



2009

PLAYOFF EDITION CONFERENCE FINALS

February 14th. 2010



PACIFIC ATLANTIC CONFERENCE FINALS

BLUE SHIELD BLOCKS, KNIGHTS SHOCK!

*INTERCEPTION RETURN FOR TD
INSPIRES KNIGHTS 'D' / JACKSON
WINS ANOTHER GAME IN RELIEF
WITH TD PASS TO SMITH*

Charles Woodson looks for a lane after intercepting Peyton Manning in the first quarter of the PAC Final. Woodson scored on the play to put the Knights in front 7-0. They would go on to win 14-13, eliminating the Pats.



LOS ANGELES

14



CHARLESWOOD

13

CHARLESWOOD – Entering this playoff contest there were no teams from the inaugural EFL season that knew each other less than the Pats and the Knights. They had met just twice in three seasons, Charleswood prevailing in both games. In those two meetings both defenses had dominated. The Knights had scored just one touchdown in two games against the Pats; a 3-yard pass from David Carr to Tatum Bell back in 2007. The Pats’ offence had fared better, with 3 touchdowns, but the combined score of both games – Pats 26, Knights 18 – was enough to cause both offences to blush.

Going into this game there was no reason to believe the offensive output would be any different. The Knights were in a virtual tie with Florida for the top-ranked defense in the league while the Pats’ offence was only sometimes dangerous – showing periodic lapses against the better defenses and schemes. The pressure was on *Adrian Peterson*, the hero of the quarter final round victory over Chino, to deliver a haymaker punch on the ground to open up room for *Peyton Manning* to throw the ball. But would a good performance from Peterson be enough to create room against a star-studded Knights secondary? It was no secret that Manning had had only one reliable weapon all year, and that was tight end *Tony Gonzalez*. The wide receiver trio of *Torry Holt*, *Bernard Berrian*, and *Marques Colston* had been underwhelming in their contribution, accounting for only 4 touchdowns, largely due to the two-tight end / two-running back formation favoured by the Pats – not exactly a scheme designed to spread the field and bring the wide receivers into play.

In spite of all the red flags signaling danger for the Pats’ attack, most fans supported and believed the idea that Manning would out-duel the tandem of *Jason Campbell* and *Tarvaris Jackson* aligned against him. The Pats’ defense was no slouch either, ranked third in the league, and its strength was its secondary. Did anyone expect either of the Knights’ quarterbacks to be able to move the ball against them through the air, on the road, in hostile Patriots Place, in such an important game – anyone other than *Jeff Dohrn*, that is? The LA coach had fired up his squad by posting all of the pundits’ predictions on their team message board. All week he openly challenged his defense while lending support to his offence. “I don’t just know you *can* do it, I know you *will* do it,” he reportedly said to his team in the final meeting in the locker room prior to the game.

The fired up crowd in Charleswood got a taste of the frustration to come on the Pats’ very first series. After *Adrian Peterson* got what appeared to be a first down on his second carry of the day, the referee spotted the ball inches from the first

down marker. Expecting the Knights to key on Peterson, the Pats handed off the ball to **Ovie Mughelli**. But the Knights played a straight run defense with a blitz and Mughelli never stood a chance. He was stuffed for a one-yard loss and the Pats were forced to punt after three-and-out. That began a back-and-forth opening quarter that saw neither team able to sustain a drive or score until **Charles Woodson** stepped in front of a pass intended for **Torry Holt** and returned it 39 yards for a touchdown. It was great individual play by Woodson, as the Knights defense was playing the run, leaving only the corners and safeties in a zone defense. Suddenly it was 7-0 Knights and the fans at Patriots Place shifted uneasily in their seats.

The Pats answered with a strong drive of their own, relying on Peterson to move the ball 45 of 56 yards all the way to the LA 19 yard line. But in another inauspicious sign for the home team, Peterson fumbled the ball and the Knights' **Jason Ferguson** recovered to end the threat. LA, however, would fail to exploit the turnover and actually lost yards on the possession, giving the Pats the ball back in good field position. Charleswood forged ahead with a short drive of 38 yards, kept alive by a 4th down offsides penalty to third string end **Jamaal Anderson**, to get on the board with a 35-yard **Stephen Gostkowski** field goal. Then it appeared as if the home team would completely wrest control of the game from LA when **Bernard Berrian** returned a **Steve Weatherford** punt 71 yards for a TD and a 10-7 Pats lead they would carry into half time.

The Knights had done nothing offensively in the first half, so out went starter **Jason Campbell** and into the game at QB came **Tarvaris Jackson**. He promptly led his team on a 70 yard drive, with the help of a 35-yard run by **Jamaal Charles**, to the Pats' 8 yard line. There they faced 4th down and inches. But instead of hammering it into the soft gut of the Pats' defensive line, they sent Jackson on a bootleg and he was tracked down for a 3 yard loss. The crowd went wild and, at that point, all the winning signs pointed toward Charleswood. But the Pats offense, appearing for the first time in the second half, looked sluggish and had to punt after gaining only 3 yards. LA got the ball back near midfield.

Jackson, appearing unaffected by the failure of the previous drive, fired a series of short and accurate passes underneath the coverage to move the ball to the Charleswood 7. It looked briefly like the Pats would dodge another bullet, however, when **Shonn Greene** fumbled at the 4. But tackle **Kareem MacKenzie** fell on the ball to save the Knights drive and set the stage for a 4-yard TD pass from Jackson to **Steve Smith** on the next play. The Knights now led 14-10 but, with a full quarter remaining, there was still plenty of time to play.

The Pats opened the second quarter with a drive to the Knights 6 yard line but had to settle for a field goal when Peterson was held to 1 yard on 3rd & 4. With LA clinging to a 14-13 lead, a 21-yard pass from Jackson to **Roddy White** shifted the increasingly important field position battle in favour of the Knights. Manning would be hard pressed to sustain a long drive against this defense and, in the end, would fail in the attempt. Needing only a field goal to take the lead, the patient Pats were derailed when **Brad Meester** was flagged for holding with 2:31 left in the 4th quarter. A botched trick play got them into more trouble and finally they failed to convert on 4th & 14 from their 35 yard line. They got the ball back with 38 seconds left, deep in their end, but it was too late. Progress against LA's "Blue Shield" was slow – Manning and the Pats simply ran out of time. Against the odds, the amazing Knights had pulled off a great upset and were heading to the Championship Game.

* Playoff * 02-12-2010 Patriot Place. Temp: 75 Wind:

MVP: **Charles Woodson**

2008 **Los Angeles** 7 0 7 0 -14
2008 **Charleswood** 0 10 0 3 -13

1 0:01 **Los Angeles** TD Woodson 39 interception return (Brown,K) (0-0-0:00) 7-0
2 4:11 **Charleswood** FG Gostkowski 35 (9-38-5:01) 7-3
2 2:00 **Charleswood** TD Berrian 71 punt return (Gostkowski) (0-0-0:00) 7-10
3 1:05 **Los Angeles** TD Jackson 4 pass to Smith (Brown,K) (8-53-5:03) 14-10
4 10:43 **Charleswood** FG Gostkowski 22 (10-63-5:22) 14-13

< Los Angeles >

< Charleswood >

Passing Att Cmp Yds Sk 25 In Td Rate
Jackson 17 10 95 0 0 0 1 94.0
Campbell 11 4 39 0 0 0 0 47.2

Passing Att Cmp Yds Sk 25 In Td Rate
Manning 30 16 127 0 0 1 0 50.3

Rushing Att Yds Ave FD 10 Lg TD
Charles 7 58 8.3 1 2 35 0
Greene 7 20 2.9 1 0 6 0
Jackson 3 7 2.3 0 0 5 0
Benson 1 2 2.0 0 0 2 0
Bell 4 1 0.3 0 0 1 0
Jackson 2 0 0.0 0 0 3 0

Rushing Att Yds Ave FD 10 Lg TD
Peterson 27 126 4.7 5 3 20 0
Berrian 1 14 14.0 1 1 14 0
Norwood 3 8 2.7 0 0 5 0
Manning 1 5 5.0 0 0 5 0
Mughelli 2 -3 -1.5 0 0 0 0

Receiving No Dp Yds Ave FD 25 Lg TD
Smith 7 0 57 8.1 6 0 15 1
White 2 3 29 14.5 1 0 21 0
Charles 2 0 29 14.5 1 0 19 0
Heap 1 0 8 8.0 0 0 8 0
Jackson 1 1 5 5.0 0 0 5 0
Greene 1 0 6 6.0 0 0 6 0

Receiving No Dp Yds Ave FD 25 Lg TD
Gonzalez 7 0 58 8.3 4 0 13 0
Berrian 5 0 45 9.0 2 0 14 0
Holt 3 0 20 6.7 0 0 9 0
Colston 1 0 4 4.0 0 0 4 0

	LAK	CHP
First Downs	10	13
Rushes	24-88	34-150
Passes	28-14-134	30-16-127
Sacked	0-0	0-0
Fumble	2	1
Penalties	5-40	4-35
Turnovers	0	2
Time	28:35	31:25
Third Down	6-14	3-15
Fourth Down	0-1	2-3
Red Att/Td/Fg	2/1/0	2/0/2
Net Offense	222	277

Injuries: Jackson(LAK-5)



GAME MVP
CHARLES WOODSON
LA KNIGHTS

AFTER THE GAME

"He didn't see me. We was in a run set and I saw him look my way but he was looking at Torry. I thought he was going to pass to him so I got in front of it. I got a jump and it carried me to the end zone. He said I bumped Torry but he always says stuff like that!" – **Charles Woodson**, describing his interception of Peyton Manning.

CAN-AM CONFERENCE FINAL



DURHAM

27



FLORIDA

34

AARON RODGERS COMES OF AGE! DRAGONS ADVANCE!

*YOUNG FLORIDA QB THROWS
TOUCHDOWN PASS IN FINAL
SECONDS TO CAP FLAWLESS
TWO-MINUTE DRILL*

FLORIDA – From the beginning the Florida Dragons knew there was one team they would have to beat this year in order to repeat as EFL Champions. That team finally came to town this week. The Durham Thunder Lizards arrived as a 7-point underdog, but nobody was taking them lightly. A regular season loss to the Dragons in Week 5 had come at a time when the North Division Champs were still working out some kinks in their game plan. After that 20-6 loss at home, the Dinosaurs had won 12 straight, including a 31-10 whitewash of Gwinnett in the quarter final round of the playoffs. Most observers agreed that 14-2 Durham was a more confident team coming into the playoffs, and certainly capable of upsetting the 15-1 Dragons, even at Dragonmount.

In order to pull it off, the T-Lizards would need to mount a balanced attack on the indomitable Florida “Firewall” defense, the best in the league when one factored in the takeaways. The Florida secondary was



Florida’s Aaron Rodgers gets the ball away before he is knocked down by Durham’s Chris Canty in 4th quarter action in the CAC Final. Rodgers led the Dragons to the winning touchdown in the waning seconds of the game, to send Florida to the Championship game for the second straight year.

too good to be given the luxury of sitting on the pass. **Michael Turner** would have to do better than the 25 yards he was held to during their regular season match-up if Durham was going to stand a chance. On the Florida side, young **Aaron Rodgers** was about to play the biggest game of his career against a defense that, like his own, had forced many turnovers during the regular season. Whether or not he would hold up under the pressure was the wildcard in the game; the one variable for a team that had so far executed its season-long plan to near perfection.

Nerves appeared to get the better of the young Dragons quarterback early in the contest. On his first drop back to pass he stared blankly at the field in front of him and was sacked for an 8-yard loss by Durham’s star defensive end, **Jared Allen**, forcing a punt. Durham’s **Phillip Rivers**, on the other hand, looked much more in command during his first possession, completing passes of 16 and 17 yards to **Calvin Johnson** on the Dino’s opening drive. Johnson had managed twice to gain a step on **Darrelle Revis**, but the Dragons’ shutdown corner had twice punched the ball loose as Johnson tried to turn up field. The first time it bounced out of bounds, but the second time the ball bounced up into the hands of defensive tackle, **Brodrick Bunkley**, who ran it back 51 yards to the Durham 20 yard line. The crowd at Dragonmount went crazy with glee and amusement at seeing Bunkley lumbering down the sideline, slowly dragging Johnson and **Dwayne Bowe** on his back before **Nick Mangold** finally managed to knock him down.

Despite the break, Rodgers did not appear settled. He was bowled over for a 3-yard loss by **Ty Warren** on the first play from scrimmage, but managed two short completions to **TJ Houshmandzadeh** for 12 yards on the next two plays to bring up 4th & 1 at the 11 yard line. **Jim Heaton** did not hesitate; he kept his offense on the field and called the number of the EFL’s Offensive MVP, **DeAngelo Williams**, who charged and fell forward for the first down. Four plays later, facing 4th and 1 at the one, Williams got the call again and burst through a crack in the Durham line to score the first major of the game. As they had done all year, the Dragons capitalized on a turnover and led 7-0.

The T-Lizards responded with 3 straight completions for a total of 51 yards, but as soon as they turned to the ground game they stalled. Turner was stopped for no gain and **Kevin Faulk** was held to 2 yards on a screen and 3 yards on a draw to force a **Mason Crosby** 33-yard field goal to put the visitors on the board, but behind 7-3. A pattern for the day was beginning to emerge, one that would put the Thunder Lizards at a strategic disadvantage through a lack of run support.

Rodgers, now looking more comfortable, attacked the Durham defense head on with a long slant to **Brandon Marshall** for 24 yards, following up with a short hitch to Houshmandzadeh for 12 yards before handing the ball back to Williams, who ripped off four straight runs to cover the final 24 yards into the end zone for Florida's second TD. Down 14-3 and struggling to move the ball, the Lizards had to punt again and looked in serious trouble until Rodgers overplayed a hot hand. After completing to Marshall for 20 yards, he looked right back at him on the next play but got locked in a little too early. **Ken Lucas** read the play and lunged, snaring the ball at the Durham 37 yard line for the Lizards' first takeaway. Rivers made the most of the turnover by hitting a wide open **Calvin Johnson** in stride across the middle for a 45-yard TD pass to pull within 4 points, trailing 14-10. But the Dragons moved sharply up the field for a quick field goal to lead at half time, 17-10.

A slow third quarter started with the Thunder Lizards turning 8:25 minutes worth of ball possession into 3 points after a holding penalty to **Eugene Monroe** in Florida territory was enough to wreck the prospective TD drive. The Dragons had no immediate answer and were forced to punt after three plays. The Lizards appeared to be picking up steam on their next possession. Beginning at their own 10 yard line, they moved the ball efficiently to the Dragons 33 yard line. But a play designed to defeat the aggression of the Florida pass rush backfired as **Justin Tuck** dropped back into coverage and picked off a quick pass by Rivers. That was parlayed into a 42-yard field goal by **Jason Elam** that started a furious 31 point 4th quarter.

On Durham's first play from scrimmage after the kickoff, Rivers was picked again, this time by **Lofa Taupu**, leading to what appeared to be the clinching TD on a 24-yard pass to Houshmandzadeh. The score was 27-13 Florida with about 7 minutes remaining, but the Dinos were not done yet. In desperation, they moved the ball 52 yards in under 3 minutes for a TD to pull within one score, trailing 27-20. But the onside kick attempt failed and Florida took over at the Durham 39. The Dragons appeared about to seal the deal again after a 24-yard pass to Houshmandzadeh brought Florida into the red zone, but **Jonathan Stewart** inexplicitly fumbled two plays later and **Karlos Dansby** snatched the bouncing pigskin and took off, beating it all 88 yards to the Dragons' end zone to tie the game with 2:40 remaining. It was a spectacular turnabout that astonished the crowd at Dragonmount and paralyzed them briefly into eerie silence. But after **Will Demps** returned the kickoff 22 yards they rose again and cheered as Rodgers took the field to carve out a place in Florida football lore.

Starting at their 26 yard line, the Dragons deployed 3 wide receivers against the Durham nickel package. Rodgers calmly picked apart the Durham secondary, checking down to his secondary options effectively while the offensive line stood firm against the Dino's 4-man rush. In 2 minutes, Florida had moved to the Durham 34 yard line, within striking distance of Elam. But Rodgers would not put the game at the foot of his kicker. On 2nd and 10 he dropped back, avoided a rush by **Chris Canty**, and launched a short dart to Marshall, who ducked a tackle and exploded toward the goal line. It was a footrace that Durham safety **Adrian Wilson** was not going to win. Marshall scored to the deafening roar of the crowd with just 9 seconds left. It was all but over. The Dragons' young QB had proven his mettle and earned a trip to the league's biggest game.

* Playoff * 02-12-2010 Dragonmount. Temp: 76 Wind: Calm None MVP: **Rodgers**

2008 Durham	3	7	3	14	-27
2008 Florida	7	10	0	17	-34
1 7:42 Florida	TD Williams 1 run (Elam,J) (8-20-3:44)				0-7
1 3:35 Durham	FG Crosby 33 (7-56-4:07)				3-7
2 14:52 Florida	TD Williams 7 run (Elam,J) (6-60-3:40)				3-14
2 2:41 Durham	TD Rivers 45 pass to Johnson (Crosby) (5-63-2:40)				10-14
2 0:25 Florida	FG Elam 40 (6-46-2:16)				10-17
3 6:35 Durham	FG Crosby 35 (16-67-8:25)				13-17
4 10:34 Florida	FG Elam 42 (11-53-4:53)				13-20
4 7:36 Florida	TD Rodgers 24 pass to Houshmandzadeh (Elam,J) (5-38-2:35)				13-27
4 4:46 Durham	TD Turner 1 run (Crosby) (7-52-2:50)				20-27
4 2:40 Durham	TD Dansby 88 yd fumble recovery (Crosby) (0-0-0:00)				27-27
4 0:09 Florida	TD Rodgers 34 pass to Marshall (Elam,J) (9-74-2:31)				27-34

	DTL	FLD
First Downs	20	23
Rushes	22-66	27-116
Passes	33-23-284	32-23-288
Sacked	0-0	3-16
Fumble	2	1
Penalties	5-46	4-30
Turnovers	3	2
Time	29:31	30:29
Third Down	8-10	4-11
Fourth Down	0-0	2-3
Red Att/Td/Fg	2/1/1	7/3/0
Net Offense	350	388

Injuries: Kalil(FLD-1)

< Durham >

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate
Rivers	33	23	284	0	1	2	1	80.9

Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD
Faulk	9	34	3.8	1	0	9	0
Turner	12	33	2.8	2	0	6	1
Rivers	1	-1	-1.0	0	0	0	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Johnson	8	1	141	17.6	6	1	45	1
Bowe	7	1	76	10.9	6	0	18	0
Gates	4	1	39	9.8	4	0	15	0
Faulk	3	0	23	7.7	1	0	18	0

< Florida >

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate
Rodgers	32	23	288	3	1	1	2	107.3

Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD
Williams	21	101	4.8	7	1	12	2
Stewart	4	10	2.5	0	0	6	0
Jackson	1	4	4.0	1	0	4	0
Rodgers	1	1	1.0	0	0	1	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Houshmand	10	0	121	12.1	5	0	24	1
Marshall	9	0	138	15.3	7	1	34	1
Miller	3	0	23	7.7	2	0	13	0
Jackson	1	0	6	6.0	0	0	6	0



GAME MVP
AARON RODGERS
FLORIDA

AFTER THE GAME

"All year I've had to deal with critics and I know it comes with the territory when you replace a guy like Tom. But the team and coach Heaton never doubted me and that gave me the confidence I needed. The fans were great as well, very supportive, unlike you guys."
- Florida QB, **Aaron Rodgers**.



AROUND THE EFL With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – Went down to Mickey’s to catch the game again looking for some of that special bar fly insight into the mysteries of the game of football. What’s so mysterious about it, you ask? Let’s face it – unless you are on the coaching staff or you are a player on the field, there’s no way you know *exactly* where everyone should be on a given play from scrimmage. I mean, if the play is drawn up and executed by professionals to fool *other* professionals, then how in hell are we, fans and writers, supposed to know exactly what is happening on the gridiron, and *why*, apart from the obvious end result? For all you know, that great “read” the quarterback made was actually a great blunder by the defense, or that “awful pick” he threw was actually a perfectly thrown timing pattern to a half-wit wide receiver running the wrong route. The average spectator judges measuring the bottom line and rationalizes those judgments retrospectively to fit the result. It’s called “reverse path analysis” and it works every time. But is it *right* every time?

The worst offenders are football commentators. Paid to say something entertaining and lucid about what they are witnessing, they are under intense pressure to deliver with no time to consider. They say the most obvious things and perpetuate all the myths and clichés. They also let their personal knowledge of many of these players they are watching cloud their judgment of their performance – for better or worse. As soon as I raised my hand to throw my beer at the television screen after hearing yet another TV analyst comment on how much a “Student of the Game” **Peyton Manning** was (while watching him dissect a clearly demoralized and disinterested Mohave defense in Week 16) I knew it was time for a change. The drunks are more focused on the moment, uncensored and spontaneous in their reactions – more likely to curse inappropriately, but less likely to regurgitate sophomoric crap. Capturing their reactions is my mission during these playoffs. It is only through the beer mug lens that truth is found in sport. Better, I say, to watch a soundless game with a bunch of drunks suffering various mild and serious forms of Tourette’s Syndrome, than numbing my brain listening to the endlessly trite comments of the network analysts.

STUDENT OF THE GAME GETS SCHOOLED

If the Student of the Game was looking to learn another lesson, he got a valuable one from the Knights defense this week. In what was an absolute shocker to the networks, but was in fact predicted in fine detail by Joe “the Donut” Baker (who sits at the far stool near the fold-up entrance behind the bar), the Los Angeles Knights upset the Charleswood Patriots 14-13 in Patriot Place to advance to the Big Game. According to “Doe” (rhymes with Joe, and short for “donut”), Manning likes soft targets and has built a reputation coming back from deficits that he himself created through mediocre play early in games against, as he calls them, “*piss teams*.” “*Manning and that kid Patterson [Peterson] aren’t big time players*,” he told me with a straight face before the start of the game. “*The Knights are going to beat them*.”

Kirby Bolduc, also known as “Frenchie,” was not so adamant. A man who pays his bar tab with betting winnings can’t afford to be so bold. But he had put his money on LA to beat the 6 point spread, without predicting an outright win. “*Six points is a lot for teams that can’t score on each other*,” he said to me. “*Manning has no receivers and LA can’t pass deep so it’s all going to happen on the ground and that means a low score*.”

A guy named Asper, who likes to use big words and has no friends at the bar, but doesn’t let that prevent him from entering other people’s conversations, weighed in loudly, with due gravity and authority, that we should all watch Pats’ receiver **Jason Avant** because, as he said, “*in games like this it’s always someone obscure who comes out of nowhere to make the big play*.” The pronouncement temporarily knocked the discussion off track but Frenchie rescued it with a quick dismissal; “*Manning doesn’t know who his first string receivers are, how’s he going to find Avant?*”

The loudest guy at the bar is Mitch, a beefy ex-construction worker on disability who yells everything he says, from his observations of the game to his beer order. You can eavesdrop perfectly on Mitch's cell phone conversations because he is one of those guys who raises his voice when he talks on the phone and repeats the end of other people's sentences before answering. Mitch likes offensive linemen and not a game passes without an observation from him about the importance of the offensive line. Mitch wears an old black **Alan Faneca** Pittsburgh Steelers jersey from the good old days of the NFL. "*The play of the offensive lines in the EFL is not as good as it used to be in the NFL,*" he bawls. "*The players haven't been together long enough. Look at Durham. That line should dominate, but it doesn't! That wouldn't happen in the old days.*"

One thing about guys who watch football in bars; they tend to favour underdogs but never truly believe in them. They are comfortable with disappointment, and one way to ensure that is to call an upset and watch it not happen. They also consider themselves secret experts at some level, and the expert proves his expertise by predicting the unexpected, while qualifying it with all sorts of escape clauses in case the expected occurs. So everybody, to some degree, had predicted a strong LA performance, if not necessarily a win – for different reasons, of course, and with the caveat, "*if (insert Peterson or Manning here) doesn't have a good game.*" But as the game progressed, and it looked increasingly like Manning was not going to get good enough on this day to pull the game out of the bag, the sense of excitement at Mickey's rose as it dawned on patrons that they were actually about to witness an upset. Only Frenchie looked genuinely unsurprised when a long desperation pass from Manning sailed over **Bernard Berrian's** head to end the game. "*Can you believe that?*" barked Mitch, apparently forgetting that he had predicted an LA upset just three and a half hours earlier. "*Unbelievable! Extraordinary!*" exclaimed Asper. "*I thought Manning was going to pull it off,*" Joe "the Donut" Baker said as he shook his head slowly from side to side.

I must admit I was surprised. Unlike my new bar buddies (who might not be so cozy with me after they read this article) I tend to favour the front-runner. I never truly believed in the Knights' platoon system at quarterback while I did believe in **Peyton Manning**, **Adrian Peterson** and the Charleswood secondary. They have let me and a great fan base in Charleswood down and I hate them for it.

FLORIDA ONE GAME AWAY FROM HISTORIC REPEAT

[Imagine "The Classic Battle" by Sam Spence playing the background] It has never been done before in the history of the EFL – a team repeating as Gale Sayers Trophy winners in consecutive seasons. Some said it would never be done in our generation – others said not even in this century – the salary cap, the "system," would prevent it. But here we are, in the third year of the EFL's existence and Florida looks poised to repeat as EFL Champions in consecutive seasons after earning a berth in the final game by pulling out a home win over Durham in the CAC Final.

It was an historic win for the franchise, the league, and especially for a young quarterback named **Aaron Rodgers**, who few believed would be able to fill the boots of 2-year Dragons legend, **Tom Brady**. Looking back now, I'm not sure exactly *why* most of us thought that. Rodgers had done nothing wrong and had only looked very good every time out. But in the back of most people's minds, including my own, lurked the persistent belief that, despite his apparent competence, he would somehow fold under pressure like a cheap tent in a stiff breeze. Well, so much for the urban legend that claimed Rodgers would be a Nervous Nelly when the chips were down in the big game. Those chips were down in the waning minutes of the semi-final game against Durham and Rodgers looked as good as ever, if not better than ever.

The Thunder Lizards had just done something no team had done all season: shocked the Dragons with a big play late in the game to come from behind. With Florida leading 27-20 the Dragons were threatening to ice the game with less than 3 minutes remaining and the ball in their possession inside the Durham red zone. But without a hint of warning, **Jonathan Stewart** fumbled and **Karlos Dansby** scooped it up and returned it 88 yards for the tying TD. It was a stunning body blow that felt like a turning point. But Rodgers would not let that turning point happen. Looking more poised than even "Tom Terrific," Rodgers calmly moved the Dragons up the field, hitting pass after pass. The pretense of the run was non-existent and the T-Lizards doggedly played the pass in a nickel set. It didn't matter. Rodgers asserted his will, with the help of star wideouts **TJ Houshmandzadeh** and **Brandon Marshall**, and moved the ball steadily and quickly up the field until the dam burst and Marshall broke free for a 34-yard TD pass with 9 seconds left on the clock. It was a great drive and a great play and it caused the quiet young skinny guy wearing a white Rodgers jersey, sitting in a booth at the far corner of Mickey's bar, to suddenly jump up and shrilly wail, "yyyyeeeeesssssss!"

BOUNTY ON SPATS IN IOWA

The wagon train from Iowa finally arrived in New York and with it all the hate mail I had been waiting for since I took the Cubs to task for their performance in the Championship re-match against Florida in Week 13. Someone, who calls him/her self “Mother Bear,” wrote from a postal code somewhere in Adams County, where there are apparently no street names or lot numbers: “**You r stupid and dum.**” Presumably this person is related to everyone else in the County so my reply, written in French, will no doubt land in the right hands (or paws) eventually.

More problematic for Yours Truly, in case I ever have to go to Joe Ferguson Stadium to cover a Cubs game, is the notice I received from the Sheriff of Johnson County advising me of an arrest warrant in my name for a violation of sections 16(3)(f)(iii) and (iv) of the Municipal Standards for Public Etiquette Act, in which is stated that it is an offence to publicly defame the professional credentials of a resident of the County through: “offering unqualified opinion as fact in a matter of dispute,” and “the use of undignified language in a manner deemed offensive by the Reeve.” It appears that in Johnson County, the Sherriff and the Reeve are the same person – a cost cutting measure I am told. The “resident” I supposedly slandered is **Deron Redding**, who stays at the local Sheraton during home games, but permanently resides in a beach front condo in Malibu. I probably have a case against the County, but why risk going there and getting locked up and forgotten? Who would come to the remotest portions of Iowa and fend off a hostile and barbaric populace to post bail for me?

FEARLESS PREDICTION

Now that I have washed my hands of **Peyton Manning** and the choking Patriots, I move to more solid ground in backing the Florida Dragons to win the Gale Sayers Trophy. The Knights will be unable to stop **DeAngelo Williams** and both LA quarterbacks will turn the ball over frequently. Final score: Florida 42, Los Angeles 7.

NEW YORK GRIPES

The **Michael Turner** Fan Club is melting faster than a pat of butter on a hot coal. The Durham running back looked less than ordinary against Florida for the second time this season. If the “Firewall” had been gunning for him I might sympathize with his plight. But Florida looked more concerned about **Philip Rivers** and **Calvin Johnson** than Turner, yet the running back still could not deliver. Turner didn’t follow his blocks, he ran into them. Why would I have expected anything different? It’s a testimony to the power of pre-season media hype that, even after a proven track record of mediocrity in the regular season, I still thought Turner was a force in the Durham offence. “Frenchie” knew better, of course, because he studies the game like a bettor. He told me Turner couldn’t grind it out – that he’s an all-or-nothing type of runner, and he is more nothing than all.

Okay, so why is **Jeff Dohrn** starting **Jason Campbell**?? In five straight games Campbell has been relieved by **Tarvaris Jackson** after failing to move the team. Why maintain the fiction any longer? Campbell is a loser who wastes at least one quarter each game.

EFL NAMES OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS



OFFENSIVE M.V.P.



DEANGELO WILLIAMS

FLORIDA DRAGONS

DeAngelo Williams captured 8 out of 15 votes, beating out Peyton Manning and Philip Rivers. Williams set an EFL record with 26 rushing TDs and finished second in rushing yards with 1,467 yards, averaging 5.6 yards per attempt. He was the reliable base of the Dragons’ offensive attack all



DEFENSIVE M.V.P.



MARIO WILLIAMS

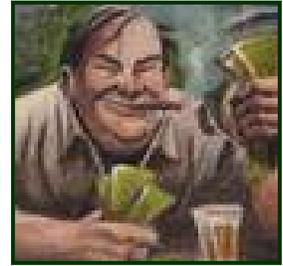
IOWA CITY CUBS

Mario Williams captured 5 out of 15 votes to win a close race for defensive MVP. Williams was a force against both the run and the pass, finishing 3rd in sacks, 2nd in sack yards, 1st in QB Pressures. He finished with 53 tackles, 5 run stuffs and a league high 8 forced fumbles.

BUG THE BOOKIE!

JIMMY THE GEEK GIVES YOU HIS PICKS FOR EFL CHAMPIONSHIP ACTION

YOUR SOURCE FOR FANTASY AND ON-LINE BETTING SOLUTIONS



JIMMY'S EFL CHAMPIONSHIP PICK

(GALE SAYERS TROPHY)

'THE BIG HOUSE,' CHINO C.A., SATURDAY, 6:30 PM

FLORIDA @ LOS ANGELES (LINE - DRAGONS BY 3)

For those who believe that defense wins Championships, you can't go wrong here. The question is will the best defense ultimately make the difference in this game? It will be hard to tell since experts can't agree on which defense is the best. The Knights get the nod from analysts who value the greater experience of their stars over the brash aggressiveness of the younger Florida defensive standouts. Others, like me, look at the astounding league-high 34 turnovers generated by the Florida "Firewall" and can't see how the Knights' stinginess in yards surrendered outweighs the big-play impact of Florida's game-changing defense. They not only stop their opponent, they score on their opponent. So, if defense *does* win championships, then Florida gets the nod based on that alone. But offense also plays a role and in this category one team is clearly better. Aaron Rodgers threw a big monkey off his back by leading his team to the game-winning TD in the CAC Final Game against Durham. The questions about his ability to perform under pressure have been officially put to rest. So where is the chink in their scaly armour now? - nowhere. Offensive MVP, DeAngelo Williams offers complete insurance against big game jitters in the passing game, and TJ Houshmandzadeh and Brandon Marshall offer complementary and reliable options as passing targets. The Knights two quarterbacks have had their moments, but they are not going to cause damage to a defense quickly or consistently.

WHEN FLORIDA HAS THE BALL: The Dragons will not be able to move the ball with impunity against the Knights' "Blue Shield." As dangerous as they are, they will have to fool defenders out of position to beat them consistently. The Knights' defense is playing an extremely disciplined style this year and does not gamble much. Look for the Dragons to attack the outside portions of the line with Williams and draw in the outside linebackers. They will not be afraid to take a shot downfield.

WHEN LOS ANGELES HAS THE BALL: The Knights offense was not bad this year but they are not explosive. Regardless of who plays quarterback, they move at a measured pace using the ground game and short passes. If they break a long play, it is because of Steve Smith or Roddy White and not the play call. Look for a conservative offensive game plan involving lots of off tackle runs and short passes designed to maintain possession while Jeff Dohrn crosses his fingers for a big gainer from one of their explosive young runners or an electrifying "Steve Smith Special."

THE BOTTOM LINE: The math here is simple: both defenses virtually cancel each other out, leaving the game in the hands of the offenses. The Knights cannot win that race. They will be successful if they manage to keep the Florida "Firewall" from scoring on them. It may be tough slogging for the Florida offence early, but eventually they will break away when the Knights' defense is gasping for breath from being on the field all day. It's too bad for the Big Game TV ratings that this one will be a blowout.

PICK: FLORIDA

SHOULD YOU LISTEN TO A THING I SAY??????

HOW I'M DOING AGAINST THE SPREAD

LAST WEEK: 0-1-1

OVERALL: 88-43-3