

2023 EFL PREVIEW

SEASON
17

we're NUMBER 1!

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE



NICK BOSCH
SCARBOROUGH BLUE ENIGLES

JUSTIN JEFFERSON
BUDAPEST NORTH STARS



HANSON REDDICK
LA PLATA BRAVES



CHRIS JONES
PEG CITY CRUSADERS



PATRICK MAHOMES
VIRDEA VIOLATORS



JALEN HURTS
PICKERING SPARTANS





1st Place



CANTON (AP) – There is no longer any doubt. The EFL is indisputably the no.1 professional football league in the world. One could clearly see the ascendent trajectory with the expansion of 2016, but the abject failure of EFL Asia, trepidation surrounding the unexpected move into Europe, and the collapse of Championship franchises in St. Charles and Aurora fueled the doubters who saw the EFL as being too overreaching in trying to reclaim the NFL’s monopoly on primetime gridiron action. Despite these road bumps, the EFL bus has motored forward toward its destiny with increasing speed due to a clearing of the road ahead.

It was only a matter of time (and surprisingly it took a full four years) before the Tiny Football League (TFL), the two-team remnant of the 20-team Superior Football League (SFL) and EFL main rival, finally imploded. It is no more.

The Tex-Mex Football League (TMFL), with its gimmicky two-down, five-yard first down and mandatory punt on third down lost the plot when it mandated that women comprise one-third of all active rosters. Nobody but *Bud Light* drinkers care to watch anymore.

The Canadian Football League (CFL), following its expansion to Halifax last year, is the only league other than the EFL to have expanded since the first year after the collapse of the NFL in 2007. North of the 49th parallel is where many good undrafted college free agents end up now, which strengthens that league considerably. However, it is still in Canada and few care about the CFL – even Canadians.

The Gentleman’s Football League (GFL), an attempt to revive the roots of the original NFL through the funding of local athletic clubs in a semi-pro, “grassroots” football league based in “flyover country,” using throwback pads and uniforms, did not finish its first season. The Dugger Pitmen were declared league champs after finishing 6-0, percentage points better than the 5-0-1 Shelby Millers. Almost nobody knows the league came and went since the GFL prohibited live TV broadcasts to preserve its local character and encourage people to come out to watch the games.

With competition like that, it is no wonder that the EFL, with all its flaws and missteps, has risen to the top of pile in possession of the golden football. It has a close to a

total monopoly on the best football talent in the world now. The fact that Moose Jaw Mounties’ QB, *Taylor Heinicke* dominates the CFL is proof that the talent pool outside of the EFL is drying up. It is now debatable whether a CFL all-star team would be able to hang with the EFL Champion Durham Thunder Lizards for longer than 30 minutes.

Fans want to watch the best. More importantly, they want to wager on the best, whether online or in a homegrown fantasy league. This has made the EFL the center of action in Las Vegas and, with that, the main attraction of corporate sponsors.

With the EFL now in a prime position to absorb the remainder of pro-worthy talent in what remains of the rival pro leagues, league officials are hinting at another expansion. From a strict business viewpoint this makes perfect sense – for many, that would be the end of the discussion. However, true fans of the sport – the most competitive football purists – dread such a move. In their view, the EFL is close to perfect from a



A rare photo of a night game between the Dugger Pitmen and the Fostoria Glassmakers of the Gentleman’s Football League. This shot was taken with a Kodak Brownie, state-of-the-art 1920’s camera. The GFL banned live TV coverage to preserve football’s roots and paid the price by lasting half a season.

competitive standpoint. They oppose diluting the talent pool. Currently, there is scant filler on any EFL roster and what there is consists of rookies and other prospects with the best chance of eventually making the grade, whose attractive salaries help struggling accountants fit their teams under the cap.

Demoralized Pilots fans might disagree with the above assessment, as their team looks like it will certainly fail to get off the ground again this year. In the greater picture, however, most pro teams currently operating outside the EFL would love to have Seattle's current "problems." A team with established and budding stars like **Budda Baker** and **Ceedee Lamb**, hot up-and-comers like **Trent McDuffie** and **Kenneth Walker III**, and ageing but still dangerous **Khalil Mack**, could do very well in the CFL, even with **Carson Wentz** at quarterback. In the EFL, however, the Pilots are one of the teams in the mix to finish last in the standings. And this year, that distinction carries with it all the shame associated with being the worst team in the league, but not necessarily its one redeeming reward: The first pick in the draft.

The EFL Committee resorted to use of its dictatorial powers to declare a limited Draft Lottery to take effect in 2024 rookie draft. This lottery affects only the bottom four teams, but in a creative (some would say diabolical) twist, the team that finishes last has a mere 15% chance of affirming its claim to the no.1 overall pick in the first draw and is at a disadvantage in each subsequent draw to determine the top four picks in the draft. Finishing last is precisely *not* where a team aspiring to nab **Caleb Williams** of USC wants to be. Finishing fourth last, no.21 in the standings, is where tanking teams now wish to be. That position carries a 40% chance of claiming the first pick on the first draw and maintains the advantage throughout subsequent draws.

But how does one engineer a "tank" to such a precise finish?

"Let's face it, teams will find a way to increase their chances of slipping into that number 21 slot," argues **Cowan Bullherd**, host of syndicated talk show, *Morning Bull*. "But it is going to be harder for GMs and coaches than just torching the roster and calling predictable plays! It will take a bit more finesse and strategy and at least enough competitive roster talent to win a few games. That can only be an improvement. Nobody wants to see another 2021 Peg City, or 2015 Virden or, going back to the original tank-a-thon, a 2012 Charleswood / Iowa City toilet bowl. For those whining about a lottery, just go back and watch game film from those two teams!"

As the season progresses, fans will be watching the bottom five or six teams as they jockey for the no.4 position. No doubt there will be shenanigans of some sort in the final weeks that will cause lottery doubters to call for a return to the historical status quo. How it plays out cannot be predicted in advance, but late-season challenges will include the dregs of the league potentially needing wins as well as losses. In any event, the league and most observers are convinced that the playoff races will not be adversely affected – at least not any more than in the past.

"Parity will be a thing again this season, especially among the second tier of teams," predicts **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org in the 2023 edition of the *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*. "After the top two or three, there is a crowd of about a dozen teams with the potential to steal a division or secure a wildcard berth. Behind them are three or four dark horse candidates and then come the four or five at the bottom. It is not a coincidence that the league set the lottery line at the bottom four. This is precisely the number of teams that have virtually no chance of making the playoffs."

Schultz's team of analysts do a good job breaking down the seasons in advance and have proven highly reliable over the years. Virden and Pickering top the Outrider Power Rankings heading into Week One, with Budapest listed at no.3, clearly behind the top two, but distinctly above no. 4, the defending champion Durham Thunder Lizards. After Durham, a tightly compacted string of contenders raises a few eyebrows and provokes intense debate.

In the eyebrow-raising category at no.5 is the Georgia Gladiators, the State of Georgia's original, yet *de facto* "other" team, pushed into the shadows by their five-year string of ineptness and the astounding success of Marietta's Cobb County Coyotes. Things started to turn in 2022, with signs of life from the Glads coinciding with a Coyotes collapse, and now some prominent prognosticators are predicting a viable Georgia run deep into the playoffs in 2023.

"The transition from **Big Ben** to **Tua Tagovailoa** was not a smooth one, but a 4-1 finish in the final weeks of last season coupled with a strong training camp in 2023 have Georgia fans on the east coast buzzing," senior *ESPN* analyst, **John Claytown** stated in an interview with *Sirius XM EFL Network* radio. "They have a strong running game, a solid offensive line and a couple of potential game-breakers at wide receiver in **Amari Cooper** and rookie, **Jaxon Smith-Njigba**. The way Tua was slinging it in pre-season, I see this as a breakout year for him. The Glads' defence doesn't really have any stars on it, but coach **Dave Birdsall** typically gets the most out of those guys, so expect that group to be competitive. They're going to have a winning season – it's only a matter of how many wins into the double digits they can pile up."

Georgia's position in the power rankings clearly makes them the Outriders' favourite to win the South Division. If it happens, it would be the first division title the team has won since 2011 when they went to the Championship Game. But not far down from them on the list, at no. 7, is division rival LaPlata, a strong challenger that will seek a new start as it moves to a new home for a second time in three years.

The franchise that redefined the word "dynasty" over seven years of dominance in Aurora under coach **Rich Liotta**

experienced its bleakest period since the 2008 expansion year during the last two disastrous seasons in Oshawa under local Oshawa-an and former Toronto Boatmen offensive coordinator, **Scott Dennis**. The book on what exactly caused the team formerly known as the Aurora Mustangs to abruptly stop winning when they became the Oshawa Pink Panthers has yet to be written. However, the pink and baby-blue uniforms and the baggage that came with them was suspected to have played a role. It finally blew up in their faces.

General Motors, the lead partner in the Oshawa business consortium that purchased the Mustangs, had been going through tough times, with fractured supply chains, rising inflation, and worker discontent hurting the bottom line. The Pink Panthers were kept afloat due to the television deal, as fan attendance had not met projections. Positive financial and moral support from Toronto's LGBTQIP2SSA community had held together a cataclysmic 2-13-1 first season, but that support began to diminish last year as Dennis attempted to distance himself from Pride Toronto's efforts to get the entire team to march in Toronto's Gay Pride parade. Concerned that the close association was having a hidden corrosive effect on his players, Dennis this year declined an invitation to speak at a Gender Affirmation fund-raising banquet. When pressed publicly for the reasons, Dennis blurted out:

"I just don't think its appropriate for us to get involved with that," he said to a reporter questioning him after a session of OTAs back in June. "I mean, it's one thing to be able to choose your partner without being judged or discriminated against. It's another thing when you start crossing that line where you believe that men can have babies."

The room went silent, which made Dennis nervous. Trying to lighten the moment, he attempted a joke:

"I mean, people are free to think that, but...", he stammered nervously. "...but if my players thought that I thought that, well, maybe they might think they can go on maternity leave, and that I'd be good with it. You know, there's enough reasons to miss a football game as it is."

With this remark, Dennis became an instant celebrity in conservative circles throughout the continent and an official pariah with the liberal establishment. He became the target of a vicious cancel campaign by the very group that had two years previously, praised him for being an ally and a progressive force in the LGBTQIP2SSA movement. His attempts to



Zach Sieler of the Galgos de Chihuahua sacks **Davis Webb** of the Raptors de Naucalpan in Tex-Mex League action. Sieler signed a five-year, \$25.6 million deal with the Spartans, including an \$8 million signing bonus, to shore up the middle of the defensive line. Sieler's deal was the largest of three big free agent signings by Pickering, which included linebacker **Kaden Elliss** and safety **Darrick Forrest**, totalling \$55 million, to strengthen an already good defence for the long haul.

walk back the remarks failed to convince radicals, and by mid-July, GM was under pressure to sever ties with their coach.

Dennis was under contract for another 8 years, which would have cost the cash-strapped car company more than they were willing to part with. They balked at the initial pressure, prompting Pride Toronto to announce they would boycott GM products until the company served them the head of their team's head coach. Other organizations followed suit, with *Bud Light* withdrawing their sponsorship of the gender-neutral bathrooms at the GM Megadome.

With the team's reputation on the football field severely damaged by two losing seasons and with the franchise now at war with half of its fanbase, GM made a business decision to sell the team as soon as possible. In a stroke of immense good fortune, they found an unexpected and particularly generous buyer – one with such impeccable credentials that the EFL Committee waived the extensive pre-approval vetting process and approved the sale in record time.

It turns out that the 2018 Champion St. Charles Chargers had had a particularly powerful and high-profile supporter in the days when **John Clingan**'s team was blowing up all preconceptions about expansion franchises. Although the Chargers did suffer a losing season in their second year, they made the playoffs in their first season and won a Championship in their third. This success won over a fanbase that included **Steny Hamilton Hoyer**, US Rep (Dem) for Charles County, Maryland. The congressman was so enraged when the league stripped Clingan of the Chargers and moved the team to Las Vegas, that he put forward a motion to launch a House investigation into the EFL itself, a move that was promptly quashed by other congressmen who were fans of the Chargers' rivals.

With the explosion of controversy in Canada around Dennis' comments radiating south of the border, and knowing GM was in dire straits, the congressman made his move to bring football back to Charles County and closer to the seat of government. He added a line at the last minute to a spending bill on aid to Ukraine that committed \$750 million of taxpayer money to the purchase of the Oshawa Pink Panthers and the team's relocation to LaPlata, Maryland, just 7 miles south of St. Charles, where the Chargers had played. Moving the team to LaPlata was the congressman's attempt at subterfuge, hoping to conceal his true intent to return football to St. Charles. With the somber discussion of the war in Ukraine as cover, the bill was passed with no debate about the purchase of the football team. And so it happened that Congress came to own a professional football franchise for the first time in U.S history.

This sleight of hand provoked a much larger controversy, but not before Congressman Hoyer took steps to ensure the viability of the franchise for the 2023 EFL season. He tacked on a contract to hire a GM and coach to a spending bill on green energy initiatives and transferred the team's payroll to the Federal Department of Health and Human Services. He had the Department of Housing and Urban Development sign a lease with St. Charles Stadium and renamed the team the LaPlata Braves while adopting the burgundy and gold of the NFL's defunct Washington Redskins. In quick successive strokes, the congressman had effectively brought football back to Charles County, Maryland, while reviving the spirit of the original Washington D.C. football franchise.

Trusted with the job of coaching amid the politics is **Stanley Milton**, a professional play-designer who has shied away from public exposure in the past. Milton is what is known to football insiders as a "ghost coach," a technical football professional contractor who provides consultation on play-design for established coaches in the pro and college ranks. Similar in stature to a session musician, Milton is hired to consult or to design a playbook (do a gig) for a "public facing" coach. Rumours abound that he was the brainchild behind the success of **Mike Martz** with the Chargers and that he designed the playbook for the Maryland Terrapins that led to a rebound after their disappointing finish in 2019. The truth will never be known, because such contracts contain binding confidentiality clauses. All the same, Milton is now the focus of attention as he attempts to rebuild two historic imperatives: the rightful return of football to Charles County and glorious return of dominance to the Mustangs, now Braves, franchise.

"There is a lot of disagreement over who will carry the torch for the South Division, now that the Irish are rebuilding and the Cadillac seem to be dealing with a **Kyler Murray** issue," began **Chris Hortenson**, host of ESPN's Sports Central and moderator for the pre-season roundtable, '*Call Your Shot!*' "Is the road really that wide open enough for the Gladiators?"

"I am going to circle back to the Mustangs – I mean Braves!" **Will Simons** jumped in. "Let's forget about those two years they spent wearing pink in La-La Land and focus on where they were before that and where they are going now. In case you haven't noticed, the Braves have a great defence and it's going to wreak havoc. Everyone thinks **Matt Ryan** is washed up, but he's been around enough to know he can be patient with a defence like this at his back, which will lead to fewer interceptions. Opposing defences still haven't figured out **Davante Adams** after all these years, so they won't be ready for rookie running back **Jahmyr Gibbs**, who brings some electricity to the run game they haven't had since **Kenyan Drake**. If you're sleeping on LaPlata, wake up! Because they're coming for the South Division title."

The consensus is that Georgia and LaPlata, the bottom two teams in the division one year ago, will battle it out for first place in the South Division in 2023. So, what happened to Erieau and East Elmhurst, nos.1 and 2 last year, to make them fall out of favour with the oddsmakers?

"The Irish went all-in with **Carson Wentz** last year and it didn't work out," explains **Kevin Kolb**, on his weekly

2023 PRE-SEASON POWER RANKINGS

1. **Virden Violators**
2. **Pickering Spartans**
3. **Budapest North Stars**
4. **Durham Thunder Lizards**
5. **Georgia Gladiators**
6. **Bruxelles Bombers**
7. **LaPlata Braves**
8. **Twin Cities Triumph**
9. **Peg City Crusaders**
10. **Brooklin Hawks**
11. **New Jersey Wrecking Balls**
12. **York Excaliburs**
13. **Scarborough Blue Eagles**
14. **Cowtown Corn Kings**
15. **Cobb County Coyotes**
16. **Chino Convicts**
17. **Erieau Cadillac**
18. **Iowa City Cubs**
19. **Billtown Bats**
20. **Sebastian Swordfish**
21. **Buffalo Derailers**
22. **East Elmhurst Irish**
23. **Charleswood Patriots**
24. **Seattle Pilots**

The *Outriders Pro Football Almanac* has an enviable track record of accuracy to justify paying attention to its pre-season rankings. But they are never perfect. Can you predict the imperfections in this Power Ranking list?

quarterback show, *Sunday Signals*. “Now he is gone, and coach **Archbishop Thomas Molloy** has no viable options at the game’s most important position. **Jacoby Brissett** is not much more than a good back-up and **Sam Darnold** has not proven he can deliver in the pros. So, Molloy’s been told to tear down the roster and rebuild around **Micah Parsons** and **DK Metcalf**. Obviously, they have their eyes on **Caleb Williams** or even a **Drake Maye** in next year’s draft.”

The Cadillac still have an abundance of talent on their roster, especially on the edge of the defensive front and their skill players on offence. One would assume they would be in the mix with former no.3 overall pick, **Kyler Murray** healthy. But confidence in the team is low heading into the season after an unconvincing finish to 2022 and a rocky training camp marred by poor play and strange goings on.

“*Is Kyler Murray attempting to become the first transgender player in EFL history?*” **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** of *Deathspun* writes provocatively in the lead to his article ‘It’s Woke Up Time.’ “*It certainly looks that way, despite his claim that a skimpy bikini he wore at training camp was a data tracker. Perhaps it was really a tease to gauge public reaction to what Cadillac insiders whisper are odd changes in their quarterback’s behaviour and appearance this off-season. Violent mood swings, unexplained absences, trouble concentrating, and feminine hygiene products appearing mysteriously in the garbage cans close to his locker. These are the rumours leaking out of the Cadillac training facility in Blenheim that have led to speculation that Murray is undergoing some type of gender-affirmation therapy or even preparing to undergo gender reassignment.*”

Like most of his *Deathspun* articles, Smith-Abdullah digs deep into the mystery, liberally citing anonymous sources and resorting to spy techniques to make a circumstantial case before confronting his subject, Murray, directly. It is a charge

the Cadillac quarterback denied a little too vehemently. When asked directly after a pre-season game if he was preparing for gender reassignment, Murray’s eyes popped as he shrieked, “absolutely *not!*” burst into tears and stormed out of the gallery.

Whatever is going on with the Erieau quarterback has cast an air of uncertainty around the team. The Cadillac bought themselves another season in Erieau with their playoff appearance in 2022, but in the process may have doomed their franchise quarterback to experience an identity crisis not unlike the one that **Marshawn Lynch** suffered when he got too comfortable in the tiny, sedate and strangely “woke-ish” peninsula on Lake Erie.

While the South Division appears ready to flip, no such dramatic change is expected in any of the five other divisions in the EFL, although competition in the Central and Coastal Divisions is expected to be more intense than ever.

“*Virden remains the team to beat in the Pacific Conference. They will not be seriously threatened in the division by Peg City or Twin Cities despite improvements in both of those teams in the off-season,*” writes **Harry Schultz** in the Forward to the *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*. “*Similarly, Pickering’s off-season moves, the steady improvement of **Jalen Hurts**, coinciding with a slight downgrade of the Durham roster due to salary cap issues, and an ageing Budapest, puts them firmly in the driver’s seat in the Atlantic Conference. For the viable contenders following behind the Violators and the Spartans in their respective divisions, expect the 2023 season to be a bitter and grueling dogfight for, at best, a home wildcard berth.*”

“It must be frustrating for uncompromising competitors like **Guy Williams** and **Stephen Katopodis** to grind out a painstaking rebuild of their teams, only to find themselves stuck behind **Patrick Mahomes** and the Violators,” remarked host **Kris Hortenson** of ESPN Sports Central as he addressed the ‘*Call Your Shot!*’ panel. “But football can be a crazy game at times. Does anyone see an entry point for either of those teams to maybe unseat the Violators?”

After a brief pause, panelist **Skope Boylezz** dove in. “I know you want us to put our thinking caps on, Kris and come



LaPlata Braves coach **Stanley Milton** discusses play design with first-round draft pick **C.J. Stroud** in training camp. The future of the franchise at QB will have the luxury of learning behind veteran **Matt Ryan** this year.

up with some plausible upset scenario, but I've already thought this through, and I don't see a way – barring a serious injury to **Patrick Mahomes** – that the Crusaders or the Triumph can beat them out. Look, when **Lance Barrate** made that trade to get **Matthew Judon**, that was a sign that he wasn't messing around this time. For once, Mahomes has a great defence backing him up. You know I love that Crusader defence too. It's geared to stop the pass for sure. But you know Mahomes will find a way around it. And is anyone going to tell me that **Mac Jones** or **Ryan Tannehill** will be able to challenge that Virden defence? Come on! For Lance Barrate and the Violators, things will get serious in the post-season. Until then it's all warm-up!"

Nobody likes **Skope Boylezz**, but the other panelists could hardly disagree with his assessment. The deck did seem stacked against any potential challenger for the Central Division crown. All the same, at least one of the panelists felt compelled to show

some deference to the only coach in the division who had actually won a championship.

"Yes, the Violators are the team to beat, but if anyone is going to beat them in the regular season it's going to be **Guy Willimas'** Triumph," professed **Will Simons**. "For all his ingenuity in building his roster, Barrate has been rightly criticized for going through the motions on game day, banking on his players' talent to overcome the opponent's game plan. The Triumph coach, on the other hand, is a master game-planner, who gets the most out of his players because of it. He's going to take the most important thing away from the Virden attack and force his opponent to either adjust or keep throwing himself up against a wall. This year, the Triumph have enough talent on both sides of the ball to be able to exploit a good game plan."

This comment prompted a derisive snort from the intemperate **Russ Flont**, who threw himself into the discussion with his usual brashness. "Come on, Will! You think that Guy Williams is going to be able to chalk board his way around **Tyreek Hill and Ja'Marr Chase? And Chris Olave? And Gabe Davis? And TJ Hockenson?**" Flont paused for effect, his bug eyes surveying the other panelists like a sentient fish. "If he's lucky, **Jaire Alexander** makes Tyreek look human for a day, but then you have the best quarterback in the history of pro football throwing to those four other studs! Who's going to stop that – **Avonte Maddox?** <Ha!> Don't get me wrong: Williams is a good coach, but there are limits to what coaching can achieve when you're up against the top talent in the league!"

"Russ is calling Patrick Mahomes the best quarterback in history!" snarked **Will Simons**. "I'm sure there are dozens of great quarterbacks with more seasons under their belts and real championship rings on their fingers who would object to that statement!"

It's tough to win a championship, but to be truly "great" in the eyes of history winning at least one championship is practically a pre-requisite. **Dan Marino** managed to join the club of greatness without one, but he is a rare exception. Mahomes is still in the early stages of his career, but people are already starting to question his status and legacy due to his lack of a championship ring.

Since taking over the starting job in Virden full-time in 2019, Mahomes has led the Violators to the playoffs each year and assembled a respectable 6-4 playoff record. He won the division twice and appeared in two Gale Sayers Games. In both of those finals the Violators faced a better, more balanced team with a good quarterback, but in neither game were they severely overmatched. When he had a chance to hang with **Aaron Rodgers** and Budapest in the final quarter of the 2020 game, he faltered. Last year's final saw him thwarted decisively from the beginning by an excellent Thunder Lizards defence. The tag of not being able to win the big game has already been hung on him by impatient fans eager to match the success of provincial rival Charleswood. With possibly his best supporting cast ever, the pressure is on Mahomes to deliver this year.

In his quest for validation of his greatness, Mahomes will be sneaking a peek at the standings in the Atlantic Conference this year, looking to see which teams he might face if the Violators mow through the Pacific Conference as many

expect they will. The weight of pre-season analysis suggests that he should direct his focus to the Coastal Division, where a grueling 17-week war is expected to unfold pitting Pickering against Budapest, with both York and Brooklin playing the role of capable spoilers.

“We know that there is a place already set aside for Aaron Rodgers in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton,” writes **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* in his article, ‘The Circle of Football Life.’ *“But for the three-time Gale Sayers Champion losing still cuts to the bone. At 39, in the twilight of his career, he does not want to exit the big stage with the memory of defeat in Durham in the Atlantic Conference Championship lingering forever through his retirement. This may be his last chance to drink the champagne of ultimate victory. His coach knows this and has positioned the North Stars for what looks like one final push to reclaim the Coastal Division and blaze through to the final.”*

“The North Stars can never be discounted,” explains **Harry Schultz** of [Football Outriders.Org](http://FootballOutriders.Org) in an interview on Sirius XM EFL Network. “This is not just due to **Aaron Rodgers**. He has two of the best wide receivers in football in **Justin Jefferson** and **Stefon Diggs** to make it almost too easy to pass the ball, even against the good defences. But the North Stars also have star playmakers on defence, **Minkah Fitzpatrick** and **Cameron Jordan**, and an obsessively committed coach in **Darrin Jones** to stitch everything together. So, there are enough scenarios in our simulations where everything comes together for them because of these factors. But there is no denying that this roster is beginning to turn over and is not as deep and experienced as it was in its prime. The Spartans, on the other hand, are ascending. There are fewer doubts about **Jalen Hurts** this year and the roster is solid as a rock, even if it lacks superstar power. The key variable will be whether coach **Gus Konstantakos** can keep his emotions in check in key moments.”

“The Coastal Division will be a grind!” declared **Ryan Clark**, making his second appearance on ESPN’s Sports Central roundtable and feeling more confident in the second year – perhaps too confident. “And you know everyone is talking about Budapest and Pickering, but I see this division as up for grabs, all the way!”

This statement brought a string of guffaws from the other panelists, led by the sclerotic **Russ Flont**: “Ryan, Ryan, Ryan!” he tut tutted. “You have the greatest quarterback of all time in **Aaron Rodgers** and the hottest young quarterback talent in the league in **Jalen Hurts** in the same division and you think a fly-by-night free agent like **Geno Smith** and an ageing **Tom Brady**, with nowhere near the receiving talent Hurts and Rodgers have, are going to challenge them for the division?? Come on! Granted, Brady is awesome, possibly the greatest quarterback of all time, but there are big issues in York, with



Kyler Murray stands ready to enter 7-on-7 drills at the Cadillac training facility in Blenheim, 9 miles northwest of Erieau. Social media exploded after this and other photos were published of a scantily clad Murray on the practice field, looking toned, but oddly effeminate. Rumours of a gender identity complex now dog Erieau’s QB, creating an unwanted distraction.

their coach sometimes forgetting what day it is, let alone what down it is!”

“**Geno Smith** was dominant in the CFL, Russ! That’s not a joke league, I don’t care what anyone says. He led the best offence in the league in BC and we’re talking about a game with bigger balls and only three downs to get 10 yards,” Clark countered. “Look at what other big time CFL quarterbacks did in the NFL! **Joe Theismann** won an MVP, **Jeff Garcia** was a four-time Pro Bowl selection, and **Warren Moon** is in the Hall of Fame. The Hawks have talent on their roster. All they were missing was a quarterback – until they signed Geno. Mark my words, they’re going to make some noise!”

“I’ll believe that when I see it, Ryan,” interjected **Will Simons**, an inveterate Budapest supporter. “I think the Hawks are destined for another basement finish. Not because they are terrible, but I think **Tom Brady** will have a say in putting them there. Brady has enough support in York to compete this year. They’re a longshot, but they have the potential. It really comes down to how well he plays and whether the coach can keep the team focused through 17 weeks.”

“Have we forgotten who the defending champs are, everybody?” barked **Skope Boylezz**. “You’re talking like everything begins and ends in the Coastal Division – by the way, why do they call it the coastal division? That bugs me a bit, I have to say – anyway, there was a damn good team in the league last year that made Aaron Rodgers look like a rookie and put Patrick Mahomes in his place in front of millions of viewers in the final. Are you telling me **Josh Allen** and the Thunder Lizards are heading for an extinction event this year?”

Analysts seem to be split on Durham’s prospects in 2023. There are some, like **Caleb Cogger** of *EFL Magazine*, who see another run at the big prize; and others, like fan forum contributor, **Schrell Partisian**, of ‘Bleacher Feature,’ who think their control of the North Division is in jeopardy.

“Durham was against the cap heading into the off-season and unloaded All-Pro, De’Vondre Campbell, fan favourite Devin McCourty and promising guard, Ben Powers out of the gate,” writes Cogger, in his article, ‘Rinse and Repeat.’ *“Some took this as a signal that the team was regrouping for another run two or three years down the road. But George Kaldis then did a clever thing: He packaged two late first-round picks to Seattle to bolt up to the 6th pick in the first round. Coupled with the third overall pick that he had purloined from Scarborough in 2022 (in one of the most questionable trades in recent history), he snatched two of the top cornerback prospects in the draft, thus solidifying his secondary at rookie salary rates. This may turn out to be the key move of the off-season for Durham, since the rebuilt back end of the defence complements its still fearsome pass, rush led by Brian Burns. The other critical parts are still in place as well. Fred Warner is still the rock in the middle of the defence and Josh Allen is still there to cover up minor flaws in the offensive line and make big plays. All the while, Budapest and Pickering will be beating up on each other while Durham goes at half speed against a mediocre trio of challengers in their division. They may not knock off Virden a second time, but they are a great bet to get another opportunity.”*

On the other side of this debate is Partisian, who saw the same moves as being inhibitors to a Thunder Lizard second straight title push.

“Durham started selling before the spilled champagne was dry on their Gale Sayers Trophy,” he wrote in his article, ‘One and Done.’ *“Cutting ties with Devin McCourty and bringing in rookies to man the two starting corner positions was a strong signal that the team was prepared to take a step back to be in position to take control of the conference when Aaron Rodgers eventually retires in a year or two. They remain a strong team and should win their weak division, but do not expect an immediate return to their championship glory in the post-season.”*

Anything can happen in the post-season. Durham’s chances once they get there are as good as any other team, and almost everyone believes they will get there.

“The Lizards have a disadvantage against their conference rivals because the North is pitted against the Central in inter-conference play,” Schultz says later in his interview on *Sirius XM EFL Network*. “This won’t affect their divisional standing, but it



Patrick Mahomes hangs his head as he walks off the field in Peg City following his team’s Gale Sayers Game loss to Durham. The young Virden phenom is accused of not being to win the big game.

could affect playoff seeding amongst the division winners. One scenario could see the Lizards play to a high level and still finish third seed in the Atlantic because of a loss to one or more of Virden, Peg City and Twin Cities, which means a road game in the quarter finals.”

The assumption in Schultz’s reasoning is that the Thunder Lizards are not under threat from any of their division rivals. Cowtown, Sebastian and Scarborough enter the campaign as wildcard prospects at best according to the *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*. At worst, all three could finish the season with sub-500 records and out of the post-season. The Blue Eagles, who boast one of the league’s ascending stars at quarterback, **Joe Burrow**, an established star in running back, **Dalvin Cook** and a superstar in defensive end, **Joey Bosa**, are alluring to creative writers looking to justify a plausible alternative analysis and separate themselves from the herd. But, as **Severin Handfottner Jr.** of ‘Coaches Call’ observes:

“Under the spangly surface, the Blue Eagles’ roster is a threadbare cloth, easily torn,” he writes in his article, ‘Why Not Scarborough!’ *“Joe Burrow is a valuable piece, but play him wrong, or leave him on his own, and you will lose him. It doesn’t matter who the nominal coach is in any given year in Scarborough, the handling of the team’s prime asset is influenced entirely by the owner, who thinks he has a literal football god at his command capable of supra-human feats. Burrow is asked to do it all in the Scarborough system and is expected to make it work with a weak supporting cast. Last year he had no viable run game and the most harmless receiver group in the league yet passed the ball over 600 times. This year he has the running back in Cook, and a promising rookie wide receiver in Jayden Reed, but no go-to stud on the flanks and no tight end. Given that the Eagles have modest playoff aspirations, the lack of effort to secure that “top guy” betrays a lack of vision that has plagued this organization since it moved from Florida.”*

With its track record of combining underachievement one year with talent bare rosters the next, it would be simply unwise to have high expectations of Scarborough, even if one can see the potential in its star players. In a similar category is Sebastian, a team impossible to predict and one that often gets in its own way.

In his skeptical commentary on the North Division, Handfottner continues: *“In coaching circles, Russ Lemmon is considered a rogue and, in some ways, dangerous. His penchant for off-the-wall calls is often confused with analytics, when it is more likely just a form of lunacy working in the moment. This gives analytics-based coaching a bad reputation. His aggression on fourth down is so outside the box that his attempts are changing the data, giving statisticians actual examples of situations like 4 & 8 at own 21 with the score tied in the 1st quarter. Prior to Coach Lemmon, there was no data for that situation. His play-calling on the other downs is equally erratic. On offence, it is often counter-intuitive, which is not necessarily a bad thing if one has the players to execute. On defence it resembles pure guesswork. When analyzing Sebastian, the roster is a secondary consideration after the coach. Will he get lucky this year or not? That is the question.”*

Rounding out the troika of teams attempting to knock Durham off its North Division throne is traditional rival Cowtown, a team that has made the playoffs in 11 of its 16 seasons but has yet to make the final, let alone win a championship. The Corn Kings offered the greatest resistance to the Thunder Lizards in 2022, even beating them once and claiming the division temporarily in Week Eleven. From that peak they descended, backing into a wildcard berth and getting eliminated in the wild card round.

“The Corn Kings are consistent – consistently *not good enough!*” declared **Skope Boylezz**, responding to moderator, **Kris Hortenson**’s remark that some think the Corn Kings are a solid bet to take on Durham. “I’d hate to be one of their fans. There has not been a ‘go-for-it’ moment in the front office since **Farmer Brown** shelled out a small fortune for **Darius Williams** in free agency in 2021, and that wasn’t even a good team that year! The deal for **Larry Fitzgerald** back in the days of **Joe Flacco** was about the only time I have seen them roll the dice to nab a real superstar and have it pay off. Look at them this off-season! They muddled around, doing next to nothing until the final weeks. They don’t seem to know who they want at quarterback, which will create a lot of issues with team chemistry. **Jimmy G** is supposed to be the starter, but he’s getting paid less than two of his back-ups. That Jimmy G is one heck of a guy to hang in and keep smiling under those circumstances. At least they’re well-coached. But that won’t be enough to do any better than they usually do, just above or below 500!”

Shifting back to the Pacific Conference, hype surrounding the Violators and the Central has tended to mute mainstream discussion about the possibility of other powers emerging to challenge the narrative of a chosen team in Virden. But the Pacific Conference does seem to begin and end in the Central Division, according to the FootballOutriders.Org.

“One of the reasons the Central Division stands out this year is because the rest of the Conference is entering a mini recession according to our models. The West is exhausted, and the Wrecking Balls are recuperating from a disappointing early exit in the playoffs,” writes **Harry Schultz** in the *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*. *“But we do see something interesting. Our team of data scientists predicts a stronger return of a familiar face in Bruxelles. The Bombers don’t have an overtly powerful-looking roster, but factoring in the creative ways that **Ken Main** causes the parts to interact and the way he used an even lesser bag of talent last year boosts them surprisingly high in our simulations. I hope we aren’t overstating the values; I don’t think we are. Few mainstream commentators will see it coming, but the Bombers will likely win the East.”*

Assuming that Schultz is correct about the Bombers usurping the Wrecking Balls in the East Division, does the rebirth of Bomber football mean a deep run in the post-season? Or another one-and-done?

*“Post-season success for Bruxelles will depend on how well **Justin Fields** matures over the course of the year,”* writes Schultz. *“The coaching staff will be prepared for any opponent, but the young quarterback will still have to make some plays through the air, or at least pose that threat, in order to beat a top-tier team like Virden, or any playoff grade defence in the post-season. His legs do pose a serious threat when a play goes sideways, so there is a strong possibility of unscripted moments of glory making up for the technical flaws. That tends to drive a defence batty and could have a cascading effect on its morale. But he will have to be more of the complete package than he has been to date.”*

The Outriders prognosis for the Bombers is not shared by most. The loss of **Robert Quinn**, the runner-up for Defensive Player of the Year behind **T.J. Watt** in 2022, is considered a devastating blow to the defence. Rookie linebacker **Jack Campbell** looks like a future pro bowler, but he will not make up for the loss of Quinn’s game-changing production. **Harrison Smith** is finding it harder to keep up at the age of 33, and there is no standout on the defensive line to consistently pressure the opposing quarterback. Everything will ride on the offence putting the defence in a position to succeed, and this will depend on Fields’ ability to get something out of **Chris Godwin** and **Garrett Wilson** and free agent **D’Onta Foreman**’s success in replacing **Elijah Mitchell**’s production in the ground game. These are too many ifs for most prognosticators.

“Did the Wrecking Balls miss their chance last year?” ESPN Sports Central moderator **Kris Hortenson** floated out to the panel of ‘Call Your Shot!’ **Matthew Stafford** is reportedly dealing with a shoulder issue that kept him out of pre-season games. Is **Daniel Jones** ready to take over and do what Stafford did last year?”

“Let’s hope not!” cracked **Will Simons**. “Or else he’ll be throwing away games in key moments and killing the vibe at Stone Pony Shore just like Stafford did.”

“Hold on, Will!” jumped in **Russ Flont**. “You can’t be putting all the blame on Stafford for what happened in New Jersey.”

“I don’t see why not, Russ,” Simons replied with a grin. “I didn’t see anyone else throwing those three picks that breathed life back into that Bats corpse in the playoffs last year. And I am pretty sure it was Stafford who threw those four picks against Georgia to throw away the first seed in the playoffs. Talk about killing a team.”

“You have to admit, Will, they probably wouldn’t be in that position to begin with if it weren’t for Stafford,” **Ryan Clark** offered tentatively. “I mean, he did get them there, and there’s no stronger arm in the league, even at his age.”

“No stronger arm, maybe, but no weaker psyche either,” Simons countered venomously. “I’m sorry – I want to fall in line with the Stafford-is-an-elite-quarterback myth, because he is a great guy. But he’s had only one great season, and that was way back in 2012 with Virden, which he ended with 4 interceptions and a loss in his first playoff game that year. Look up ‘choke’ in the dictionary of football, and you’ll find Stafford’s grinning mug.”

The room braced for a vociferous rant from Flont in defence of yet another “greatest quarterback of all time,” but instead the ruddily complected Flont just shook his head and rolled his eyes. Not even he was willing to offer a spirited defence of the QB who had far too often been at the center of bitter fan disappointment on the teams he had played for.

“**Jeff Cohen** made his usual bucket full of off-season moves involving literally dozens of players and draft picks,” observed senior *ESPN* analyst, **John Claytown** in his interview with **Jim Miller** on *Sirius XM EFL Network*. “When the dust settled, only three of these players broke training camp with the team – not counting rookies acquired in draft picks of course. The biggest name was **Cameron Heyward**, who fell victim to **Stephen Michael**’s purge in Billtown. **Quandre Diggs** was another important piece, as was **Desmond King II**. So, you can see there was concern about the defence in New Jersey. But frankly, I am more concerned about the offence with **Matthew Stafford**’s health a question mark. I wouldn’t bank on **Daniel Jones** being able to carry the offence through the air and the Wrecking Balls have traditionally not run the ball well. Plus, they are coming off such a demoralizing exit in the post-season last year, that even the ‘merchant of hope,’ **Jeff Cohen**, is keeping a low profile. I think the Wrecking Balls will find themselves back in a tough grind just to make the post-season.”

The consensus is that the main battle in the East will be between Bruxelles and New Jersey, with Cobb County and Buffalo playing the active spoiler role. However, that consensus is met with strong resistance in Marietta, home of the Coyotes, where fans and local media fully expect their team to be in the mix for the division title after securing the no.1 pick in the draft with the worst record in the league last year.

*“The pressure is back on **Eron Osman** after he was given permission to step back and tank in 2022,”* writes **Severin Handfottner Jr.** of ‘Coaches Call.’ *“His paymasters in the Gridiron Secret Society are very concerned about the revival of the Gladiators on Georgia’s east coast and need to re-establish the Coyotes’ competitive reputation so that they can revive the quashed Reclaiming the Honour of Georgia Act, under a different name. They are under a tight timeline, as any prolonged success of the Gladiators will make it next to politically impossible to have legislation passed in the House to exile them from the State of Georgia. So, Osman must win now. This must be a one-year rebuild, which explains his profligate spending in free agency. That included shelling out almost \$7 million in guaranteed money to 34-year-old lineman, **Brandon Graham**.”*



Justin Fields raises his arms in celebration of some unknown success in a training camp scrimmage. The Bombers hope to build on a surprise post-season berth in 2022 and bring their team to the next level in 2023.

*He also made a late move to acquire veteran safety **Jessie Bates** from Brooklin. At the same time, he sold some assets to acquire picks in this and next year's draft, strengthening the team this year and positioning it to grow further next year at affordable salaries. This pressure to rebuild and compete at the same time, with a rookie quarterback at the controls, could have an interesting effect on Osman's play-calling this year. How much leeway can he give the talented, but inexperienced **Bryce Young**? Can he afford to be too conservative? He has tough decisions ahead, but if any coach can walk this tightrope, it is Osman, who ranks high on our coaching index for both pre-game planning and in-game adjustments."*

William E Coyote of the Marietta Daily Journal is fully behind the party line. "Coach Osman has put together a masterpiece and done it on the fly. The 2023 edition of the Coyotes is built for this year and for many years to come. **Bryce Young** brings youth, energy and smarts to the game's most important position. Fellow first-

*rounder **Jordan Addison** is an essential third piece in a dangerous wide receiving trio. **Calijah Kancey** solidifies the middle of the defensive line while veterans like Graham, Bates and free agent **Foyesade Oluokun** offer a steadying presence for the young platers in critical moments. People who haven't been paying attention will be very surprised by the Coyotes this year. Coach Osman has certainly done more with less in the past. Expect big things."*

In Buffalo, the mood is the exact opposite of that in Coyote Land. In fact, it is grimmer than the already depressing reality of the team that has regressed steadily since being acquired by Derail Corporation CEO, **Daryl Brothers**. WGR 550 Sports Radio in Buffalo morning show host, **Jeremy White** was forced to later soften this comment he made the morning after the Derailers' 31-10 loss to Seattle in the final pre-season game, one in which **Lamar Jackson** played a full half:

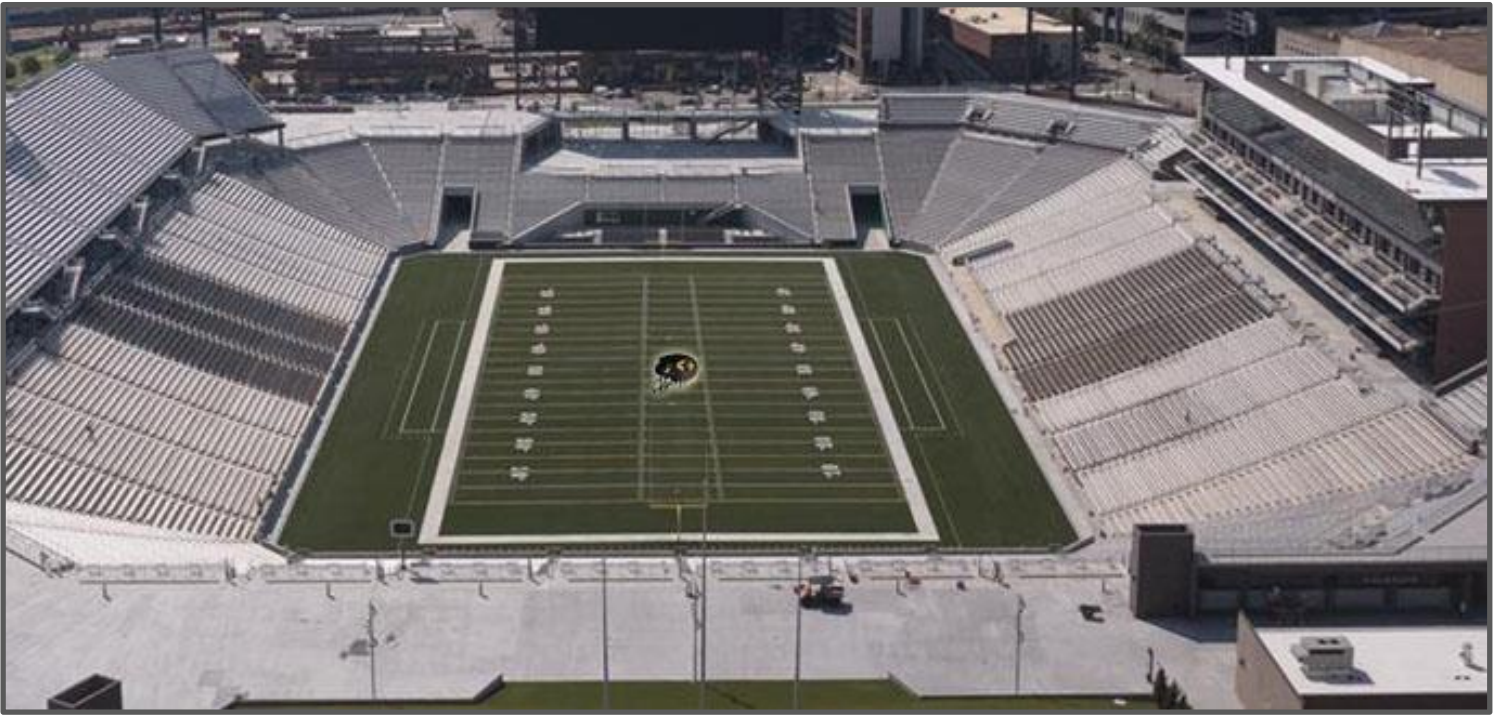
"This season is already over as far as I'm concerned. Stick a fork in 'em, they're cooked!" White complained in his opening address. "You know, there is nothing to lose by saying this because they are at rock bottom anyway: They look like the worst team in the league! Do you know why I know that? Because they just lost to the worst team in the league, Seattle, who were playing their 3rd and 4th stringers! And you know what the kicker is? They won't even get the best crack at Caleb Williams, because being the worst team in the league gives you the worst chance at nabbing the first overall pick in the EFL's wacky new lottery system! This is typical Buffalo sports! A real lose-lose situation!"

White reflects the general mood of depression that prevails in Buffalo sports fans these days. But more objective observers, looking from a distance, don't think the Derailers' season will be quite as bad as White imagines.

"Buffalo is heading toward the basement in the East," writes Schultz in his Alamanc. "But on any given Sunday they have the talent to pull off an upset or humble a mediocre opponent. Lamar can still take over a game, while there are very dangerous playmakers in the back end. **Aaron Donald** is the most famous of these, but flying under the radar is linemate, **Quinnen Williams**, who had a monstrous training camp and appears to be heading toward his best year. **L'Jarius Sneed** and **Jaycee Horn** are predators in the secondary laying in wait for a blitzing **Bradley Chubb** to induce a hurried and errant throw. This team will produce a few gold nuggets in a pan filled mostly with sand. The coaching all but guarantees that the run game, outside of Lamar, will underproduce, while the receiving unit is unimpressive."

Out west, the collective prognosis is in some ways even more discouraging than the faint and patchy hopes in Buffalo. Analysts focusing on the West Division can agree on only one thing: that Seattle is the worst of a bad lot. After that, there are cases to be made that any of the other three teams, Chino, Billtown or Iowa City, could finish at the top. Unlike the Central or Coastal Divisions, however, it will not be a case of three great teams battling it out. Rather, the race to the top of the West will be an exercise in survival, with the winner being the last team to eliminate itself.

"The state of the West Division is so dismal that the Billtown Bats, a team that traded away most of its high-end, high-priced talent for picks and prospects in a rebuilding effort, may end up winning the division anyway for the second straight year," writes **Caleb Cogger** of EFL Magazine in his pre-season editorial. "An argument can be made for **Justin**



This year, the Billtown Bats are returning home. Newly built Veteran Field in Williamsport, PA, pictured above, is an “open-air stadium that draws inspiration from the blue-collar roots in Central Pennsylvania,” according to the team’s promotional literature. It replaces the space age Assassin’s Den in Las Vegas with a more conventional, but authentic game day experience.

Herbert being the best quarterback in the division and the offensive line on par with any other. The defence still has star power, despite the losses. And – don’t underestimate its importance – the Bats will be playing at home for the first time, in a brand-new stadium in Williamsport, PA. There are weaknesses as well. **Jerry Jeudy** is the only true threat to defences at wide receiver and will be taken out by double-teams. The void created by trading **Dalvin Cook** will not be filled by **Damien Harris**. And the secondary, apart from **Patrick Surtain II**, is riddled with holes. The good news for Bats fans is that their competition has problems of their own.”

For the definitive word on the West Division, we return to **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org.

“The league is staring at the possibility that a division-winner will finish with an under-500 record for the first time since the infamous ‘Expansion Division’ of 2008,” Schultz postulated in an interview with **Alex Marvez** on *Sirius XM EFL Network* promoting his *Outriders Football Almanac*. “Of course, I personally think at least one of the teams in the west will finish 9-8, or 10-7, but our simulations have demonstrated with alarming frequency that 8-9 could get the job done. This is partly the result of these teams being either in various stages of rebuilding or, in the case of Chino, natural recession. The other part is that they play the Coastal Division in inter-conference play, which will take its toll on their collective record. The team that fares the best against the Coastal – by that I mean wins one or possibly two games – will win the West.”

“Picking a winner in the West Division this year is kind of like betting on bug races,” declared **Cowan Bullherd** on his radio talk show, *Morning Bull*. “All of them look the same, except for that slow one at the back going the wrong way – that would be Seattle. But seriously, at this moment in time, the west has no good team. The Cubs are *going* to be good! I see them returning to dominance as early as next year if they can get their quarterback situation figured out. I never thought I’d say this, but **Russell Wilson** looks washed up to me – just a guess, but they picked up **Derek Carr** for a reason. Their secondary is weak, which is the kiss of death in this era. But they have some attractive young front-seven talent, starting with first round pick **Will Anderson Jr.**, and one of the sturdier offensive lines in football. I like the Cubs *next* year. This year, I like Chino!”

Indeed, if there is a favourite in the west, it is Chino in a photo finish. *ESPN* Senior Analyst, **John Claytown** summed it up matter-of-factly for *Sirius XM EFL Network*: “The Convicts did a smart thing and got some insurance behind **Dak Prescott** by trading for **Jared Goff**. Both quarterbacks can lead this team effectively. **Christian McCaffrey**, if he can stay healthy, is a dual threat game-changer and a legitimate target downfield as well, which will open-up room for their wide receivers. I like their defence too, with **Za’Darius Smith** and **Von Miller** providing veteran pop to the pass rush. The Convicts are always in the mix in the final weeks, and they will be again this year. Unless they fall into that mid-season funk they are prone to, I expect them to finish ahead of Billtown and Iowa City by a pair of games at least.”

Our survey of the EFL in 2023 thus ends with a profile of its weakest division. And yet, as we can see, even in the league’s weakest division, great talent and prospects abound, with bright futures in store. In an elite football league like the EFL, there are no truly bad teams – just relatively good teams with a few great ones sprinkled in. That’s why the EFL is **#1**.



It is written

The Football Oracle

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

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

Hello EFL Fans. Welcome to the Football Oracle App. This interactive platform allows you to keep up with my visions and ask questions. Just tap on the '?' icon to ask about your favourite team or player. The spirits know all, but sometimes they like to play tricks. So, I cannot guarantee that everything I see will actually happen. But I'm pretty good at sniffing out a capricious spirit. Access is by subscription as I have to pay to have somebody mind my corporeal form. I offer you this free glimpse into the future: Georgia will win the South for the first time since they went to the final in 2011. To find out more, access the blue 'P' on my app. - The Football Oracle

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

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

PACIFIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



11-6

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

The team will perform better than the sum of its parts. **Joel Bitonio** is the unsung hero of a sturdy O-line that will raise the level of **Justin Fields** and the ground attack. **Darius Slay** shines in an average secondary propped up by ageing **Harrison Smith**. **George Karlaftis** offers some pass rush. **Brett Maher** is money, but no true gunner on the roster.



9-7-1

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

Terry McLaurin has star pedigree, but can **Daniel Jones** get him the ball consistently? Weakness up front will limit the run game. **Matt Milano** and **Cameron Heyward** anchor a strong front seven with a deep pass rush. Safeties **Quandre Diggs** and **Antoine Winfield Jr.** lead the secondary. Known fumlbers in the return game drops the ST grade.



6-11

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

Tristan Wirfs is a stud and needs to be to keep agile but fragile rookie **Bryce Young** protected. **Travis Etienne** is intriguing as is rookie WR, **Jordan Addison**. The pass rush is dangerous up the middle and on the edge with **Daron Payne** and vet **Brandon Graham**, but secondary depth will be a concern. PR, **Montrel Washington** is a scary adventure.



5-12

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

The usual problems plague the offence again this year, with everything riding on **Lamar Jackson**. The wide receivers are un-explosive, and **A.J. Dillon** cannot carry the run game solo. **Quinnen Williams** and **Aaron Donald** lead a good defence, which will see too much field time to be effective over the long term. Special Teams are merely serviceable.

CENTRAL DIVISION



15-2

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

If **Patrick Mahomes** can't get it done with this supporting cast, he likely never will. **Lane Johnson** at left tackle offers elite blindside protection, **Tyreek Hill** at WR is an elite playmaker, and **James Conner** at RB wins the tough yards. The defence, led by **Derwin James**, is the best it's ever been in Virden. Mediocre special teams hardly matter here.



11-6

PEG CITY CRUSADERS
COACH: **Stephen Katopodis**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **A**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **A-**

Ryan Tannehill takes over at QB to direct an improved offence. **Saquon Barkley** provides breakaway speed and outlet insurance, while **Brandon Aiyuk** heads a solid trio of wide receivers. **Chris Jones** is dominant on the D-line, complementing a pair of shutdown corners in **Jalen Ramsey** and **Marlon Humphrey**. ST is one gunner shy of an A-grade.



10-7

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

This offence belongs to **Trevor Lawrence** now and will score many points through the air with **Tyler Lockett** and **DJ Moore** on the flanks. Fragility at running back may create in-game headaches. **Bobby Wagner** returns to anchor a very good defence with takeaway potential. **Devin Duvernay** is a homerun threat as a KR and gunners abound.



4-13

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

A stocked stable of running backs, led by furious **Isaiah Pacheco**, will get a workout taking the heat off the mediocre **Kenny Pickett**. **Travis Kelce** wishes he was back in Bruxelles. Rookie **Jalen Carter** joins a hard core of premium talent on the D-line, but the secondary will not be able to keep up. Punter **Riley Dixon** is the highlight on ragged ST.

WEST DIVISION



9-8

CHINO CONVICTS

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

Jared Goff joins **Dak Prescott** to provide depth and distraction in the QB room. **Christian McCaffrey** and **Aaron Jones** form an explosive and versatile RB tandem, while **Zay Flowers** lifts the receiving corps. **Von Miller** and **Za'Darius Smith** set the edge of a solid D-line, but secondary is highly flammable. Two long-legged kickers take up space on ST.



7-10

IOWA CITY CUBS

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

Does the acquisition of **Derek Carr** spell the end of the **Russell Wilson** era? Whoever starts at QB will enjoy good protection and three excellent targets at WR, led by speed tank, **AJ Brown**. The offence will need to score, as the defence, led by rookie **Will Anderson Jr.**, is young and undeveloped. **Justin Tucker** stars for a gold standard ST unit.



6-11

BILLTOWN BATS

COACH: **Stephen Michael**
OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **C+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C** TOT: **C+**

The pressure is on **Justin Herbert** to keep this RB-starved offence on the move. **Jerry Jeudy** is the best and only option at WR, while rookie **Dalton Kincaid** seeks to establish himself at TE. The defence is degraded from last year but retains the elite **Patrick Surtain II** and **Demario Davis** to prevent full implosion. Retaining two punters on ST says it all.



4-13

SEATTLE PILOTS

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

Carson Wentz seizes the controls of the only team that would take him. **Kenneth Walker III** needs to run hard and **Ceedee Lamb** to slip out of constant double teams for this offence to score. **Khalil Mack** is still capable and **Uchenna Nwosu** a rising star, but the secondary is unstable due to injuries. Coverage on kicks will be good, but KR will not be.

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



11-6

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

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

Josh Allen will not have as much to work with this year. **Tyler Allgeier** takes over sole responsibility for the backfield while **Cooper Kupp** will be isolated on the outside. **Brian Burns**, **Fred Warner**, a pair of elite safeties and two first-rounders at CB ensures the defence will stay strong. Two many kickers and not enough returners hampers the ST.



8-9

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

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

Jimmy Garoppolo will start the season under center, but with 4 QBs on the roster may not finish. **Jamaal Williams** is a grinding red zone threat while **Mike Evans** and **Christian Watson** are deep strike capable. **TJ Watt** and **Roquan Smith** lead a capable defence when healthy. **De'Andre Carter** rescues the return game. 3 gunners locked and loaded.



7-10

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

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

Joe Burrow is set behind a fine offensive line anchored by Zack Martin. **Dalvin Cook** is a game-breaker out of the backfield, but lack of an equivalent at receiver will spell inconsistency for the offence. **Nick Bosa** and **Talanoa Hufanga** are the only impact players on a thin defence. Gunners plentiful and **Jayden Reed** will electrify as a returner.



6-11

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

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

An embarrassment of riches at RB, led by **Nick Chubb**, will keep this offence moving the chains. **Kirk Cousins** could be dancing trying to throw downfield behind a mediocre offensive line. **Christian Wilkins** is the best player on a defence with too many linebackers and not enough pass rushers. Special Teams much improved over last year.

COASTAL DIVISION



14-3

PICKERING SPARTANS

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

All pro **Trent Williams** will give **Jalen Hurts** all the time he needs to find **DeVonta Smith** and **George Pickens** downfield. When he doesn't, Hurts will take off or handoff to breakaway threat, **Miles Sanders**. The defence lacks a true leader but is deep, especially in the secondary, and will play downhill this year. **Greg Zuerlein** may prove frustrating.



10-7

BUDAPEST NORTH STARS

COACH: **Darrin Jones**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **B+**

Aaron Rodgers settles in with his elite triad of receiving threats, led by **Justin Jefferson**, for what may be his last stab at the title. **Raheem Mostert** is a speed upgrade at RB. **Minkah Fitzpatrick** is one of the league's best defenders but leads an aged defence that will take plays off. Deep set of returners and good gunners spearhead a nice ST unit.



9-8

BROOKLIN HAWKS

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

The pieces are in place for QB, **Geno Smith** to succeed. Rookie **Bijan Robinson** brings needed relief for **Austin Ekeler**. **Drake London** and **Evan Engram** have the outside and seams covered. D-line is a bit thin, but **Alex Highsmith** brings pass rush pressure that a revamped secondary hopes to exploit. ST will experience shortcomings in all phases.



8-9

YORK EXCALIBURS

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

Tom Brady will be called upon to create a credible deep passing threat to cover for workhorse **Derrick Henry** and chain-mover **Amon-Ra St. Brown**. **DeForest Buckner** and **Greg Rousseau** bring pressure outside and in, but the linebacking squad lacks depth. Kevin Byard and Jordan Poyer still perform at a high level. ST are lunch-pail reliable.

SOUTH DIVISION



12-5

GEORGIA GLADIATORS

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

Take-two of the **Tua Tagovailoa** era looks promising, as offensive weapons abound, supported by a strong offensive line. **Josh Jacobs** is poised to breakout and **Amari Cooper** leads a deep corps of receivers. **Preston Smith** stands alone in the pass rush and **Vonn Bell** leads a questionable secondary. The best coverage team leads a top-notch ST.



10-7

LAPLATA BRAVES

COACH: **Stanley Milton**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **A-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **B+**

Matt Ryan exits his illustrious EFL career in style with explosive rookie **Jahmyr Gibbs** providing an offensive spark between connections to **Davante Adams**. **Jeffery Simmons** and **JJ Watt** anchor a do-it-all D-line, paving the way for QB terror, **Haason Reddick** and shutdown CB, **Sauce Gardner**. K, **Greg Joseph** will create nervous moments in the clutch.



7-10

ERIEAU CADILLAC

COACH: **Jamie Rilett**
OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A** TOT: **B-**

An erratic **Kyler Murray** and a so-so O-line will limit top level skill positions, with **Jaylen Waddle**, **Mark Andrews** and RB, **Dameon Pierce** most affected. The D-line is deep with two elite pass rushers in **Myles Garrett** and **Myles Crosby** and a sturdy middle. Secondary is good but will spend time on field. **Jason Myers** is money, coverage is elite.



4-12-1

EAST ELMHURST

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

Jacoby Brissett and **Sam Darnold**, a back-up and a bust, occupy the QB room, signalling a rebuilding year. **DK Metcalf** and rookie deep threat **Quentin Johnston** will have to be patient. **Micah Parsons** is a beast and **Jonathan Allen** is a stabilizer on a defence otherwise lacking in impact players. **Amari Rodgers**'s greasy palms won't help on ST.

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BRUXELLES @ NEW JERSEY (line – WRECKING BALLS by 3)

The Wrecking Balls open the season at home where their season abruptly ended through self-immolation in the playoffs last year. Have the wounds had time to heal for the fans and the players? The New Jersey coaching staff has not announced a starter at quarterback this week, but with Matt Stafford limited in practice nursing a shoulder ailment, expect to see the newly arrived Daniel Jones. In this way, the Wrecking Balls can start fresh and set a positive tone before reintegrating Stafford into the game plan. This uncertainty makes it difficult to predict how this game will end. We have seen no evidence in the pre-season that Justin Fields has learned how to read a pro defence, yet the Bombers are coming off a high by simply making the playoffs and winning the wildcard game and have the advantage in the trenches when on offence. If New Jersey struggles to move the ball with Jones, this run heavy Bruxelles squad that can grind the Balls down. The Bombers smell fear and see the division as open for them. **PICK: BRUXELLES**

COBB COUNTY @ BUFFALO (line – COYOTES by 1)

What started as a line favouring Buffalo has morphed into a slim edge for the visitors as bettors respond to positive statements coming out of Marietta and the announcement by the Derailers that the owner will once again be assuming play-calling duties on game day. There is widespread excitement and optimism that first overall pick Bryce Young will perform as advertised, and this presumption has unlocked all sorts of theoretical possibilities about the performance of a healthy Travis Etienne and the potential of rookie WR, Jordan Addison. When fans are coming off watching a last place finish the only hope is up and many believe the Coyotes are ascending before they have even played a game. The Derailers are in a bad state, but they have veteran studs on defence and a dynamic quarterback who, in Week One, has not yet had the stuffing knocked out of him by his crazed owner. If Buffalo is ever going to win, it is most likely to be early and at home against a team they think they can beat – like the team that just went 2-15. **PICK: BUFFALO**

TWIN CITIES @ VIRDEN (line – VIOLATORS by 8)

This is an aggressive line to start the season given that the Triumph have one of the better built rosters in the conference and are expected to be in the race for at least a wildcard berth. That the Violators are favoured by a two-point converted touchdown is a testament to not only the homefield advantage, but to the plethora of weapons on this offence and the off-season improvements on defence that will make things tough for Trevor Lawrence. Nobody envies the Triumph defensive coordinator this week, but conversely the Virden coach will have to be flexible in the face of it, because there is little doubt the Triumph game plan will seek to suppress the deep ball to Tyreek Hill and Ja'Marr Chase. Can Patrick Mahomes be patient and take what's given underneath? Can the Violators run the ball consistently? That is something they have not done much since Mahomes arrived on the scene. On the other side, the run-first tactic of the Triumph cannot continue as it did last year against a defence like Virden's. Lawrence will have to mix in more passes and distribute the ball, with DJ Moore being the key to success. The wily Triumph coach no doubt has a few tricks up his sleeve to make this a winnable game, but a few breaks are needed as the deck is stacked in the home team's favour. **PICK: VIRDEN**

PEG CITY @ CHARLESWOOD (line – CRUSADERS by 9)

The Patriots open this season at home even less optimistic than they were last year. This is not because the Pats are any worse, but because the Crusaders are much better than they were last year, and the Pats are a little less better. Peg City traded for Ryan Tannehill for a capable veteran presence to run a revamped offence that includes a healthy Saquon Barkley and a more mature Brandon Aiyuk. The Pats have four quarterbacks, including a returning DeShaun Watson, and none of them looked sharp in training camp. It is unknown who will get the start this Sunday, but it doesn't matter much for this analysis, because the Crusaders are in another league on both sides of the ball and are one of a couple of 'survivor pool' Week One favourites. It is a matter of how emphatically Peg City will lay the wood to their more established crosstown rival. Securing the adoration of the Winnipeg market and siphoning off support

will require some kind of statement game. Expect the “visitors” to not back off. **PICK: PEG CITY**

SEATTLE @ CHINO (line – CONVICTS by 10)

This is the other ‘survivor pool’ favourite to open the season as the Pilots are a hot mess and the Convicts are at home. All the same, I am surprised with the double-digit line. The Convicts of recent years have not dispensed many blowouts as, win or lose, nothing seems to be easy for them. Some complain that Dak Prescott is to blame for Chino’s shakiness. Whether that is fair or not, the Convicts traded for Jared Goff and are paying him a fortune, so it is unimaginable that he will sit on the bench. It appears that the Prescott Era is over, or at least temporarily paused. This could backfire as Goff has not exactly lit up the scoreboard consistently wherever he has played. The only sure thing is that it won’t bite the Convicts this week. Seattle will likely prove powerless to stop Christian McCaffrey on the ground or through the air. On the other side, the combination of Carson Wentz to Ceedee Lamb provides homerun potential but also many strikeouts as Za’Darius Smooth and Von Miller go head-hunting in the backfield. Nevertheless, with recent memories of Chino painfully shooting itself in the foot in games like this, I say take the points. **PICK: SEATTLE**

IOWA CITY @ BILLTOWN (line – BATS by 3)

The Cubs are the second team in the division to apparently ditch their longtime starter in favour of another team’s ditched longtime starter. With Russell Wilson struggling in training camp and putting on weight, Cubs management snatched up Derek Carr off the waiver wire from Brooklin and created an instant quarterback controversy in the Hawkeye State. This will present a distraction on an otherwise much improved Cubs squad. Building through the draft is beginning to pay off, as the Cubs are loaded with young talent. Not all of it is ripe and there will be plenty of rookie mistakes this year. But whoever ends up holding the reins at QB has a wealth of targets in the passing game and a talented, if untested, rookie running back in Roschon Johnson. There is no QB controversy in Billtown, where Justin Herbert stands alone – literally. The Bats’ QB will be called on to do more with less and will not have the same stout defence backing him up. Expect the Bats to struggle in the league’s worst division as well as here. **PICK: IOWA CITY**

SEBASTIAN @ DURHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 5)

The defending champs start the season at home, where a big pre-game ceremony is planned to celebrate the team’s first Gale Sayers Trophy. It was a long time coming and one can sense the relief in the Lizards’ head office and in the community that the perennial contender finally got over the hump. But we all know what that means! Yes, the dreaded “championship hangover.” There is no doubt it will come – the question is how hard. The Lizards backed off arming in the off-season, choosing to consolidate their roster and get salaries under control. They will turn to a pair of first-round rookies to man the cornerback positions and will hand the ball to second year running back Tyler Allgeier, who plans to run behind rookie guard Cody Mauch. Other rookies fill in the roster between returning veterans. This will not be the same powerhouse as last year, but still strong enough to win the division and deal with teams like the Swordfish. Sebastian has too much of some things – like running backs – and not enough of others – like defensive line. It is a typically unbalanced roster that will try to get by on dares. On opening day, the champs don’t dare lose. **PICK: DURHAM**

COWTOWN @ SCARBOROUGH (line – BLUE EAGLES by 2)

The power difference between these teams heading into the season looks razor thin. So, the Blue Eagles get the benefit of the homefield advantage in an uncertain Week One line. On the surface, the star power in Scarborough in the form of Nick Bosa and Dalvin Cook, and the tantalizing potential of Joe Burrow and up-and-coming safety Talanoa Hufanga, give the home team a distinct edge in addition to an enthusiastic crowd hoping to erase the sting of a disastrous 2022 season. However, the memories of that campaign are fresh, and a slow start could turn the historically volatile Scarborough fans in the wrong direction. Jimmy Garoppolo gets the start for the Corn Kings, but many question whether he will remain the starter, with young Davis Mills and veteran Andy Dalton getting paid much more waiting on the bench. It could be simply a hedge against injury, but if the coach has doubts in his quarterback, this could translate into uncertainty on the field. It’s a new season, and a fresh start! **PICK: SCARBOROUGH**

BUDAPEST @ PICKERING (line – SPARTANS by 6)

The schedule makers decided to jump right into the deep end with this opening day match-up between the two favourites to win the Coastal Division and perhaps represent the Atlantic Conference in the final. This is first of two bookend games to start and end the regular season between these two powerful rivals and there is a lot riding on the outcome. The Spartans are as deep as teams come defensively, prepared for the long haul at four quarters per week for 17 weeks. While all but injury-proof on the back end, the Spartans are talented but relatively thin on offence. They certainly cannot afford to lose Jalen Hurts, who can be expected to put himself in harm’s way with regularity again this year scrambling for first downs when plays break down. Scrambling, of course, was one of the big reasons the Spartans surprised the EFL last year by winning the division. For Budapest, this season has the air of a “last stand” to it after they exhausted their budget to sign Stefon Diggs and Cameron Jordan to one-year deals. They will be going all-out here

and every week until the end. Expect a tight game – a virtual chess match – and a late field goal to win it. **PICK: BUDAPEST**

YORK @ BROOKLIN (line – HAWKS by 4)

One off-season can make a big difference and we are already seeing how bold moves to switch quarterbacks and reach for Bijan Robinson with the 8th pick of the draft have changed the view of the Hawks heading into this season. Coupled with a relatively static off-season in York and general disillusionment after they failed to make the playoffs last year, Brooklin is suddenly looking like the team more likely to disrupt the Budapest-Pickering race. The always spirited Hawks have matured in the secondary and at linebacker, making them less of a target for sustained airstrikes. At the same time, they have the talent and numbers at receiver to inflict passing damage on an opponent, provided Geno Smith performs as advertised. The Excaliburs bring nothing new to the table this year except for an extra year of age on Tom Brady and other stars. They are still a good team, but the competition around them has improved substantially. Is Derrick Henry bowling over svelte, speedy linebackers at the pace of a river barge going to be enough to keep up in the Coastal Division this year? Can Brady work his magic for the last time? Week One will tell us a lot. **PICK: BROOKLIN**

GEORGIA @ ERIEAU (line – GLADIATORS by 2)

Seemingly out of the blue those in the know are buzzing about Tua Tagovailoa and the Gladiators. It wasn't just the trade for Amari Cooper that started the chatter about the Glads being a contender this year. It was more the sudden dawning in training camp that Tua can consistently throw the ball accurately and avoid getting sacked every two minutes. This, and the maturing of their defence into a unit that finally appears capable of slowing down an opponent (they still aren't ready to stop anybody yet) has pundits predicting a changing of the guard in the South Division. Whether it is the Glads or the Braves, the Cadillac appear ready to surrender the division back after one difficult season at the top. Opposing defences are catching on to a simple trick to stop Kyler Murray: Stand in front of him and watch him try to see over both lines. The Erieau quarterback had a weak camp, and his visible frustration is infecting the entire offence. It has never been enough that the Caddies have one of the best defensive lines in football, so do not expect them to make it up with their defence. This is watershed game for the Glads and a trip to the woodshed game for Erieau. **PICK: GEORGIA**

EAST ELMHURST @ LAPLATA (line – BRAVES by 12)

It was probably for the best. We'll see soon enough. The 11th hour sale of the Pink Panthers and relocation to LaPlata, Maryland has the potential to re-inject life into one of the league's most storied franchises. There is a hum of excitement in the Washington DC area as football returns to the neighbourhood and the players feel it. In addition to the new start vibe, there is a definite talent factor at play that should propel the Braves to the top of the race for the South Division this year. Matt Ryan is looking like a huge weight has been lifted from his shoulders as he surveys his backfield and sees two complementary running backs there to relieve some of the heat of opposing pass rushes, who last year knew exactly what the Pink Panthers would do on every play. The defence boasts top end talent in Sauce Gardner, Haason Reddick, and a not-yet-over-the-hill JJ Watt. Opposing them is a rebuilding Irish squad that will not see many chances at victory this year. Consider this game a tune-up for an exciting Braves season ahead. **PICK: LAPLATA**



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