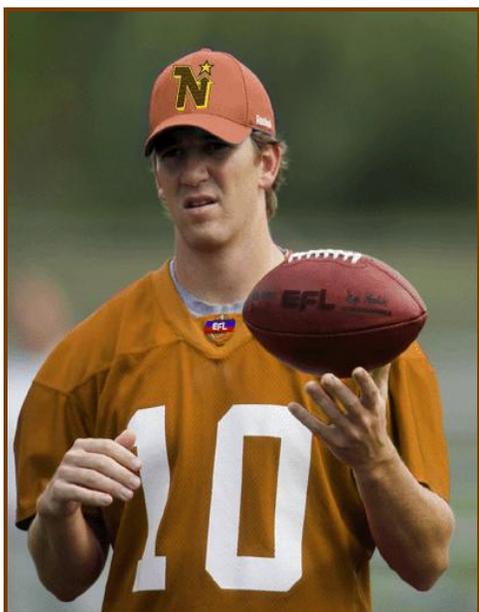


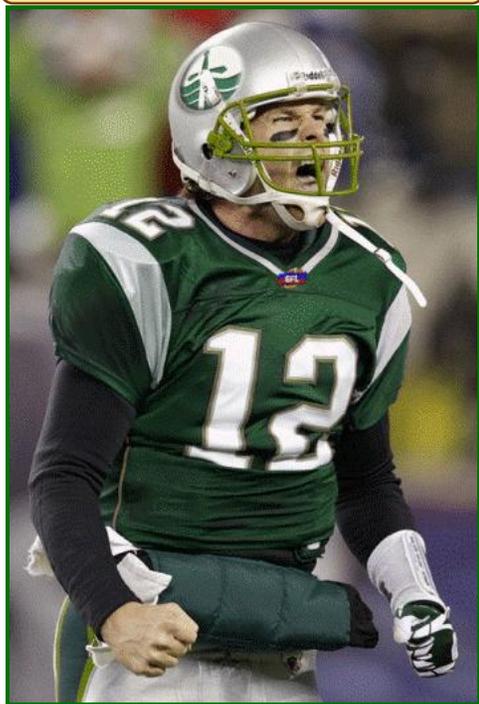


2012 PREVIEW

THIS IS THE YEAR
TO.....



Does Markham's *Eli Manning* hold the balance of power in the North?



Scarborough's *Aaron Rodgers* (above) serves notice that the Blue Eagles will soar high in 2012; but cross-conference rival *Tom Brady* (left) is re-armed and ready for a comeback. How far can he take the Excaliburs?

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- JIMMY THE GEEK'S WEEK ONE PREDICTIONS

ITS GONNA BE A ...

DAWNG FIGHT!



CANTON (AP) – Is it a face lift or a tummy tuck? Is it the result of a magic pill or protein powder? Could it actually be diet and exercise? Whatever it is, the Markham North Stars suddenly don't look the same and are shining brighter than ever heading into the EFL's 2012 campaign. Shining brighter than *what* – a 12-volt car bulb, you say – perhaps derisively?

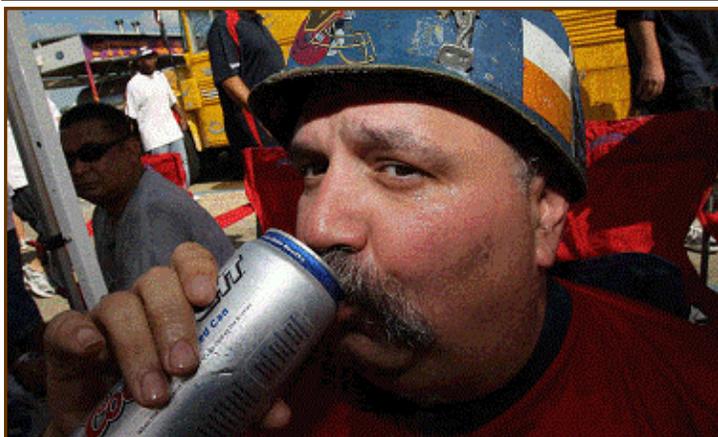
The North Stars have been anything *but* stars in their first four EFL seasons. Not that the adjectives used to describe them over those four years have been *all* bad. 'Tenacious,' 'determined,' 'bullheaded' even 'courageous' – all come to mind when thinking of **Darrin Jones'** loveable losers. Unfortunately, it has been the praise of those who get something when they expect nothing. Sporting a 20-42 record over four seasons, without ever achieving a winning record in a single campaign, it goes without saying that there are no post-season statistics to report for the Markham franchise. Their victories have been the little ones – like gaining first downs on 3rd-and-long – not often the big ones that fall under 'W' in the standings.

All of that is about to change in 2012. Not only will the North Stars win more games than they lose this year, they look poised to win more games than any other team – if they can keep it together on game day.

Taking their cue from their division rival Pickering, they vowed to *go-for-it* this off-season. But unlike Pickering of 2010, they had very little to build upon. Darrin Jones' principal assets were cap room – a natural product of a team without many high-paid impact players – and draft picks. Building on a pair of returning stars in the disruptive pass-rusher **Trent Cole**, and offensive line mainstay, **Michael Roos**. Jones declared

“the future is now” and proceeded to revamp his team with an aggression that caught everyone by surprise. Jones launched into his rebuilding project with the zeal of a fat kid who finally tires of being called “Tubby.” After six months, the tubby North Stars are svelte and nearly unrecognizable.

It all began quietly with a trade for wide receiver **Steve Breaston**. Not exactly a warning shot, but with **Jordy Nelson** as the only receiving weapon at the disposal of the (at the time), unknown starting quarterback, it was a necessary depth addition. Over the next month a bevy of trades brought key additions, like possession receiver **Wes Welker** from Garland, and bulldozing running back and backfield receiving threat **Jonathan Stewart** from Scarborough. A fire sale in Iowa City in exchange for draft picks contributed safety **Jairus Byrd** to the secondary while a similar rebuilding project in Charleswood allowed Jones to acquire veteran



Markham fans are looking forward to more than the beer this year. Not that there's anything wrong with beer!

superstar **Ed Reed** in exchange for the young, hard-hitting safety **Louis Delmas**. With Reed came instant credibility for a secondary that already featured the reliable **Charles Tillman** at corner, but lacked depth. On the heels of the Reed deal, Jones shopped a pair of draft picks to Death Valley for veteran **Nate Clements** to play opposite Tillman and suddenly four key pieces were in place in the defensive secondary. This quartet became much more dangerous the very next day when Jones plucked protected free agent, quarterback terror **John Abraham** from the Pats for a third round pick. The one-two punch of Cole on the left and Abraham on the right of the defensive line would help the corners and allow the solid but unspectacular linebacker corps to stay at home and play their assignments.

With the defense now stable, multiple weapons at wide receiver, a promising tight end in **Jared Cook**, and a pair of complementary running backs in Stewart and **DeAngelo Williams**, within a month the situation in Markham had changed dramatically for the better. But there was one *big* missing piece, without which there would be no serious North Star bid for post-season success – there was no quarterback. With unloved **Mark Sanchez** shipped off to Florida to be booed or ignored at the Fish Tank, the Stars were left with no proven player at the most important position in the game. The Jones Gambit, as it was being called at the time by ESPN's **Kris Hortenson**, was looking a lot like a big bluff at that point



A relaxed **Jared Allen** glides through non-contact workouts in training camp OTAs. The Dinos' premier pass rusher is in a contract year and taking aim at enemy quarterbacks.

Then it came – *The Deal*. Of all the moves, it was the most important one – a real game-changer. Jones targeted a developing team in Virden, moving some of his better prospects and the #9 overall pick in the draft to the Violators for the signal-caller he was looking for – **Eli Manning**. With **Matt Stafford** poised to take away the starting assignment in Virden from the interception-prone Manning, GM **Lance Barrate** could afford to let Peyton's younger brother go, and he didn't seem very choked up about it either.

Manning, who had toiled under duress in Virden could not conceal his excitement at the change in scenery. "I can't wait to get out of...I mean I can't wait to meet my new teammates in Markham," Manning said as he doffed a New Epoch© North Stars cap at a press conference. "The North Stars are reaching for the stars and I am looking forward to being a part of that."

The final "all in" bet in the Jones Gambit came over one month later when Markham engineered one of the most stunning trades of all – leveraging Iowa city cap room to acquire veteran SFL Big Pond Pandas' star guard **Evan Mathis** in free agency. In exchange the Cubs snagged rookie **Stephon Gilmore** and promising young tackle **Charles Brown**. The \$30 million bonus awarded to Mathis to lure him away from the SFL was a record signing bonus in the EFL's history – the kind that could have attracted an elite quarterback, let alone a guard untested on the EFL gridiron. It raised the

stakes dramatically and set off an unprecedented four-way arms race in the North Division, with Markham's rivals Durham, Cowtown, and Pickering scrambling to keep pace.

Darrin Jones had improved his hand and upped the ante, but his cards have still yet to be played. Sitting quietly at the table opposite Markham's riverboat gambler, with a strong hand of his own, is Durham's **George Kaldis**. The always competitive Thunder Lizards, who have never posted a losing record in the EFL's five years, appear to be well-positioned to knock Markham down from the star-studded skies. A top-flight secondary featuring captain *Adrian Wilson* and second year pro *Cam Chancellor* at safety, and a rejuvenated *Carlos Rogers* at corner, promises to make the going tough for those opposing quarterbacks who somehow manage to elude the best pass rusher in the game, *Jared Allen*. The defence will make plays, despite an unimpressive linebacker corps, but the real strength of the Durham squad will come from an offence that has the tools to dismantle all but the most elite



Garland safety **Eric Weddle** is one of several homegrown Mustangs who are looking like thoroughbreds this year. Expect to see Weddle and the rest of Doug Shirley's crew raise their arms high in triumph more frequently in 2012.

defences. Beginning in the trenches, center *Nick Mangold* and newly acquired guard *Carl Nicks* will pave the way for the two Bushes – the pounding Michael and the explosive Reggie, while blindside protector *Michael Oher* will keep Mohave refugee *Matt Schaub* upright.

Yes, you read that correctly – *Matt Schaub*. It appears that the *Philip Rivers* era is mercifully at an end in Durham and with it comes an opportunity to stretch the field on a regular basis without fear of a game-changing disaster. Schaub could not have asked for more weapons than he inherited from the oft-bumbling Philip. With 'Megatron' *Calvin Johnson* and *Dwayne Bowe* spread out wide, and *Vernon Davis* and *Antonio Gates* jumping off the line, there should always be somebody open down field.

As in Markham, there is a whiff of something very different in the air in Durham. Always good on paper, there is a sense that they will back up the hype this year. An indication of this sentiment is the strong endorsement of the Dinos' post-season odds from **Harry Schultz** of the stats-based rating agency FootballOutriders.Org. In the past the agency has always correctly down-played Kaldis' squad, but this year they are singing (in the monotone warble of true stats geeks) a different tune.

"Call it the change in uniform – getting away from that awful candy blue and orange – or call it the change in quarterback if you want," begins Schultz, citing two popular topics in the Durham press, "both are factors. But the main reason Durham will prevail in the North Division is because of what I call 'team build.' This team is built to win the type of game the league is playing this year. The combination of the pass rush and aggressive secondary will force quarterback errors – and we all know Eli throws interceptions – and the offence has the strength to dominate in both quick-strike and ball-control styles. What's their weakness? They've been criticized for the lack of an impact linebacker; that is a drawback, but I don't think it will play a decisive role. Believe it or not, the lack of a fullback will limit their options in short yardage situations, and those come up more frequently than people think. In close games against strong opponents, that could be decisive."

Durham has tossed their chips into the pot, matching the North Stars bet-for-bet; but there are others at the Can-Am card table looking to score big and refusing to fold. Keeping a low profile is Scarborough's **Chris Dickinson**. It's not that he refuses to speak to the Press, but he is definitely avoiding them. Can you blame him?

The second-year owner has taken blistering heat from national media, especially in Florida, for driving former owner Jim Heaton's Cadillac into the ditch last year. The favourite to win it all in 2011 failed to make the playoffs with a team that many in the mainstream media thought could not be beaten.

"That's why they play the games," grated **Cowan Bullherd** on his nationally syndicated radio show, *Morning Bull*. "You don't think coaching makes a difference in this league? I've got news for you, people, it makes *all* the difference! You can't put a High School coach in there and expect results from professionals."

Somebody close to Dickinson must have whispered something similar, but more gently, into his ear because 'Jonesey' is out as head coach of the Blue Eagles and in is none other than former NFL coach, **Bill Belichick**. Paroled after serving a prison term for setting up spy-cams in opponent's locker rooms in the final year of the NFL, Belichick is back on the sidelines and surlier than ever with the Media. With one-syllable sound bites to decipher and with and all but two training camp workouts closed to the public, sports writers, even in Scarborough, are not sure what to expect from the Blue Eagles in 2012. What we *do* know is that most of the same cast of characters who failed to take flight with the blue-and-gold last year are back in 2012. Despite last year's humiliating finish, they are still an impressive bunch and, some think, remain the team to beat in the FFI



This Mustangs fan thinks his team is strong enough to clip the Blue Eagles. Bruised egos in Scarborough will guarantee a tough fight.

Piloting the Blue Eagles is, according to ESPN's **Russ Flont**, "the greatest quarterback in the game today" **Aaron Rodgers**. For once, Flont might not be exaggerating. Rodgers is backed up by the most versatile running back in the league, **Ray Rice**; a potential game-breaker in back-up running back **CJ Spiller**; the most complete tight end in the league in **Heath Miller**; and the ever-dangerous **DeSean Jackson** at slot receiver. **Logan Mankins** and center **Ryan Kalil** anchor an offensive line that can push around any defence on a good day. **Brandon Marshall** must be respected as Number One at wide receiver, but his lapses in concentration are a concern.

From the few training camp reports available, the defence appears to be dominant once again. The game could change for the worse at any moment for Scarborough's opponents with **Darrelle Revis** patrolling the secondary and **Terrell Suggs** doing it all near the line-of-scrimmage. **Calais Campbell** at left defensive end, **LaMarr Woodley** at outside linebacker, and safety **Michael Griffin** round off a dangerous group of defenders that has everything going for it but a decent nickname.

With such high rollers as Jones, Kaldis, and Dickinson at the table, one can be excused for failing to notice the most surreptitious card player of all. His face partially obscured by the shadow of his ten gallon cowboy hat, Garland's **Doug Shirley** has never played the high stakes game before; but with the right play, and a few blunders by his opponents, his Mustangs could find themselves raking in the jackpot at the end of the big game.

Dishing off **Wes Welker** to the North Stars for a first round pick sent an early signal that the Mustangs were content to spend another year building their powerhouse. But Shirley turned around and parlayed that pick into a mega-deal with rebuilding Iowa City, picking up **Arian Foster**, **D'Brickshaw Ferguson**, **DeAngelo Hall**, and run-stuffer **Vince Wilfork**. It was the only big off-season move by the Mustangs, but it filled out the roster nicely.

Most of the Garland's talent is of the homegrown variety. The development of **Duane Brown** at tackle and the emergence of **Max Unger** and **Chris Kuper** at guard will open up more room for the terrific tandem of Foster and **Matt Forte** in the backfield, and give **Matt Ryan** more time to find one of several options downfield, that include a more mature **Darrius Heyward-Bey** and red zone specialist **Laurent Robinson**. The defence has matured under ultra-conservative stewardship to the point where a blitz or two might be in order for a change. The middle

of the field is a virtual no-go zone with Wilfork clogging the center of the line and linebackers **Brian Cushing** and **Navorro Bowman** at left and right inside linebacker. Coaches are raving about safeties **Eric Weddle** and **Earl Thomas** and expect them to make a difference in both the running and the passing games. Second year pro **Patrick Peterson** strikes fear into special teams coverage units, but he is still learning the cornerback position. Garland will be a contender this year, but how far they go will depend on their opponents and whether or not they can compensate for relative weakness at cornerback.

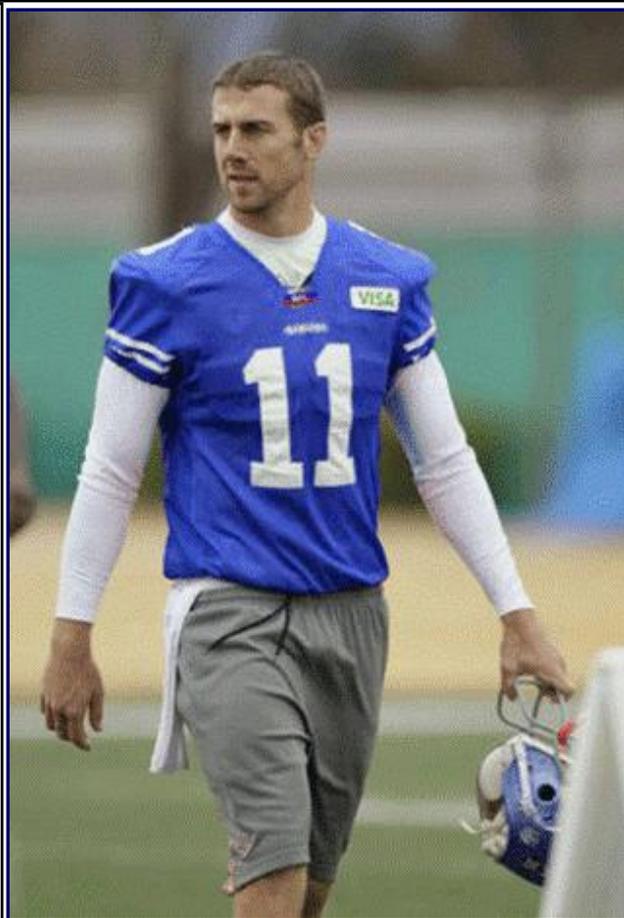
While four powerhouse teams play high stakes poker in the Can-Am Conference, a game more resembling BINGO is taking place across the east-west expanse of the Pacific-Atlantic Conference – and not everybody is playing. With extensive home renovations going on in traditional PAC strongholds like Charleswood and Iowa City; Mohave saving money to pay for stadium upgrades and settle lawsuits from heat-stricken fans; **Cam Newton** trying to do it by himself in Chino; and two expansion teams in the mix, the Conference appears to be up for grabs for a lucky contender from among the remaining four.

In the smoky Bingo hall, starting with the most free spaces are the reigning champions in Los Angeles. Determined to make a return trip to the big game, **Jeff Dohrn** spent the off-season doing promotional spots on TV morning shows to brag about his team while patching holes in a squad that is showing the wear-and-tear of age and injury. Gone is **Jamaal Charles** and in his place comes scat-back **Darren Sproles** – a dangerous kick and punt returner and dynamic receiver out of the backfield, but no threat to carry the running game for any sustained period. The job of gaining the tough yards will fall to **Shonn Greene**, who is no Charles, even when he is following the blocking of All Pro tackle **Joe Thomas**. Gone as well, to expansion Commonwealth, is Championship Game MVP **Josh Freeman**. Will Blandford's \$7 million offer sheet for Freeman was too rich for the cash-strapped Knights, especially after they landed free agent quarterback **Alex Smith** from the SFL's Mississippi Rebels for

million per year and a \$5 million signing bonus.

Smith will be expected to perform at a high level with **Roddy White** and **Steve Smith** stretching the field and ageless vet **Tony Gonzalez** picking up close range castoffs; but the burning question is whether or not the vaunted 'Blue Shield' can live up to its reputation in 2012. The core pieces are still in place, but with wads of cash tied up paying ageing veterans **Charles Woodson**, **Osi Umenyiora**, **Nnamdi Asomugha**, and **Kevin Williams**, there was not much left in the kitty to purchase insurance. The chinks in the Knights' armour will not appear at first glance; but as the season wears on, the effect of having to play **Ashton Youboty** and **Quinton Carter** in nickel and dime packages will be felt.

Coughing and waiting nervously for the letter 'B' is **Jay Hammond** and the Excaliburs. Despite a wretched under-achieving performance in 2011, many people think **Tom Brady** is poised for a comeback in 2012, blaming a woefully understaffed receiving corps for his previous season-long troubles, and citing an arsenal of receiving threats this year in **Victor Cruz**, **Michael Crabtree** and **Anquan Boldin** to support the argument. Brady will have time to find his targets while standing behind an offensive line led by backside protector **Jason Peters**. The disappointing **Darren McFadden** was packaged off to Pickering in the off-season for Thunder Lizard reject, **Michael Turner**; perhaps the change of scenery will improve the fortunes of both.



Los Angeles QB, **Alex Smith** has a tough act to follow. Can he equal Freeman's achievement and lead the Knights back to the Championship Game?



Joe Flacco has fans in Cowtown excited at the prospect of another playoff run. You can expect to see more naked fans in the seats at Tillman Field in 2012.

Assuming the offence performs as hoped for in Camelot, York's final fortunes will depend on the defence. A complete overhaul of the secondary was necessary, but Hammond failed to land a true shutdown corner in the off-season to raise the defence to an elite level. Instead, he had to settle for quantity over quality, acquiring 8 new defensive backs through trades, free agency and the draft. The best of the lot is former Gladiator, *Assante Samuel*, who is wily and nifty but may have lost a step from the days of his prime. *Von Miller* looks ready to bust out as a mortal danger to opposing quarterbacks while coaches are excited to see what former CFL star *Jason Babin* can do rushing from the edge. The middle of the defensive line is solid with *Geno Atkins* and *Cullen Jenkins* capable of both stuffing the run and applying pressure on the quarterback.

Smoking a cigarette and praying to his pal Satan for an 'I' and a 'G' is the grim **Chris Worthley**, Head Embalmer of the Undertakers. By Worthley's standards it was a quiet off-season; but he still made 17 deals involving role players, prospects, and innumerable draft picks that analysts are still examining to determine if he came out ahead. Apparently banking on, in ESPN's **Russ Flont's** words, "the best quarterback of all time" in *Drew Brees* to carry most of the load, Death Valley did not make any significant moves to improve their immediate prospects in 2012 except for an early-season deal for wide receiver *Marques Colston* and an 11th hour trade for corner *Sheldon Brown* in a bid to garner a little respectability in the secondary.

Worthley believes in rebuilding and competing at the same time.

"Why not?" He asked in response to a skeptical reporter's question during a recent Press scrum at the Crypt – the media room at the Graveyard. "I can chew gum and punch you in the nose at the same time, why couldn't I beat the Knights with a few rookies on my roster?"

The Undertakers' plan for 2012 appears to revolve around Brees' ability to scare opposing defences into allowing *Ryan Matthews* and *Willis McGahee* to run roughshod over them. When Brees needs to go vertical, his main targets will be the twin tight end threats, *Rob Gronkowski* and *Aaron Hernandez*, and Colston. On defence, the hope is that they will sack their way out of trouble with *DeMarcus Ware* and *Charles Johnson* while banking on a remarkably easy schedule to keep the yardage count down from last year.

Finally, dragging an oxygen tank while sucking on a Marlboro through a surgically carved hole in his throat, is **Lance Barrate**, Chief Torturer of the Virden Violators. Lance needs an 'N' and an 'O' which, coincidentally, spells Virden's chance of winning the Championship this year. But in a weak Division within an even weaker conference, and considering the real possibility that Brady will stink again in spite of positive changes in York, it is remotely possible that the impossible could happen. The Violators under Barrate have always been a tough out, no matter how bad they appear on paper, and this season they are no longer bad on paper.

Outriders analyst, **Arpin Plunderflunder** made his case for a Virden North Division title in his weekly blog, *Fantasy Freakz*:

"*Matthew Stafford* is healthy and looking sharp. The receiving corps is young and very deep, capable of fielding strong four or five wide-receiver sets that will pose problems for defences. This will take a lot of coaches by surprise. *Beanie Wells* and *Ben Tate* make a good combo at running back, but the offensive line continues to be the weak link – not bad, just *not good*. The defence has some pass rush power but won't be able to stop the run. I personally think Barrate is one of the better game-day coaches in the EFL and I expect him to make the most of obscure guys like tight end *Fred Davis* or linebacker *Melvin Ingram*. *Aldon Smith* is nasty and *Tramon Williams* is

probably the best corner they've ever had. I like their chances in a pushover Division and I think Stafford will be a top fantasy performer this year. It's time to re-think your draft boards, Freakz!"

Outriders' reputation for offbeat analyses aside, many mainstream commentators share Plunderflunder's view that the Violators will at least make the playoffs in a weak conference – as much due to a lack of competition as to Stafford's gun-slinging potential. While some western commentators, notably '**Left Coast**' **Larry Lummux** of JAIL-870 radio in Chino, are weakly arguing that the Convicts will make a comeback, the really hot debate in sports talk circles centers around who might score an upset and break into the projected top four in the stronger Can-Am Conference.

Last year's North Division champs, the Corn Kings, are alive and well after being pushed into keeping up with the Joneses. A bold move that sent 3 top draft picks to the Cubs' for star wide-out **Larry Fitzgerald** was the centerpiece of a series of trades that puts Cowtown once more in the discussion for a post-season berth. Stealing protected free agent **Justin Smith** from the crumbling Patriots' roster; then targeting disgruntled Virden tackle **Ryan Clady** and acquiring star corner **Brandon Flowers** in the process all but secured a ranking in the top five for Cowtown's defence. **Maurice Jones-Drew** will keep the chains moving on the ground but the big question in Cowtown remains the same as it always has throughout the team's history: will the quarterback play hold up? Last year's MVP, **Joe Flacco**, vows that it will.

"I think I'm the best quarterback in the league and I don't need Russ Flont to tell anybody that," Flacco said on 590 MOO Radio in Cowtown after the final pre-season game. The comment caused immediate controversy and placed a big weight on Flacco's shoulders for the coming season. If his boast proves true, expect Cowtown to surprise and possibly knock Garland or Markham out of the playoff race.

In Pickering, the Spartans are just a quarterback away from serious contention. In one of the first moves to be made following the expansion draft, **Gus Konstantakos** acquired the second overall pick in the rookie draft from Mission Viejo's **Chris Ferraro** in exchange for 3 late first round picks, a steak dinner, and a bottle of scotch. With that pick, the ancient warriors pinned their hopes on rookie QB, **Robert Griffin III**. The star from Baylor will get every chance to succeed on a team custom built to compete in the harsh North Division. With the versatile and dangerous **Percy Harvin** spear-heading the offence, and **Johnathan Joseph** and **Joe Haden** locking down both sides of the secondary, the Spartans should compete at a high level and knock off a top team or two. But can they hold their ground to the end with a rookie at the helm? Most think no; but Konstantakos thinks yes.

"Never surrender!" the Spartans owner bellowed when asked by a reporter if he thought he could compete with Markham's off-season run. He gave the same answer a minute later when asked if he would keep the playbook simple for Griffin when facing the Thunder Lizards; and then the same answer after that to whether or not he would bring in a veteran to mentor his young protégé. In fact, "never surrender" is usually *the* answer to any question at Pickering Press Conferences. That, and "Spats must die!"

Incumbent CAC Champion, Gwinnett is, sadly, a shadow of the team that made it to the final game last year. The offence still features most of its top weapons, with **Big Ben** back as #1 at QB; **LeSean McCoy** darting out of the backfield; and **Reggie Wayne** leading the Gwinnett Air Corps. Unfortunately the defence that stood so strong in 2011 is showing signs of age in 2012, especially on the line. **Casey Hampton** is still big, but needs a little more rest between plays, while MVP candidate **Robert Mathis** looks less stout defending the run. The secondary is a big question mark, even with **Troy Polamalu** in its ranks. Despite a noticeable drop-off in the talent level of the Glads' D, the fiery **Dave Birdsall** has a way of inspiring his team on game-day and there is nothing like a win over a rival like Scarborough to make a veteran feel 5 years younger. Don't count on the Glads, but don't count them out either.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE NEW GUYS?

EFL 2012 promises to be a "dawg fight" at the top and the bottom of the pile. Proving that some people will bet on anything, Vegas is offering a custom package of pre-season wagers featuring the four expansion teams, including a special program of odds pitting the four expansion teams against the 'Bottom Four' established teams. This yet-to-be-determined group is shaping up in most projections to be Charleswood, Mohave, Iowa City and South Carolina. Creative bookies are offering competitive odds on virtually everything that could be compared between these opposing foursomes; but the odds of all four expansion franchises finishing last in their divisions



Andrew Luck, the number one pick in the 2012 rookie draft, smiles as he holds up a Mohave jersey. At that point, Luck had never been to Mohave. He's not smiling now. Hellfire owner **Bobby Elder** is hoping to acquire *Lady Luck* as well, to improve the fortunes of his struggling franchise.

RUSS FLONT'S BEST QUARTERBACKS OF ALL TIME

Peyton Manning
 Aaron Rodgers
 Drew Brees
 Matt Stafford
 Philip Rivers
 Colt McCoy
 Joe Flacco
 Patrick Ramsey
 Tarvaris Jackson
 Brett Favre
 Brock Osweiler
 Andrew Luck
 Byron Leftwich
 Kyle Boller
 Tom Brady
 Kellen Clemens
 Jakes Delhomme.....

moved to an unfavourable 1-3 bet recently because of the disintegration of Charleswood, the indifference of Mohave, the immaturity of Iowa City, and the lethargy of South Carolina.

Of the newcomers, the overwhelming favourite to finish out of the basement is **Will Blandford's** Commonwealth Colonials. Not only do they have, according to **Russ Flont**, "a true champion, one of the best quarterbacks in the game today" in LA free agent **Josh Freeman**, they are fortunate enough to play in the same division as the Pats and the Hellfire. Despite Mohave's acquisition of #1 rookie **Andrew Luck** who, according to **Russ Flont**, has the "potential to be the best quarterback of all time," the prospects for **Bobby Elder's** fire-eaters are burning slightly less brightly than the ass of a drunken firefly; while in Charleswood, **Peyton Manning's** surgery is spreading to the rest of the team as **Jason Findlay** carves up the body of the once healthy Patriots.

If the Colonials miss their chance to rise above their humble origins and lead the way for their expansion brethren, there is an outfit in Mission Viejo that just might be capable of knocking Iowa City into the basement. The Cubs are changing their image this year; but the switch to a darker blue jersey and a ferocious, very mature-looking "cub" on the helmet comes at a time when the roster is younger and more "cub-like" than ever. **Deron Redding** has assembled the youngest and most inexperienced team in EFL history, with no player on the roster over the age of 27; although **Chris Ferraro's** Monarchs won't reign at the top of the West this year, they just could avoid being the peasants in their division.

In the north the best of the expansion franchises, Twin Cities, is in tough sharing a division with four playoff contenders. They are hoping for 3 wins, including two against their expansion partners. In the sunny south, the Regulators stand a couple of notches above Sebastian because of proven stars on their roster such as **Tony Romo**, **Frank Gore**, **Richard Seymour** and **Tamba Hali**. As uninspiring as **Hal Corson's** team may be again this year, the Swordfish have the only passing attack that might actually be stopped by the South Carolina secondary. **Russ Lemmon** is talking a good game, but he'll be fortunate to win two of them this year.

One thing all the pundits agree on is that 2012 will be one of the most competitive seasons yet in the EFL. A select panel of 20 ESPN personalities picked seven different teams to win it all this year with Scarborough and Durham tied at the top and Garland sneaking on the list with one vote. **WHO LET THE DAWGS OUT?**



It is written

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*

Nobility where art thou? The malefactor threatens. Death is alive. Honour fades. The condemned are stayed. So many helpless to predation. There is nothing that ever happens that was not meant to happen. The celestial spheres innumerable burn brightly over the wetlands where ancient creatures live out of time. The Earth shall burn and warriors wilt beneath the gaze of the inferno. Oh, it cannot be! It is too capacious to be of humanity! Accipitridae of azure. Equus. The martial spirit of Man succumbs to animal. Reward delayed, it comes finally to the living banner. - 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. On a windless night the ceaseless burbling of the water over the rocks and the chirring of crickets is occasionally punctuated by a raspy moan or a shrill howl emanating from a dark burrow on the top of the hill where a solitary soul wrestles with the torment and rapture of transcendent visions. She is the Football Oracle – a Green Bay Packers fan who foretold of the demise of the old NFL and, some say, was driven mad by the vision. She is the frenzied woman through whom the Football Gods speak.

It takes a special kind of mind to blunt the five senses and tune into the sixth frequency of the spirit world while making a cup of tea; and the Football Oracle has that kind of mind – or at least she used to. Spend enough time in both realms and one might begin to wonder which is real and which a dream; or, if not a dream, the etheric visions of manifold potentialities all co-existing outside our dimensional space, ready to coalesce as one reality with the acts of man...or something like that, anyway!

The Oracle's earthly faculties appear to be slipping these days. Not that they were ever firmly rooted in our reality once her visions started, but in the beginning she could commune with the spirits and serve tea without skipping a beat. She even took a stroll to order pizza using a payphone once while channeling the spirit of Vince Lombardi.

When I arrived this year for my annual pilgrimage I found a scarecrow of a woman, her boney frame bundled in stained fleece blankets, barricaded behind a wall of shopping carts, cardboard boxes, and broken lawn chairs. Her raspy voice commanded me to "be-gone demon, or submit to the cleansing!" Negotiations went on for over two hours before I convinced her that I was not a demon, then another 45 minutes before she finally recognized me. (I will not share with you what she had in mind for the "cleansing" as this is a family magazine) She let me in finally and tried, in her own manner, to be hospitable by serving me "tea and biscuits" – which turned out to be a stone and a plastic toy tea cup with a piece of Lego inside. At least she got the tea cup part right.

I realize that Oracles tend to speak in riddles as a rule but this year's ramblings went beyond riddles to gibberish. They were the most difficult I have ever had to decipher. Just look at the excerpts from the raw transcript above and you will know what I mean. Throughout it all, she had a recurring vision that was clearly so terrible that she was unable to speak of it - something huge and horrifying. I still don't know what it is, but as the season unfolds, it may become apparent. What follows is my best guess at the rest....

PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



14-2

#1 SEED

YORK EXCALIBURS

COACH: **Jay Hammond**

MVP: **Tom Brady**

OFFENCE: **A**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-**

York's success or lack of it will depend on execution. On paper they have a top-5 offence and a good defence. Ball control will be the key to keeping the defence fresh and, with **Tom Brady** at the controls and **Michael Turner** running behind a stout line led by **Jason Peters**, it will not be difficult. If used correctly, linebacker **Von Miller** will be a terror to opposing QBs as **Jason Babin** and **Geno Atkins** draw double-teams. The rookie kicker will create some tense moments, however. With little competition they will dominate the East.



10-6

#4 SEED

VIRDEN VIOLATORS

COACH: **Lance Barrate**

MVP: **Matthew Stafford**

OFFENCE: **A-**

DEFENCE: **C**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-**

Virden is an incomplete team, but in an expansion year with many rebuilds going on in their conference they have a good shot at a playoff spot. The key is their offence, led by **Matt Stafford** – a young QB finally coming into his own. The offensive line is suspect, but with a deep receiving corps and plenty of good running backs to rotate, points will be scored. The defence is respectable when set up in the 3-4 but has no true impact player and is vulnerable to the pass. Special teams are a bit of a mess, but will not prevent a playoff berth.



6-10

MOHAVE HELLFIRE

COACH: **Bobby Elder**

MVP: **Jimmy Graham**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **D+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C**

Projecting 6 wins for Mohave may be overly generous, but the Oracle sees big seasons for **Jimmy Graham** and **Hakeem Nicks**, a solid performance by **Andrew Luck**, and some big plays by the secondary. All this could tip the balance in Bobby Elder's favour when facing the Charleswoods and Iowas of the league. The defensive line is flat out bad, though, and will find itself on the field a lot if opponents decide to run the ball. **Brandon Banks'** fumble problems and **Billy Cundiff's** lack of accuracy hurt the special team grade.



3-13

COMMONWEALTH COLONIALS

COACH: **Will Blandford**

MVP: **David Hawthorne**

OFFENCE: **C+**

DEFENCE: **C**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-**

This is the expansion team with the best shot at rising out of the basement of its division – not because the Colonials are any good, but because Charleswood is so bad and Mohave is suspect. A key unknown is how far **Fred Jackson** can carry the offence and take heat off **Josh Freeman**. The defence has a warrior in **David Hawthorne** and a couple of soldiers in **Domata Peko** and **Donte Whitner**, but will give up lots of points. **Leon Washington** is a fine returner and the kicking is in good shape – a good thing cause they'll need it.



2-14

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

COACH: **Jason Findlay**

MVP: **Jason Witten**

OFFENCE: **C-**

DEFENCE: **D**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+**

The acquisition of **Michael Vick** will make the difference between 2 wins and 0 wins in 2012. The presence of **Adrian Peterson** and **Jason Witten** contributes to the illusion that the offence will keep the score respectable, but the defence is so bad that the offence will be playing from behind most of the year. A weak D-line and a brittle secondary that truly blows, despite promising rookie **Mark Barron**, will make it nearly impossible to stop any offence; expect a lot of blowout losses. It is hard to believe this team is the Pats.

PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

WEST DIVISION



11-5

#2 SEED

DEATH VALLEY UNDERTAKERS

COACH: **Chris Worthley**

MVP: **Drew Brees**

OFFENCE: **A**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

The Undertakers will go as far as **Drew Brees** and **DeMarcus Ware** can carry them – they set the tempo on either side of the ball. Other key assets on this team are the most dangerous tight end tag team around in **Rob Gronkowski** and **Aaron Hernandez**, and running back **Ryan Matthews**. The 11th hour acquisition of **Sheldon Brown** at corner was the little help the secondary needed. **Randall Cobb** is a dynamic return man and **Graham Gano** can strike from a distance. Expect a season-long “death” match with LA for the division.



11-5

#3 SEED

LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

COACH: **Jeff Dohrn**

MVP: **Charles Woodson**

OFFENCE: **B+**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-**

The EFL Champion Knights will make a respectable run at defending their title in 2012, but face a steep uphill climb to complete the quest. The heart of the team – the Blue Shield – can field a decent starting 11 in the 4-3, but lack the depth to be effective in pure passing situations. **Charles Woodson** will have to carry the team with big plays while **Alex Smith** will need to play flawless football and hope his top 3 targets stay healthy, because there is not much after them. **Darren Sproles** is a spark on special teams and on 3rd down.



8-8

CHINO CONVICTS

COACH: **Rob Nazar**

MVP: **Cam Newton**

OFFENCE: **C**

DEFENCE: **A**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A**

Cam Newton is the offence and he will rely on running back **Steven Jackson** and guard **Jahri Evans** to help him carry the load because the receiving corps is one of the worst in the league. Expect a lot of scrambling by the QB and not many quick strikes. The defence is strong, especially up front with **Haloti Ngata** and **Julius Peppers**; linebacker **James Harrison** remains a force in spite of nagging injuries and age. **Josh Cribbs** is as reliable a returner as there is. Chino could surprise, or they could collapse, or they could go 8-8.



5-11

IOWA CITY CUBS

COACH: **Deron Redding**

MVP: **Jason Pierre-Paul**

OFFENCE: **C+**

DEFENCE: **C**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-**

Despite an off-season purging of every player good and bad near the age of 30, the Cubs still have talent on their roster. Any defence featuring **Jason Pierre-Paul** and **Patrick Willis** needs to be respected at least a little bit, while any offence with **Mike Wallace** and **Trent Richardson** on it can score points occasionally when it matters. With that said, there are still too many green rookies, including the starting QB **Russell Wilson**, to consider the Cubs a threat to the better teams. 5 wins is optimistic and don't expect upsets.



2-14

MISSION VIEJO MONARCHS

COACH: **Chris Ferraro**

MVP: **Mike Williams**

OFFENCE: **C**

DEFENCE: **D-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

The only impressive things about the Monarchs are their two starting cornerbacks **Lardarius Webb** and **Brent Grimes**, their all-purpose return man **Brandon Tate**, and their royal purple uniforms. **Colt McCoy** will start at QB, meaning he is not “the guy” going forward since the O-line is not yet capable of protecting him. **DeMarco Murray** has immediate potential in the running game, but running will be an afterthought this year as the defence gives up oodles of points and yards. The Monarchs might challenge the weakest teams.

CAN-AM CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



14-2

#2 SEED

MARKHAM NORTH STARS

COACH: **Darrin Jones**

MVP: **Eli Manning**

OFFENCE: **A**

DEFENCE: **A**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-**

The suddenly daunting North Stars are good enough to go unbeaten if everything falls perfectly for them. However, **Eli Manning's** "Hyde" will throw away a game or two just as his "Jekyll" will win a few out of the blue. The ground game will grind opponents literally into the dirt while the defence, led by pass-rushing ends **Trent Cole** and **John Abraham** and safety **Ed Reed**, forces turnovers at a league-leading clip. Add in All Pro kick returner **Joe McKnight** and the big leg of **David Akers** and there is no rest for Markham's opponents.



12-4

#3 SEED

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

COACH: **George Kaldis**

MVP: **Jared Allen**

OFFENCE: **A-**

DEFENCE: **A**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-**

Philip Rivers lost his starting job to **Matt Schaub** after 5 years as leader. He stays on the roster as a possible distraction to the newcomer, who looked great in training camp. With **Calvin Johnson** leading a gang of great receivers and tight ends, and **Reggie Bush** sparking the ground game, the Lizards will move the ball with the best. **Jared Allen** is poised for a great season and the secondary will give him extra time to get to the QB. **Devin Hester** is always a threat in the return game. Not as balanced, will finish second to the Stars.



8-8

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

COACH: **Jim Coghlin**

MVP: **Maurice Jones-Drew**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **A-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+**

Joe Flacco will struggle to repeat last year's MVP performance with such tough divisional competition. **Larry Fitzgerald** is the main target in a passing game that will suffer from lack of production at tight end. **MJD** will get a lot of action and attention, so the line must step up. Acquiring **Brandon Flowers** staved off a steep downgrade in the secondary but they still lack the depth they had last year. Newcomer **Justin Smith** will stabilize and toughen the line. **Eric Weems** is no game-breaker in the return game. A 500 finish at best.



8-8

PICKERING SPARTANS

COACH: **Gus Konstantakos**

MVP: **Jonathan Joseph**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A**

Rookie QB, **RG III** is the key to the Spartans' season. He brings the added dimension of running, but ultimately will have to read EFL pass coverage if he is going to lead his team into the post-season. The rest of the pieces are there; **Percy Harvin** is the most versatile threat on any offence and **Chris Johnson** is always a threat to break a big run. The best corner tandem in the league, **Jonathan Joseph** and **Joe Haden**, will boost a speedy defence downgraded slightly by a soft line. The Spartans are a contender if **RG III** performs as billed.



3-13

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

COACH: **Guy Williams**

MVP: **Ray Lewis**

OFFENCE: **D+**

DEFENCE: **B-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A**

Jay Cutler is going to have a rough time while he lasts. His #1 receiver and feature running back are both rookies and there are no veterans on offence to mentor them. The improvisation of **Tim Tebow** will be welcomed on an offence likely to struggle with basic play execution. The defence is respectable with **Ray Lewis**, **Dwight Freeney** and **Alan Branch** leading the way. **Ike Taylor** is a solid corner but he has little company in the secondary. The special teams are strong throughout, which will help win when facing other weak teams.

CAN-AM CONFERENCE

SOUTH DIVISION



15-1

#1 SEED

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

COACH: **Chris Dickinson**

MVP: **Aaron Rodgers**

OFFENCE: **A+**

DEFENCE: **A+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C**

This team has a perfect season in them, but will face more difficult competition than two years ago when they pulled off the only 16-0 season on record. **Aaron Rodgers** might be slowed down at times but he won't be stopped by anybody – ditto for running back **Ray Rice**. Proven playmakers at WR will make the offence a machine. The “superstar power” of **Darrelle Revis** and **Terrell Suggs** will cover up some downgrades from last year on the defensive side. Special teams will not impress, but they don't really need to.



11-5

#4 SEED

GARLAND MUSTANGS

COACH: **Doug Shirley**

MVP: **Matt Ryan**

OFFENCE: **B+**

DEFENCE: **A-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A+**

A surplus at running back pushes last year's rushing title winner **Arian Foster** to second string behind twin run/catch threat, **Matt Forte**. Wide receiver is solid and QB, **Matt Ryan** is capable of taking over a game; the offence will score if the coach lets them. The defence is loaded with stars, with **Eric Weddle** and **Earl Thomas** commanding center field, and **Navorro Bowman** and **Brian Cushing** commanding the box, but there is weakness at cornerback. **Patrick Peterson** is potentially the most dangerous returner in the game.



8-8

GWINNETT GLADIATORS

COACH: **Dave Birdsall**

MVP: **LeSean McCoy**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

If pre-season fumble problems persist for **Ben Roethlisberger**, it could derail an offence that still has fire in its engine. **LeSean McCoy** is always a danger to score in and out of the red zone, while **Reggie Wayne** and **Ed Dickson** offer stability at the WR and TE positions. The defence has fallen into the group of good-not-great defences, but when **Troy Polamalu** is on the field there is always hope. **Antwan Barnes** could emerge as a vital force in the pass rush. With a little luck, Gwinnett has an outside chance to steal a playoff berth.



7-9

SOUTH CAROLINA REGULATORS

COACH: **Hal Corson**

MVP: **Tony Romo**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **C**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-**

There are some impressive names at the skill positions on offence but a questionable O-line will hold them all back this year. **Tony Romo** will have his great games and his bad ones but he will be running for his life in all of them. The defence is strong against the run with **Richard Seymour** and **Glenn Dorsey** on the line, while linebacker **Tamba Hali** can get to the QB; but the secondary, like last year, is both brittle and bad and will surrender lots of yards. The special teams are especially bad this year as well. How will they win 7 games?



2-14

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

COACH: **Russ Lemmon**

MVP: **Andy Dalton**

OFFENCE: **D+**

DEFENCE: **D**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

The debate about who will start at QB for Sebastian goes unnoticed outside of Florida – the Swordfish are not a threat with either **Mark Sanchez** or **Andy Dalton** at the helm. **Pierre Thomas** has moves but his durability as a full-time option at RB is questionable. **Robert Meachem** is a talented WR but, at #1, is being asked to do too much. The O-line has promise for the future but not right now. **Marcus Sherels** was a nice free agent pick-up to return kicks and punts. As for the defence, nobody knows, or *wants* to know, who they are.

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JIMMY'S WEEK ONE PICKS

CHARLESWOOD @ VIRDEN (line – VIOLATORS by 9)

The Battle for Manitoba will not get more dramatic than this. When these two teams meet again in Week Sixteen there will be nothing for the Pats to play for but pride – if they have any left. What is left of the Patriots of last year will fight valiantly this week – motivated by opening day excitement and desire to shock their rival on their home turf. Expect this contest to be close for one quarter before the Violators take control with a passing attack that the Pats are ill-equipped to stop. If the Pats are going to stem the onslaught they will have to control the ball on the ground with Adrian Peterson to keep Matthew Stafford off the field. The Virden defensive line is a little soft up the middle, but so too is the Pats' offensive line. Don't expect AP to make enough plays to compensate for this mismatch. **PICK: VIRDEN**

MOHAVE @ YORK (line – EXCALIBURS by 6)

It is merely the "luck" of the draw that #1 pick Andrew Luck gets to break into the EFL against the team many project to be the class of the Conference. The Excaliburs indeed appear to be loaded on offence with Tom Brady directing the assault, but few are taking for granted that he and his teammates are going to back up the hype – after all, the fans have been fooled before. Nervous Nellies in Camelot can relax – this game will not be close. Luck will be forced to the air early, for lack of a running game, and the Swords' defence bring the heat on the young Hellfire pivot. On the attack, Jay Hammond's crew can get it done any way they choose, but expect to see a lot of Michael Turner punching holes in the overmatched Mohave line by the second half. **PICK: YORK**

MISSION VIEJO @ COMMONWEALTH (line – COLONIALS by 6)

The odds-makers are not showing much respect for the Monarchs by giving 6 points; or else they really like what Will Blandford has built so far in Commonwealth. Regardless, when two teams who have never played a league game face each other for the first time, there are too many unknowns to justify dipping into the kid's college fund to back a 6-point favourite. The Colonials may have built a more balanced team in that they appear to have a slightly better defence; but there is not much separating the offences, unless you make the assumption that Championship MVP Josh Freeman will duplicate his QB mastery on an expansion team without Roddy White and Steve Smith. **PICK: MISSION VIEJO**

DEATH VALLEY @ LOS ANGELES (line – KNIGHTS by 1)

The Game of the Week in PAC is the first chapter in what will likely turn into an epic death match for the division between these two teams. The Undertakers lost thrice to the Knights last year, the last 35-33 in the PAC Final that featured a thrilling 457-yard aerial display by Drew Brees. Chris Worthley is looking for revenge and his team believes it is ready to unhorse the Knights on their own field. But don't expect Death's Tax Collectors to bomb the Knights' secondary from the air exclusively; Ryan Matthews looks ready to break out in 2012 and should see his share of action in the ground and short-passing games. Alex Smith makes his Knights' debut and all eyes will be upon him to see how he measures up. I expect a respectable performance from the former SFL star, but I don't expect him to keep up with the sniper Brees, or completely avoid an official welcome to the league by DeMarcus Ware.

PICK: DEATH VALLEY

IOWA CITY @ CHINO (line – CONVICTS by 10)

Another traditional rivalry with an untraditional disparity in talent takes place here at the Big House. Although the jury is still out on Chino's prospects for the season, there is no reasonable doubt that they should dominate Iowa City this opening day. The new-look Cubs are introducing a new QB in rookie Russell Wilson. His first challenge will be to use his 5'11" frame to peek over the helmets of his tall and mostly incompetent offensive line. Then he will have to avoid Haloti Ngata and James Harrison. If he gets around those two he will have to navigate around Aqib Talib and Cortland Finnegan in the secondary. Then he'll have to do it all again....over and over. Do I need to start talking about Cam Newton to convince you it will be a rough day for the Cubbies? **PICK: CHINO**

COWTOWN @ PICKERING (line – SPARTANS by 2)

The #2 pick in the draft makes his debut with Spartans under fairer conditions than his rookie QB brethren in Iowa City and Mohave. How Robert Griffin III will perform in his first EFL appearance is the hot topic leading up to this game, overshadowing the story of this divisional rivalry that took an unexpected turn last year when the Corn Kings knocked the Spartans from their season-long hold on the North Division in the season's final week. Gus Konstantakos has been brooding ever since, waiting for his revenge. If RG III performs as advertized, this should be a close game, but not so close that the Spartans will not cover. But if the Corn Kings can contain him in the pocket and force him to read the coverage, it could be a disastrous coming out party. Nothing is certain here, but I am not about to bet against the #2 overall pick in the draft. **PICK: PICKERING**

MARKHAM @ DURHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 1)

The other Game of the Week pits the refitted North Stars against the same old pack of Dinosaurs in Durham, but without their historic leader Philip Rivers at QB. It is a big change for Durham, no less so than the near complete overhaul in Markham. So which change will prevail? I like the changes Darrin Jones has made, but until I see his team's chemistry on the field, I have to presume that the team with nearly equal talent and the longer history together will prevail on their home field. Markham will have to blitz to bring enough pressure to bear, but the Lizards' line will hold and Schaub will pick apart the Stars corners.

PICK: DURHAM

SEBASTIAN @ TWIN CITIES (line – TRIUMPH by 2)

Everybody is curious about the "new guy" and this curiosity, combined with the historic occasion of two "first ever" games, will draw a host of TV viewers...for a quarter or two anyway. Fans of teams other than the Triumph and Swordfish will find something else to do before the first half is done because this game, close or not, is certain to be ugly. Jay Cutler and Kendall Wright will look deceptively good for a day as their line holds up against rookie end Chandler Jones. Whoever starts for Sebastian will find the going a little tougher against a team with actual veterans on the field. Ray Lewis will have the Triumph pumped up fatter than a 'Plode' Blimp. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

SCARBOROUGH @ GWINNETT (line – BLUE EAGLES by 2)

The defending Can-Am Champion Gladiators kick-off against the team that until last year always seemed to have the upper hand on them. Unfortunately for Gwinnett those pre-2011 days are back, starting with this game. There is no way Blue Eagles' QB Aaron Rodgers passes up the opportunity to air it out against this secondary that features Leodis McKelvin as a starter. I see Scarborough passing its way into a comfortable lead then unleashing Ray Rice to finish them off. Meanwhile, the Glads' Big Ben will take a beating in the pocket from Terrell Suggs and LaMarr Woodley while trying to outshoot the Fastest Gun in the South. Expect a high-scoring game with most of the scores coming from the Blue Eagles. **PICK: SCARBOROUGH**

SOUTH CAROLINA @ GARLAND (line – MUSTANGS by 4)

Most commentators seem to think that Garland will make the playoffs and compete at the top level in 2012 because of their defence and a well-armed offence led by Matt Ryan. One thing I have learned from watching Garland over the years is that you can never count on them to follow the script. For instance, with an opportunity to make a bold opening statement by shredding what little stands in the Regulators' secondary between the Mustangs receivers and the end zone, I can picture Doug Shirley sending Matt Forte off tackle 20 times and kicking 5 field goals. If that happens, don't expect Tony Romo and Greg Jennings to make the same mistake against Patrick Peterson and DeAngelo Hall. **PICK: SOUTH CAROLINA**