

2019



CONFERENCE



EFL

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

2019



FINALS

In our 18th season and still going strong!
February 23, 2020

EAST



BRUXELLES BOMBERS

20



COWTOWN CORN KINGS

19



TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

31



AURORA MUSTANGS

42

NORTH



CENTRAL



COASTAL



WEST



SOUTH



TRIUMPH SEAL THE DEAL!



Chris Harris Jr.
Twin Cities Triumph

Twin Cities corner *Chris Harris Jr* does a victory lap after scooping up a *Marcus Mariota* fumble and returning it 14 yards for a TD in 4th quarter action at Twin Cities. The Triumph defence sealed the deal to complement an MVP offensive performance by *Melvin Gordon III*, who piled up 231 total yards and scored a TD in the Triumph's 31-20 victory over the Bombers.



Who was slick in
the Conference
Finals?

“Brylcreem” THE
EFL’S FIRST SPONSOR



Melvin Gordon
RB
Twin Cities
Triumph

124 yards rushing, 107 yards rec., 1
TD. Centerpiece of Triumph attack.



Jurrell Casey
DT
Twin Cities
Triumph

6 tackles, 1 Sack, 2 STF, 1 HUR, 1
FF. Key strip-sack in 4th to clinch win.



20

Bruxelles



GAME CENTER 2019 Pacific Conference Finals



31

Twin Cities

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Mariota	21	33	299	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Mack	15	70	4.7	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Thompson	6	56	9.3	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Bruxelles	3	7	7	3	-	20
Twin Cities	7	3	7	14	-	31

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cm	Att	Yds	TD
Trubisky	16	27	225	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Gordon III	19	124	6.5	1
Receiving	Re	Yds	Avg	TD
Gordon III	8	107	13.4	0

Play of the Game

In the 4th Quarter, 4:04 left, Triumph lead 24-20. Bombers start at own 17. Jurrell Casey sacks Marcus Mariota, strips ball, Chris Harris Jr recovers and returns 14 yards for a TD.

'FLASH' GORDON ZAPS BOMBERS!

MELVIN GORDON CHURNS UP 231 TOTAL YARDS IN TRIUMPH WIN!

SUMMARY: An official capacity crowd of 66,655 was on hand at Wilhalla Stadium for the Pacific Conference Championship. The visitors came in as clear underdogs, which fueled the home fans' optimism. So, when the Triumph took the opening drive 75 yards in 7 plays, finishing with an 11-yard TD strike from Mitch Trubisky to Kenny Golladay, the party in the stands got off to an early start with crowd noise reaching 137 decibels. The din grew when Golden Tate lost fumble at the Twin Cities' 10-yard line on Bruxelles' first series. But with the crowd on its feet, Trubisky mis-fired on 2 of 3 pass attempts to engineer a three-and-out, reminding fans that the Bombers' pass defence was no pushover. Good field position led to Bruxelles' first points, a 46-yard Matt Prater FG, to make it 7-3. The score remained that way until the 2nd, when Dustin Hopkins booted a FG from 40 yards after being set up by a 35-yard completion to Golladay to re-establish the Triumph 7-point lead. Bruxelles answered two drives later when H-back, Chris Herndon and running back Marlon Mack turned short passes into a combined 60 yards to set up an 11-yard TD pass from Marcus Mariota to Tate to tie the game at 10. The Triumph offence ended on a sour note, when Fabian Moreau picked off Trubisky as he tried to get into FG range before half time. The 2nd half began with three-and-outs for both sides then Tate quieted the crowd with a 59-yard catch-and-run to the Triumph 20 to set up a 7-yard check-down to Mack for a TD and the Bombers' first lead. Melvin Gordon answered for the Triumph, snatching an outlet pass and zipping 48 yards to the Bruxelles' 3, where he took it in himself on the next play to tie the game. The Triumph 'D' clamped down, with Kenny Clark sacking Mariota on 3rd down to force a punt. Trubisky and Golladay shone on the next drive, converting a 3rd & 8 with a 17-yard pass and finishing off the 70-yard march with a 26-yard connection for a TD to vault out in front, 24-17. Bruxelles pushed back, reaching the Triumph 5-yard line, but a stuff of Mariota on 3rd & 1 followed by a holding penalty on a conversion of 4th & 2 forced the Bombers to settle for 3. The Bruxelles' D held on the next Triumph series, but with 3:55 left in the 4th, Jurrell Casey sacked and stripped Mariota at the 14 and Chris Harris Jr returned the fumble for a TD to put the game away for the Triumph.

QUOTES: "We can't expect to come in here and turn the ball over in key situations and expect to beat a team like the Triumph. Having said that, I am proud of the way we battled. If it wasn't for a couple of bad bounces, who knows?" - Bruxelles coach, Ken Main.

"It was a real close game or 56 minutes. I thought we played well overall, but we were fortunate to put the game away on their last drive. Jurrell made a game-changing play there and the ball bounced right to Chris. Respect to Kenny Main for bringing it today!" - Twin Cities coach, Guy Williams.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



Faart van Wijnendaele FVW@BrusselsTimes #MariotaFumble was the end but beginning was #PhantomHold on @tkelce. EFL refs return to spotlight.



Lars Odegard @LarsValhalla @Melvingordon25 dances into limelight this week. @AB84 no catches! @Triumph are meshing like a true team.



Bruxelles 20 Twin Cities 31



	1	2	3	4	F
Bruxelles	3	7	7	3	20
Twin Cities	7	3	7	14	31

* Playoff * 02-23-2020 Wilhalla Stadium Temp:70 Wind: No Line MVP:Gordon III

1	10:43	Twin Cities	TD	Trubisky 11 pass to Golladay (Hopkins) (7-75-4:17)	0-7
1	4:07	Bruxelles	FG	Prater 46 (7-30-3:07)	3-7
2	7:51	Twin Cities	FG	Hopkins 40 (7-52-4:13)	3-10
2	1:10	Bruxelles	TD	Mariota 11 pass to Tate (Prater) (6-97-2:29)	10-10
3	10:22	Bruxelles	TD	Mariota 7 pass to Mack (Prater) (4-79-1:49)	17-10
3	7:18	Twin Cities	TD	Gordon III 3 run (Hopkins) (6-75-3:04)	17-17
4	14:38	Twin Cities	TD	Trubisky 26 pass to Golladay (Hopkins) (8-70-3:36)	17-24
4	7:16	Bruxelles	FG	Prater 34 (12-73-7:07)	20-24
4	3:55	Twin Cities	TD	Harris Jr. 14 yd fumble recovery (Hopkins)	20-31

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Manola	33	21	299	3	0	2	4	113.1
	33	21	299	3	0	2	4	113.1

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Trubisky	27	16	225	3	1	2	2	95.4
	27	16	225	3	1	2	2	95.4

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Mack	15	70	4.7	2	1	13	0
Tate	1	36	36.0	0	1	36	0
Manola	6	14	2.3	2	1	10	0
Thompson	1	7	7.0	1	0	7	0
	23	127	5.5	5	3	36	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Gordon III	19	124	6.5	7	3	28	1
Trubisky	5	29	5.8	2	2	12	0
White	3	11	3.7	0	0	7	0
Moore	1	11	11.0	0	1	11	0
	28	175	6.3	9	6	28	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Thompson	6	0	12	56	9.3	2	0	12	0
Mack	4	1	5	37	9.3	2	0	23	1
Tate	4	0	5	91	22.8	3	1	59	1
Kelce	2	0	5	22	11.0	2	0	13	0
Godwin	2	0	3	44	22.0	2	1	26	0
Westbrook	1	0	1	6	6.0	1	0	6	0
Herridon	1	0	1	37	37.0	1	1	37	0
Pettis	1	0	1	6	6.0	0	0	6	0
	21	1	33	299	14.2	13	3	59	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Gordon III	8	0	14	107	13.4	4	1	48	0
Golladay	5	0	5	101	20.2	5	2	35	2
White	2	0	2	15	7.5	1	0	11	0
Seals-Jones	1	0	1	2	2.0	0	0	2	0
Brown	0	1	4	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Moore	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	16	1	27	225	14.1	10	3	48	2

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Manola	1	0	0
Tate	1	0	0
	2	0	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Moore	1	0	0
Harris Jr.	0	2	1
Hunter	0	1	0
	1	3	1

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Smith,T	1	12	12.0	12	0
	1	12	12.0	12	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Moore	2	51	25.5	35	0
Henderson	1	14	14.0	14	0
	3	65	21.7	35	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Westbrook	1	2	8	8.0	8	0
	1	2	8	8.0	8	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Moore	2	2	12	6.0	9	0
	2	2	12	6.0	9	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Prater	2-2	46	2	8

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Hopkins	1-1	40	4-4	7

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Kern	4	183	45.8	0	0	0	52

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Wishnowsky	5	227	45.4	0	3	0	53

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Sf	Hur	FF	Int
Davis	9	0	0	0	3	0	0-0
Jones	5	1	0	1	1	0	0-0
Smith,H	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Smith,P	4	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Moreau	3	0	1	0	0	1	1-0
Fuller	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Walker	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Haden	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Suggs	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Clark	2	0	0	0	2	0	0-0
Gipson	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Burns	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
White	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ogbah	1	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Robinson	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Griffin	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Woods	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	50	2	4	2	8	1	1-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Sf	Hur	FF	Int
Wagner	7	0	0	2	2	0	0-0
Slay	7	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Harris Jr.	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Casey	6	1	0	2	1	1	0-0
Lee	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hunter	4	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Alexander,J	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Savage Jr.	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jenkins	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Clark	1	1	1	0	2	0	0-0
Crawford	1	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Hughes	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Ford	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Avery	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hager	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wormley	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Davis	0	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
	52	4	3	4	8	2	0-0



231 total yards (124 rush – 107 rec) and 1 TD led the way for the Triumph 'O.'

	Bruxelles	Twin Cities
First Downs	18	19
Rushes	23-127	28-175
Passes	33-21-299	27-16-225
Sacked	4-17	2-17
Fumble	2	1
Penalties	6-52	1-15
Turnovers	2	1
Missed Tackles	8	6
Dropped Passes	1	1
Bad Passes	1	2
Passes 25+	3	3
Runs 10+	3	6
Blitzers	26	15
Time	30:32	29:28
Third Down	5-12	4-10
Fourth Down	0-1	0-0
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/2/1	3/2/0
Net Offense	409	383



28

Cowtown



22

Aurora

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Fitzpatrick	15	27	135	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Gurley	22	127	5.8	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Gurley	10	42	4.2	0

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Cowtown	7	3	6	3	-	19
Aurora	14	14	7	7	-	42

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Ryan	23	32	297	5
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Drake	7	55	7.9	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Adams	6	95	15.8	2

Play of the Game

In the 2nd quarter, 3:30 min mark, 3rd & 17 COW at own 18, **Ryan Fitzpatrick** throws long and is intercepted by **Josh Norman**, who returns it to the COW 27 to set up 4th Aurora TD.

MUSTANGS RIDE ROUGHSHOD OVER KINGS! MATT RYAN SNIPES FOR 297 YARDS AND 5 TDs TO LEAD AURORA CHARGE!

SUMMARY: On a clear day before a sellout crowd in Aurora, the Corn Kings came in to the Conference Final game as underdogs, but also as a surprise “sleeper” pick for some high-profile experts. The reason: Cowtown had handed the Mustangs one of its two losses in the regular season and their red hot QB and dangerous pass rush were seen as a “bad match-up” for Aurora. But after a bit more than a quarter of back-and-forth, Aurora started to pull away and it soon became clear that the Mustangs’ were on the road to their fifth championship game. After both teams punted to end their first possessions, the Mustangs landed the first punch with a 34-yard TD pass from **Matt Ryan** to **Albert Wilson** to cap a tidy 60-yard drive lasting a mere four plays. Cowtown did not reel for long and delivered a solid counter-punch with a 75-yard push that featured a blend of run and pass plays crowned by an 11-yard TD run by **Todd Gurley**. The Mustangs charged back, moving 90 yards in less than three minutes thanks to completions of 20 and 40 yards to star wideout **Davante Adams**, the second for a TD, to reclaim the lead, 14-7. The Corn Kings answered with another possession drive into Aurora territory at the 27, but were pushed back to the 36 on a 3rd down sack by **JJ Watt** and a false start penalty. **Matt Bryant** came on to salvage the effort with a 54-yard FG. Then the Mustangs went to work churning out the drive that would ultimately cow the Cowtown defence. A 19-yard run by **Kenyan Drake** on 4th & inches from the Aurora 48 kept the drive alive and a 9-yard run by **Zach Zenner** on 4th & short at the Cowtown 23 into the teeth of the defence sucked the energy from the Corn Kings’ sideline. Ryan finished off the 75-yard drive with a pinpoint 4-yard TD to Adams to extend their lead, 21-10. An element of desperation entered the Corn King offence. **Ryan Fitzpatrick** was picked off by **Josh Norman** trying to convert long on 3rd & 17, setting up Aurora at the Cowtown 27, leading to a 13-yard TD to **Kyle Rudolph**. A glimmer of hope flickered for Cowtown when **Adam Humphries** hauled in a 5-yard TD to open the 3rd. But Aurora replied with Ryan completing 7 passes on the next drive, including a 16-yard TD to Wilson, to take control. The 4th quarter played out like a formality, with a second pick of Fitz icing it for the Horses.

QUOTES: “It is one thing to beat a team like this at home, it is a whole other ballgame trying to upset them in a playoff game in their own park. I am proud of my guys for the effort they gave all year. They fell to the better team today!” – Cowtown coach, **Jim Coghlin**.
“One of the keys today was our offensive line giving Matt time to throw. We struggled picking up their blitzes in that first game, so we made adjustments for this game. Matt was pressured just once, I believe, and that was the difference for our offence. – Aurora coach, **Rich Liotta**.”



HAPPY FAN



titter

ANGRY FAN



Orville Smucker @Smuckerscoop
Ever since they switched from blue to red this Garland team has been on a roll. That Matt Ryan kid is going to be a good one.



James Duthie @efljamesduthie
Another complete effort from both sides of [@AuroraMustangs](#). Any doubts about [@M_Ryan02](#) being MVP should be put to rest.

Cowtown 19 Aurora 42

	1	2	3	4	F
Cowtown	7	3	6	3	19
Aurora	14	14	7	7	42



* Playoff * 02-23-2020 Magna Park Temp:48 Wind:0-5 None No Line MVP:Ryan HFA:

1	9:08	Aurora	TD	Ryan 34 pass to Wilson (Lutz) (5-60-2:34)	0-7
1	2:57	Cowtown	TD	Gurley II 11 run (Bryant,M) (10-75-6:11)	7-7
1	0:00	Aurora	TD	Ryan 40 pass to Adams (Lutz) (6-90-2:49)	7-14
2	9:44	Cowtown	FG	Bryant 54 (9-39-5:09)	10-14
2	3:57	Aurora	TD	Ryan 4 pass to Adams (Lutz) (13-75-5:47)	10-21
2	1:43	Aurora	TD	Ryan 14 pass to Rudolph (Lutz) (3-27-0:32)	10-28
3	6:08	Cowtown	TD	Fitzpatrick 5 pass to Humphries (2 - failed) (15-75-8)	16-28
3	3:07	Aurora	TD	Ryan 16 pass to Wilson (Lutz) (9-85-2:55)	16-35
4	12:40	Cowtown	FG	Bryant 38 (13-55-5:28)	19-35
4	9:31	Aurora	TD	Zenner 2 run (Lutz) (4-18-1:49)	19-42

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Fitzpatrick	27	15	135	0	2	1	2	50.7
Garoppolo	11	9	63	0	0	0	2	90.5
Total	38	24	198	0	2	1	4	63.3

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Ryan	32	23	297	2	0	5	0	140.2
Total	32	23	297	2	0	5	0	140.2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Gurley II	22	127	5.8	11	4	13	1
Powell	7	39	5.6	1	2	10	0
Bibbs	2	7	3.5	0	0	6	0
Garoppolo	1	1	1.0	0	0	1	0
Total	32	174	5.4	12	6	13	1

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Drake	7	55	7.9	3	4	19	0
Zenner	5	23	4.6	2	0	9	1
Ryan	4	-3	-0.8	0	0	0	0
Total	16	75	4.7	5	4	19	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Gurley II	10	0	14	42	4.2	1	0	9	0
Humphries	5	0	8	43	8.6	4	0	16	1
Evans	4	0	6	49	12.3	2	0	17	0
Burton	3	0	8	45	15.0	3	0	17	0
Bibbs	1	0	1	8	8.0	0	0	8	0
Bourne	1	0	1	11	11.0	1	0	11	0
Total	24	0	38	198	8.3	11	0	17	1

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Adams	6	0	9	95	15.8	6	1	40	2
Edelman	5	1	8	66	13.2	4	0	20	0
Rudolph	4	0	5	39	9.8	1	0	14	1
Drake	4	0	5	25	6.3	1	0	11	0
Wilson	3	0	4	65	21.7	3	1	34	2
Goeden	1	0	1	7	7.0	0	0	7	0
Total	23	1	32	297	12.9	15	2	40	5

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Garoppolo	1	1	0
Total	1	1	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Total	0	0	0

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

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Coleman	4	76	19.0	24	0
Total	4	76	19.0	24	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Humphries	1	1	12	12.0	12	0
Total	1	1	12	12.0	12	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Peterson	1	1	5	5.0	5	0
Total	1	1	5	5.0	5	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Bryant	2-2	54	1-1	7

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Lutz	0-0	0	6-6	6

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Hekker	2	99	49.5	0	1	0	51

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Koch	3	148	49.3	0	2	0	54

Defense	Td	Sk	Def	Stl	Hur	FF	Int
Darby	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Quin	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Smith	5	0	0	2	0	0	0-0
Watt	4	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Talib	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Johnson,D	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Kerrigan	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Davis III	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Harrison Sr	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Sheffield	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Addae	1	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Hand	1	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Dareus	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thompson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mayowa	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Total	39	0	6	4	1	0	0-0

Defense	Td	Sk	Def	Stl	Hur	FF	Int
Brown,P	12	0	1	1	0	0	0-0
Woodyard	10	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Peterson	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Reddick	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Norman	4	0	0	0	0	0	1-15
Watt	4	1	0	1	3	0	0-0
Thompson,T	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Davison	3	2	0	0	0	0	0-0
Onyemala	3	1	0	0	1	1	0-0
McCourty	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thomas	1	0	0	0	0	0	1-18
Williams,K	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Davenport	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thompson,S	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Westbrooks	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
March-Lilla	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Total	61	4	2	2	4	1	2-33



MATT RYAN
AURORA

23 of 32, 297 yards, 5 TD passes, no TOs. Not a perfect day, but close.

	Cowtown	Aurora
First Downs	23	21
Rushes	32-174	16-75
Passes	38-24-198	32-23-297
Sacked	4-21	0-0
Fumble	1	0
Penalties	8-42	3-20
Turnovers	2	0
Missed Tackles	3	11
Dropped Passes	0	1
Bad Passes	4	2
Passes 25+	0	2
Runs 10+	6	4
Blitzers	15	8
Time	37:57	22:03
Third Down	7-16	2-7
Fourth Down	2-3	2-2
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/2/1	4/4/0
Net Offense	351	372



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – With the national media going ape sh*t over the novel coronavirus, despite there only being 35 confirmed cases here in the United States, the good news is that President Trump is not panicking and, after speaking with President Xi of China, is confident that the situation is “very much under control.” I wish the same could be said about the bullhorns in our media. I don’t know who decided CNN and other media outlets of questionable reliability were epidemiology experts, but save me the hysteria and wake me up when the World Health Organization declares a global pandemic.

In the meantime, the fear-mongering media is having a gradually corrosive effect on the sanity of some persons in authority, who appear to detect the scent of future lawsuits lingering in the air if, in fact, anything comes of this. Fears of a virus that has yet to kill a single person in North America have EFL officials and local authorities nervous about transmission in the stands at football games. Aurora City Council met to discuss the issue and the EFL Committee convened to review options to ensure “player and fan safety.” Thankfully, saner heads prevailed and the Conference Final between the Corn Kings and the Mustangs was permitted to proceed without any significant changes. The stadium authorities at Magna Park in Aurora seized the opportunity, however, to ban all food and drink from entering the stadium and impose strict search measures “as a precaution” against spread of the virus, leaving ticketholders at the mercy of jacked up “playoff pricing” at the concession stands.

In Minneapolis, concerns that cramming close to 70,000 people into a domed stadium might not be a good idea were muted by conservative city councillors, backed by the Triumph and Wilhalla Stadium investors, who in their desire for a full gate, highlighted some of the stadium’s state-of-the-art and environmentally sound features, one of which is an eco-friendly HVAC system based on geothermal heat pumps. The promotion of this and other progressive components to the stadium (like the healthy food options of the Birdie Burger chain) was enough to assuage the concerns of leftists, despite the obvious absence of a scientific relationship between geothermal heat pumps and virus transmission through respiratory droplets. Apparently, eco-friendly is now conflated in some people’s minds with bio-security.

The good news is that there was no hint of last year’s farcical experiment in “woke” broadcasting by the EFL Network. The playoff game broadcasts were left out of the league’s hands and placed in the safe hands of FOX (Atlantic Conference) and CBS (Pacific Conference). The results were two professionally broadcast games, with all the bells and whistles of playoff hype partially masking the fact that the vast majority of sports analysts saw the Bombers and Corn Kings as belonging to a tier distinctly beneath that occupied by the Triumph and Mustangs. It is not often that we see such a vast majority consensus in the mainstream and alternate media on the anticipated outcomes, as was witnessed in the lead-up to this year’s Conference Finals. Both lines widened as the week progressed as a result. The Triumph began the week at -3 and finished at -5, while the Mustangs started the week at -6 and took the field at -8. The actual results ended up bearing out this analysis, although the Bombers did put up a fight inside a deafeningly raucous Willhalla Stadium.

BROWNOUT

Coming off the Triumph’s decisive victory over division-rival, Virden in the Quarter Finals, the capacity crowd of over 66,000 fans at Wilhalla Stadium in Minneapolis was ebullient and confident as their triumphant heroes took the field to face Bruxelles. **Guy Williams**, fired up for the fight, sprinted from the tunnel toward the sideline to the thunderous roar of an appreciative crowd when he was introduced by the stadium PA announcer.

Williams was beginning to acquire **Bud Grant**-like status in the State of Minnesota for consistently guiding his teams into the playoffs. Unlike Grant’s Vikings, however, the Triumph had actually won a Gale Sayers Trophy, the EFL equivalent of the Super Bowl. As a coach, Williams was in the middle of cementing his legacy as one of the best in modern pro football, a view shared by many in the national media as well. His tough and uncompromising approach to preparation and accountability was balanced by his fierce support for his players, and this brought both harmony and confidence to his team. But in the midst of this unifying spirit of mutual accountability, goodwill and support, one notable detractor threatened to blow it all up.

The tension was building between Coach Williams and arguably the team’s best offensive star over the past 6 years, **Antonio Brown**. Williams had once been criticized for spending just shy of \$22.5 million to lure Brown to the Triumph as an unrestricted free agent in 2014. But within two seasons those critics were backpedalling. Williams’ investment had paid off spectacularly. In 6 seasons with the Triumph, including playoffs, AB had caught 655 passes for 9,803 yards and an incredible 115

touchdowns! He posted back-to-back 120-catch seasons in 2015 and 2016 and, in 2016, won Gale Sayers Game MVP for his 12-catch, 205-yard, 2-TD performance in his team's Championship win over Sebastian, and League Offensive MVP for racking up 2,059 yards and scoring a league record 31 touchdowns. Heading into the 2019 playoffs, Brown's talent and impact on the playing field was beyond dispute. But it was also beyond dispute that the now 30-year old Brown was drawing a huge amount of attention from opposing defences and that young quarterback, **Mitch Trubisky** did not have the confidence to throw with abandon into double-coverage and trust that AB, a half-step slower than in his mid-20's prime, would be able to emerge with ball all the time.

Williams had, of course, picked up on this dynamic and had begun to exploit it by getting the ball into the hands of the speedy and talented **Kenny Golladay** who in his third season was beginning to show signs of maturing into a star in his own right. Defences, focused on Brown, were letting his young partner on the opposite side run free. Although Brown could be credited with an "assist" on many of Golladay's big plays, the former MVP did not view being a decoy as a role worthy of his stature.

AB exploded in the Triumph locker room and attacked his coach at halftime in last week's quarter final game against Virden. The tantrum came after teammate **Kenny Golladay** caught 4 TD passes in the first half, all of them coming in the red zone. Cell phone video of the confrontation between Brown and Williams emerged after the game. Brown can be heard calling his coach a *'bitch-ass cracker,'* as he tosses around equipment and (following a disturbing pattern), begins to take off his uniform and underclothes. The video abruptly ends when Brown throws a cleat at the videographer.

A pouty but fully-dressed Brown was featured in sideline camera shots during the second half of the Virden game, but he remained in the line-up and even caught a 12-yard pass early in the 3rd quarter before being spelled as the Triumph ran out the clock on the rout. The mood was more subdued in the post-game presser, with both Williams and AB half-heartedly attempting to play nice. But within hours of leaving the stadium, Brown was on Twitter: "Imagine conforming to a system giving it a 100 percent to see him treat me like this is unfairly! Making money off my sweat and blood fuck the @Triumph!"

Coach, **Guy Williams** kept silent. The team turned the other cheek. Despite apparently being sexually propositioned by Brown in a most shocking manner two weeks earlier, Triumph spokesperson, **Molly Qerim**, tweeted mollifying words: "It is a sport of passion. Glad to see @AB84 cares as much as he does!"

The last thing any sane football fan in Minnesota wanted to see was a Brown-Williams split as the team prepared for the Bombers and a possible second berth in an EFL Championship Game. After trouncing Virden, fans and sportswriters alike felt that this Triumph squad had the personnel to win it all. Brown was a key piece – if not *the* piece – of an offence that did not need to carry the team on its back, but needed to do its part to make the most of its top-five defence.

This was not a case of a team divided, however. This was a case of a single player divided. AB apparently retained just enough decency to show remorse when his physical and verbal transgressions crossed the line into insult and obscenity; but regret was short-lived. As if a screw had come loose inside his head, he came to the stadium primed to blow-up at any real or imagined slight. And he took no prisoners when perceiving a threat to his status.

In the week leading up to the game against the Bombers, a local Minneapolis TV channel showed practice film of **Kenny Golladay** running routes inside the red zone while describing his 4 TD catches against Virden. This prompted AB to re-post a private message that Golladay had sent to him before he had arrived in Twin Cities: "What's up AB? I'm a receiver at University of Northern Illinois. I appreciate all your work. You are a great man on and off the field. Do you have any tips that can help take my game to the next level?" Brown followed the re-tweet with a clear shot at his teammate: "Tip of the Year for @kgxix: Keep playing on my other side and you will get the leftovers!"

This prompted the young receiver to reply: "All I did was show that man love and respect from the moment I got to the league. I am fortunate to get to play with a great receiver, but I won't apologize for catching the ball when it comes my way."

The city was abuzz with talk about the Brown-Golladay rift. Rumours circulated that AB would not take the field if Golladay was in the starting line-up. But the gossip was put to rest when the two teammates embraced for the cameras after Friday practice, with Brown sobbing uncontrollably and blubbering something about "love," "full respect," "if you were a woman, I'd..." and other inanities. Peace reigned for the moment. But every Triumph fan was now acutely aware of the risk. **Antonio Brown's** ego was a potential weapon of mass destruction and nobody seemed to know the code to disarm it.

There was no such disunity on the Bombers' side. The team had escaped from Johnson County last week before a mob organized by the local Sheriff had stormed their hotel with the aim of lynching some of the players as "terrorists." The encounter with "Johnson County Law" had clearly left **Kenny Main** rattled, however. He reportedly purchased a Glock 41 upon arrival in the State of Minnesota and carried it concealed for the entire week leading up to the game.

The Bombers' bond as a team had been strengthened after the frightening experience in Iowa. Despite the fact that they were all, to a man, American-born and bred, they had begun to see themselves as Europeans – foreigners in a hostile land. **Harrison Smith** had started to wear checkered bicycling jerseys and bib shorts, reflecting the popularity of cycling in Belgium. **Terrell Suggs** had taken to wearing the "timeless" clothing of Antwerp designer, **Jan Jan Van Essche**. **Ken Main** was drinking *Maredsous Triple* for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The Bombers' coach was now more or less permanently drunk when his team was on the road. Far from viewing this as a problem, he saw this as embracing the culture of Belgium.

"North American attitudes to drinking are immature," Main once opined in an interview for the Belgian magazine, **Knack**. "They place restorative drinks like beer and wine in the same category as vodka or gin. I find the European acceptance of a drink like

beer at any time of the day as refreshingly advanced, even though I understand it has been a traditional practice for centuries here.”

The Bombers were going to need more than a sense of persecution to beat the Triumph on their home turf. They would need the veteran leadership of **Marcus Mariota** to rise to the fore while finding a way to rattle the nerve of young QB, **Mitch Trubisky** on the other side. After posting an 11-3 record in 14 regular season starts, finishing 9th overall in passer rating, third in quarterback rushing yards and coming off a quarter finals trouncing of powerhouse Viriden in which he threw for 300 yards and 5 TD passes, Trubisky was still viewed as the Achilles’ heel in the Triumph attack. A common opinion of the “upset-coming” crowd was that the Bombers’ secondary, the stingiest in the EFL in surrendering yards, and the dangerous pass rush combo of **Frank Clark** and **Chris Jones** would converge to force Trubisky to commit crucial errors at key moments. In theory, it made sense. But such theoretical success was dependent on Coach Williams playing into the trap, something the savvy new-era Bud Grant avoided doing too often after an early testing of the waters on the opening drive.

The Triumph started the game with possession and ran the ball on the first three plays in order to set up the ‘kill shot’ deep to one of the wide receivers. The Bombers played right into it, selling out to stop the run on the fourth snap. Trubisky dropped back and looked deep. It is not clear who he was targeting first – Golladay or Brown – but it is a moot point because both were blanketed on the play after quick recoveries by **Kyle Fuller** and **Joe Haden**. With the center of the field open, however, the agile Trubisky scrambled for 12 yards. Coach Williams went right back to the same play on the next snap, a tactic known as ‘doubling down.’ Again, the Bombers’ corners were up to the task of dogging the elite receiving duo opposite them and the Triumph QB had to settle for a check down to **Melvin Gordon III** for a modest gain. Whether the Bombers’ defensive coordinator was ready for the deep shot or not, his players were wise to it and reacted immediately. So, the Triumph were forced to settle for a more conservative route to the end zone on their opening drive. Gordon ran 8 yards off right tackle for a first down to the 11, then Golladay got an inside jump on Haden and Trubisky fired a bullet into his bread basket for a TD. The crowd erupted. Golladay handed the ball to Trubisky for the spike. The TV camera cut away suddenly to **Antonio Brown** as he sprinted toward the sideline, ignoring his teammates’ celebration.

“And, of course, all eyes will be on Antonio Brown today, Adam,” play-by-play announcer **Gyro Spedes** remarked as the camera followed Brown to the Triumph bench.

“And for all the wrong reasons, Gyro,” colour commentator **Adam Archerletta** noted wryly. “But Coach Guy Williams is not the sort of coach who is going to adjust the game plan to pander to a player’s desires. He won’t take a player out of the game plan just to punish him either. AB is up against one of the top corners in the EFL today, so we’ll see how this plays out.”

The early probing action put the long slant on the backburner for the time being. Williams would circle back to long patterns again and again later in the game, when he felt that the “heat was off,” but success was limited. In fact, the long pass play worked as designed only once all day; a 35-yard long out to Golladay that helped to set up a 40-yard field goal by **Dustin Hopkins** in the 2nd quarter. Most of the time, Trubisky wisely held on to the ball, threw it away, or checked down to a running back. The one time he attempted to force a pass downfield into double coverage, Bruxelles corner **Fabien Moreau** came away with the ball to cut short a drive late in the first half and preserve a 10-10 tie heading to half time.

The Bombers’ defence held the Triumph ‘big-play’ in check throughout the first half, slowing the game down while backs **Marlon Mack**, **Chris Thompson** and even **Chris Herndon** kept the chains moving on offence. The Triumph ‘D’ was focused on stopping **Travis Kelce** and **Chris Godwin**. Left alone in the red zone, **Golden Tate** got wide open on a slant route and Mariota found him too for an 11-yard TD catch to tie the game at 10 with 1:00 left in the 2nd quarter, where the score stayed heading into half time.

It had been a decidedly even game through 30 minutes, with plenty of highlights. But the head stat line on return from the intermission was the target differential between Brown and Golladay. The latter had been targeted twice, once for a TD catch and the other for a 35-yard gain. Brown had been targeted once but the pass had been incomplete. What was interesting was that the Bombers had left Fuller out on an island with Brown, shifting double-coverage to Golladay and occasionally backfield receiver, **James White**.

“What do you make of this stat, Adam?” **Gyro Spedes** asked his booth partner when the CBS ‘Key to the Game’ Stat flashed on the TV screen showing just the 2-to-1 target spread in favour of Golladay.

“Well, that reflects how many balls have been thrown in the direction of those receivers, not necessarily how many times the play was designed to go to either of them,” **Adam Archerletta** clarified. “We saw Mitch Trubisky take several deep drops. That usually means a deep pass. I am sure that Coach Williams has called his wide receivers’ numbers more than 3 times this afternoon, but the Bombers’ secondary has played really well so far. It looks like Kyle Fuller might be getting into AB’s head just a little bit!”

Indeed, there had been a lot of jawing back-and-forth between Brown and Fuller but no penalties as a result. The repetitive stare of the camera on the battle between the All Pros turned into a sub-plot spin-off of the pre-game drama that had focused on the two Triumph wide receivers. But on the playing field and in the stands the focus of attention shifted to running back **Melvin Gordon III**. Mentioned only in passing in pre-game discussion in the mainstream and alt-stream media, Gordon wound up bailing out the Triumph offence time and again and his effectiveness eventually set the stage for a Triumph breakthrough in the 2nd half. They would need it.

On the Bombers’ second possession of the 2nd half, **Golden Tate** was once again left alone with no Triumph player within 10 feet of him when Mariota tossed a looper over the a vaulting **Bobby Wagner** that Tate hauled in and took 59 yards down the sideline before finally being knocked out of bounds by **Darnell Savage Jr** at the Triumph 20. Mack ploughed through the defence for 13 yards then caught a check-down to Mack for a 7-yard TD and all of a sudden Bruxelles was in the lead, 17-10.

The crowd at Wilhalla Stadium went quiet just enough to allow the furious voice of **Antonio Brown** to be heard above field

level over the whoops of the Bruxelles players, braying in the direction of Coach **Guy Williams**. Major media outlets have since censored the content, but my translation of what I picked out from my game tape goes like this: **“Get me the F*%king football you queer-assed white-trash pussy!”**

The cameras, already pre-positioned, instantly focused in on the Triumph sideline. **Bobby Wagner** sprang into action stepping in-between Brown and his coach and guiding AB gently away in the opposite direction. A flicker of rage fired out of the eyes of Coach Williams, but only for an instant. He composed himself and barked out words of encouragement to his special teams as they went to take the field for the kickoff. *“Wee Willie”* Williams would not come out to play...at least not yet.

After the kickoff was downed in the end zone, Williams went to work. Patiently, he called four straight running plays, good for 24 yards. Banking on the yardage being enough damage to warrant special attention from the Bruxelles defence, on the fifth play Trubisky dropped back deep in the pocket and looked downfield. But the Bombers did not bite this time and the secondary held up again. Stymied and under pressure Trubisky caught sight of Gordon and flipped the ball to him at the last split second before being crunched by a blitzing **Terrell Suggs**. Taking advantage of the spread-out Bombers’ defence, Gordon put his homerun speed to work to cover 48 yards before being forced out of bounds at the Bruxelles 3-yard line. The roar of the crowd and the adrenaline surge of the big gain carried Gordon over the goal line on the very next play and the game was tied once more.

While Gordon embraced left guard, **Joel Bitonio** – who had sealed off a lane on the score by taking out **Chris Jones** – Brown made a kicking motion as he stomped off the field. When he reached the Triumph bench, he hurled his helmet on the ground and again had to be reigned in by Wagner. Coach Williams ignored Brown’s antics and strode out to give Gordon a pat on the back. The running back had delivered a game-changing play and everyone – even the Bombers – knew it. He had turned around a dicey situation in spectacular fashion. Yet, following a cursory replay of the 48-yard scamper on the check down, the network cameras re-focused again on the Triumph sideline, where Brown could be seen spitting words of fury in the direction of his coach.

“Have you ever seen anything like that in your days of playing football, Adam?” **Gyro Spedes** asked his booth partner.

“Football’s an emotional game, Gyro,” **Adam Archerletta** replied. “Guys can get caught up in the emotion. The more competitive a player is the easier he gets caught up in the emotion of the game. AB is a competitor and an emotional guy to begin with. He just wants to contribute. I’m sure Coach Williams understands that and is letting him vent.”

It was neutral commentary designed to de-escalate the media controversy while not giving offence to anyone. But it rang false as the camera focused on Brown’s attempts to penetrate what was now a wall of beefy Triumph linemen in a protective circle around their coach. Frustrated, Brown stepped back and started to remove his pants. He was subsequently gang tackled by Bitonio and **Russell Okung** and carried into the tunnel, from where he emerged just in time for the Triumph’s next offensive series, looking re-energized and surprisingly enthusiastic. As he ran by his coach, he gave a friendly wave and patted his chest in a “my bad” gesture.

“I don’t know what Joel Bitonio and Russell Okung said to AB in the tunnel, but he looks like he ready to play, Adam,” observed **Gyro Spedes**.

“They probably reminded him that there was still plenty of football left and the team needed him more than ever,” **Adam Archerletta** replied. “I mean, they come back to tie the game then the defence just now gets a big stop. They are getting the ball back in pretty decent field position. There is still time to be the hero here!”

Indeed, the Triumph defence had held off a Bombers push, thanks to sacks by **Danielle Hunter** and **Kenny Clark** that forced a Bruxelles punt from their own 28. The Triumph took over at their 30-yard line with 3:08 remaining in the 3rd quarter. The stage was set.

Emboldened by recent successes on both sides of the ball the Triumph went on the attack. Trubisky dropped back on the next play from scrimmage and looked downfield. He looked first at Brown then Golladay but both were covered. He checked down to Gordon but the ball sailed on him and fell incomplete. Rather than back off, the Triumph continued to press through the air and started to find some success, although a tripping penalty on Okung on 2nd & 1 threatened to undo it all. Facing a key 3rd & 8 at the Bruxelles 43, the Triumph kept their pro set on the field while the Bombers suddenly switched to 7 defensive backs. Smelling a screen of some kind they doubled both Triumph running backs and trusted their corners to man-up as they had all game. However, no screen came. Trubisky went straight to Golladay, who took off like a rocket to gain a step on Haden and picked up 17 yards on a medium slant.

They went back to Golladay again on the next play, but Haden had him blanketed. His primary option covered, Trubisky checked down in the direction of Brown, but led him too far and the pass went past his outstretched arms. A frustrated Brown made a rude gesture with his hands toward his quarterback and stormed back into the huddle.

“Is it a good idea to call out your quarterback in the middle of a drive at a critical point in the game?” **Gyro Spedes** asked rhetorically as Trubisky led the offence to the line of scrimmage to face 2nd & 10.

“Not usually,” replied **Adam Archerletta** dryly. “But sometimes that sort of thing can light a fire under somebody.”

It may have done just that. On the next play, Trubisky did not even look off the coverage by glancing in Brown’s direction. He went straight to Golladay, placing a pass perfectly along the seam and hitting his receiver in full stride. The rest of the play was a foot race that the 29-year old Haden was not going to win against the 25-year old rising star. Golladay sprinted into the end zone for a 26-yard TD catch and a 24-17 Triumph lead.

Wilhalla Stadium erupted in elation. Golladay spiked the ball in exultation. Trubisky sprinted to the end zone to joint the revelry. The offensive line ran in formation back to the Triumph sideline after giving their quarterback a perfect pocket from which to



throw the go-ahead touchdown. **Guy Williams** raised his arms in the air as he let loose with a primal ‘*VEEAARRQHI!*’

But coverage of the Triumph celebration was cut short by the camera switching to a shot of Brown knocking over a cooler of *Gatorade* then taking the hat off the head of a hapless ball boy and tossing it into the stands. This time Brown did not look at his coach. He turned and glared in the direction of his quarterback. Trubisky did not return his stare. He returned to the bench and high-fived his offensive line.

The crowd reacted this time with some displeasure, prompted by Brown targeting the ball boy. The fans in the section where the hat had landed started to boo. AB returned fire with a pair of middle fingers. This caused the fans in other sections to catcall and toss items toward the Triumph receiver. A hot dog landed at Brown’s feet. He immediately picked it up, placed it at his groin pointed at the crowd and.....

...the camera abruptly cut away as **Gyro Spedes** exclaimed, “Oh my! That is *not* okay!” The field mics picked up a sudden loud chorus of boos.

Brown was again gang-tackled by members of the offensive line and carried into the tunnel as the special teams

Mustangs’ WR, **Davante Adams** steps into the end zone to finish off a 40-yard TD pass from **Matt Ryan** as time expires in the 1st quarter. Aurora went on the beat Cowtown 42-19 and advance to the final.

unit took the field. He did not re-emerge for entire length of the Bombers subsequent drive; a 12-play, 7-minute, 73-yard affair that ended with **Matt Prater** kicking a field goal from 34 yards. The 3-points was a consolation prize after **Travis Kelce** was flagged for holding to nullify a 3-yard carry by **Kerryon Johnson** on 4th & 2 at the Triumph 6. I am told that Coach **Ken Main** threw a clipboard after the holding call, but no tape of this is available as the camera stayed focused on the tunnel between plays to see if Brown would re-emerge.

Less than a minute before the offence would take the field AB jogged out of the tunnel, waving happily to the crowd and patting his chest in his now familiar “my bad” gesture. He handed the ball boy a \$100 bill as he took the field and joined the huddle, jumping up and down excitedly. He was greeted with a strange mix of jeers and applause. Clearly not everyone was ready to forgive the instantly infamous “hot dog incident,” while others simply wanted their star to be back to normal.

As if by some unspoken group consensus, the next play was a deliberate attempt to try and get AB into the game. It was an aggressive long slant that had everything working for it, including the Bombers double-covering Golladay and Fuller getting caught off guard by Brown’s sudden break downfield. Trubisky’s pass was on the money and, as it approached its moving target on a trajectory that had ‘big gain’ written all over it, everyone could see that only safety **Tashaun Gipson** stood between Brown and the Bombers’ end zone over half a field away. The crowd rose to its feet in anticipation of a highlight reel play. They got one, but not the kind they were expecting. As Brown settled under the pass, running at full throttle, he glanced up field to locate Gipson. That split-second dividing of his attention, however, was enough to break his concentration. AB hit the ball with his hands, instead of the other way around, causing it to ricochet off his helmet, rotate up in the air and bounce just beyond the reach of a diving Gipson. Incomplete.

Brown stopped and stared at his hands then clutched his helmet in disbelief. The crowd began to boo. Trubisky shook his head but quickly recovered and called the offence together. Brown jogged slowly back to the huddle. There was nobody to blame but himself. Nevertheless, everyone was waiting with baited breath to see who would bear the brunt of his latest frustration. The Triumph were 6:59 minutes away from a Championship berth if they could hold on to their 24-20 lead, but the game had turned into the ‘Antonio Brown Show’ – a Greek Tragedy if there ever was one.

The Bombers, on the other hand, were just a touchdown away from making it to their third Championship game but they now seemed almost inconsequential. They had become extras in the storyline, the proverbial “visitors,” in their colourless white jerseys, existing only to act as foils for the home town heroes. AB was at best a tragic hero and at worst a villain on this day.

The real hero made his presence felt on the play after Brown’s drop. Gordon jetted, dodged and weaved his way to a 28-yard gain to set up a first down at the Triumph 45. The crowd sensed another scoring drive, but the Bombers’ defence abruptly stiffened and forced a punt from mid-field that went out of bounds at the Bruxelles 17. **Marcus Mariota** and the offence took the field for what looked like their last chance to steal a playoff victory on the road. But of course, somehow even this scenario circled back to Brown.

“That drop by Antonio Brown is looking mighty big here if the Bombers can drive the field and score,” **Gyro Spedes** remarked as Mariota set up under center.

Archerletta started to answer but was cut short by Mariota taking a quick snap and rolling out to his right. He scanned the field and did not notice **Jurrell Casey** shed the block of right guard, **Frank Ragnow** and set his sights on the backfield. Mariota stopped and set but as he raised his arm Casey slammed into him, jarring the ball loose. It bounced up into the arms of **Chris Harris Jr**, who carried it 14

yards, untouched, to the end zone for an easy score. At 31-20, the Triumph now owned an insurance policy, a two-score lead.

Sensing it was over, the crowd began to celebrate in the stands. The Triumph offence quietly congratulated itself on the sideline while the defence and Coach **Guy Williams** remained focused on the field, not yet willing to let down their guard.

All real hope was lost for the Bombers and they knew it. Their demoralized offence finished with a quiet 4-and-out, handing the ball back to the Triumph at the Bruxelles'29. With 2:17 left in the game the final possession was a mere formality. For some reason, however, Coach Williams called a pass play on 2nd & 10, catching the defence, the fans and the sportscasters by surprise. The play went for 9 yards to set up a 3rd & 1 plunge for the final first down. But with the Bombers out of timeouts and the clock running, the Triumph refused to take up the victory formation and kneel. They continued to run plays into the Bruxelles line up until the final gun.

"Adam, does it surprise you that the Triumph are running the ball with purpose in a game that is pretty much over?" **Gyro Spedes** asked as Gordon slashed off tackle for a 7-yard gain as the clock counted down from 1:49.

"It does a little, Gyro," **Adam Archerletta** replied. "I know that Guy Williams likes to his players to play 'past the whistle,' as they say, but I don't see any upside to running your star halfback into the line when the game is in the bag. Anything can happen – a fumble, an injury. There is no point increasing risk, in my opinion, especially when you heading to the championship. I don't know what message this is supposed to convey but there must be a reason for it."

Whatever the reason, it was not uncovered in the post-game press conference. **Guy Williams** was delayed in his appearance at the podium after an altercation with his star receiver in the Triumph locker room, which was livestreamed on Facebook by AB himself. The vidoe shows him confronting Williams about his sexual preferences, suggesting he is into all kinds of vile acts while offering his coach, "a piece of this" as he flashes open the towel around his waist. It is at that point that two burly men and an even burlier woman appear in camera view and wrestle Brown to the floor, cutting the livestream short. It is not clear who these people were and Williams refused comment when he finally appeared for the press.

"I don't have much to say and I will not take any questions," Williams began. "You saw what happened on the field today. We were fortunate to beat a very good team and we are honoured to represent the Pacific Conference in the Gale Sayers Game for the second time in our history. As far the team is concerned, we still have major work to do to accomplish our goal this season. I thought we played well as a team overall, but, as you all saw, one man thinks he is bigger than the team and I cannot allow that to continue. Hopefully we can come together as a team to welcome AB back as part of that team. I feel for AB. We have been through a lot together. But these transgressions, if they continue, will not stand. Thank you."

Very sobering words from a coach who looked like he desperately needed a drink but was afraid to have one in case "Wee Willie" escaped and created more havoc. No such restraint was evident on the other side. AB was tweeting furiously later that evening:

"There is a zero percent chance that Antonio Brown ever plays another snap for the @Triumph. Coach is a wack ass Trump supporter. Hates black people unless they are uncle toms like @Melvingordon25. Free AB!"

Brown's flameouts show that the team is clearly dealing with an unbalanced individual. I have no doubt he will return to the Triumph for the Championship game – if the Triumph will hve him – his ego cannot resist it. So, don't expect AB to get the help he needs for at least two more weeks, which means we can expect more "Brownouts" and reduced power to the Triumph machine in the lead up to Gale Sayers XIII.

FOOL'S GOLD

I apologize to Cowtown and Aurora fans for the unbalanced coverage of this week's Conference Championships. But let's face it people: nobody outside of Cowtown knows where it is; and everybody outside of Aurora hates the Mustangs – and that includes most of the people of Garland, TX, where the core of the current Mustangs dynasty was born. The human-interest angle, the drama, the possibility of scandal and frankly the prospect of a classic football game all favoured the Pacific Conference game between the Triumph and the Bombers. Therefore, that is where Yours Truly focused 90% of his attention before and after the actual playing of the games.

Of course, the networks did a fair job of pumping up the Atlantic Conference Championship Game to be something that it turned out to be not; a competitive match. And there were a fair number of respectable commentators who felt that the Corn Kings would at least beat the 8-point spread if unable to pull off the upset. I was not one of them, but I could see their points about Cowtown having beaten the Mustangs once already this year and being built – in theory anyway – to beat them as well as anyone could. Those commentators were looking for a repeat of the regular season ambush at Tillman Field, in which a strong Cowtown pass rush got through at key moments to disrupt **Matt Ryan's** timing and **Todd Gurley** performed like a Hall-of-Famer from start to finish. Even with all of that, it took luck and overtime for the Corn Kings to stun the Mustangs.

Being smarter than most, I knew that would not happen again, especially on Aurora's home field. People can say what they want about the silver spoon **Rich Liotta** was fed when he inherited players like **JJ Watt** and **Matt Ryan**; but my view is that he is an underrated tactician who would have studied that film hard and would be prepared to counter whatever the Corn Kings could muster.

Rich Liotta was his usual dull self when talking to reporters in the week leading up to the big game. The Corn Kings did "*not get enough credit*" (in the Press); he expected a "*tough game*;" Ryan Fitzpatrick was "*a cool-headed veteran who catches on to the flaws in a defence*;" his counterpart, Coach Coghlin would "*have his team as ready as can be*;" the Mustangs were "*mentally prepared for a hard fight*" and no, he was "*not seeking revenge*" for the earlier loss. **Jim Coghlin** was equally careful with his words. He bent over backwards to be complimentary toward his opponent at all times: The Mustangs had proven to be "*one of the best teams in league history as well as pro football history*;" Matt Ryan was "*having an MVP year*;" JJ Watt was "*back*" and "*we will have to be extra prepared for him*;" and

“strict mental and physical preparation is what we need to do to be ready for this game.”

It’s hard to generate a compelling story angle when coaches and their players are doing everything in their power to avoid giving bulletin board material to their opponent. The teams had no history of bad blood either, which was a drawback. And despite the presence of stars on both squads, none of their premiere players had egos too big for the locker room.

If there was a human-interest angle at all, it was the sudden rise of **Ryan Fitzpatrick**, the ‘Gnome of Tillman Field, or *Fitzmagick* as he had recently come to be called. The quarterback carousel in Cowtown over the past two seasons was beyond the grasp of journalists who did not live in Cowtown or understand the dynamic created by small town politics. The playoff Golden Boy of 2018, **Jimmy Garoppolo**, or ‘*Jimmy G,*’ had appeared in just one regular season game in 2019, and that was in relief. **Joe Flacco** was named the starter under center in 2019 after appearing to have lost the job to Garoppolo in 2018. Then Fitzpatrick had appeared out of nowhere in Week 9 of this year to face the Mustangs – no reason given by Coach Coghlin apart from “it was time to give Ryan a shot.”

Some were crediting that surprise start with throwing off the Mustangs defence, resulting in the upset. Fitz had started every game since and the offence had blossomed under him. For a guy who had started his pro career when the NFL was still in existence and had been bounced around between four professional leagues since he was a back-up with the Rams, his apparent mastery of the Cowtown offence bordered on the mystical. A metaphysical belief that Fitz was a kind of Corn King Messiah sent from a benevolent all-knowing spirit in the sky had taken hold in the parts of Cowtown where one could also find prominent highway billboards reminding you that “Christ Is Coming – Repent Your Sins!” Not that football was more important than one’s immortal soul, but it was close.

‘I BELIEVE IN GNOMES’ hoodies began sprouting up at Cowtown games starting in Week 14 when it looked likely that the Corn Kings would win their Division for the first time since 2011. The ‘Cult of the Gnome’ had grown ever since. By the day of the Atlantic Conference Championship several dozens of the yellow and green tops could be spotted in the stands at Magna Park, disrupting the otherwise uniform blanket of red and gold.

I admit that my firm intellectual belief in the superiority of the Mustangs was briefly challenged by my visceral reaction to the fantastical appearance of the long-bearded, stocky Fitzpatrick as he warmed up on the sideline. His mocking grin and glint in his eye spoke of the devil’s own mischief. He made me think of a Leprechaun and we all know what they are capable of. Hiding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow is no mean feat. Maybe he *could* beat the Mustangs a second time. But that gold turned out to be Fool’s Gold.

The Spell over me was broken fairly quickly, although it took longer (early in the 4th quarter) for the True Believers to see the light. For roughly 20 minutes of game time it looked like Fitz and the Corn Kings might be able to hold their own long enough for the result to come down to the wire. The Corn Kings defence had forced an Aurora three-and-out on the opening drive, showing they were capable. The Corn Kings offence responded to the first Aurora touchdown with an impressive and steady touchdown drive of their own, showing they too were capable. Until the final seconds of the 1st quarter, the score was 7-7 and it looked like “game on!”

The first sign that whatever benevolent spirit had guided the Corn Kings to this point had stopped working its magic came as time expired in the opening frame. **Matt Ryan** dropped back on 2nd & 6 and went deep to **Davante Adams**. The Corn Kings had seen the play coming and had doubled the Mustangs’ star. But Ryan’s pass skirted over the outstretched hand of **TJ Watt**, through the reaching arms of **Aqib Talib** and into the arms of Adams, who darted into the end zone for a 40-yard TD. It was a perfect pass. **Matt Ryan** was obviously no Gnome, but he was no less magical when he needed to be.

The second sign came on the Corn Kings’ subsequent possession when a drive that started with promise ended abruptly due to successive minor miscarriages. Having reached the Aurora 31, Fitzpatrick went for the throat with what was intended to be a long slant to **Mike Evans**. Although the Mustangs defence as a whole was focused on **Todd Gurley**, All Pro corner **Patrick Peterson** stuck to his man like a bur. Seeing the tight coverage, Fitz checked down to Gurley but the throw was low and incomplete. Two plays later, on 3rd & 6, Fitz held the ball too long and was sacked by **JJ Watt**. **Andre Dillard** was then flagged for a false start on the field goal try. If not for the impressive leg of **Matt Bryant** hitting from 54 yards, the Corn kings would have come away with nothing. But the fact that they had to resort to a shaky FG attempt against a team that usually only settled for touchdowns was a bad omen.

That’s when I snapped out of it. It was not an “omen” at all – in the sense that any higher power was involved in the game’s outcome. The Mustangs were simply a better team and they went on to prove it before 30 minutes had elapsed. They marched 75 yards for a TD on their next drive; picked off Fitzpatrick on a ridiculously poor decision on 3rd & 17 to end Cowtown’s next possession; then made short work of the short field to score their 4th TD of the first half, for a 28-10 halftime lead.

The Corn Kings drove 75 yards for a TD to open the 2nd half. The 5-yard TD pass from Fitzpatrick to **Adam Humphries** revived hope for worried Corn Kings fans that the Gnome still had enough magic left in him. But the true Master Magician on this day was the Ryan wearing red. The Mustangs QB’s 16-yard TD pass to **Albert Wilson** on Aurora’s next series capped an 85-yard drive in which the Mustangs had cut through the Cowtown defence like butter. Matt Ryan’s “magic” was more powerful. Fitz had to bow to it.

With the Corn Kings trailing by 16 points, 35-19, they began a must-score drive at their own 25 with 11:00 left. On the first play, the Gnome threw a terrible pass to Aurora safety, **Michael Thomas**, setting up excellent field position for the Mustangs’ final TD, a 2-yard run by **Zach Zenner**. **Jimmy Garoppolo** finished the game at quarterback for Cowtown as Coach Coghlin raised the white flag.

I would like to say that the game was closer than the 42-19 final score, but I cannot. The best that I can say is that it did not reflect the effort; the Corn Kings tried *really hard* in this game, at least as hard as Aurora. But with regard to competitiveness, 42-19 is an accurate reflection. The Mustangs are a talented, well-coached team that plays best when it matters most. David did *not* beat Goliath this time. With all due respect to the Triumph, the Mustangs are charging toward a third Championship!

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Jimmy's CHAMPIONSHIP PICK

At Georgia Stadium, Greensboro, GA

TWIN CITIES @ AURORA (line – MUSTANGS by 2)

INJURIES: Twin Cities – Kwon Alexander (OUT); Aurora – None.

BACKGROUND: Since entering the league in 2012 the Triumph have faced the Mustangs only four times and only once since the team moved to Aurora. The Garland Mustangs under Doug Shirley had the number of the early versions of the expansion Triumph, winning all three matches. The Triumph prevailed the only time they faced the Aurora version, with that win coming last year in the only season the Mustangs failed to reach the playoffs under Rich Liotta. Being in opposite conferences for all but two seasons, the teams have never faced each other the post-season. Both have won Championships – the Mustangs winning in 2014 and 2017 and the Triumph winning in 2016. They are the only teams in EFL history to post perfect seasons, with the Mustangs accomplishing that rare feat twice. This game will mark the first Championship win for either team in a season in which they lost a game.

WHEN TWIN CITIES HAS THE BALL: The Triumph ran the ball 42% of the time during the regular season for an average of 5.2 yards-per-carry, giving them the third highest run production in the league and the highest among the top five offences. This apparent commitment to the run is somewhat deceptive, however. Quarterback, Mitch Trubisky accounted for 80 carries, second most on the team, and over half of those came on scrambles out of the pocket. While the Triumph do possess a legitimate game-breaker threat at halfback in Melvin Gordon III and a slippery dual-purpose third-down back in James White, the offence's center of gravity remains on the edges, focused on Antonio Brown and the underrated Kenny Golladay. Everything the Triumph do is designed to optimize Trubisky's chances to get the ball into the hands of one of these two assassins. It doesn't necessarily need to be a deep ball either. Both can score from anywhere on the field if the coverage slips or the throw is on the money. They simply make defenders miss. The Triumph have not changed their offensive approach in the playoffs so far, except that Golladay has emerged as the money man in the passing game, much to the chagrin of the increasingly unstable A.B. Defences understandably focus on Brown as the main threat; in the past Guy Williams has almost defiantly continued to throw his way, usually with success. However, in the Bruxelles game, Brown was clearly a decoy and the backs got the majority of targets. So, how will the Mustangs handle this? The beauty of the Aurora defence is that it boasts a luxury: two top corners capable of hanging with the likes of AB and KG. The Mustangs won't feel the need to commit to double coverage whenever a pass play is expected. Add to the mix an elite pass rusher in JJ Watt taking on a solid, but far from elite, Russell Okung on the left side; and an under-the-radar pass rush specialist like Denico Autry making life difficult for journeyman Brandon Shell on the right, and the pocket will be hot for Trubisky whenever he tries to stretch the field. The linebackers, merely average by comparison with the other two levels of the 'D,' will likely stick to fundamentals and blitz only occasionally. Don't be surprised if they put a spy on Trubisky in obvious passing situations.

WHEN AURORA HAS THE BALL: Putting the ball in the hands of Matt Ryan this year has been like putting a pistol in the hands of your worst enemy while standing in front of him saying "shoot me." Yet there is no way to avoid it – Ryan will get the ball and he will score. The challenge for defences in 2019 when dealing with the Aurora offence has been slowing it down, rather than stopping it cold. The Mustangs are obviously oriented toward the passing game. They threw the ball 64% of the time in the regular season, which is historically high even for them, with a healthy dose of those throws going deep or very deep. Although they operated out of a two-tight end set half of the time, they rushed the ball only strategically or in the dying minutes of blowouts when they had the lead, of which there were many. These definite tendencies produce potentially dangerous misconceptions, however. The workhorse in waiting, Devin Singletary is a solid all-purpose runner and Kenyan Drake has the explosiveness and agility of an elite all-purpose back. If the Mustangs chose to run, they could do so effectively. They simply choose to pass. And it is no wonder why. There is an argument to be made that Davante Adams is the most dangerous wide receiver scoring threat in the league. Adams averaged almost 20 yards per catch, with 20 TD passes in 106 receptions. He was targeted 175 times this year – third most in the league – making up 29% of all Ryan's throws. This does not include the passes where he was the intended primary receiver but the play resulted in a check down to an outlet, a sack or a scramble.

The Ryan-to-Adams combo is the most notorious and dangerous one in the league and has been over several years since the Mustangs launched their dynasty. On the other side of Adams, Ryan has at his disposal the disciplined, sure-handed route-runner, Julian Edelman. He won't stretch the field often but he is one of the most dependable receivers on third down any QB could ask for. With these two drawing all the attention, it is easy to forget about the tall and speedy Tyrell Williams and the soft-handed and tough mucking tight end, Kyle Rudolph. The Aurora offence has weapons and, on top of that, an offensive line sturdy enough to give Ryan time to use them. But as daunting as the Aurora attack is virtually all of the time, it is not invincible. The Triumph have assets on defence that will test the balance of that Aurora offence. Bobby Wagner is an All Pro field general at inside linebacker who will diagnose the plays and be where he needs to be on every snap. He is the starting point for everything they do on defence, but he is not alone. Jurrell Casey is both a run-stuffer and an interior pass rush threat who will make handling quarterback terrorizer Danielle Hunter even more impossible. And while the safeties are not exactly household names, they are good enough to support three very good corners in a blended mix of 'man' and 'zone' schemes. It is a defence that is not afraid of giving up some yards on the ground to stop the pass and when it puts its mind to taking something away, it has had plenty of success. The Triumph will almost certainly focus on taking Adams out of the game as much as possible and trust that their high-grade defensive talent will prevent the rest of the Mustangs arsenal from delivering a mortal wound.

THE WAY I SEE IT: This is the Championship match-up the league has been secretly anticipating and hoping for. Although the debate was alive for most of the season, there can now be no doubt that the league's two best teams have made it to the final and deciding game. There is also little doubt that these two coaches – both of whom are hall-of-fame bound already – are among the best, if not the best, the EFL has seen to date. The Mustangs were more dominant during the season and the playoffs and are rightly favoured in this game, albeit only slightly. However, the Triumph fended off what many believe was tougher competition in their conference and division during the regular season. They also had to get past the league's best offence in Virden in the post-season in order to get to this point. Whatever the pre-game arguments are in favour of one or the other, they will be deemed to be settled once and for all after this game is over. Barring an intervention from the officials (which is always a possibility these days) this should be a highly competitive and tight contest between two evenly matched teams. The Triumph are a cut above the Mustangs on the defensive side of the ball. While good defence in the season of offence that was 2019 generally did not result in many shutouts, good defence proved to be the difference maker at key moments in many games. On the other hand, the Mustangs benefit from a marked advantage at the game's most important position: quarterback. For many observers, that is enough to throw their money behind an Aurora cover. However, as discussed, Mitch Trubisky brings a third dimension to the Twin Cities attack that Matt Ryan cannot bring; the ability to extend plays and gain chunk yardage with his feet. If – and it is a 50-50 "if" – Trubisky can stay on target with his throws, the Triumph offence will have little trouble keeping up with the Aurora offensive juggernaut. That would make good defence at key moments decisive. Both teams have stars on the defensive side – all of whom are potential difference-makers. But the Mustangs have more holes, particularly on the edges at linebacker and in the back end of the secondary at safety. Expect Guy Williams to have a game plan ready to exploit these weaknesses while Rich Liotta worries less about what the Triumph defence can or cannot do and develops a game plan suited to his team's proven strengths. There is merit to both approaches. But in the end, I think that the tiniest details in planning will make the difference in this game. That, and a dash of old-fashioned, Football Gods luck in the form of a lucky bounce. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**



ANCIENT HISTORY CHANNEL PRESENTS

This Week in EFL History
With Professor Sterling Smitherman

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – The Conference Finals of 2013 fulfilled both a dream and nightmare scenario for **Archie Manning**: His sons, Peyton and Eli, would face off in the EFL Championship.

The Gale Sayers Game would inevitably be a bittersweet experience for the patriarch of the Manning Family. But getting there was pure joy.

His elder son, Peyton, was nearly perfect, completing 22 of 26 pass attempts for 254 yards and 5 TD passes in the Patriots' 38-24 win over Chino. Peyton's performance was aided by 146 tough yards on the ground by

Adrian Peterson and **Kendall Hunter**, running behind a suspect offensive line against one of the better defences in the league in 2013. The Pats' defence chipped in, taking the ball away twice and holding **Cam Newton** to just 176 yards passing and no TDs. The Convicts complained about the referees after being out-flagged 8-1 by the home team.

In the highly anticipated match-up between the league's top two defences, Markham's **Eli Manning** defied the analysts' predictions by out-dueling **Matt Ryan**, 24-14, in a style that highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of the younger Manning. The interceptions were there – two of them in the first half – but they amounted to nothing as the Mustangs could not turn them into points. More importantly, Eli hit on 3 TD passes, the first an opportunistic check down of 29 yards to **DeAngelo Williams** to open the scoring; the second a 30-yard medium fly to **Jordy Nelson**; and the third on a 25-yard fly to **Marques Colston** to seal the game late in the 4th quarter. The Mustangs had been the 'Team of Destiny' in the minds of fans, but a paternity test proved the North Stars to be Destiny's Child in 2013. In retrospect, setting up the Battle of Brothers was the perfect destined end to a thrilling season.