

2014



EFL NEWS

2014

CONFERENCE FINALS

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

CONFERENCE FINALS

February 15, 2015



EAST	WEST	NORTH	SOUTH
 SANTA CLARA BANANA SLUGGS	28	 DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS	13
 CARTHAGE CANNIBALS	31	 AURORA MUSTANGS	26



BRING ON THE HORSE MEAT!

Steven Hauschka



Steven Hauschka (left) focuses on the target as he lays into a 48-yard field goal as time expires to upend Santa Clara 31-28 and send the Cannibals to the Final in just the 3rd year of the franchise's existence. A Samoan native (above) displays his approval and screams for horse meat. But winning the championship will not be an easy task for Carthage. The favoured Mustangs dominated the Thunder Lizards 26-13 in the Can-Am final to stay perfect at 18-0.



Who was slick in the Conference Finals?

"BRYLCREEM" THE EFL'S FIRST SPONSOR



Anquan Boldin
WR
Aurora Mustangs

7 catches, 105 yards, 2 TDs. Went toe-to-toe with Sherman and won.



Lavonte David
CB
Carthage Cannibals

6 Tackles, 2 Sacks, 1 Stuff, 1 QBP. Dialed up pressure on RGIII.



13-5-0



CAN-AM QUARTER FINALS



18-0-0

Durham

13

MVP

Matt Ryan

26

Aurora

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Brees	19	28	172	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Jackson	5	23	4.6	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Johnson	5	65	13.0	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Durham	6	0	0	7	-	13
Aurora	7	6	3	10	-	26

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Ryan	27	43	272	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Forte	21	87	4.1	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Boldin	7	105	15.0	2

Play of the Game

With 13:04 remaining in the 4th quarter, leading 19-6 and facing 2nd & 10, Matt Ryan threw a 34-yard TD pass to Anquan Boldin to put the game away for the Mustangs.

KEYS TO THE GAME

- Foles 11 of 23, sacked 4 times
- 49 yards rushing
- 2 of 10 on 3rd down

NO CONTEST!

AURORA 'D' FORCES 2 TURNOVERS

MATT RYAN THROWS 2 TDS

KEYS TO THE GAME

- shut down aggressive play-making secondary
- Boldin beats Sherman
- Balanced attack

SUMMARY: The Thunder Lizards responded to a first series stop by their defence with an early penetration into field goal range on a 29-yard pass to **TY Hilton**. But Aurora's **Malik Jackson** shut down the early momentum with a strip-sack of **Nick Foles** that was recovered by **David DeCastro** for a 12-yard loss. Durham was able to recoup 7 yards and settled for a 47-yard **Phil Dawson** field goal to open the scoring. The Mustangs answered with an 80-yard drive in 9 plays that saw Durham caught off guard when little-used RB **Chris Polk** ran for 17 yards on 3rd and 6 for a 1st down at the Durham 20. Three plays later, with Durham watching Polk, **Matt Ryan** slung a strike to **Anquan Boldin** in the end zone for a 5-yard score and a 7-3 lead. Durham dodged a bullet on their next series when an **Antonio Gates** fumble was recovered by the Mustangs' **Erin Henderson**, but the play was reversed on a controversial booth review. Foles found **Vernon Davis** for 18 yards on the next play to set up an eventual 37-yard field goal to make it 7-6. Aurora then marched 62 yards in 14 plays to widen their lead to 10-6 on a 36-yard field goal by **Nick Folk**. **Devin Hester** fumbled away the ensuing kickoff, putting Aurora at the Durham 26. Unable to gain a yard the Mustangs found themselves pushed back to the 36 when **Kory Lichtensteiger** was flagged for holding, but Folk made good on the 54-yard FG try to give the home team a 13-6 advantage. That lead would hold to half time as both defences took control. The punting duel continued into the 3rd quarter with Aurora winning the field position battle to gain possession at the Durham 45. **Matt Forte** ran 5 times for 21 yards and **Julian Edelman** caught a 10-yard pass to set up a 31-yard FG by Folk. An inaccurate Foles was unable to make progress for the Lizards and the Mustangs added another FG after a 34-yard pass to Boldin brought them into range. Down 19-6 in the 4th quarter, Durham went for it on 4th and 7 at their own 38. **JJ Watt** tracked down Foles for a sack and a turnover on downs. Ryan made the Dinos pay with a 34-yard TD pass to Boldin to make it 26-6. **Drew Brees** entered the game for Durham and was driving into Aurora territory when **Eric Decker** was stripped by **Earl Thomas**. The Mustangs burned 3:05 off the clock then went into 'prevent' to seal the Can-Am Conference title.

QUOTES: "The Mustangs played like champions today. They made us look ordinary. Nick has been getting the job done all year but today he faced a defence at the top of its game. There was no doubt which team was better. Not much else to say." – Durham Coach, **George Kaldis**.
 "We executed our game plan and that seemed to frustrate them a little by the end. That 4th down stop in the 4th quarter led to a TD that made the score more lop-sided than the game was. I am fortunate to be able to coach a team like this." – Aurora coach, **Rich Liotta**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



Sir Reginald @RMClapham
 Ah dear me! That was a bally batty-fang. Chewed into dish cloths by Celestials were the Dinosaurs.



James Duthie @efljamesduthie
 The defence is peaking and the offence is doing its job. One more game until history is made!



Durham 13 Aurora 26



	1	2	3	4	F
Durham	6	0	0	7	13
Aurora	7	6	3	10	26

Complete

* Playoff * 02-22-2015 Candlestick Park Temp:48 Wind:10-20 None No Line MVP:Ryan

1	8:06	Durham	FG	Dawson 47 (8-42-4:22)	3-0
1	3:20	Aurora	TD	Ryan 5 pass to Boldin (Folk) (9-80-4:46)	3-7
1	0:41	Durham	FG	Dawson 37 (7-38-2:27)	6-7
2	9:08	Aurora	FG	Folk 36 (14-62-6:29)	6-10
2	7:59	Aurora	FG	Folk 54 (4--10-0:51)	6-13
3	3:56	Aurora	FG	Folk 31 (10-32-4:49)	6-16
4	14:15	Aurora	FG	Folk 34 (9-58-3:41)	6-19
4	12:51	Aurora	TD	Ryan 34 pass to Boldin (Folk) (2-34-0:16)	6-26
4	0:31	Durham	TD	Brees 4 pass to Bowe (Dawson) (14-91-3:01)	13-26

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Brees	28	19	172	0	0	1	0	96.1
Foles	23	11	124	1	0	0	4	64.4

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Ryan	43	27	272	2	0	2	1	96.3

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Jackson	5	23	4.6	2	0	8	0
Bush	3	15	5.0	0	0	7	0
Foles	1	7	7.0	0	0	7	0
Gerhart	1	4	4.0	0	0	4	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Forte	21	87	4.1	4	2	12	0
Polk	3	17	5.7	1	1	17	0
Young_D	1	2	2.0	0	0	2	0
Ryan	2	0	0.0	0	0	1	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Hilton	6	0	11	64	10.7	2	1	29	0
Decker	6	0	8	55	9.2	2	0	10	0
Johnson	5	0	9	65	13.0	5	0	17	0
Bowe	5	0	7	33	6.6	3	0	12	1
Davis_V	3	0	8	44	14.7	3	0	18	0
Jackson	3	0	4	19	6.3	1	0	9	0
Gates	1	0	2	9	9.0	1	0	9	0
Bush	1	0	2	7	7.0	0	0	7	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Boldin	7	0	10	105	15.0	6	2	34	2
Miller	5	0	7	33	6.6	1	0	8	0
Edelman	5	0	11	40	8.0	1	0	10	0
Cooper	4	0	5	49	12.3	3	0	15	0
Forte	4	0	7	22	5.5	1	0	13	0
Kerley	1	0	2	12	12.0	1	0	12	0
Polk	1	0	1	11	11.0	0	0	11	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Foles	1	0	0
Hester	1	0	0
Decker	1	0	0
DeCastro	0	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Bowman	0	1	0
Carroll	0	1	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Hester	5	104	20.8	31	0
Fleming	1	20	20.0	20	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Johnson	1	16	16.0	16	0
Peterson	1	0	0.0	0	0

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

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Kerley	2	1	18	9.0	9	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Dawson	2-2	47	1-1	7

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Folk	4-4	54	2-2	14

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Morstead	4	193	48.3	1	0	0	61

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Koch	4	180	45.0	0	3	0	54

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Rodgers-Cro	8	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
McCourty	7	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Joseph	6	0	0	2	1	0	0-0
Lofton	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Dumervil	5	0	1	0	1	0	0-0
Davis,T	5	0	1	0	1	0	0-0
Sherman	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Chancellor	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Drescher	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Houston	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Allen	1	1	1	0	3	0	0-0
Dockett	1	0	1	0	2	0	0-0
Foote	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Massaquoi	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Rivers	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mathieu	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Dansby	8	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Harrison	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thomas	6	0	2	0	0	1	0-0
Henderson	5	2	0	0	2	0	0-0
Peterson	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Bowman	4	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Carroll	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Boykin	2	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Weddle	2	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Walden	2	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Ellis	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Franks	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson	1	1	0	0	0	1	0-0
Watt	1	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Breeland	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Norman	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Angerer	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Avril	0	0	0	0	4	0	0-0



272 yards passing, 2 TDs and mistake-free vs best CB in football.

	Durham	Aurora
First Downs	21	18
Rushes	10-49	27-106
Passes	51-30-296	43-27-272
Sacked	4-33	1-5
Fumble	3	0
Penalties	3-30	7-40
Turnovers	2	0
Missed Tackles	7	1
Dropped Passes	0	0
Bad Passes	4	3
Passes	1	2
Runs 10+	0	3
Blitzes	12	9
Time	24:27	35:33
Third Down	2-10	7-18
Fourth Down	0-2	1-2
Red Att/Td/Fg	1/1/0	4/1/3
Net Offense	312	373



13-5-0

Santa Clara

28

MVP

Philip Rivers

31



15-3-0

Carthage

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
RGIII	19	30	244	4
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Moreno	14	63	4.5	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Jeffery	6	95	15.8	2

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Santa Clara	0	7	7	14	-	28
Carthage	0	14	7	10	-	31

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Rivers	27	42	323	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Lacy	26	100	3.8	2
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Gordon	7	98	14.0	2

Play of the Game

With the game tied 28-28 and 3 seconds left, **Steven Hauschka** made no mistake with a 48-yard game-winning FG into the wind to send the Cannibals to the final.

KEYS TO THE GAME

- Moreno held to 63 yards
- Blitz pressure failed
- Persistent double-teams on Lacy left WRs open

RIVERS, HAUSCHKA CLUTCH IN EPIC WIN! 48-YARD FG WINS IT AT GUN

KEYS TO THE GAME

- 13 of 16 on 3rd down conversions.
- Lacy 9 1st downs, 2 TDs
- 7 PDs by secondary

SUMMARY: LeGarrette Blount started the game with a 47-yard return on the opening kickoff, giving the Cannibals great field position at their 49 yard line. But the Sluggs' **Charles Johnson** tipped a pass then sacked **Philip Rivers** for an 11-yard loss on the first two plays from scrimmage to set up an eventual punt. Long-snapper **Clint Gresham** sailed the snap over the head of punter **Pat McAfee** for another loss, turning the ball over to Santa Clara at the Carthage 24. The Slugs drove to the 4 yard line but **Knowshon Moreno** was stoned for no gain on 4th and 1, giving the ball back to Carthage with no damage done. The Cannibals' offence was the first to gain traction: a 27-yard pass to **Doug Baldwin** and 20 tough ground yards by **Eddie Lacy** keyed the game's first touchdown drive that ended with Lacy squeezing through the trenches from 2 yards for the score. With **RGIII** struggling with his accuracy, the Cannibals soon got the ball back; Lacy ground out 32 yards on 8 carries, including a 4-yard TD run, to make it 14-0. With 0:25 left in the 2nd quarter the Sluggs finally got on the board, with RGIII checking down to **Alshon Jeffery** for a 16-yard TD pass to make it 14-7 at half time. A 3rd down sack by **Lavonte David** stopped a budding Sluggs' drive to start the 2nd half then the Cannibals replied with a 94-yard drive that ended with Rivers finding **Josh Gordon** for a 9-yard TD pass. Down 21-7, the Sluggs got back in the game with a wild scrambling 42-yard completion to an unguarded Moreno, setting up a 7-yard TD pass to **Randall Cobb**. On the Cannibals' next series, a nearly blocked punt by McAfee netted just 29 yards, setting up the tying score – a 22-yard bullet to Jeffery that capped a 54-yard drive. After safety **Antrel Rolle** picked off Rivers, the Sluggs drove 48 yards, 31 of those coming on scrambles by **RGIII**, and took their first lead on a 20-yard TD pass to **Andre Johnson**. A 38-yard kick return by Blount gave Carthage good field position and Rivers took advantage, going 6 of 9 for 61 yards and a 14-yard TD to Gordon to tie the game at 4:44 mark of the 4th quarter. The Sluggs could not mount a drive and the Cannibals took possession at their own 13. Rivers was 3 of 3 for 32 yards on 3rd down and Lacy converted another to sustain a drive to the Santa Clara 30, where **Steven Hauschka** kicked a 48-yard field goal for the win.

QUOTES: "Philip is the leader of this team. When we needed his calmness under pressure he delivered. But this was a team effort down to our kicker, Steve, who gave us the points we needed to beat a great team. I am so proud my face might explode right now." – Carthage coach, **Ken Main**. "Any loss is bitter, but in a playoff game, one game away from the championship, it hurts even more. I think we're all hurting right now because we all played a role in this loss. It was a team effort. A quarterback can only do so much – his teammates have to step up too." – Santa Clara QB, **RGIII**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



General Supernaw @SpOpReDead
The Navy has won this round fair and square. It's back to the drawing board for the Army.



Admiral Smith @USNavySmithAd
I salute the Army Special Forces for coordinating a great football season for the Sluggs. The Navy sails on to the final!



Santa Clara 28 Carthage 31



	1	2	3	4	F
Santa Clara	0	7	7	14	28
Carthage	0	14	7	10	31

Complete

* Playoff * 02-18-2015 The Killing Field Temp:24 Wind:5-15 None Line:CAR by 19 MVP:Rive

2	12:47	Carthage	TD	Lacy 2 run (Hauschka) (11-63-5:06)	0-7
2	3:51	Carthage	TD	Lacy 4 run (Hauschka) (12-76-7:00)	0-14
2	0:25	Santa Clara	TD	Griffin III 16 pass to Jeffery (Henery) (10-70-3:20)	7-14
3	6:18	Carthage	TD	Rivers 9 pass to Gordon (Hauschka) (8-94-4:55)	7-21
3	3:47	Santa Clara	TD	Griffin III 7 pass to Cobb (Henery) (4-63-2:25)	14-21
4	13:20	Santa Clara	TD	Griffin III 22 pass to Jeffery (Henery) (8-56-2:56)	21-21
4	9:03	Santa Clara	TD	Griffin III 20 pass to Johnson (Henery) (6-48-2:42)	28-21
4	4:44	Carthage	TD	Rivers 14 pass to Gordon (Hauschka) (10-59-4:12)	28-28
4	0:00	Carthage	FG	Hauschka 48 (13-57-3:30)	28-31

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Griffin III	30	19	244	1	0	4	4	128.3

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Rivers	42	27	323	3	1	2	3	93.7

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Moreno	14	63	4.5	4	1	15	0
Griffin III	4	39	9.8	3	2	21	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Lacy	26	100	3.8	9	2	15	2
Rivers	1	3	3.0	0	0	3	0
McAfee	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Blount	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Jeffery	6	0	6	95	15.8	5	0	22	2
Johnson A	4	0	6	40	10.0	1	0	20	1
Moreno	3	0	3	53	17.7	1	1	42	0
Gronkowski	3	0	8	32	10.7	2	0	14	0
Cobb	2	0	6	19	9.5	2	0	12	1
Jones	1	0	1	5	5.0	0	0	5	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Gordon	7	1	12	98	14.0	7	0	21	2
Baldwin	6	0	9	102	17.0	5	2	28	0
Cook	4	1	7	49	12.3	4	1	26	0
Amendola	4	0	5	26	6.5	0	0	7	0
Lacy	3	0	3	23	7.7	0	0	12	0
Sanders	2	0	5	19	9.5	1	0	14	0
Rudolph	1	0	1	6	6.0	0	0	6	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Revis	0	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
McAfee	1	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Holliday	4	106	26.5	37	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Blount	4	158	39.5	47	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
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Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Moncrief	3	0	4	1.3	2	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Henery	0-0	0	4-4	4

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Hauschka	1-1	48	4-4	7

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Masthay	4	181	45.3	0	1	0	49

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
McAfee	2	88	44.0	0	1	0	59

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Burfict	11	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Byrd	7	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Jenkins	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Grimes	6	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Revis	6	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
McCoy	5	1	0	2	0	1	0-0
Johnson,C	5	1	1	0	0	0	0-0
Tuitt	3	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Elam	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Matthews	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Bryant	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mathis,R	1	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Phillips	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Rolle	1	0	0	0	0	0	1-0
Dennard	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Fairley	1	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Masthay	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Lewis	10	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
David	6	2	0	1	1	0	0-0
Whitner	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Arrington	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Ellerbe	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Babineaux	3	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Johnson	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Verrett	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hawthorne	1	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Beason	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Gooden	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wolf	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Reed	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hardy	0	0	0	0	1	0	0-0



PHILIP RIVERS
CARTHAGE

323 yards passing, 2 TDs and converted 7 of 12 3rd downs passing.

	Santa Clara	Carthage
First Downs	19	28
Rushes	18-102	29-89
Passes	30-19-244	42-27-323
Sacked	4-36	3-29
Fumble	0	1
Penalties	2-18	7-64
Turnovers	0	2
Missed Tackles	7	2
Dropped Passes	0	2
Bad Passes	1	4
Passes	1	3
Runs 10+	3	2
Blitzes	53	29
Time	25:35	34:25
Third Down	4-9	13-16
Fourth Down	0-1	1-2
Red Att/Td/Fg	5/3/0	4/4/0
Net Offense	310	383



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – Okay, let’s deal with the elephant in the room quickly before it drops a big elephant-sized turd on my rug.

It is not often that I have to say what I am about to say. In fact, it is rare; very rare, indeed. Perhaps so rare, that **Blake Bortles** completing a bomb to **Chris Ivory** into a 20 mph wind against **Richard Sherman** would get better odds from a Vegas bookie than me having to say what I am about to say. The reason is because it almost never happens that I am in a position such as I am in right now. But I am and most of you know it. So, it just makes sense to come out and admit it, say I am sorry for misleading you, and move on.

So.....here we go.....the thing you almost never read.....about to be in print.....forever....or as long as printed things last and computers can read the software that stores them.....perhaps preserved in somebody’s anti-Spats time capsule.....or etched in stone to be mistaken for Holy Writings in two thousand years.....the tribulations of the Prophet McChad.....the dark time of the soul moment....the proof that I am bound, as we all are, by the constrictions of time and space and human frailty.....the thing you never thought could be.....yet is....impossibly.....is....like a market for bacon-flavoured donuts.....or Charleswood winning more than one football game.....a head-scratcher....beyond belief.....but real and as annoying as a hemorrhoid.....the truth that must be faced.....the medicine that must be swallowed.....the path to redemption.....

.....I don’t have to say it.....there is no law against *not* saying it.....it is not like me saying it will fix what happened....make it right in the world.....but saying it might just make it right in the world of Spats McChad.....or it might not....there is no way of knowing unless I say it....which I am about to do.....very....very....soon.....

.....<ahem>..... <!>.....okay.....(I can do this!).....

.....L.....WAS.....WRONG! If you lost your house on my advice I am sorry. Better luck next time.

Instead of the Durham-Santa Clara final that we *should* have had, we have a Carthage-Aurora match-up that I, for one, did not anticipate. But in my own defence (since few will stand up for the Titan when it is wounded), who could possibly have anticipated that Santa Clara would have focused its defensive game plan on *double-covering Eddie Lacy*? (not keying, *double-covering*) Or that **Robert Mathis** would have run into or tripped over **Andre Smith** on all but 2 of his 41 blitzes? Or that **Philip Rivers** would not have fumbled away the ball at least once in his own territory? Or that **Knowshon Moreno** would have had just 14 carries all game? Or that **Nick Foles** would suddenly turn back into **Nick Foles** under the pressure of the biggest game of his career? Or that **Matt Ryan** wouldn’t have choked, as he always used to do in the Garland days, against one of the league’s elite secondaries? Or that **Richard Sherman’s** “trick elbow” would flare up at the exact moment when **Anquan Boldin** would catch a long pass in front of him? I could go on....but why belabour the point – Santa Clara and Durham let me down, big time!

And now I have at least two weeks of intense harassment to endure via e-mail, Titter, and in the ‘Comments’ section beneath my syndicated column on the Internet, until my prediction of the outcome of the Final proves to be accurate and fans, except the ones who hate me most, move on to discuss the biggest game of the year and forget my little...“misunderstanding.”

So, what exactly happened? My foresight may have failed me, but my hindsight is as good as anybody’s. Read on folks

ARMY VERSUS NAVY

Unnoticed by most fans across the league a familiar old rivalry had been quietly developing throughout the season, away from the glare of the mainstream media spotlight. The appropriation of the Death Valley Undertakers by the US Army Special Forces during Operation Re-Dead had been well-publicized despite the Top Secret nature of the military operation because, when it comes to football, there is only so much that can be withheld from the American public. To the credit of the Army, once that part of the operation became de-classified they had public fun with their team for as long as it had belonged to them. Pastel ‘Plum’ & ‘Rose’ base colours and a bright yellow Banana Slug on the helmet looked strange on the football field, but they had lightened everyone’s mood a little in the months after the Pentagon had been forced to annihilate an entire Michigan community.

The sale of the team to **Neil Shannon**, owner of Dark Oceans Worldwide Services, promised to bring some stability and a lot more conservatism to the “look” of the team, not to mention a little more sense to the coaching of it. With **Chris Worthley** and his entire staff suddenly out of the picture, the military had been forced to fill the gap on an emergency basis. Restricted to the use of Service personnel with the appropriate security clearance, options were few. Major **Cooper Gerow**, the most qualified on paper, struggled with the pace before booking off with PSTD. **Ryan Rich**, the richest boy in the world, proved



a worthy tactician but incapable of balancing school with professional coaching duties; not to mention that he was legally not permitted to look at the Banana Sluggs' playbook, which until two weeks ago had been classified 'Secret' because it contained sections that, if revealed publicly, could seriously damage national security.

Although Shannon had vowed publicly to be a "hands off owner" after handing the head coaching reins to his former Citadel teammate **Joe Chefalo** and filling in on defence during his team's Week Twelve game at Mission Viejo, he had shown himself at all times to be very curious about everything involving his team. He was a fixture in the team's offices and on the field during practices. He of course travelled everywhere with them and soon he was "hanging out" with a few of the players – most notably **RGIII** and **Robert Mathis**.

It was not long before Chefalo quit as "Head Coach." At the time the reason was a mystery, but eventually something resembling a story began to leak out.

Getting the inside scoop on the Banana Sluggs is notoriously difficult, due to the holdover of military



An Aurora fan (upper left) watches confidently as the Mustangs ride over the Thunder Lizards while 'Man-Eater' (above) patrols the Killing Field whipping fans into a blood-frenzy. Fans and mascots like these will descend on staid Columbia, SC in two weeks for the annual EFL Gale Sayers Game.

personnel still on staff. It doesn't help that the team's official correspondent, one **Lieutenant Smedley Farnsworth**, files his stories with Special Forces Ops, thereby making them classified material and unprintable except in confidential briefing documents for Operation Re-Dead Command. The local sports columnist assigned to the Sluggs, **Drew Redwood** of the *Santa Clara Mercury-Dispatch*, normally writes about tennis and has few contacts in the football world. His coverage seems to consist of him watching the games on TV like everyone else and stealing ideas from ESPN.

So, I consider it somewhat of a coup that I was able to penetrate the murky world of clandestine military football operations to discover that, whatever **Neil Shannon** was saying publicly, he was doing something completely different behind the scenes.

It appears that with the departure of Chefalo, the Army continued to supply coaches, as per the initial purchase agreement, until Shannon could hire a permanent head coach. One by one these officers would ask for reassignment within a week or two of taking over. If my sources are correct, it is not hard to understand why. During coaches meetings Shannon would sit next to whoever was in charge that week and hover over their shoulder to read their notes. He would interrupt general discussion to offer his point of view on every conceivable matter, from play-calling to the starting line-up to which pants the team would wear. He was tolerated because he was the owner and for no other reason.

In the 7 weeks since Shannon had taken over the team the Banana Sluggs had been through 4 Army head coaches: a Captain, two Lieutenants, and one Sergeant-Major; a fellow named Higgenbottom, who, at two weeks tenure, lasted the longest. By the time the Conference Final arrived, one of the team's fitness trainers, a corporal named Milligan, had been promoted to the top job. He was considered perfect for the position because he was comfortable taking orders and laughed at all of Shannon's jokes.

In the background, the Army was closely watching. **General Brathwaite Supernaw** was carefully reading every line of Lt. Farnsworth's correspondence reports. He was keenly aware that the Army had inherited a superpower of the football world. The Army, and he personally, would be judged on how well it performed. Although he had built in plausible deniability by forcing a sale

to his good civilian friend, Shannon, the Pentagon knew who was really in charge. And the top Generals in America were already laying wagers on the outcome of the ultimate showdown between Army-directed Santa Clara and Navy-run Carthage.

You see, while **Ken Main**, CEO of *Tinna Inc.* – a tuna canning company that employs almost 20% of the Micronesian population – actually owns the Cannibals, it is a little-known fact that the Pentagon, for unfathomable reasons, subsidizes the football franchise, enabling it to survive in an otherwise inhospitable football climate. The branch of the Service entrusted with ensuring the success of ‘Operation United States of Oceania’ is, of course, the Navy, by virtue of its sea power in a part of the world that is almost entirely ocean.

The Commander of the Pacific Fleet, **Admiral John Wesley Smith**, was also closely watching events unfold in the EFL. He had been a classmate of Supernaw’s at West Point and was a friendly but fierce rival, having finished a close second to his Army comrade in every major competitive endeavour at military school except for, of course, swimming. Smith had bitterly rued the day he learned of his friend’s accidental acquisition of the Death Valley Undertakers. Smith had been overseeing the Cannibals for two years, albeit from a distance, and was proud of its meteoric rise from expansion small fry to killer whale of the EFL’s East Division. Suddenly his West Point rival was ahead of him again, having received custody of one of the league’s elite teams. No doubt Brathwaite would wish a wager if the teams met in the playoffs – which Smith would have to accept – and it looked very likely that his Cannibals would be defeated again by the more talented team. They had already been crushed 51-24 in an embarrassing Week Eleven debacle that had formed the basis of some persistent ribbing from his friends in Washington.

When the day of reckoning finally arrived, a jam-packed Admiral Byrd Field (aka “The Killing Field”) was host to over 1,000 Navy seamen and US Marines drawn in from ports in San Diego and Hawaii and a few hundred Army Special Ops personnel attached to units that had “fought” against the zombies during the Death Valley Campaign of 2014. General Supernaw and his aides sat in a makeshift Command Box at press level as guests of Admiral Smith and his staff. Then, of course, there were the hundreds of media from across the continent as well as what looked to be the entire adult population of the five islands of American Samoa forcing its way into the tiny stadium. Due to the “open gate” policy in effect for Samoan citizens, no official crowd count is available; but all 28,736 seats ended up being filled and fans stood in the aisles and children sat on parents’ laps to catch a glimpse of the action. The unfortunate ones who could not fit into the park milled about outside watching the game on giant screens while drinking beer and scoffing down *‘palusami’* and corned beef. There was only one event in Carthage that day and it was football, American style.

As with many small sports communities, the awareness of its smallness tends to bring out “short fan syndrome.” This is the tendency of a small market crowd to over-compensate for its lack of size with excessively loud and obnoxious behaviours that would not be tolerated in places like New York City, for example. What might get you arrested in Manhattan is considered “charming” and “entertaining” when done while wearing face paint in a remote and exotic location where people used to eat each other for a living. When set against that backdrop, chopping off the heads of effigies of **Robert Griffin III** and pretending to dine on its severed private parts doesn’t seem that bad. It could be worse – that could be the *real RGIII* they were doing that to!

It is the determined goal of the average fanatical Cannibal fan and the numerous team mascots that roam The Killing Field to make the experience of the visiting team as uncomfortable as possible. To that end, all sorts of outrageous acts short of physical assault are permitted up to a point approximately 10 yards from the visitor’s bench. If you get any closer than that, Security will stop you and likely arrest you. But stay outside of that “neutral zone” and almost anything goes.

On this day, ‘Man-Eater,’ the head mascot for the Cannibals, tore apart straw models of the Banana Sluggs’ main stars and tossed the pieces into a giant boiling cauldron that a semi-naked cheerleader named Poon stirred with a gigantic spoon, occasionally testing the “broth” and commenting through her clipped-on PA microphone that *“it needs a little more blood.”* To which the crowd invariably chanted: “MORE BLOOD!” and ‘Man-Eater’ would follow by ripping off another limb from straw Banana Slugg and tossing it into the cauldron.

The intense provocation of the visitors by the home crowd may have backfired, however. The Sluggs started strong, as if the integrity of their carcasses depended on their performance. Defensive lineman **Charles Johnson** tipped a **Philip Rivers** at the line on the game’s first play from scrimmage then sacked Rivers for an 11-yard loss on the next. Rivers then threw high to a double-teamed **Doug Baldwin** on third down and in less than one minute the punting unit was on the field. Long-snapper, **Clint Gresham**, who should never be named on a broadcast or in a write-up if he is doing his job, sailed the snap over the head of punter **Pat McAfee**, resulting in a Santa Clara possession starting at the Carthage 24 yard line.

The Sluggs overcame a couple of sacks to move the ball to the Cannibals’ 4-yard line, where they faced 4th and 1 and an early decision. With owner **Neil Shannon** standing next to Corporal Milligan on the sideline, the Sluggs’ nominal head coach hesitated. That prompted Shannon to lean over and say to the young Corporal: “Don’t let me interfere with your decision to go for it and put this game away early, *Sergeant!*” In a split second, Milligan barked out the play, *‘O-M gut-wrencher on 2!’* and the Sluggs’ offence stayed on the field. The Cannibals responded with a big-man package of five linemen and 4 linebackers – all of whom were blitzing on the play. **RGIII** handed off to **Knowshon Moreno** but **Lavonte David** stoned him at the line for no gain.

The old coach’s axiom that you take the points when you can get them on the road popped into my head at that moment, largely because that was exactly what network analyst **Solomon Billcotts** said at the time, but also because that is one of the

standard observations made by most commentators at the moment-of-fail on 4th-down conversion attempts made inside easy field goal range by the road team. What being on the road has to do with it is not clear, even in this day of emerging power and insight created by analytics. If there is a study on why it is more important for the road team to kick an easy field goal and reject a 4th down gamble than it is for the home team, I would appreciate my readers pointing me to it.

As for the decision to gamble: like any gamble there is a down side if you lose. For Santa Clara the downside was that it lost an opportunity to score first and capitalize on the home team's error. The psychological impact of that, whether on the road or not, is hard to gauge. But it is a fact, after the fact, that the Sluggs' were slow to move the ball until close to the end of first half, while the Cannibals looked tougher and more confident in the trenches in building up a 14-7 half time lead.

The main story on the networks after two quarters was the Banana Sluggs' troubles on offence; the team that had scored 51 points against Carthage in their last contest had managed just one touchdown in two quarters so far. **RGIII** had been erratic, Moreno had been less than average, and **Stevan Ridley** had been non-existent. But the story could have also been the Santa Clara defence, that featured an out-of-control **Robert Mathis** blitzing on almost every down and a pre-occupation with **Eddie Lacy** as a *pass-catching* threat. Lacy had been double-teamed, along with deep threat **Josh Gordon**, on nearly every pass play. While the Cannibals were certainly not moving at will, they were taking what the Sluggs were giving to them and making steady progress.

The sense of being an underdog had grown deep roots in Carthage. While the Cannibals had dominated many of the teams that had visited the Killing Field during the season, there was a strong belief among the fans that they were over-matched against the Banana Sluggs. So when the home team followed up its first half success with an opening series sack of **RGIII** by **Lavonte David** to bring on the Santa Clara punting unit; and the offence made a series of big plays on a 94-yard touchdown drive that finished with Rivers slinging a quick dart over the middle to Gordon for the score, the jubilant home fans could not contain their excitement. They hooted, danced and frolicked in the stands, many linking arms and moving in large groups by tribe through the aisles like dozens of competing waves, disregarding those who remained in their seats, or worse: picking up children and other small people at random and throwing them in the air with a loud "eeeeeyyyyyyyyyiii!" before moving on. It was all a very traditional display of joy apparently, but disconcerting to those who did not know the traditions. The Army Special Ops soldiers weren't impressed and showed their displeasure with dozens of well-placed disabling blows to the more threatening-looking natives.

But the celebration would not last long. On the first play of the Sluggs' subsequent possession, **RGIII** found himself in trouble with his primary receiver covered and David on his tail. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Moreno wide open and deep down field in a spot where he should not have been. On the run, Griffin heaved the ball high in the air, on a catapult trajectory that made it look like he was throwing it away. When the ball finally came down it landed in the arms of Moreno who fell to the turf as he secured it for a 42-yard gain. It was the kind of crazy break that changes games; and for the next 11 minutes or so it looked like it might have been the turning point.

Bang-bang-bang came the Santa Clara scores: a 7-yard touchdown pass to **Randall Cobb**; then a 22-yard touchdown pass to **Alshon Jeffery** to tie the score at 21; and finally a classic Rivers turnover – a high throw on an interception by safety Antrel Rolle – to set up a 20-yard touchdown pass to **Andre Johnson**. The Banana Sluggs had strung together 21 unanswered points and looked to be in control with a 28-21 lead and 9 minutes left to play.

In the Commander's box, General Supernaw leaned over to Admiral Smith and whispered loudly, "Your boys put up a good fight, Smitty. They just couldn't finish – reminds me a bit of you."

The Admiral winced slightly. "It's not over yet, Brath," he replied dryly.

When the Cannibals' offence took the field they made no secret of their intent; with four wide receivers and a tight end there would be no running the ball. The Sluggs answered with 6 defensive backs and focused their attention on **Josh Gordon** and **Doug Baldwin**. Bit-by-bit the Cannibals moved up the field, with check down passes to the slippery **Danny Amendola** keeping the drive alive. But when they got into field goal range they stalled at the 25 yard line and stared at 4th and 3. With just over 6 minutes remaining, down by 7, **Ken Main** was not about to gamble that his team would get this close again in a situation to tie the game or take the lead. He kept his offence on the field but substituted Lacy for the tight end. It turned out to be the key substitution of the game.

Like a moth to a flame, Shannon's eyes were immediately drawn to no. 27. With the glazed look of the obsessed he turned to Corporal Milligan and barked: "Lacy! Put a second body on Lacy! Don't let him grab the outlet pass!"

Rivers dropped back and surveyed the field. **Robert Mathis** blitzed and Lacy picked him up, leaving the safety and linebacker assigned to him temporarily frozen in place. Gordon was double-covered, but Baldwin had a couple of steps on **Janoris Jenkins** across the middle. Rivers zipped the ball into his bread basket and he scampered for a 13-yard gain and a first down. Two plays later Rivers threaded the needle to a double-teamed Gordon in the end zone for the tying score. The Killing Field erupted in euphoria again. Children, small adults and dwarves flew up in the air. Food and drink were spilled and toes were trampled as gangs of shrieking fans marauded about the stands. Mathis kicked the bench when he returned to the sideline.

The Sluggs went three-and-out on their next possession. **RGIII** suddenly looked worn out and ragged, making three consecutive off-target throws. But a deep punt and a holding penalty on **Keenan Lewis** pushed the Cannibals back to their own 13

yard line to start their march to history.

It was perhaps **Philip Rivers'** finest hour (3:33 minutes actually) as a pro. Facing a sea of defensive backs and a relentless blitz, Rivers kept his team moving forward, converting three straight 3rd downs with precision passes, none more important than the 6-yard completion to **Jared Cook** on 3rd and 5 at his own 18 yard line – a miss there and it would have been punting time with plenty of drive time on the clock for a Santa Clara push into field goal range. But Rivers' perfect pace gained valuable yards while it subtracted precious time off the clock. When the Cannibals had reached the Banana Sluggs' 40 yard line they turned to **Eddie Lacy**, who carried them to the 30 yard line, into the outer ring of field goal range for **Steven Hauschka**, with 3 seconds left on the clock.

With the crowd at the Killing Field on its feet and 'Man-Eater' on his knees, his arms outstretched and face raised to the sky in petition to whatever Gods a cannibal would pray to, Hauschka stretched his leg as holder **Pat McAfee** took his position eight yards behind the center. Admiral Smith and General Supernaw sat stoically in their seats, not a trace of emotion on their faces, eyes glued to the gridiron. The scene froze for an instant; McAfee's outstretched hand waiting for the snap, Hauschka's arms hanging loosely as he focused on the spot, the line stalk still in a moment that felt suspended in time. Suddenly Gresham's arm snapped back like a bolt of lightning, the ball spiralled into the waiting hands of McAfee, who snatched it out of the air, turned it, spun and placed it in one fluid motion as Hauschka stepped forward and laid his right foot into the ball. He got all of it; and if it could stay right it would make it through. For a split second it looked like it might hook left but at the last moment it held, turned slightly to the right and sailed through. The line judge's arms went up at the same time that thousands of Cannibals supporters threw up theirs and roared in triumph. It signalled the start of 24 hours of dancing in the streets in Samoa. No rioting, just dancing....and lots of alcohol.

General Supernaw turned his head to Admiral Smith and with the slightest hint of a smile said: "Congratulations, Smitty. Your team came through in the end. Reminds me a bit of that time you beat me in the breast stroke."

Admiral Smith grinned: "You weren't that close, Brath; not that close at all!"

FOLISH GAMES

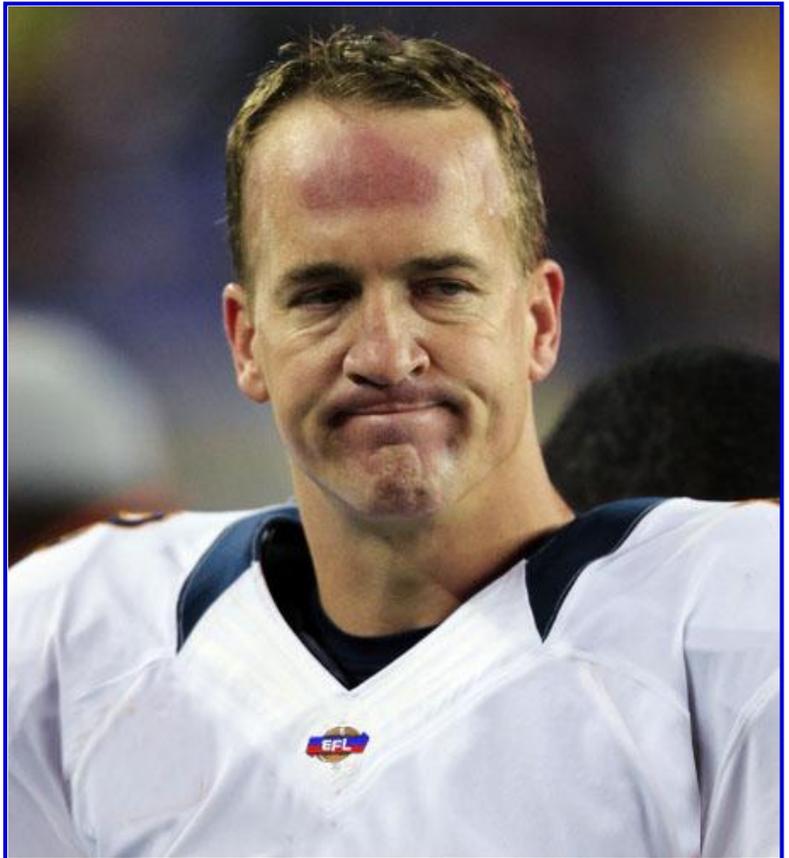
In Aurora, the Can-Am Conference Championship game between the Thunder Lizards and the undefeated Mustangs got off to an early noon time start due the league's concern that early winter darkness would interfere with a game that went into overtime. Lightless Candlestick Park had been a scheduling pain all year, essentially disqualifying Aurora home games from "flex scheduling" options

down the stretch. Now the lack of lights was interfering with valuable playoff ratings as the less anticipated Santa Clara-Carthage match-up had been moved into prime time. It worked out well for the league in the end as the Carthage win over the Banana Sluggs had become an instant classic, while the much bally-hoed "Battle of the Behemoths" in Aurora, contrary to all projections, soon became an instant nightmare for **George Kaldis** and his traveling dinosaurs.

There was a time in the game when it did not look so bad for the visitors, however. When the Mustangs' **Malik Jackson** sacked Lizards' starter **Nick Foles** and forced a fumble that was covered up by Durham – allowing the Lizards to get on the board first with a 47-yard field goal by **Phil Dawson** – the break on the bounce and the recovery to score made the most of a less than dominant start on offence.

But to beat a perfect team you have to do more right things than wrong things by a ratio of about 10-1. You can't keep dodging bullets. Every down counts. And keeping the dominant emotional edge is critical. On that last count, the Lizards came up flat on both sides of the ball, but especially on offence where they looked stilted in their execution, unsteady in their demeanour, and passionless in spirit. On the other side their competition looking like a gang of scarlet and gold clad Viking berserkers by comparison. Actually, forget it being relative; they just looked like Viking berserkers.

JJ Watt personified the juggernaut that is the Mustangs' defence. His numbers – 1 tackle, 1 sack – do not tell the tale of his impact. Durham left tackle, **Jordan Gross**, one of the league's best, needed help on almost every passing



Peyton Manning ponders a rough day at Durham that saw his Spartans knocked out of the playoffs in the Quarter Finals. Manning was unable to lead Pickering back to the Championship game, but his 12 wins, 42 TD passes and 115.7 QB rating are MVP-calibre numbers nonetheless.

down, leaving *Cliff Avril* practically free on the other side to harass and bully Foles in the pocket. The comfortable mastery that the Durham pivot had displayed the previous week against the Spartans had not necessarily abandoned him in Aurora this week – *JJ Watt* and the Mustangs’ ‘D’ had chased it out of him.

Speaking of Foles – the case that was being made all season by supporters of *Drew Brees* was finally made this week. In the biggest game against the toughest opponent to date, Foles “foleded.” He did not have the mojo to stick it to a better team. To be fair, he did not wilt as much as he failed to blossom. On the other hand, had Brees started he might not have won, and he may have thrown a couple of interceptions where Foles had thrown none, but he would have laid it *all* out on the field and, in the process, given us a better game to watch. Instead we got a 26-6 game with a 26-13 score.

Whether the Mustangs were simply too strong, or the Thunder Lizards too fragile, the net result was an uneven game that took about one quarter to reveal itself. The scoreboard did not reflect the disparity until early in the 4th quarter, but for anyone watching from the beginning it was apparent which team held the upper hand throughout. Even in the 1st quarter, one that ended with Aurora clinging to a 7-6 lead, there were early warning signs for Durham. A fumble luckily recovered and a lost fumble overturned on replay had enabled the Lizards to kick two field goals. When they started fumbling and losing the ball, the field goals stopped and with that the points; the Mustangs did not look like they were going to surrender a meaningful touchdown.

The turning point, if there was one, seemed to come in two stages on the Mustangs’ opening touchdown drive. The first stage was a surprise call to send the back-up to the back-up’s back-up running back, *Chris Polk* on a stretch play on 3rd down and 6 at the Thunder Lizards’ 37 yard line. Polk, who had 7 carries all season for a 2.4 yard average, cut through the Durham defenders like *Walter Payton*, slipping a couple of tacklers before being brought down 17 yards later by safety *Devin McCourty*. The Lizards were still scratching their heads three plays later when they loaded up to stop Polk, only to watch the Mustangs’ best receiver, *Anquan Boldin*, fake out all-pro corner *Richard Sherman* for an easy touchdown on a 5-yard pass from *Matt Ryan*. That was the second stage – a touchdown on a day when field goals were the dominant score.

To say this game was a disappointment is an understatement. It was depressing to watch; and not because I had staked my reputation on a Durham victory. Simply put, it underscored the futility of playing 160 regular season games and two playoff rounds to crown a team that been imposing its will on the pack all season as if it were already King of the Conference. Durham had been the last hope that the Mustangs would have to break a sweat in order to win it all. But even Durham’s impressive collection of talent looked ordinary, perhaps less than ordinary, against an Aurora team gassed up and firing on all engines.

Throughout an incredible, dominant regular season, Mustangs’ coach *Rich Liotta* had been polite and restrained. He remained that way when asked by local Aurora correspondent *James Duthie* after the game whether he felt he was coaching the best football team of all time. “I don’t know about all time, Jim,” Liotta responded cordially. “But I do know it’s the best team I have ever coached in all my time.”

MVP SEARCH

As we do every year, members of the Affiliated Press (AP), of which I am one, set aside time to consider who the two best players were during the past regular season. As a public service with the goal of making you all better football fans, each year I share with you, my dear readers, my thoughts on the candidates – who they are and why they are in the running. Sometimes the winner is head and shoulders above the rest and sometimes the winner is just a teeny-weensy bit better than a crowd of others. Regardless, there can only be one winner for the offence and one for the defence. It is always a complex process and a difficult decision. But in the exercise, wisdom can be gained. So let us take a look at the best of the best in 2014, starting on offence:

Peyton Manning (PIC) – He may be ultimately judged on his failure to win a championship in 2014, but it is hard to find fault with his numbers: 4,324 yards passing, 42 TD passes and a league-leading QB rating of 115.7 should earn him a few votes.

Cam Newton (CHI) – His post-season ended on a down but his regular season was a success story. He completed 71.7% of his passes and threw for 3,461 yards and 26 TD passes with just 5 picks. Add in his 673 rushing yards and Chino wouldn’t have made the playoffs without him.

Matt Ryan (AUR) – Ryan was let loose this season and he responded with career highs in passing yards (4,627) and TD passes (43). He started every game for his team and won them all. I don’t think you can ask for anything more.

Philip Rivers (CAR) – A re-born Rivers is the reason the Cannibals finished as the no. 1 seed in the PAC. He led the league in passing yards with 4,869 and was 3rd in TD passes with 36. He was remarkably consistent against all levels of competition.

Robert Griffin III (SCB) – Controversial at times, there is no argument that he gave the West Division titlists their best chance to win when he was on the field. 3,348 yards passing, 434 yards rushing, and just 5 interceptions highlighted a year of progress.

BEST OF THE REST: *LeSean McCoy* of Gwinnett won the rushing title with 1,638 yards and carried a very bad team to a respectable 5 wins. *Antonio Brown* of Twin Cities caught 67% of the passes thrown in his direction while leading the league in catches with 110 and finding the end zone 17 times. The Triumph’s *Jay Cutler* had his season curtailed by injury and still threw 30 TD passes. Mustangs’ fans are claiming that *Anquan Boldin*, with 91 receptions for 17.8 yard average and 17 TDs is the reason for Ryan’s banner season. If a lineman could be an MVP, *Evan Mathis* of Santa Clara would be it – he didn’t miss a blocking assignment (that anyone noticed) and surrendered just one sack all year.

While quarterbacks dominate the ballot for the offence, the defensive standouts are more rounded:

Lavonte David (CAR) – Winner of the Best Solo Performance by a defender in 2014, he propped up a terrible Carthage defence and kept it from being horrendous. He led the league in sacks with 20 and racked up 101 tackles, 2 picks and 5 forced fumbles.

Patrick Peterson (AUR) – Out of the glare of the spotlight, he quietly posted one of the best shutdown corner seasons in league history. Only 43.3% of passes thrown his way were completed and for the highlight reel he added 5 interceptions and 2 pick-sixes.

JJ Watt (AUR) – Facing constant double-teams his sack numbers were down this year with 11, but his tackles-for-loss shot up to 17. He also had 4 forced fumbles and 11 pass deflections, placing him and Carlos Dunlap (12) in a class of their own.

Richard Sherman (DTL) – He may end up being punished for a sub-par Conference Final outing against Anquan Boldin, but during the season Sherman was a supreme force at corner with 6 interceptions, 16 passes defended, and a 58.7% completion rate.

Eric Weddle (AUR) – He made completing a pass down the middle a perilous gamble with 4 interceptions and a league-leading 18 deflections. He was rarely tested and when he was, passes found their targets just 37.5% of the time.

Robert Mathis (SCB) – He blitzed more than any other linebacker in the league and still managed to play almost 80% of his team's snaps. He placed second in sacks with 16 and second in forced fumbles with 5. He was a constant disruption with 17 QB pressures.

BEST OF THE REST: *Luke Keuchly* was a disciplined tackling machine for the Regulators with 148, 11 of those for loss, 1 forced fumble and an impressive 8 pass deflections. *Earl Thomas* of Aurora notched 58 tackles, made 4 interceptions, and allowed just 46.4% of passes thrown at him to be completed. *Alterraun Verner* of Chino played almost every snap of the season against the best wide receivers in the league and came away with 85 tackles, 4 interceptions, 2 pick-sixes, and 13 pass deflections. *Robert Quinn* of LA was an intimidating presence on the league's worst team with 54 tackles, 10 sacks, 5 stuffs and 2 forced fumbles.

FEARLESS PREDICTION: Still smarting from being shutout in the Conference Finals, I nevertheless raise my arm confidently in favour of the Aurora Mustangs to complete their perfect season with a well-earned win over the Carthage Cannibals. As entranced as I was by the drama of the Cannibals' victory over Santa Clara in the PAC Final, I was mesmerized by the precision with which Aurora slowly and painfully flayed the Thunder Lizards. It might not even be close.

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RECORD VS THE SPREAD AFTER THE QUARTER FINALS:

98-63-5

JIMMY'S CHAMPIONSHIP PICK

At 'Carolina Slammer' in Columbia, South Carolina

CARTHAGE @ AURORA (line – MUSTANGS by 7)

INJURIES: Carthage – TJ McDonald (OUT); Aurora – None.

BACKGROUND: The teams did not face each other during the regular season. The only previous meeting of these franchises was back in 2012 when the expansion Commonwealth Colonials fell to the Garland Mustangs 38-9. Until this year, the Colonials/Cannibals had never appeared in the playoffs. The Mustangs of Garland/Aurora are currently 3-1 in post-season play.

WHEN CARTHAGE HAS THE BALL: The Cannibals will take their cue from the Mustangs' defensive alignment and grab what is given to them; which won't be much against the best defence in the league. They will expand and contract their formations according to the situation and will not be afraid to run from 4-wide receiver sets or pass from pro sets in running situations. Everything they do is with the intent of finding an ideal match-up or opportunity for Josh Gordon to break a big one to the house. However, Philip Rivers is not likely to force a throw into double-coverage unless absolutely necessary. Although primarily a passing team, the Cannibals have the capacity to grind out yards on the ground, which they have done successfully in both playoff games and in the season finale against Twin Cities. There isn't much weakness to target on the Mustangs' backside. Willie Young is a vulnerability at nose tackle but he is supported by the best inside linebacker pairing in the league. Expect the Mustangs to shut

down the pass first and the Cannibals to bide their time on the ground with Eddie Lacy until they see an opening for an air strike.

WHEN AURORA HAS THE BALL: The Mustangs will hope to exploit favourable match-ups with their wide receivers against the Carthage corners. Expect Anquan Boldin to be “bold” in challenging rookie Jason Verrett while Julian Edelman keeps Keenan Lewis occupied. The Mustangs can run the ball well but they are not very interested in doing so. They may get around to it once they have a comfortable lead, but prior to that their ground game serves the sole purpose of setting up the deep shot to Boldin. Sometimes that involves multiple consecutive carries for Matt Forte, but those do not change the over-arching strategy to grab a quick lead and/or put the game away early with a long strike in the passing game. The Cannibals’ defence relies heavily on Lavonte David doing something in the back field to disrupt the passer or stuff a runner. Without David, the Carthage defence is as close to useless as it gets. Greg Hardy needs to step up and cause havoc or it could be a very long day for the Cannibals’ D-men.

THE WAY I SEE IT: The measurables favour Aurora by a large margin but the door to a Carthage victory is open a crack due to their offence – which was the most efficient in the league last year – and the ability of the Cannibals’ coach, Ken Main to adapt a strategy on the fly. If Philip Rivers continues to maintain his 4th quarter form from last week, this could be a very close game. But Rivers has a long history of turnovers that could easily decimate their chances in a shootout if the Mustangs’ defence brings its usual pressure to bear. Aurora coach Rich Liotta has proven to be a good planner, but he has not been overly challenged too often by difficult in-game situations. Things could go sideways for the Mustangs if their aggressive offensive game plan results in a turnover or two, but that has not been a problem so far this year. When consummating a perfect season the toughest game is the last one. If Aurora can pull it off, they will be the first team in EFL history to achieve the ‘Holy Grail’ of franchise accomplishments. If not, they will be the closest team to reach that milestone but will be forever known for missing it. Much as I would like to call an underdog here, I just don’t see a realistic opportunity. The Mustangs are the best team in the league and they should prove it beyond any doubt in the season’s final game. **PICK: AURORA**



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