of the Durham quarterback, or the great showing of the Budapest defence – take your pick, it was a joint effort.

What this means is that the upcoming 15th Gale Sayers Game will feature a clear underdog in the Coyotes up against a demonstrable powerhouse in the North Stars. It does not look good for “Georgia’s Team” no matter how clever the game plan of their coach may be. They face Mission Impossible and **Eron Osman** is no **Tom Cruise**.

I am not, however, saying that Cobb County’s Finest cannot find a freakish, contorted path to victory. **Aaron Rodgers** has choked before – many times in fact – and the Coyote version of **Ryan Tannehill** just puts up insane numbers in the quietest and most unobtrusive way. He threw 40 touchdown passes in the regular season and nobody noticed, for crying out loud! He has another 7 so far in the post-season. What does he have to do to get respect? Miss all of his reads, run around like a chicken with his head cut off, and throw recklessly to the open man when coverage inevitably breaks down? That seems to be what fans and GMs are looking for these days; a quarterback who can “improvise” (read: overcome bad reads and play calls). It takes time to learn an EFL playbook, but it doesn’t matter if your QB plays on instinct and has the mobility to buy time. The irony is that Tannehill actually has plenty of mobility; he just doesn’t lean on it. He is a falling-out-of-style out-of-style “pocket passer” who is not **Tom Brady**.

I am not, however, waving the ‘Tannehill for MVP’ banner. He has his shortcomings, and those are very likely to be exposed when he faces the Budapest defence in Sebastian two weeks from now, especially if circumstances force him to the air too often. No quarterback in the league – and I mean *no* quarterback – is not intimidated by the thought of having to throw into the teeth of the Budapest secondary when that group knows the pass is coming. Well, maybe Brady could handle it...*if* he had the receivers.

My respect for the accomplishments of the Coyotes over the past two seasons under new ownership/management, tempts me to call an upset in the final. However, my practically infallible football brain screams otherwise; not to mention my equal respect for the patience, tenacity and leadership of the North Stars’ **Darrin Jones**. Yes, I know, he skulked off like a thief in the night to Central Europe and left thousands of Markham fans in the lurch, for no obviously good reason! That is an indelible mark against his character and legacy. But setting that aside – and seeing how, against all odds, he is winning over a major European country to American football – I have to conclude that *Gale Sayers XV* will be the coronation of the North Stars most of us expect. The repeat that always eluded the league’s greatest dynasty, the Aurora Mustangs, will be earned by Budapest. That will put them in the discussion, along with the Mustangs and the Florida Dragons, as one of the league’s greatest dynasties.

WEEK THREE COMMITTEE

There is an unspoken understanding between members of society’s elite that public squabbles in front of the rabble should be avoided at all costs. Any perceived crack in the unity of the ruling class could be potentially exploited by a demagogue who might seek to overthrow the established order by aligning the people in the direction of one or another outside the club. Public spats are also not good form. A gentleman must maintain the appearance of self-control and cannot be moved off his mark by trifles. And the outcome of a football game upon which only sporting interest is at stake is certainly a trifle in the world of the rich and powerful.

Yet, the typically placid demeanour of Patriots’ owner **Jason Findlay** was visibly disturbed in a public way when the Coyotes delivered a powerful blow to the reputation of his team as a major Pacific power with a 35-7 victory over them at Coyote Field in Marietta, GA in Week Three.

“Something went terribly wrong today!” a flustered Findlay snapped at reporters who caught up with him as he approached his waiting limousine outside the VIP entrance at Coyote Field. “I have not ruled out ‘home field advantage’ as a possible cause, but the coaching staff will review the film carefully and report back to me. All I know is this is not how my team should perform!”

Findlay’s comments – on their face appearing not much more than the product of frustration after a stinging loss – caught

the attention of local media in Charleswood. After 15 years of reading Findlay's verbal and physical cues they grasped that he was abnormally unsettled, even livid at the outcome of this particular game. This appeared to have been, for him, more than a loss on the field.

"The implication is that the Patriots' owner expects to see something more than missed assignments in the Charleswood secondary when he reviews that game film," wrote **Charlie Wood**, Pats' beat writer for the *Charleswood Banner* and *Charleswood Sun*, the next day. *"It might have been just a bad day. But Findlay has seen plenty of bad days over the years and has always kept his form. Not this time."*

The next day, Findlay tried to walk back his comments at his Monday meeting with the media. Looking flustered he admitted that the Coyotes had outplayed his team but also suggested that bad luck had played a role. His effort was not overly convincing and reporters continued to probe the Pats' owner about what he thought might *really* be behind the loss. The damage had been done.

The Charleswood media were not the only entity that took note of Findlay's discomposure. The Georgia consortium of businessmen that owns the Coyotes also reacted to the rare outburst from the Patriots' owner. The term "homefield advantage" had been interpreted as a bald-faced accusation of cheating. Georgian powerbrokers, progeny of the Deep South, were particularly sensitive to criticism from northerners, especially in relation to corruption. As hosts, their honour had been gravely offended. This, by extension, meant that the honour of the State of Georgia had also been offended – as the Coyote ownership group was believed to be inexorably entwined with the Gridiron Secret Society of the University of Georgia, thought to represent the Georgia Establishment, or "Deep State."

They did not react with vulgarity over *Twitter*, nor engage in a war of words through the media. They reacted with typical solemn formality through the most prominent known member of the Gridiron Secret Society, Georgia Governor, **Brian Kemp**. He promptly struck up a committee composed of members of the General Assembly to look into the allegations.

"We have before us no formal allegation of impropriety by any league or state officials," Governor Kemp stated on Monday in the State Legislature. "I trust, I *hope*, that is because there is no true foundation for such accusations. Yet, we do have somewhat of an appearance of irregularity in that a high-standing personage – no less than the owner of our guest team this past Sunday, the Patriots – stated in front of television cameras that 'homefield advantage' factored into the outcome of the game – the clear inference being that it did so in some illegitimate way. This cannot be permitted to stand without a thorough examination of the circumstances of the game to see if this perception has merit, or may have been merely the product of understandable frustration on the part of the Patriots' owner at seeing his team manhandled like college boys by our Coyotes."

Over the course of the next thirteen weeks, the Week Three Committee (as it came to be known) called hundreds of witnesses and reviewed game film from a dozen different network camera angles, as well as raw footage from other news sources and even private video from cellphones and video cams. Their findings were exhaustively detailed in a 2,763-page report, reviewed by the guest "expert consultant" on the Committee, University of Georgia football coach, **Kirby Smart**, (himself a member of the Gridiron Society) and tabled to the Executive of the Assembly on February 7, 2022. The report was publicly released on February 14, 2022, coincidentally or not, the first day of the week leading up to the Pacific Conference Final clash between the Coyotes and the Patriots in Charleswood.

In the press conference held by Governor Kemp to announce the findings, the Governor ceremoniously declared that the Cobb County Coyote Football Club, the Georgia World Congress Authority (owners of Coyote Field), the Elite Football League, the EFL Referees Association, Coach **Eron Osman** and his staff, equipment managers, team sponsors Coca-Cola, IBM, SunTrust Bank, Home Depot, and Arby's, as well as so-called 'Lady Luck' were *"all equally exonerated of any wrongdoing, any impropriety, any illegal act, any breach of the moral faith in their conduct on October 24, 2021, when the Coyotes duly slaughtered the Patriots by the score of 35-7."*

The report went on to state that, far from any corruption being detected, the game been impeccably officiated, properly administered with respect to each and every one of its support functions, extremely well-coached by the Coyotes coaching staff, and near-flawlessly played by the Coyote players themselves.

"This was a Win with a capital 'W'," the Governor concluded, "A victory in which all citizens of Georgia, not just Coyote fans, can take pride. A win to show our children what it means to be winners."

While every organization and prominent individual connected with the Coyotes organization was singled out for praise, the report heavily indicted the Patriots, in particular their coaching staff, while falling short of singling out the owner, Findlay for personal censure. Under questioning from the media, committee football expert, **Kirby Smart** had this to say about the Patriots:

"I have reviewed thousands of hours of game film in my career," Smart replied when asked about the Patriots' role in the loss. "I have to say that the Patriots' game plan, particularly the offensive game plan, was far too simple, far too predictable, completely lacking in imagination, with almost no attempt at deception and, to top it off, it was poorly executed by their players. I have seen nothing quite so bad since that 1976 Tampa Bay Bucs documentary I watched on *YouTube* two years ago. There are High School teams in Georgia with a more complicated playbook."

In other words, it took the Georgia Legislature 13 weeks and a 2,763-page report to come to the same conclusions that Yours Truly did the day after the game. I refer you to my Week Three column, which covered this debacle more succinctly and accurately. The Week Three Committee report, for all its two-thousand-plus pages, fails to pick up on the main reason for the Patriots' staid game plan – the 'Community Coach' program. Go back and have a read if you haven't already – it explains everything.

Somebody high up in Charleswood must have read my column, because the 'Community Coach' program underwent some serious modifications after that humiliation in Marietta in Week Three. Consultants were hired, among them actual coaches with professional experience, such as **Marty Mornhinweg** and **Hue Jackson**. 'Community Coach,' **Olaf Blätt** – the sideline director of that

fiasco in Cobb County – was after Week Three required to submit his game plans to these consultants for approval before installing the offence for the coming game. Although the game plans, especially on offence, were slow to evolve into something akin to a professional offence, by Week 13 the Pats were consistently running more slants, sweeps and draws, varying the depth of their passes, and generally creating more pre-snap movement on the field and employing some modest elements of deception. The Pats' offence was performing well enough, even if not up to the high level many had expected from them in pre-season evaluations.

The Pats were now, however, coming off one of their best offensive performances of the year in their Divisional round victory over the Violators. They were at home and confident. The one-sided loss to the Coyotes back in Week Three felt well behind them, despite the Governor of Georgia's bombastic public efforts to resurrect the controversy sixteen weeks later in order to embarrass the Pats and motivate the Coyotes. When asked to comment on the Week Three Committee Report, Pats' owner **Jason Findlay** was his usual easygoing self:

"I haven't read the report – it is quite long, I hear," Findlay smiled. "There is no point going back there as far as my team is concerned. The staff and the players have learned from that game and I am confident we will all witness a much different Patriots team on the field this Sunday."

In this, Findlay was correct. It was a much different Charleswood offence that charged out of the gate – sparked by an opening kickoff return of 48 yards by **Isaiah Rodgers** – and marched 56 yards to the game's first touchdown. **DeShaun Watson** connected on a long go-route to **Amari Cooper** for a 23-yard gain to loosen up the Coyotes' defence and, after a nervous moment scrambling for a fumbled snap inside the 10, Watson and Cooper finished it off with an 8-yard hook-up in the back of the end zone. The fans at Patriot Place and the Charleswood players exploded in celebration, the build-up of tension releasing without restraint in the moment. The Pats were ready to play.

Of course, the opponent always has a say. The Coyotes appeared unfazed on the sideline. Coach **Eron Osman** impassively studied his play sheet while **Ryan Tannehill** finished his warm-up throws. *Cooty the Coyote*, the team's domesticated live coyote mascot, stood at his coach's feet, surveying the field. He yipped as reserve tight end, **Blake Jarwin** jogged onto the field, prompting Osman to raise his head and do a quick count. He quickly saw that Jarwin was the twelfth man on the kick return team. Cooty's alert had been warranted.

"Blake! Get out of there!" Osman yelled. Then he glanced down at his feet. "Thanks, Cooty!"

A too-many-men penalty avoided, the Coyotes took the ball at their own 25 and went to work. What followed was a no-nonsense, pass-heavy push featuring the Coyotes characteristic short to mid-range arsenal of slants and crosses. They led with their best 'two-minute drill' material, with little attempt to change the pace with handoffs, save for a botched pitch nullified by off-setting penalties and a single off-tackle run to give the receivers a breather. These were straight-up pass plays, with no deception apart from the strategic decision not to get the ground game going while the Patriots' defence was still in feeling-out mode. Just when it appeared that the Patriots had adjusted to the Coyote approach, facing 3rd and 10 at the Charleswood 23-yard line, Tannehill evaded pressure and delivered a strike to **Julio Jones** into a sea of seven defensive backs for a 23-yard TD. **Desmond Trufant** had made a play for the ball but it had been delivered with an extra touch of zip. His leap was late. The pigskin spiralled through his outstretched hands and into Jones'. (I filed this play away in my growing brief of exhibits that I will someday cite to refute the baseless but commonly-accepted view of Tannehill as merely a "game manager").

The Coyote touchdown was greeted with a hush from the estimated 58,000+ fans in Patriot Place, save for a celebratory howl from *Cooty the Coyote* and a burst of cheering coming from a knot of Coyote fans tucked into the southeast corner of the stands. There could not have been more than a few dozen of them but they wore their allegiance loudly and proudly to make up for their lack of numbers. One would have expected more visitors to make the trip for such a big game, but the Patriots' 'Home Sweet Home' campaign to restrict ticket sales to inside the country and buy back season tickets at a premium to sell to Manitobans had made it exceedingly difficult for Mariettans to secure game tickets. The Winnipeegers saw it as payback for what many of them still believed was a hometown fix back in Week 3 in Georgia.

The Patriots responded with determination. Following their opponent's lead, they attacked through the air with Watson completing all five of his passing attempts enroute to a 65-yard scoring drive. On 2nd and 5 at the Coyote 6-yard line, with all defenders' eyes on **Alvin Kamara**, Watson rifled a short comebacker to **Travis Kelce** just inside the goal line for the go-ahead major. The pressure was now back on the Coyotes to repeat their success on their first drive.

The sense of an impending shootout was already gripping the crowd and the broadcast booth.

"Three possessions and three touchdowns so far," FOX play-by-play announcer **Joe Duck** observed. "Do you think the defences will show up or is this going to be a shootout, Troy?"

"Well, both offences are bringing an attack mindset to this game and both are executing well," analyst **Troy Acheaman** replied. "The Patriots' defenders came flying out of the gate on that first drive but Ryan Tannehill and his receivers simply beat them with great execution. Can they keep it up? We'll see. But eventually both defences will likely adjust to what the offences are doing and play a role."

The Coyotes responded by changing gears, with Tannehill handing the ball off to **Damien Harris** to start the drive. Perfect blocking delivered unexpectedly dramatic results. An opening run of 11 yards followed by 41-yard breakout off right tackle put the Coyotes at the Patriots' 23-yard line to end the first quarter. After the break, a rested Charleswood line went for broke. **Carl Lawson** shot inside **Tristan Wirfs** and sacked Tannehill before he could even set his feet. The result, a 7-yard loss, felt like a major check to Coyote momentum.

"Tannehill calling the shots here," narrated Duck as the Coyote QB surveyed the defence. "The snap...pocket collapsing...he's down! Carl Lawson sacks Tannehill back at the thirty."

"Big play coming after the break!" Acheaman jumped in. "That run by Harris had the defence on their heels but now the offence is in a hole."

One thing about this Coyote offence that should be very clear to everyone now is that it does not panic. This could be a reflection of their coach's calm yet firm demeanour, Tannehill's rising confidence, or some of both. Whatever the reason(s), this unflappability keeps

them competitive and alive in virtually every game. On the heels of the brutal sack, Tannehill adjusted with a rollout to buy extra time and fired a bullet on target over the middle to a crossing **DeVante Parker**, who tacked on a few extra yards to the 12-yard line for an 18-yard gain and a first down. This immediate and emphatic answer to the Pats briefly sucked the sound from the stands, but the fans quickly recovered and started chanting '*D-FENCE! D-FENCE!*'

The Patriots' defence, however, was still discombobulated from the big play. As Tannehill lined up under center, they called timeout before the snap to regroup. The pause seemed to help them as they stopped Harris for no gain and swatted down a pass at the line on the next two plays. However, on third down the steely Tannehill stood in the pocket as a delayed Pats blitz came at him from two sides and flipped a dart over the middle to Jones, who barreled past the defenders to run it in for a 12-yard TD. Four possessions, four TDs. The game was tied at 14 apiece.

The Patriots' sideline that had been for so many years under **Peyton Manning** a sea of calm in every football storm, was animated. Watson launched a half dozen warm-up throws at high velocity, fiery resolve in his eyes. Revenge was driving the Patriots' offence on this day. Emotionalism had taken root. So far, it was paying off.

The game appeared to break distinctly in the Patriots' favour over the next two series. Their next offensive drive was a near-perfect balance of Watson and Kamara, with Watson's decisiveness in the pocket delivering the goods in the form of three passes in three attempts for 53 yards, including a superb medium slant to Kelce that went the distance for a 23-yard score. Five series, five touchdowns, 21-14 Patriots' lead.

With the atypically animated crowd at Patriot Place on its feet and roaring at 100 decibels, the Coyote offence began their next series with a false start. This was red meat for the rabid crowd and they upped their noise antics. Buoyed by the fans, the Pats' defence forced a three-and-out, thanks to excellent backend coverage and pressure that forced Tannehill to check down twice and miss once. The offensive cycle of the Coyotes had been broken and now it was up to the Charleswood offence to exploit the opportunity.

The Pats went back to a balanced attack, shading towards the run with Kamara but punctuating the series of handoffs with a key 9-yard pass to convert third down and a 16-yard delivery to **DK Metcalf** to bring them within field goal range at the Cobb County 22-yard line. The Coyote defence, knowing full well that falling behind by two touchdowns would put inordinate pressure on their offence, dug in their paws. Defensive lineman, **Daron Payne** stepped up and swatted down a Watson pass at the line to foil a 3rd & 4 attempt at the 16. The Pats did not hesitate. **Wil Lutz** was immediately sent onto the field to attempt a field goal and make it a two-score game.

It was the proper call. A few fanatics in the crowd who wanted to go in for the early kill booed, but did so somewhat half-heartedly, as the small amount of rational thinking capacity they retained recognized that going up two scores before the half was a win given the evenness of play. In retrospect, the "right call," up to the moment just prior to the snap from **Zach Triner**, marked the high point of the game for Charleswood. Lutz, who had been so deadly accurate over four years of dominance with the Mustangs but who had missed two field goals in the divisional round versus Virden, flat out missed the kick.

"Here's the kick...and it's...*wide left!*" Duck exclaimed in astonishment. "He missed it by at least six feet – not even close." "The snap and hold looked fine," Acheman noted. "He just pulled it, which is something kickers tend to do when they need a bit more leg to get it there. But that attempt was just 34 yards, one yard longer than an extra point. That miss might come back to haunt them."

It looked as if the haunting would have to wait until the second half after a holding penalty on **Wes Schweitzer** and two incomplete passes brought up 3rd & 20 for the Coyotes at their own 14 with still 1:25 left to play in the first half. The home crowd sensed that Lutz may yet get a chance to redeem himself before the break or (even better) Watson and the offence might find the end zone if the defence held on 3rd & 20, which, given its recent inspired play, it was expected to do with ease.

The crowd roared '*D-FENCE! D-FENCE!*' as fans raised foam 'Ds' and picket fences in time with the chant (Pats fans aren't known for their originality). As the barrage of sound rained down, Tannehill stood in the shotgun, waiting for the snap. The Pats had seven DBs on the field playing at mid-depth. They appeared to expect a pass underneath. Tannehill gathered in the ball on the snap and stood still with it inside a stable pocket, scanning the field. The Pats were patiently marking time in their zones. Seeing this, the veteran Jones made a quick stop as if running a short hitch route then suddenly broke at an angle through the human pylons toward the third level. Tannehill zipped the ball over the head of **Ronald Darby** and hit Jones in mid-stride. Darby pursued and knocked him to the turf but not before Jones had netted a 26-yard gain. The completion stunned the crowd and the Patriots' sideline almost as badly as if it had been a touchdown.

The Coyotes were alive and out of a deep hole at their own 40-yard line but they were out of timeouts and the clock was running. They hurried to the line and snapped the ball. The Pats' defence, to its credit, recovered quickly on the fly from the unnerving third-and-long completion and brought the heat. The pressure got through causing a rattled Tannehill to toss the ball to right tackle Wirfs, who was immediately tackled for a 3-yard loss. An incompletion on 2nd & 10 stopped the clock, but brought up 3rd & 13 and another tough conversion.

"The Coyotes get a breather but they still have a ways-to-go and just 31 seconds left in the half," **Joe Duck** set the scene. "They can still get into field goal range but they're going to have to convert here, I'd think. I don't see them gambling on 4th down in this scenario."

"They need to make the 50-yard line for a first," Troy Acheman commented. "You never know – they might just go for it if they got close. But you're right, if they miss it the clock stops and the Pats, with one timeout left, would need about 15 yards to get into field goal range. You're right, they need to convert here."

The crowd was primed for a stop and thought they had one when Parker caught a pass but was tackled by **Asante Samuel Jr** two yards shy of the first. But instead of waiting out the clock and punting, Osman kept his offence on the field. Tannehill waved the players to the line. The official placed the ball, cleared the area and a split second later the ball was snapped. **Brandin Cooks** bolted inside on a slant.

Tannehill led him about a foot too far but Cooks caught it and stumbled forward, falling in-bounds after an 8-yard gain with **Kendall Fuller** on top of him. As Cooks hit the turf the stadium clock hit 0:13 and continued counting.

“First down, but now they are really going to have to hurry!” Duck proclaimed excitedly, caught up in the moment as the Coyotes scrambled in rag-tag fashion to the Charleswood 44-yard line. The clock counted down as they rushed into position, 7...6...5...4...3...2... “They get the snap off!” Duck continued. “Tannehill back, back, here comes the rush, he gets it away! Deep downfield for *Johhhhhnes*...and he’s *got it!* Breaks the tackle...and nobody’s there to stop him! That’s a touchdown for Julio Jones! That’s a touchdown for the Coyotes with no time left on the clock here in the second quarter! Oh my! Oh my! What a play! And it’s enough to stun the crowd into silence.”

“The crowd to silence! I’m a little stunned myself,” Acheman admitted as he staggered into his analysis. “The Coyotes are lucky to get this play off at all and, frankly, lucky that Tannehill didn’t get sacked or the ball knocked out as Montez Sweat slammed into him hard a fraction of a second before the throw. And what a throw! That’s an MVP-calibre pass right there!”

The replay ran on the screen, showing Tannehill standing in the pocket until the last possible fraction of a second before unloading a perfect spiral downfield that settled into the arms of **Julio Jones** just inside the 10-yard line. The corner, **Ronald Darby**, had stayed with Jones the entire way but the nice throw beat the good coverage. Instinctively, Darby tried to jar the ball loose instead of wrapping him up but he was no physical match for the sturdy Jones, who shrugged off the hit and sprinted the remaining nine yards into the end zone.

The play, and parts of it, were run over and over again throughout halftime, the remainder of the broadcast both before and after commercial breaks, and dominated highlight reels across the nation. In a well-played first half with plenty of highlights, the 44-yard TD pass from Tannehill to Jones with no time on the clock was the highlight of highlights. More importantly for Cobb County, it broke the Patriots’ serve and reset the game. When the teams emerged from the tunnel to start the second half, the atmosphere was completely different.

The Pats had charged hard out of the gate in the first half. They had delivered their best shot offensively, scoring three touchdowns and getting into easy field goal range in four possessions. But it had not been enough. The easy field goal attempt had been missed. The defence that had forced the only three-and-out of the first half lapsed ever so slightly in critical moments. And, most importantly, the Coyote offence – in particular Tannehill and Jones – had delivered superstar-calibre plays in the clutch. As a result, the Coyotes would get the ball to start the second half dead even with their foe and brimming with confidence.

The best part of this contest was the first half. The second half to come would be like another game entirely. For about 20 minutes it was eerily reminiscent of the Week Three debacle the memory of which the Patriots had hoped to expunge with a victory in this game.

The Coyotes’ opening drive of the second half set the tone for both teams. Under Tannehill, the offence maintained its cohesion and executed with precision. They moved 75 yards in nine plays – three runs, six passes – with Tannehill delivering a couple of notable darts, to Jones for 17 yards and to Cooks for 19 yards and a touchdown to finish off the tidy masterpiece. The Patriots’ defence was off balance most of the way as they focused more attention on Harris. As an aside, this may be one of the secrets to the Coyote QB’s astounding success: opposing defences leaning toward a strategy of blunting the efficient Coyote run game and forcing Tannehill to beat them. But Tannehill has now proven, if nothing else, that he is not “that guy” at quarterback. He’s not **Tom Brady**, of course. But he’s not **Drew Lock** either. He is a cross between **Kirk Cousins** and a **Mitch Trubisky**. In other words, he is capable of directing a system offence under controlled conditions,



Budapest coach, **Darrin Jones**, in the traditional garb of a *ciskós* (a Hungarian cowboy) stands on a horse and cracks a whip before the Atlantic Conference Final. The stunt whipped the crowd and his team into a frenzy as the Stars defeated Durham, 27-14.

equally capable of escaping the pocket and making a big play with his legs if needed, yet prone to gaffes under pressure. The Coyote passing scheme of mostly cross and slant patterns also increases the risk, which helps explain why Tannehill’s interceptions look worse than they might actually be. These patterns require precision and timing in traffic. A mis-step or disruption of timing will be exploited by good defences occupying the middle. More on what makes Tannehill so good, yet apparently unworthy, another time...

The opening drive touchdown to start the second half put the Coyotes in the lead for the first time in the game. From that moment, through the rest of the third quarter and first five minutes of the fourth, things did not go the Pats’ way. Nor did the Pats do much to help themselves. Overall, it was a dismal 20-minute span for the home team, one that steered the outcome irrevocably against them.

The Pats’ response to the Coyote score started with an illegal bock that wiped out a 48-yard kickoff return by the red-hot

Isaiah Rodgers, forcing them to start from their own 12. From there, inspired play from the Cobb County defensive line thwarted **Alvin Kamara**, who was unable to exploit a pass-oriented defence due to heads-up plays by the Coyotes' defensive line. On 3rd & 12, Watson was forced to check down to Metcalf for an 8-yard gain, bringing on the Charleswood punting unit for the first time in the game.

The Coyotes took over near mid-field and made short work of the Charleswood secondary, overcoming a holding penalty on **David Bakhtiari** to hit paydirt on a 28-yard TD pass from Tannehill to Parker. Again, it was a case of Tannehill's well-timed throw connecting with his receiver in stride over the middle of the field, making the defenders look flat-footed by comparison. The first boos began to be heard at Patriot Place. The Coyotes were now up by two TDs, 35-21.

Charleswood's desperation began to be reflected in Watson's play. His throws became forced, his decisions more questionable. Going for it on 4th & 6 at the Cobb County, he checked down to Cooper three yards from the line of scrimmage with **Steve Nelson** in the receiver's back pocket. He was wrapped up immediately and the Pats turned the ball over on downs. From there, the Coyotes' offence successfully played keep-away, dragging out a 63-yard field goal drive over nearly 8 minutes to take a 38-21 lead with 9:15 left.

By this point, one would think that the Coyotes would have developed an answer to Rodgers and the kick return game. Or, if they hadn't, would have made a concerted effort to kick the ball away from him or out of the end zone. But the failure of **Brandon McManus** to box the Charleswood returner into a corner or simply deny him the ability to return it at all by kicking it through the end zone came back to bite the Coyotes on the ensuing kickoff. Rodgers fielded the line drive kick at his own 3-yard line and took advantage of the open space to slice through the kick coverage on his way to a hardly contested 97-yard kick return touchdown.

This special teams failure injected life into what had been a bluing Patriots' corpse mere minutes earlier. It was now 38-28. However, it did not change the tone of the scrimmage. The Coyotes recovered an onside kick and drove relentlessly downfield with the power run game. But as the Coyotes were moving in to deliver the *coup de grâce*, Darby forced a Jones fumble and the Pats recovered at their own 8-yard line with 2:30 remaining. Watson used the shot of adrenaline from the surprise turnover to guide his offence the distance, finishing with a 12-yard touchdown pass to Kamara on a check down with 0:30 remaining. But the Pats still trailed by 3.

Incredibly (or not so incredibly seeing as it seems to be happening with improbable frequency these days) the Pats recovered the desperation onside kick, giving them great field position at their own 48 with 0:15 left and one timeout.

"An incredible turn of events here at Patriot Place!" **Joe Duck** declared as the Charleswood faithful stood on their feet and roared their support. "A little more than two minutes ago, the Coyotes looked ready to seal the deal. Now, the Patriots have a chance to get into field goal range with a well-placed throw."

"They have a shot, for sure," **Troy Acheman** agreed. "But there is no room for error now."

Watson took the snap from the shotgun and stepped back. His receivers were well-covered as the Coyote secondary played outside leverage. He continued to scan but was suddenly blasted by Payne, who had fought through a double-team by the center and right guard to corral the Charleswood signal-caller. The Pats were forced to call their final timeout, leaving them with 8 seconds to play with, 58 yards to go to the end zone and about 23 yards and out-of-bounds to get into makeable field goal range for Lutz, whose longest kick this year had been 53 yards. It was long-out or bomb time. An out pass would have had to be delivered on time and precisely on target. A bomb would be like a Hail Mary. Neither option looked promising. But, heck, weird things have a way of happening in this league.

The resulting play was disappointingly anti-climactic given the odds-defying heroics of previous points in the game. Watson dropped back and tried to set but Payne again hounded him. Instead of running around in the pocket waiting for a receiver to get free, Watson broke forward to run. He was tracked down and turfed by Payne after a five-yard gain. The clock expired, the gun sounded, and the result that had appeared to be a foregone conclusion minutes previously was confirmed. The Coyotes held on for a 38-35 win.

The improbably nervous ending to this game masked what had been mostly a desultory showing by the Patriots in the second half. Measured in game time, they showed their better side for no more than 2:38 over the final 30 minutes – the 10 seconds it took Rodgers to run back a kickoff 97 yards for a touchdown, the 2:13 it took them to march 92 yards for a TD to pull within a field goal, and the 0:15 it took to execute and scramble for the onside kick. Helping them along during that time were the Coyotes themselves, whose special teams lapses and aggressive play-calling inside the Charleswood 10, that exposed Jones to a desperate strip by Darby, set the stage in equal measure for the nerve-wracking finish of a game that should have been put away much earlier.

Was this game a classic? I would say that it falls short. Had the Patriots completed the comeback and won, this Conference Final surely would have found a prominent spot in Patriot lore and earned "playoff classic" status. Since they didn't – and it took a series of gaffes and lucky bounces to even put them in position to come back after idling in neutral for most of the 2nd half – it falls into the 'too-little-too-late' category. Some teams apparently need to see the reaper before they repent their sins but for the Pats it was too late.

I feel a little sorry for the Patriots and their fans. They certainly brought it in the first half and seemed to be shaping the battlefield for a second half squeeze and victorious finish. That they stalled was not really their fault as much as it was the Coyotes' refusal to knuckle under and Tannehill's steely focus in the clutch. The missed field goal was a bad omen. The bomb to Jones with no time left was more than that. It was a spirit-breaker for the Patriots that they never truly recovered from. Yet, there was little they could have done. It was a perfectly-executed play under physical and time pressure that could not be defended. As football people like to say: A perfect pass beats perfect coverage. This is an acknowledgement that the offence always has the initiative. The job of the best defence is to give the opposing offence no room for error.

Unlike in Week Three, there was no appetite for controversy in the aftermath of this game. The Patriots could hardly complain that "homefield advantage" worked against them. There had been no more than a couple of hundred of Coyote fans in attendance. The officials had been thoroughly vetted by the league to ensure there were no personal connections among the crew to either Georgia or

Manitoba. The game was attended and monitored by the EFL's newly-appointed Head of Officiating, **Ed Hochuli**. This could have backfired spectacularly as Hochuli, according to accounts from people in the league booth, tried to throw flags throughout the game, forgetting, or not grasping, that his role was to monitor the performance of the game's officials, not to call the game himself.

"I am obviously disappointed in the final result but I remain proud of this team," **Jason Findlay** said after the game, flanked by 'Community Coach,' **Olaf Blätt** and his minder, **Hue Jackson**. "The Coyotes performed to their highest level today. Give them credit. It was not because we sagged at all in the third quarter – it was because they executed better. It's too early to say what our plan is for next year. I'll have to speak with Vance," he added, in reference to Violators' owner, oil baron **Vance Barrate**.

Coyote coach, **Eron Osman**, flanked by *Cooty the Coyote* and **Ryan Tannehill**, was all business at the podium. He refused to indulge in cheap shots when asked if this win was vindication for veiled accusations of cheating in Week Three.

"Look, there was a report on that game and it said what everyone in our locker room already knew: We had a good day and they had a bad day when we played them in the regular season. It's as simple as that," he replied matter-of-factly. "This game today was a true test. We had to play 60 minutes of our best football to come out of here with a win. They had a couple of bad breaks but played well and had a chance at the end. They didn't give up. So, it was a credit to our players, Ryan and Julio, Daron and Jarran on defence, and of course our offensive line, which nobody seems to talk about but we know how valuable it is to our success."

So, there will be no bitter rivalry between these teams going forward – just a professional rivalry, as it should be. The Governor of Georgia held a press conference afterwards to declare that the report of the Week Three Committee had been validated by this result. He declared Monday, February 21, 2022, 'Coyote Vindication Day' and that government of Georgia employees would be allowed to leave work at noon. Whatever! There will be no Conference Final Report commissioned by the Government of Manitoba, and that's a good thing.

HORSE WHIPPED

One has to watch with a measure of admiration at how Budapest football coach, **Darrin Jones** has adapted to his new Hungarian home and is leveraging its traditions to promote American football in Central Europe to impressive effect on the field and in the stands. One also must also be impressed by his attention to detail and his high energy in buffing out even the smallest imperfections in the EFL steamroller of a football team he has built.

While league analysts – including me – all but dismissed the 27-point effort of the Swordfish offence after they had fallen behind the North Stars 34-7 early in the Quarter Final round as the consequence of "garbage time" coupled with **Russ Lemmon**'s mania, Jones himself was on the record that same day showing himself as deeply perturbed by it. In fact, the showing of his defence in giving up four plays of more than *40 yards* (explosive plays are considered to be 25 yards or more) demanded attention. While observers (again, such as me) recognized that such a huge lead as the North Stars had created the danger of inducing complacency or, at least, overly conservative play, while feeling content that at no time did the Sebastian comeback truly threaten the final outcome, the Budapest coach clearly was looking at the defensive breakdown as an early warning sign. His offence had dispatched Sebastian in spite of defensive lapses. But how would the same scenario play out against a more competent foe, like Durham?

Good question. I suppose me and others hadn't really thought that part through. I saw the Sebastian game in isolation. The thought that the Budapest defence would let up against the Thunder Lizards seemed bizarre. Yet, if it did somehow, the North Stars' offence would not have the same free reign over the Durham defence as they had over the ragtag Swordfish. The Thunder Lizards entered the Atlantic Conference Final the highest rated defence in the league, one that had completely muzzled the Irish in the Quarter Finals, limiting them to 165 net yards of offence and 3 "courtesy" points. The North Stars would be hard-pressed to score their way out of a defensive collapse against Durham.

So, the period of celebration in Budapest after beating the Swordfish was very short-lived. According to reports, the North Stars' coach did not sleep that night. Instead, he researched new ways to "whip" his no.2-ranked defence into shape. After 14 years of coaching and in the process demonstrating an acumen for defensive game-planning, the future Hall-of-Fame Budapest coach still felt he clearly did not know it all if his near-elite back-eleven defenders could give up 400 yards and 34 points to a team that had barely made the wildcard cut. This critical self-reflection may have saved his team from a grave disappointment in the Conference Final.

As is his bent, Jones sought inspiration from Hungarian traditions of which he had no knowledge prior to leaving Markham and had no real business adopting as his own. Yet, he did anyhow and, like everything he touches in Hungary, it appears to have worked like a charm.

After missing Monday's game film review due to a "personal matter," Jones reappeared on Tuesday sporting a different look. Wearing a 'Hungarian cowboy hat' and carrying a long, coiled whip, he called the defence into an emergency meeting. Before he said a word, he cracked the whip, <ssswack!>. The startled players sat up in their seats.

"Let me introduce the *béresoster*," Jones stated flatly, holding up the whip, a crease of a smile on his face. "This is a charioteer whip used by the famed *csikós*, Hungarian cowboys, to drive their horse herds. The tip of the whip, the '*sudár*,' reaches the speed of sound when it snaps. Think about it: The snap is actually a miniature sonic boom!"

Jones paused and surveyed the room, trying to gauge the effect of his demonstration. A few players, particularly those in the secondary who had let **TY Hilton** run free with seconds left in the first half to set up Sebastian's second touchdown, squirmed.

"Imagine a piece of rawhide traveling at the speed of sound contacting you. You'd feel it! Damn right you'd feel it! even through pads," Jones explained in an even, clinical tone. "I just learned how to use this thing," he added. "I'm not that good at it. My teacher, a *csikós* of renown, explained that the main point of the whip is the *sound*. The sound makes the horses move. The cowboys

don't try to hurt the horses – just scare them. The cowboys know what they are doing. *Me...*not so much. I am bringing this to practice as an audible reminder to each of you to not let up – *no matter what the situation!* If you hear the crack of the whip, you know you aren't at the intensity you need to be – even in practice. If you feel it – well, that just means I screwed up and hit you. Sorry. I can't be great all the time. Now, don't make me have to use this whip!"

Throughout the week of practice leading up to the showdown with the Thunder Lizards, the North Stars coach roamed the near sideline at practice observing the performance of his players, whip in hand. He wielded it clumsily, not always generating even the sound necessary to warn his players that they were not performing to his expectations. But occasionally the whip made a great <ssswack!> and, the odd time, it even struck a player.

"I hate this!" Jones declared on Friday, as he watched **Quandre Diggs** pull himself up from the ground after being felled by an errant *béresoster* strike to the calf. Diggs had made a key interception in the end zone against Sebastian but had also whiffed on a couple of tackles, notably one on **Jonathan Taylor's** 56-yard TD run that would have limited the running back to about 15 yards had it been made. Diggs and linebacker **DJ Goodson**, who had missed three tackles on big Swordfish plays, were drawing a lot of attention in practice from their coach. "I didn't mean to hit you there, Quandre, but shit happens. I'm still getting the hang of this thing. Better it be here than on the field. Now play to the damn whistle like I told you!"

This was a side of the Budapest coach his players had rarely seen. Jones was not so much angry at the players he whipped as he was firmly resolved to drill home the message that the defence could not let up against Durham and survive the day. This was critical mental conditioning. What appeared on the surface to be sadistic punishment was in fact tough love, administered paternalistically by a deeply caring father figure. There was surprisingly little resentment on the part of the players to their coach's new tactic. Goodson glared back on one occasion when he took a *béresoster* strike to the elbow which drew blood and a profane outburst. But when the rest of the team laughed, Goodson choked back whatever he had had a mind to say to his coach and continued to practice – harder than before.

While Jones was conditioning his defence on the practice field at Ferenc-Liszt International Airport Stadium, his opposite number, Durham coach **George Kaldis**, was cursing the delay as Hungarian military engineer units swept the temporary visitor's practice field for unexploded artillery shells.

The Thunder Lizards had flown to Hungary the day after dispatching East Elmhurst with the goal of adjusting to the time zone before the big game. However, the practice field adjoining the Telki soccer camp and the Global Sports & Wellness Hotel northeast of Budapest, used by visiting EFL teams, was closed for maintenance after a local semi-pro league game had torn up the field. While groundskeepers repaired the field, the Lizards had been moved to the nearby abandoned military base in Batorbágy, where the only flat open space suitable for football practice happened to have once been an artillery range.

While the field was made safe then painted and laid with sod, the Thunder Lizards were stuck in the classroom and had to do walk-throughs in an old basketball gym. Conditions in both locations were abysmal. In class, players sat on old vintage wooden school chairs, their once-lacquered surfaces bare and chipped, in front of a large green chalkboard for which there was no chalk. A black and white framed picture of a man looking to be in his 70s hung above the chalkboard. Above it was a red star trimmed in green and white, and below it a metal plate with an inscription.

Looking up at the picture while waiting for the coaches to arrive, defensive back **Robert Rochell** turned and asked **Richard Sherman**, "Who dat dude?"

Sherman looked up briefly at the picture then back at the young rookie. "Some Hungarian dude, I guess. How the fuck should I know?"

The gym was decrepit. A leaking pipe in the roof dripped water onto the floor, which had to be constantly mopped by one of the locker room staff. Nearly half of the old industrial bar lights hanging from the ceiling were out, making the lighting dingy. A strange, undefined and unpleasant smell filled the air.

The Durham coach had been uptight for weeks regardless and this situation did not help his mood. He had spent more hours than he could recall watching film of his team's Week 13 loss to the North Stars – the game in which his pass rush was decimated by injuries and **Josh Allen** had thrown two interceptions. Somehow the game had ended in a visibly respectable, 34-27 score, but the score had certainly not reflected the play. His team had been bowled over in the 2nd half by the Budapest machine. Durham had trailed 31-13 three-and-a-half minutes into the fourth quarter. A pair of late touchdowns improved appearances but had not threatened the bottom line. Now his team was in Hungary, over four thousand miles away from home, having to prepare for the biggest game of the year against a major powerhouse in what amounted to Third World conditions. This was seen as an omen.

"I am cursed!" Kaldis kept saying to himself as he half-heartedly went about preparing his team, sensing the doom.

I'm not above believing in curses. I have seen too many strange things happen on the football field to discount the role of the *Football Gods* in the fortunes of certain teams, at certain times. For the Thunder Lizards and their cursed coach, the cruel twist of their 2021 season was that they were forced to share it with a peaking Budapest dynasty. No less carefully constructed were the Lizards compared with their inter-conference rivals. In fact, the work that had gone into building this Durham team may have been more impressive for the fact that they picked and groomed their own quarterback. Had **Aaron Rodgers** not fallen into **Darrin Jones'** lap, it is quite likely that mediocrity at the game's most important position would have been the familiar downfall of the Stars both last year and this. The acquisition of Rodgers had lifted the 'QB curse' on Jones and the North Stars and simultaneously lifted the

course that had afflicted Rodgers after the sale of the Dragons to Scarborough. There had been no such seminal turning point in Durham – at least not visibly. The hope for Durham fans was that this game might change that. If truth be told, likely most of North America, feeling a deep-rooted, visceral, quasi-tribal impulse, was hoping Durham would break the grip this “foreign” team had on the title of ‘Champion.’ The North Stars’ image had clearly shifted from one of lovable, bumbling underdogs to one of a dangerous, hegemonic foreign actor – a clear and present danger to the “American-ness” of pro football.

The body language of the coaches spoke volumes to the mental state of their teams. **Darrin Jones** made his entrance dressed in traditional *csikós* garb to delirious applause from the overflow crowd at Airport Stadium. He drew a standing ovation when, with the assistance of his Hungarian cowboy trainer, **Csaba Lovas**, he mounted and stood on the back of a dark brown *Gidran* horse and, for a few nervous shaky seconds, waved his whip in the air before falling off and being caught by his team of assistants.

George Kaldis shuffled with short, rapid, choppy steps onto the field, his head down, clutching his clipboard with a grip tighter than a rusted lug nut on the wheel of a 1970s Chrysler. He took his spot on the sideline and studied his play sheet as if looking for some kind of inspiration. The game hadn’t even started and the Durham coach appeared to already be moving to Plan B.

We, of course, know how this game went. The media hype leading up to it turned out to be useless hot air. Although the game was close on the scoreboard through 30 minutes, it was clear by as early as the 2nd quarter that if **Josh Allen** did not improve, Durham’s fortunes would be grim indeed. Allen did not improve and the Thunder Lizards gradually faded away under the steady and relentless pressure of both phases of the Budapest game to fall quietly and ignominiously, 27-14.

It might be unfair to lay the entire blame at the feet of the Durham quarterback. But it was obvious that the biggest disparity in performance between the teams was at the quarterback position. Was **Josh Allen** not ready, or were the North Stars ready for him – whipped into game shape by their Hungarian cowboy coach? Probably a bit of both. Overall, it was a stinker of a game for the Durham QB, who many believed had crossed an important developmental line this year. That is true – in the regular season, Allen’s passing was more accurate, more decisive and he remained equally dangerous as a scrambler. But clearly there is another stage for him to reach before he is ready to take on **Aaron Rodgers** on equal footing in the highly-pressurized playoff atmosphere.

The team that many, including myself, believed had a legitimate shot at knocking off the North Stars proved to be a class below when subjected to the bright lights of the Conference Championship. In the process, they elevated the North Stars firmly into a class all by themselves. If the Stars can do this to Durham, it does not look good for the Coyotes’ prospects two weeks from now.

The Durham defence played well. The secondary performed as well as could be expected given that their vaunted pass rush proved unable to break through the shaky Budapest offensive line before Rodgers’ internal clock sounded the alarm. The savvy vet got the ball out in record time and, when forced to extend the play, seemed to move around with ease outside the pocket. Rodgers was sacked only once and was knocked down/pressured in the pocket only 3 times in 45 drop-backs. The principal key to the success of the Lizards’ defence is the pass rush and it was mostly invisible on this day.

The other key was, of course, Allen. He came out strong on the opening drive, throwing with confidence on what were clearly scripted plays he was comfortable with. Durham scored a touchdown on their opening drive, matching Budapest’s opening drive TD and sending the message that this would be the clash of titans we had all been waiting for. However, it was not long before Allen’s game fell apart. This was first noticeable on Durham’s first three-and-out midway through the 2nd quarter. With the Budapest defence guarding the run, the Lizards dialed up a pass that the All-22 film suggests was intended to be a crossing pattern to **Cooper Kupp**. This had the potential to be a big play, but Kupp did not get the free release he needed, as **Dawson Knox** failed to rub out the linebacker sitting in Kupp’s lane, disrupting the timing. The Durham line faltered and Allen was almost immediately under pressure. His panicked check down to Knox was in the dirt for an incompleteness. This play seemed to rattle the Durham QB. He had the look he wanted but had been unable to execute. Two plays later, on 3rd & 10, Allen dropped back and stared out at the field, unable to find an open man. Linebacker **BJ Goodson** lurked in the middle, watching him like a hawk. Hesitant to run, Allen was eventually dropped for a 7-yard loss by **Shelby Harris**. Allen’s brain freeze led to a rare coverage sack against the Lizards. This was typical of his day.

The mental confusion seemed to get worse as the game progressed. There was little to no sharpening of the senses. Preliminary PFFP stats breakdown reveal Allen’s difficulties in all situations. When the Budapest defence was geared to stop the run, Allen completed 1 of 4 pass attempts for 4 yards and touchdown for a 79.17 rating. He was also sacked once, fumbling the ball. The TD obviously played the key role in bumping up the rating to a merely below average level. Against a pass-oriented defence, Allen was simply bad. He completed 6 of 18 for 67 yards, 1 TD and 1 INT for a passer rating of 40.74. He also sacked once, scrambled twice for a total of 6 yards. Against ambiguous or neutral defensive postures, Allen scrambled once for 12 yards and had a 7-yard completion nullified by a holding penalty. In all, the Thunder Lizards moved a total of 79 yards when Allen was involved in the play.

Rodgers on the other hand turned in a professional, 325-yard 3 TD performance against a defence that, given the pressures on it, played well. The turning point in this game is only clear in retrospect. The Lizards’ failure to generate a first down after starting with great field position after a Budapest field goal made it 10-7 was a small but ultimately significant slip. Budapest scored another field goal after that and from there the game turned into a slow grind going in one direction in favour of the home team.

Neither coach had much to say afterwards. The game spoke for itself. **Darrin Jones** refrained from triumphalism out of respect for his opponent, aware that it is not all on the coach when a key player chokes. **George Kaldis** twisted every rule of syntax and vocabulary trying to not throw his quarterback under the bus, but the sheer effort proved the point. Allen is being crucified in the media. Rodgers is being lionized. The national media is calling this a “horse-whipping.” The North Stars are all but crowned.

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Jimmy's CHAMPIONSHIP PICK

At The Fish Tank, Sebastian, FL

COBB COUNTY @ BUDAPEST (line – NORTH STARS by 6)

INJURIES: Budapest – None; Virden – None.

BACKGROUND: Budapest enters the season's final game as the league's undisputed no.1 seed looking to complete the EFL's fourth Immaculate Season. Their opponent, Cobb County, is the no.2 seed in the Pacific Conference and finished with the league's 4th best record overall. They defeated the Pacific's no.1 seed, Charleswood for the privilege of appearing in this game, but remain clear-cut underdogs all the same. These franchises have never faced each other in the post-season, and only six times in the regular season since the league's inception. They met most recently in Week 7 of this year. The Coyotes were able to control the ball for 32 minutes in that contest, but a first play interception of Ryan Tannehill and a turnover on downs at their own 34 set up two short touchdown drives for Budapest that skewed an otherwise competitive first half. The North Stars went on to win that game 38-20, to give them a 4-2 all-time edge over the Coyotes/Knights franchise and a 4-game win streak in the series. They last lost to the Knights in 2009. The forebearers of the Coyotes appeared in and won the fifth Gale Sayers Game in 2011. This is an entirely new team, however, with no player from that championship Knights team still on the roster. Experience is on the North Stars' side, as this will be their fourth appearance in the final. They have won two Championships, the most recent coming last year and their first in 2012. They lost in the final in 2013.

WHEN COBB COUNTY HAS THE BALL: Only one team rushed more times than the Coyotes and only four teams more often as a percentage of offensive plays. If they could have run more often, they would have, but Adrian Peterson is getting on in years and both Damien Harris and Matt Breida nursed various ailments throughout the season. Even so, all three were effective running the ball out of the I-formation behind Tristan Wirfs at right tackle and Maxx Williams at fullback. Running plays out of the 'Pro' set is the bread and butter of the Coyotes' offence on first down, as it both empowers the run and sets up the play action pass that Ryan Tannehill has used to deadly effect the past two seasons. They will stay in it as long as they are on pace to move the chains but will flip to the 3-wide set as a fallback in extended yardage situations on 2nd and 3rd downs. Tannehill distributes the ball equitably between his top two receivers, Brandin Cooks and DeVante Parker; he will trust veteran Julio Jones and sophomore Michael Pittman Jr in a big moment. He rarely pushes the ball downfield, preferring to deal it over the middle on short-to-medium crossing and slant patterns to maximize run-after-catch. On the downside, this middle traffic makes Tannehill prone to throwing the occasional head-scratcher interception. The Budapest defence can be expected to meet this Coyote attack in their 3-4 base formation and flip to a four-man front in their nickel package in passing situations. By playing four linebackers over four linemen in their base set the North Stars appear willing to tolerate the occasional 7-yard burst from the Coyote running backs in order to clog the middle and keep a lid on big gains in the passing game. The blitz is not a feature of the Budapest defence, but its timing is unpredictable, coming at any time, at any down-and-distance, almost always from the outside linebackers. This blitz will have to be exceedingly well-timed and executed, as the pillars of the Coyotes' offensive line – David Bakhtiari on the left and Wirfs on the right – are close-to impenetrable. The Stars will not be overly reliant on scheme and trickery to put a clamp on the Coyotes, however. The not-so-secret weapons on the Budapest D – Minkah Fitzpatrick, Lavonte David and Cameron Jordan – are going to make their presence felt on virtually every down, regardless of where their coach puts them. The Coyotes will be content to string together a finely-calibrated mix of plays designed to wear down the Budapest defence, keep the North Stars' quarterback off the field, and perhaps, if they are lucky, catch the ever-vigilant Budapest defenders napping.

WHEN BUDAPEST HAS THE BALL: This is a Budapest offence like no other in the team's history – a powerful air unit piloted by an ace with complementary ground support, as opposed to the other way around. This has resulted in an approximately 8% drop in run attempt percentage over the previous 3 seasons. This drop is significant on its own and is likely understated due to the fact that the North Stars have been honourably running out the clock in their many victories. Their run percentage while the game is still being contested is

is likely much lower. They have also moved away from heavy two-tight end and ‘Pro’ sets and now deploy more three-wide formations. The bottom line: Aaron Rodgers is ready to drop a bomb at any time and he has lots of ways to deliver it, even if he has confined himself primarily to two preferred carriers. Stefon Diggs is the fighter jet, Justin Jefferson is the fighter-bomber and, occasionally, Nelson Agholor will make an appearance as the B-52 in this deadly air campaign known as the Budapest Blitz. Only on this team would a tight end like George Kittle be relegated to mainly a blocking role. As deadly as North Stars’ air power is, it is not on gawdy display from week-to-week. They are middle of the pack in passes attempted. They tend to make their point then step aside in favour of their committee of serviceable, but otherwise unnoteworthy, running backs to clean-up the clock. If there is a weakness on this side of the Budapest ball it is in the offensive line, which by most grades is hardly average. That deficiency is hard to detect, however, with the master, Rogers in the pocket, head on a 360-degree swivel, who knows exactly when to flush himself out and run, or check down for a tidy gain. Being a guard on the North Stars is the easiest offensive line gig in the league. Tasked with stopping this leviathan is the Coyote defence, a disciplined unit with above-average talent that has acquitted itself well as the fourth most efficient defence in the league this season. There is nothing complicated or risky about the Coyote defensive game plan; they almost never blitz and rarely shift into double coverage outside of targeted circumstances, usually on 3rd down. They deploy a four-man front in both basic and nickel packages and bank on it to generate pressure on opposing quarterbacks. This has been only modestly successful, as the Coyote pass rush ranks well into the bottom half of the league in sacks. What the defence does well is everything else, and what it does exceptionally well is generate turnovers. Dexter Lawrence leads the league in forced fumbles, with 11, while corners Tre’Davious White and Steve Nelson, and linebacker Blake Martinez each have three interceptions. Cobb County’s +11 turnover differential has undoubtedly factored in to their success this season, but they will need much more of that in this game in order to overcome the tidal wave of destiny carrying Budapest this year. If the Coyotes gamble with coverage slants and double teams, or dial up some blitzes, it will be a departure from the norm. However, don’t be surprised if we see a few wrinkles in the game plan; playing it straight and waiting for a mistake from an offence that doesn’t make very many is, barring some weather anomaly, a losing strategy.

THE WAY I SEE IT: All the signs point to this game being a Budapest coronation. No disrespect to the Coyotes and their impressive record of over-achievement, one that has seen them appear in two Pacific Conference Championship games and now the Gale Sayers Game in just two seasons in Cobb County, but there are precious few paths to victory available to them. No disrespect to Ryan Tannehill and his remarkable statistical achievements and record of victories since being given the keys to Eron Osman’s offence, but he is no Aaron Rodgers. Should this game remain close over the first three quarters, the gunslinger most likely to blink first will be Tannehill. No disrespect to the Coyotes’ coach, but a coach is limited by the talent at his disposal and there is no question that his opponent is playing with a stacked deck. Barring a special teams catastrophe, a critical fumble or an Act of God, the normal projected course of game play in a perfectly-played game by both sides trends strongly toward a Budapest victory – likely a big one. I expect this to be a chess match, nonetheless. The Coyotes are not here because they are the most talented team in their conference; they are here because they are talented and also one of the best coached teams in their conference. Similarly, a lesser tactician in Budapest might not have made it this far without suffering at least one loss. A close game is still in the cards. It will be interesting to see what strategies are employed, particularly on the Cobb County side. Sit back, enjoy the game, and know that anything, still, can happen! **PICK: BUDAPEST**



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Sterling Smitherman

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – The Conference Finals of 2015 bore similarities to the weekend we just witnessed. The Pacific-Atlantic Conference (modern day Pacific) Final produced the most competitive game. This time, it was the Patriots weathering a patented **Russell Wilson** comeback attempt in the 2nd half, nearly blowing a 31-3 lead. The 31-23 final was perhaps not as close as the score indicates, but it did have nervous Patriot fans on the edge of their seats as Wilson reached for but fell short of the line of gain on a madcap 4th down scramble in the final minute. This game was a clinic put on by the ‘Old Gunslinger,’ **Peyton**

Manning over his ‘Young Gun’ challenger. The Patriots were at their zenith with Peyton at the helm and, in the year of his return from exile in Pickering, they were going back to the Gale Sayers Game.

In the Can-Am Conference Final, it was another well-assembled Durham team travelling to a slightly better-assembled team in Aurora. Much like they did this weekend at Budapest, the Lizards fell flat, losing by the embarrassing score of 27-3. The difference here was that Durham put up even more abysmal numbers under the guidance of a veteran who should have been able to hold it together, **Drew Brees**, than they did this weekend under the young **Josh Allen**. Brees finished 15 of 32 for 100 yards, 1 INT and a passer rating of 41.1. He was sacked five times.

The Mustangs’ QB, **Matt Ryan** was not exactly stellar, but at least he threw a touchdown. The big star in this game was running back **Arian Foster**, who piled up 265 total yards (215 on the ground and 50 through the air) and scored the games only two touchdowns. The Aurora defence did the rest, smothering the Durham attack and limiting it to 113 net yards of offence.

The 2015 Gale Sayers Game would feature a return of Aurora to the final against the veteran Peyton and the Pats.