

CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

2014



EFL NEWS

2014

CHAMPIONSHIP

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

CHAMPIONSHIP

March 1, 2015



WATT A SEASON!



JJ Watt



17

CANNBALS



31

MUSTANGS

JJ Watt of the Aurora Mustangs roars at the Championship day crowd in Columbia, South Carolina during the 8<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game. Watt was a big part of the team that proved to be the best in EFL history by beating Carthage 31-17.



15-4-0

19-0-0

# Carthage

## 17

### GALE SAYERS GAME

## 31

# Aurora

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Rivers	18	32	171	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Lacy	34	163	4.8	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Baldwin	6	105	17.5	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Carthage	10	7	0	0	-	17
Aurora	0	14	14	3	-	31

TEAM LEADERS				
Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Ryan	21	34	203	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Forte	12	57	4.8	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Boldin	7	94	13.4	1

**Play of the Game**  
Trailing 10-7 with 10:01 left to play in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter, Mustangs' cornerback **Brandon Boykin** snared a pass intended for **Danny Amendola** and ran it back 38 yards for the pick-six.

## MUSTANGS ATTAIN PERFECTION! 4 CARTHAGE TURNOVERS TURN AROUND UPSET BID!

**COLUMBIA (AP)** – In balmy 60-degree temperatures under a partly cloudy sky spectators arriving from as far away as Samoa filed into the Carolina Slammer to watch history in the making. For the first time in the eight year existence of the EFL an undefeated team was competing for the Gale Sayers Trophy. The Aurora Mustangs had yet to be bested in 16 regular-season and 2 playoff games. A victory over the Carthage Cannibals on the EFL's biggest stage would consummate the league's first ever perfect season. Conversely, a win for Carthage would mark an upset of legendary magnitude. Regardless of the outcome, this was a game that would be talked about for many years – or at least until the next undefeated team came along.

The two franchises had faced each other just once since the Cannibals had broken into the league in 2012 as the Commonwealth Colonials. It was in that year that the Mustangs, playing in Garland at the time, handled the expansion Colonials with ease, taking advantage of 3 turnovers to beat them by the lopsided score of 38-9. Much had changed in the two years since that match-up: the Colonials had moved to a new home and had improved drastically through an influx of rookie and veteran talent; while the Mustangs had developed from an under-achieving .500 team into the league's premier power.

The teams' respective performances in 2014 promised that this would be a classic battle between high-powered offence and dominant defence. **JJ Watt** led a Mustangs' defence that had surrendered just 170 points all season and had held opponents to just 3.8 yards per play, both all-time league records. The Cannibals' offence, led by **Philip Rivers**, had scored nearly 32 points per game and, at an average of 420 net yards per game, had finished as the third most efficient offence in league history. Aurora's offence, led by **Matt Ryan**, had been effective at scoring, but owed much of its success to a defence that had consistently placed it in favourable positions. The Carthage defence had struggled to stop opponents, but boasted the

**QUOTES:** "I would put this game up there with the toughest we've played all year. They put a lot of pressure on our offence and we were fortunate to have some nice plays from our defence to even things out. This feels good; I'm not going to lie." – Aurora Coach, **Rich Liotta**.

"Going backwards on that opening drive of the second half was what hurt us the most. We needed to get points or at least push them into their end. But we gave them the ball in great position to score and they did." – Carthage coach, **Ken Main**.



### ANGRY FAN



### titter

### HAPPY FAN



**Kokopali @Crimpcarving**  
There is no shame on Carthage this day. The elders are pleased This was true warrior football.



**Granny Gee @ggee2**  
Garland has not forgotten you, dear Mustangs! We claim a piece of you as our own!

league's most prolific defensive playmaker, middle linebacker **Lavonte David**.

The Mustangs were, as expected, clear favourites coming in. But there was no shortage of experts who believed that Carthage could pull off an upset. Rivers appeared to be finally realizing his potential while Cannibals' Coach **Ken Main** was starting to earn recognition as a savvy game plan designer.

"Aurora hasn't lost a game all season, Bill," began ESPN play-by-play announcer **Phil Winterall**. "Does Carthage have what it takes to be the first team to hand them a defeat?"

"Of course they do, Phil, but it all starts with **Philip Rivers** and his ability to make the throws," pronounced ESPN colour analyst **Bill Badden**. "Kenny Main can scribble the X's and O's, but if Rivers can't connect the dots then the Cannibals won't even reach first base let alone put the puck in the net. A well drawn play is critical in that situation. The coach's job is to make sure those X's he's throwing to aren't covered by O's. So it all starts with the drawing board, Phil, and Ken Main's ability to get those X's open."

"Some people are calling the Mustangs' defence the best of all time, Bill," commented Winterall. "You've seen some great defences over the years. How do they stack up?"

"Well, there is a Florida defence from 2009 that might want to argue with that statement, Phil," Badden chortled as if his partner had made a hilarious joke. "And the Knights' defence that year was not far behind if I recall. That was a great year for defences! But the Mustangs do have a great defence, Phil and it all starts in the trenches with **JJ Watt**. The trenches are where the big men fight each other and that's where the game is decided, not on the drawing board with X's and O's. JJ is a ginormous man in a big man's game and he dominates the trenches."

"Do the Mustangs feel any extra pressure in this game because of the perfect season, Bill?" Winterall asked hesitantly, as if touching on a sensitive subject.

"Hell, *no*, Phil! How many times do I have to say it?" Badden roared emphatically. "The Mustangs look like they're having fun out there every week! They look like they enjoy thrashing the grease out of their opponents. Oh, they *know* about it for sure – the perfect season. But they're excited about it! It all starts with *desire*, Phil. They want this trophy bad and this is their chance to take it."

As Badden jabbered away about the role of desire in winning football games, the head official, **Carl Cheffers** called the team captains to the center of the field. The network audio cut in as he instructed the players on the rules for the coin toss as if he was introducing an entirely new concept to the start of game play. Carthage, in white jerseys and blue pants with red trim, were the visitors; Aurora, in red jerseys and gold pants, were the home team. **Steven Hauschka**, who had kicked Carthage into the Championship with a game-winning field goal last week, won the toss, bringing a roar from the crowd at the Carolina Slammer. He elected to defer. The Mustangs' **Dominique Franks** chose to receive, producing another roar from the crowd.

"Judging from the roars it sounds like the crowd is about evenly split, Bill," remarked Winterall.

"That doesn't surprise me, Phil," answered Badden. "Neither of these teams play their home games in Carolina during the season, so the crowd is not really a home crowd for either team. Home field advantage starts with the crowd, Phil; they're the twelfth man. But this here is more like half a man. Or a midget, Phil. Each team has an extra midget on the field today."



## THE GAME



**1<sup>st</sup> QUARTER (Carthage 10, Aurora 0)** – Kick-off specialist **Pat McAfee** kicked off the 8<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game for Carthage with a high and deep end-over-end boot 8 yards into the end zone, where **Storm Johnson** fielded it and smartly took a knee. The Mustangs, led by quarterback **Matt Ryan**, took to the field briskly the moment the official signalled touchback while **Lavonte David** charged onto the gridiron at the head of the Cannibals' defence.

"These teams look ready to play, Bill," observed **Phil Winterall** as both units mustered around the Aurora 20 yard line.

"You bet they *are* ready to play, Phil," Badden replied. "They're about to burst out of their equipment right now. I guarantee you every player on that field right now just wants to hit somebody, or get hit by somebody to get into the game. It all starts with that first snap and that first hit. Then the butterflies are gone and it's just football – smash-mouth, bone-crunching, spleen-rupturing, skull-cracking, bloody-nosed football."

The Mustangs started with three wide-outs and set up a screen to **Matt Forte**, good for 6 yards. For second down they brought in fullback **Darrel Young** and set up in the 'I' formation, indicating a run was likely. But colour analyst **Bill Badden** had done his homework on the Mustangs and jumped in with a comment.

"Aurora likes to go deep early in the game to Boldin out of this formation, Phil," he warned. "It looks like a run, but don't be surprised if Matt Ryan goes deep here."

Sure enough, with Cannibal safety, **Harrison Smith** moved up in run support, Ryan dropped back 7 steps and uncorked a long pass in the direction of **Anquan Boldin**. But cornerback **Kyle Arrington** was glued to the Mustang receiver and the throw was high, resulting in an incomplete pass.

"Carthage dodged a bullet there, Phil," Badden declared. "They were playing run and Arrington was isolated in man coverage against one of the best receivers in the game today. But the young corner stuck with him the whole way and forced that high throw by Ryan. It all starts with the play of the secondary, Phil. If they can cover, the big men in the trenches can do a whole lot more."

Facing 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4, the Mustangs brought in **Chris Polk**, the 4<sup>th</sup> string running back who had surprised the Durham defence in the Can-Am Conference Final with a 17-yard run in a 3<sup>rd</sup> down passing situation. The Cannibals gambled that Coach **Rich Liotta** was going to attempt to spring the same surprise. They loaded up to stop the run and the gambit paid off as **Dannell Ellerbe** stuffed Polk for a 1-yard loss. The highest scoring offence in the league had been summarily held to a three-and-out by a defence that had struggled all year.

"Strong start for the Cannibals' defence, Bill," observed **Phil Winterall**. "Can they keep it up, do you think?"

"Of course they can, Phil!" scoffed Badden. "This is playoff football. There is no tomorrow, there is no yesterday. It's war! This Carthage defence has pride. They've read what the media is saying about them and they are out to prove themselves. It all starts with pride, Phil. Pride and guts...and being willing to bleed in the mud to win!"

The Cannibals took possession at their 32 after a net of 43 yards on the punt by **Sam Koch**. **Philip Rivers** strode on to the field and set up behind a two-tight end set with **Eddie Lacy** in the backfield. The Mustangs deployed their standard 3-4 package anchored at the ends by the deadly pass rushing combo of **JJ Watt** and **Cliff Avril**. Taking a page from the Aurora playbook, Carthage played an aggressive hand early: Rivers went long to **Doug Baldwin** but the pass was offline and deflected by roving safety **Eric Weddle**. Cornerback **Brandon Boykin** had been caught in a short zone and appeared to make contact with Baldwin as he tried to catch up to him. But no flag was thrown on the play.

"Is that pass interference, Bill?" Winterall asked as the replay played on the screen.

"It looks like pass interference, Phil," Badden replied. "But the safety Weddle tipped the ball as it came over the middle, negafying the interference. **Carl Cheffers** is known as a rules guy, Phil. That's why he was chosen to referee this important game. He knows the rules."

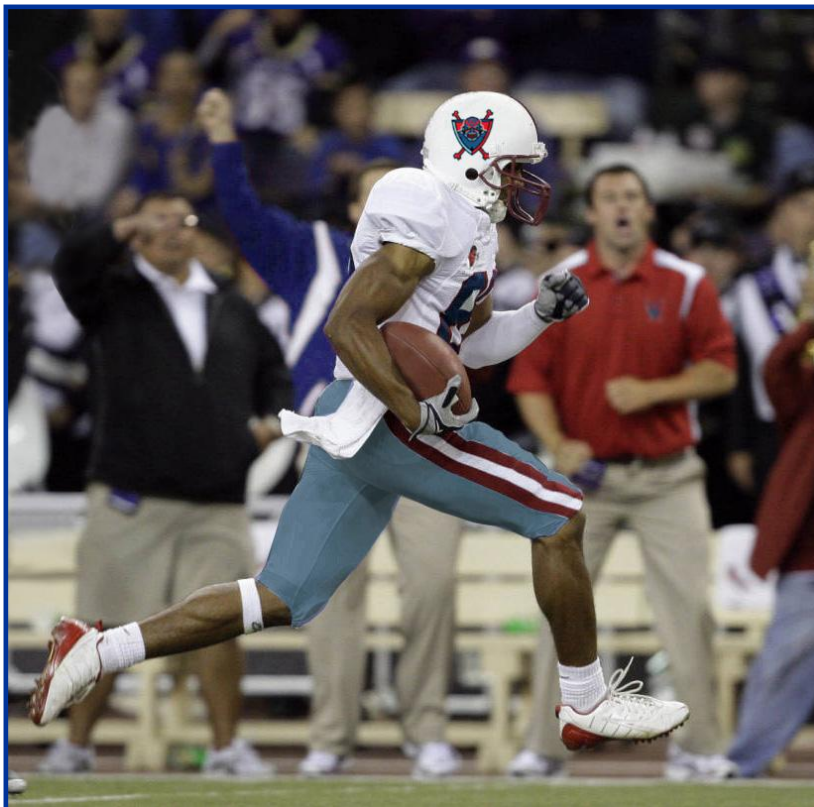
On second down Rivers attempted another pass but good coverage forced a check down to Lacy, who gained 1 yard to bring up 3<sup>rd</sup> and 9. The Mustangs re-deployed in their favourite 2-4 nickel package, while the Cannibals curiously stayed in their two-tight end set for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and long play. With the Mustangs playing pass and a linebacker shifted into double coverage, guard **Matt Slauson** wiped out defensive tackle **Willie Young**, opening up room for Lacy on a draw, who ran to the marker for a first down.

"That was a gutsy call, wouldn't you agree, Bill?" queried Winterall as Cheffers signalled a first down for Carthage.

"The Mustangs had two big men on the line of scrimmage, Phil. Sure, one of them is JJ Watt, but the other one was Willie Young and he was no match for Matt Slauson on that play," Badden explained while scribbling misplaced circles and arrows on the screen with an electronic marker. "Slauson was the Cannibals' best lineman this year. He was their best run blocker and he didn't give up a sack. It all starts with the offensive line, Phil, those big guys in the middle. Those big guys are the blood and guts of the team. You're going nowhere without the big guys up front winning those battles in the trenches."

The Cannibals were determined to exploit this formation mismatch and shifted to a no-huddle offense to prevent the Mustangs from making substitutions. Rivers handed the ball to Lacy again but veteran **James Harrison** read the play perfectly and stopped him for no gain. Rivers looked long at Baldwin on the next play but he was doubled, forcing a 5-yard check down to **Kyle Rudolph**. Undeterred, Rivers went back to Baldwin, catching the Mustangs again in a short zone. This time Baldwin came down with the catch, good for 22 yards and a first down at the Aurora 31.

Five straight carries by **Eddie Lacy** followed, earning Carthage a first down and moving them inside the red zone where they faced 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4 at the Aurora 12. Rivers went to his top regular season target, **Josh Gordon**,



It's off to the races for **Doug Baldwin** of the Cannibals (above) as he takes a pass from **Philip Rivers** all the way for a 32-yard touchdown. It was the first major of the game and it gave Carthage a 10-0 lead.

going for the score. But shutdown corner **Patrick Peterson** had position on Gordon and nearly intercepted the pass. Carthage settled for a field goal to open the scoring, bringing a cheer from the Carthage supporters at the Slammer but some cautionary words from the booth.

"Carthage has to be happy to be on the scoreboard first, don't you think Bill?" Winterall asked.

"Of course they're happy, Phil," Badden replied. "Kenny Main has to be happy his quarterback wasn't intercepted twice on that drive. But the Cannibals will need red zone touchdowns to beat Aurora, not field goals. The Mustangs have the league's best red zone defence."

Aurora started at their 20 yard again after another touchback. Ryan opened with a 7-yard completion to **Julian Edelman** but was nearly intercepted on the next play by rookie corner **Jason Verrett** on a long hitch intended for **Riley Cooper**. On 3<sup>rd</sup> and 3, Boldin was double-covered and swarmed under for no gain by five Cannibal defenders on a short quick pass. Aurora was forced to punt after a second consecutive three-and-out. The Carthage defence seemed to know their playbook.

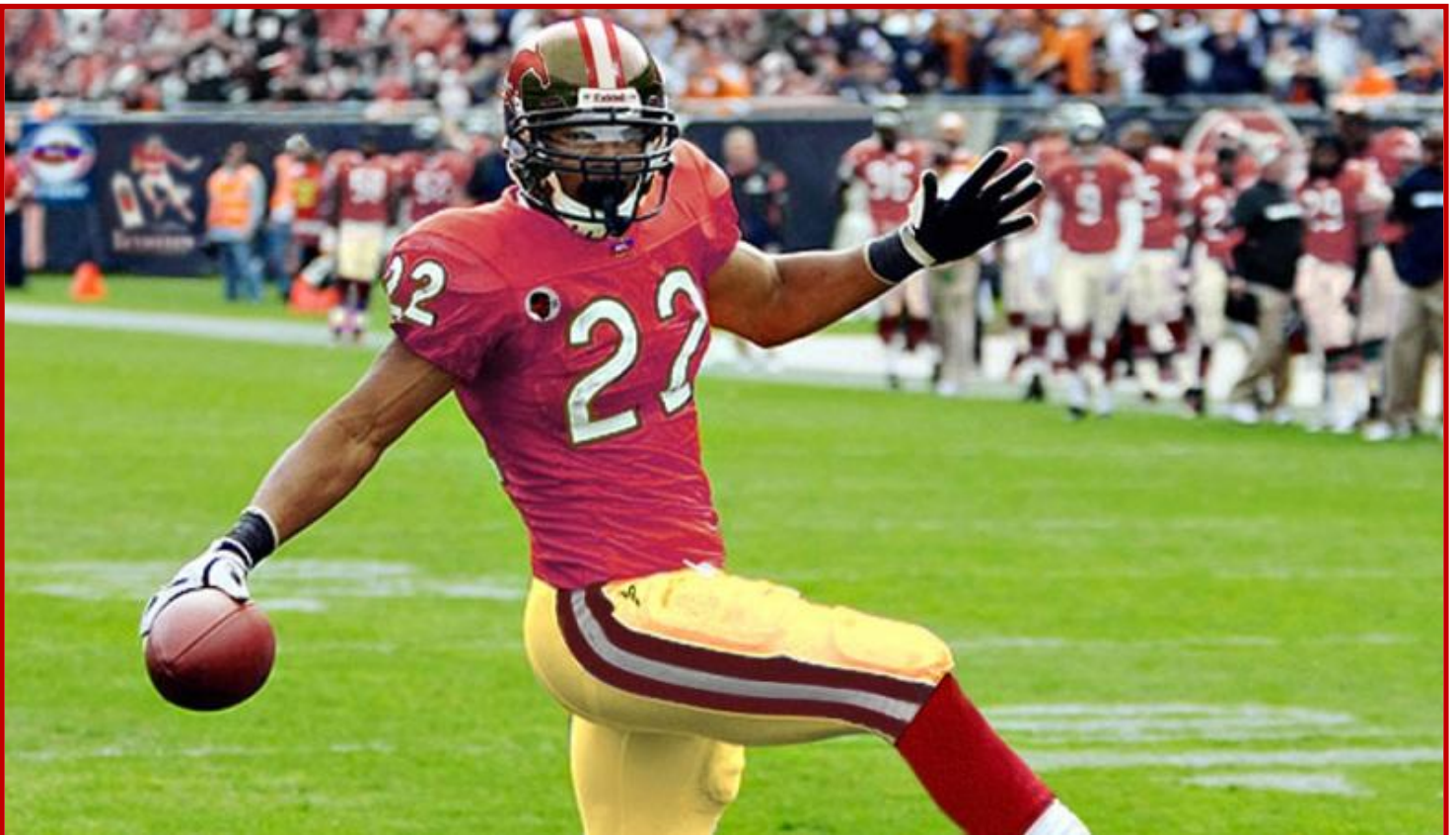
The Cannibals took over at their own 29 yard line and gained some quick real estate on a 12-yard short slant to Baldwin that caught the Mustangs secondary playing 10 yards off the line. But disaster appeared to strike on the next play. Rivers looked deep but, finding his receivers covered, was forced to scramble. Harrison nailed him from behind, the ball popped loose as Rivers fell to the turf and Peterson recovered. But the play was overturned on video review as Rivers' right knee had hit the ground before he had lost possession of the ball. The Cannibals had escaped with the ball and aimed to make the most of it.

Lacy ran to within a foot of the marker on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7 but was stuffed for a loss by **NaVorro Bowman** on 3<sup>rd</sup> and inches. That brought up 4<sup>th</sup> and 1 at the Mustangs' 48 and set up a bold challenge by the Cannibals against the league's top defence. The Mustangs ignored Carthage's four wide-receiver set, kept their base defence on the field, and focused their attention on Lacy. But the Cannibals called a quick out pass to **Danny Amendola**, who briefly looked open near the sideline. In a fine individual effort, Boykin jumped the route and nearly intercepted the pass.

"That play was all Brandon Boykin!" exclaimed an excited **Bill Badden**. "He sensed it developing and he nearly picked off that pass. That was a good call by Kenny Main, but it was beaten by a great play by the young corner. Boykin might be playing the best football of his career in these playoffs, Phil."

"Boykin had that game-changing interception return for a touchdown against South Carolina in the quarter finals, Bill," commented Winterall. "If he picks off that pass you know he's going to score."

The good feeling on the Aurora sideline brought on by the defensive stand did not last long, however. On the second play from scrimmage a blitzing **Lavonte David** forced Ryan to throw a long ball off his back foot and safety **Donte Whitner** intercepted the pass, returning it 42 yards to the Aurora 32 yard line. The Mustangs seemed momentarily stunned by the sudden turnaround and the Cannibals took immediate



Aurora running back **Matt Forte** (above) celebrates after catching a 3-yard touchdown pass from **Matt Ryan** in second quarter action in the EFL Championship Game. The score was the first of the day for the Mustangs and got them back in the game. Forte did not flash great numbers on the day, but he scored two touchdowns and gained tough yards to win Offensive Player of the Game.

advantage. Rivers faked a handoff and threw deep and on target to Baldwin, who had a step on Boykin as he sprinted under the ball and ran it into the end zone for a 32-yard touchdown. The half-a-crowd supporting Carthage erupted in celebration, making enough noise for a full house of fans. With less than a minute remaining in the opening quarter, the Cannibals were leading 10-0 and shocking the football world with an early show of dominance against the EFL's best team.

"That was a beautiful pass by Philip Rivers, noted **Phil Winterall**. "If you are Rich Liotta, Bill, are you a little worried right now?"

"If I'm Rich Liotta, Phil, then I know I have the league's best defence and an offence that can score from anywhere, so I'm not panicking," answered Badden after a moment of thought. "But the Cannibals have put a target on my quarterback and my top receiver, so I think I might want to take some pressure off of them and test the running game a bit."

As if following the Badden script, the Mustangs did just that on the ensuing possession. They ran outside with **Matt Forte** for 14 yards then inside for 17 yards to bring the ball to one yard past midfield as the whistle blew to end the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter. It had taken over 14 minutes for Aurora to gain its first 1<sup>st</sup> down, but they were finally moving and looking to regain ground.

**2<sup>nd</sup> QUARTER (Carthage 17, Aurora 14)** – The Mustangs opened the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter with a dangerous throw to a double-covered Boldin. But a perfect pass by Ryan and a diving catch by Boldin defeated the coverage and gained 17 yards to bring the Mustangs into long field goal range. They came right back with another attempt to go deep, but this time David blitzed



**Brandon Boykin** gets a hug from **Karlos Dansby** after picking off **Philip Rivers** in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and returning it 38 yards for a touchdown.

and dumped Ryan for an 8-yard loss. Unfazed, the Mustangs recovered on the next play with a slant underneath for 11 yards to Edelman, who might have broken free for a big gainer if not for a horse collar tackle by Lewis, who drew a 15-yard penalty for his efforts.

"That was the first penalty of the game, Bill," noted Winterall, "and it goes against the Cannibals."

"That was a clear horse collarer tackle, Phil," sputtered Badden. "But if Lewis doesn't make that illegal tackle Edelman is going a long way. I like the penalty call and I like the decision of Lewis to drag Edelman down by the collar. Sometimes a defender just has to do whatever it takes to make a play, even if it's dangerous and breaks the rules."

With the 15-yard penalty tacked on, the Mustangs had the ball at the Carthage 14. A 9-yard run by Forte and an incomplete pass intended for Boldin, nearly intercepted by Lewis, brought up 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1 at the 5. With two tight ends and a fullback in the game for Aurora, the Cannibals added a 4<sup>th</sup> linebacker and crowded the line. With the snap the entire Carthage box moved toward Forte, but a nice block by **Trent Williams** on **Greg Hardy** opened up a hole that Forte charged through for a 4-yard gain. With 1<sup>st</sup> and goal from the 1 yard line the Mustangs were threatening to finally score. But on first down **Darrel Young** was stuffed for a 2-yard loss by David, one of 7 Cannibals blitzing on the play.

"The Cannibals came with the house, the garage and the tool shed on that play, Phil!" howled Badden in amazement. "That's as all-out as an all-out blitz gets! It all starts with blitz pressure, Phil. Without the blitz, you can't generate pressure, and if you can't generate pressure, you're not going to win the battle in the trenches."

On 2<sup>nd</sup> and goal from the 3 yard line, the Cannibals crowded the interior and sat in a close zone without committing to the run. It was a smart move. Ryan made a play action fake and turned around to find none of his targets open across the middle. But the lack of blitz pressure gave him an extra half second to find **Matt Forte** near the sideline. He fired a low spiral that Forte grabbed as he launched himself toward the right pylon, knocking it off its spot with the nose of the ball as he tumbled through the goal line. He picked himself up and high-stepped through the end zone in celebration as the Mustangs' fans in attendance leaped to their feet. Four minutes into the second quarter the Mustangs were finally on the board and right back in the game, trailing 10-7.

"That was an impressive drive for Aurora, Bill, and much needed. Nice read by Matt Ryan, wouldn't you agree?" asked Winterall.

"I can't say enough about the two Matts on that play, Phil," replied Bill. "Forte saw no blitz so he released away from the crowd. Ryan saw him out of the corner of his eye and made a perfect throw that allowed Forte's forward momentum to carry him into the end zone. You can't draw that up with X's and O's. That's just two veterans making a play! The Cannibals were in a perfect defence but the veterans made the play! It

all starts with the veterans, Phil. The veterans are the ones that get the job done when the coaching fails.”

**Nick Folk** kicked off for the first time and **LeGarrette Blount** fielded the ball at the goal line, following a wedge to the 31 yard line where he was stopped by rookie gunner **Bashaud Breeland**. The Cannibals had good field position as they looked to extend their lead. But two plays later their offence was playing defence. On 2<sup>nd</sup> and 8 Rivers dropped back to pass but soon found the pocket crumbling as **JJ Watt** tossed aside left tackle **Andre Smith** and headed straight for the quarterback. Rivers hurled the ball high over the outstretched arms of Amendola and into the hands of Boykin, who made a move on **Emmanuel Sanders** and sprinted 38 yards for the pick six. In the span of one minute, the lead that Carthage had built up over 19 minutes was wiped out and the Cannibals found themselves trailing for the first time, 14-10.

“That makes two interceptions returned for touchdowns in the post-season for Boykin,” announced Phil Winterall.

“I love this kid, Boykin!” effused Badden. “He’s a football player! He’s a ball hawk, a cover guy and playmaker all schmogged together like a turducken! I can’t believe this guy has been on three teams in three years. He’s been a part of some huge trades and here he is, returning an interception for a touchdown in the Gale Sayers Trophy game!”

Blount fielded a bouncing kick at the 11 and returned it 16 yards to give the Cannibals decent field position at their 27 yard line. Not willing to test a hot Mustangs’ secondary, **Ken Main** went conservative, running the ball with Lacy 9 times over the next 11 plays while managing to sneak in a 19-yard pass to Baldwin to convert 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1 near mid field to keep the drive alive. The pounding on the ground with Lacy frayed the Mustangs’ defence, causing a frustrated **Erin Henderson** to pull Lacy down by the facemask at the 5 yard line. The penalty gave Carthage a 1<sup>st</sup> down at the Aurora 2 yard line and prompted a predictable response from the Mustangs’ defence – they run-blitzed Lacy. But the Cannibals crossed them up with a straight throw to the back shoulder of **Josh Gordon**, good for a touchdown. The Cannibals had moved 73 yards in 13 plays and had regained the advantage, leading 17-14 with 3:27 left in the first half.

Rested and inspired by the long drive of their offence, the Cannibals’ defence stepped up and held the Mustangs to another three-and-out. Hardy stuffed Forte for a 4-yard loss and double coverage on Forte and Edelman snuffed out Ryan’s next two pass attempts. The Mustangs were forced to punt again but the Cannibals were unable to capitalize due to an 8-yard sack of Rivers by back-up end, **Malik Jackson**. Soon the Cannibals were punting into the end zone, setting up an opportunity for the Mustangs to either try to execute a one-minute drill or run out the clock and settle for a 3-point deficit at halftime.

Frustration was beginning to show on the Aurora sideline. It wasn’t supposed to be like this – the Carthage defence had been one of the worst in the EFL over 16 games but it had been playing lights out to this point in the game. A stubborn **Rich Liotta** sent four wide receivers onto the field in an effort to get into field goal range and at least tie the game before half time. But on the second play of the drive Ryan tried to force a long throw to a double-covered Boldin. Rookie **Jason Verrett** made a leaping interception and returned it 21 yards to the Aurora 28, putting the Cannibals in field goal range with 37 seconds remaining in the first half.

“That was an ill-advised throw by Matt Ryan,” **Phil Winterall** commented as Verrett hopped to the Carthage sideline holding the football above his head like a trophy.

“The key to that play was Lavonte David,” remarked Badden. “He brought pressure on the quarterback that forced the bad pass. It all starts with Lavonte David when the Cannibals’ defence is on the field, Phil. He *is* the Carthage defence and he just gave his offence a chance to make it a two-score lead before half time.”

The Cannibals ran Lacy up the gut for 4 yards – giving him 101 yards on the day – then called a timeout. They would get no closer, however, as a deflection by Aurora safety **Earl Thomas** and a low throw incomplete to Amendola brought out the field goal unit with 25 seconds left. Surprisingly, the hero of the PAC championship, **Steven Hauschka** missed the 42-yard attempt, keeping the Carthage lead at 3 points. With 21 seconds left in the half, the Mustangs attempted three bombs, none of them amounting to anything, before the gun sounded on the first half.

By any measure the Cannibals had won the first 30 minutes. Apart from its one touchdown drive, the Mustangs’ offence had come up lame against the Cannibals’ defence – a squad that was playing the best game of its season to that point. Both quarterbacks had thrown interceptions and Rivers had paid an immediate price for his high throw on the Boykin pick-six. But the sense across the football world was that if the Cannibals could maintain this pace on defence, the game was theirs to win.

**3<sup>rd</sup> QUARTER (Aurora 28, Carthage 17)** – Carthage got the ball to start the second half. A 15-yard kick return by **Donte Moncrief** gave them a starting point of the 19 yard line as they looked to extend their lead.

“How important is this opening drive for both teams, Bill?” asked Winterall as Rivers jogged on to the field with the Cannibals’ offence.

“This is an important drive, Phil. The Cannibals want some points here,” pronounced Badden, “and the Mustangs need to stop them from scoring points. This is a classic match-up of offence against defence.”

“So far Carthage has been winning that battle, Bill,” Winterall added. “They had 201 yards of offence in the first half to the Mustangs’ 106. Do those numbers surprise you?”

“And 80 of those Mustangs yards were on one drive!” Badden exclaimed. “No, those numbers don’t surprise me Phil. Carthage moved the ball better than the Mustangs in the first half, so I’d expect them to have more yards.”

The Cannibals began with a pair of handoffs to Lacy but were pushed back 12 yards on the second one when left tackle **Andre Smith** received a personal foul penalty for punching **JJ Watt** in the nose while trying to block the monster defensive end. That put them back at their own 11 yard line and brought up 2<sup>nd</sup> and 18. The pressure from the Aurora defensive line continued on the next play as Rivers looked long but could not find anyone open. He fired a long ball about 15 yards away from the nearest Cannibal receiver. Immediately a yellow flag flew out of Cheffers’ hand – the call: intentional grounding.



Carthage quarterback **Philip Rivers** thinks out loud on the sideline as back-up quarterback **EJ Manuel** (right) listens in. Rivers had a difficult 2<sup>nd</sup> half against the elite defence of the Mustangs. He was called for intentional grounding and was picked off to set up Aurora's 4<sup>th</sup> TD while getting shutout in the final 30 minutes.

Rivers protested the but his challenge was in vain; Cheffers paced off 6 yards to the Cannibal 5 yard line where they would face a 3<sup>rd</sup> down and 24.

"You don't see that call very often on a long throw, Bill," commented Winterall.

"Philip Rivers is a smart player. He knew he didn't have a target so he threw it away. The problem was he was in the pocket and Cliff Avril was pushing back the right tackle. He threw it long to that big open space where it hit the ground. That made it intentional grounding, Phil, because it touched the ground and nobody was near it."

A 5-yard check down to Sanders brought up 4<sup>th</sup> down and 19 and brought on the punting unit. Kicking from inside his end zone, McAfee did not get enough air under his kick and **Jeremy Kerley** returned it 14 yards to give the Mustangs a nice starting point at the Cannibals' 41 yard line.

The Mustangs' offence picked up where it left off at the end of the first half – with Ryan trying to go deep to Boldin. The Cannibals' front seven were playing the run but safety **Harrison Smith** sniffed out the real play and cut underneath to attempt the interception. He popped the ball up in the air but out of reach his teammates for an incomplete pass.

"The Mustangs have tried that play a number of times, Bill, but haven't had much success," Winterall said flatly.

"They've been doing that all year and it's worked for them, Phil. But there comes a time when you have to realize that the defence is taking that play away from you," Badden lectured. "But Rich Liotta has faith that his big players are going to make those plays, so he keeps coming back to it. It all starts with having faith in your best players, Phil. If a coach doesn't believe in his players, he's not going to give them the ball. It's that simple."

The Mustangs came back with a pass to tight end **Heath Miller**, good for 16 yards, but soon faced 3<sup>rd</sup> and 15 after a delay of game penalty forced them back to the 30. Ryan took a deep drop and surveyed the field as Forte picked up a blitzing David. The Cannibals were in man-to-man coverage and **Riley Cooper** was able to get free over the middle. Ryan made no mistake, throwing it on a rope to Cooper for a 20-yard gain to the Carthage 10. From there Forte grabbed 8 yards on a draw play and chewed up the remaining 2 yards of real estate on consecutive 1-yard runs into the heart of an aggressive Cannibals' line; he charged through a gap opened up by right tackle **Duane Brown** and crossed the goal line as **Jon Beason** drilled him a fraction of a second too late. Aurora had regained the lead, 21-17.

"Matt Forte isn't known as a short yardage back but he is showing me something today," gushed Bill Badden. "He's sticking his nose in the middle of that pile. He's getting punched, kicked and gouged but he keeps going. There's a war going on in those trenches that fans don't see. It's physical and mean in there. It all starts with the big guys on the line, Phil. Look at Duane Brown's chest heaving, the sweat, blood and snot rolling down his face! That's a warrior there, Phil, because its trench warfare in those trenches!"

The Cannibals got the ball back at their 25 after a short kickoff by Folk. Down by 4 points for the second time on the day, they hoped to repeat their earlier response with a score. But after gaining an initial first down, an attempt to go deep to Gordon ended with Watt on top of Rivers in the backfield for a 5-yard loss. A screen to Gordon netted just one yard and a dump-off to Amendola on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 14 gained 5 to force another punt. This time McAfee got a hold of it, pushing the Mustangs back to their own 21 yard line.

Coach Liotta was set on getting back that lost ground quickly. He had Ryan attempt another long pass to Boldin who was double-teamed on the hitch route and ended up dropping the ball as he turned to make a move on Lewis. A 6-yard check down to Forte on 2<sup>nd</sup> down brought up 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4, then another look deep down field took too much time to develop allowing, **Greg Hardy** to wrap up Ryan in the backfield for a 6-yard loss. It was another three-and-out for the Mustangs' offence and another chance for the Cannibals' offence to make up the difference in one score.

"They got the stop they needed, Bill," Winterall noted dryly.

"The Cannibals are playing as well as anyone can expect, Phil, but they need to do something here on offence or this game could get away from them," replied Badden with a cautionary tone. "Having a lead against an offence that might be starting to press a bit is a situation the Mustangs' defence likes to be in and one they're used to. This is an important series for Carthage."

The Cannibals took the field in a two-tight end set and handed the ball off to Lacy for 3 yards. They then went to the air with a short slant that



went right through the hands of Amendola. Facing 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7, the Cannibals switched to four wide receivers and an empty backfield for the attempt to go deep to Gordon. But the Cannibals' big playmaker, who had been mostly silent all day, was double-covered again, forcing Rivers to check down to Amendola. The evasive receiver reached the first down marker, where he was sandwiched hard between Boykin and Bowman. The ball came out and Watt jumped on it for an Aurora recovery at the Cannibals' 38 yard line.

"I'm surprised Danny Amendola was able to walk off the field after taking those two hits!" Badden remarked. "What a play by the Mustangs's defence! Bang bang! Boykin levels him and Bowman sticks his hand in there to force the fumble. And of course nobody is stopping JJ Watt getting to that loose ball! Carthage is in trouble, Phil!"

With a chance to take control of the game the Mustangs explored another plan on offence. Ryan completed consecutive passes underneath to Miller for 10 yards and Julian Edelman for 14 yards then came back to Miller with a pass that the tight end could not handle with **Donte Whitner** hanging on his back. Out came the yellow flag: pass interference was the call against Carthage.



**Ken Main** of the Cannibals (left) and **Rich Liotta** of the Mustangs (right), the masterminds behind the 2014 Championship contestants, shake hands at mid field after Aurora posted a perfect 19-0 record and took home the Gale Sayers Trophy.

The Mustangs deployed in a four-wide receiver formation, facing 1<sup>st</sup> and goal at the Carthage 3 yard line. The Cannibals, sensing misdirection by the Aurora offensive coordinator, loaded up to stop Forte. But the Mustangs stuck to the air and Ryan found Boldin open in the end zone for an easy 3-yard score. A day of frustration for the Mustangs' star receiver came out all at once as he spiked the ball, clenched his fists, and roared at the crowd as Ryan ran up to embrace him.

"Boldin was wide open on that play, Bill," noted Phil Winterall. "How does he get that wide open?"

"Great players will find a way to get open, Phil, and Anquan Boldin is a great player!" Badden declared. The broadcast screen froze showing the pre-snap formations and he began to wildly scrawl circles and arrows. As the replay ran forward he started talking. "Carthage looked like they were more worried about Matt Forte in the backfield, *here!* You can see Keenan Lewis take a step towards the line, *here,* as the ball is snapped. That was enough to spring Boldin open, *over here,* and Matt Ryan doesn't hesitate. He gets the ball out quickly and <bam!> it's all over! It all starts with the quick release, Phil. If a quarterback can't release the ball quickly, it doesn't matter what the big guys in the trenches are doing."

Blount fielded another short kick by Folk, returning it to the 23 yard line. The turnover had been a serious setback and a sense of urgency had started to envelope the Carthage sideline. A 12-yard completion to Amendola yielded a first down as the officials signalled the end of the third quarter. Trailing 28-17, Carthage would need at least two scores and they would need to get them in a hurry against the best defence in the EFL.

**4<sup>th</sup> QUARTER (Aurora 31, Carthage 17)** – The final quarter started with an intrepid bid by the Cannibals to turn around the contest in one fell swoop. Rivers took a deep drop as four wide receivers all ran deep and Henderson blitzed off the edge. The Mustangs' linbacker scooted around Forte and charged toward the Carthage quarterback. Sensing the pressure, Rivers hurried the throw – a deep arcing pass heading toward a double-covered Gordon. Boykin honed in on the ball, tipping it in the air and into the arms of nickel corner **Nolan Carroll**, who secured the interception and advanced 3 yards before being dropped at the Aurora 27. Mustangs' fans exploded with excitement as Carroll jumped for joy.

"That ball was intended for Josh Gordon but he looked well-covered, Bill," Winterall said.

"Josh Gordon is the Cannibals' most dangerous receiver, Phil, but we have hardly called his name all day," replied Badden. "Patrick Peterson is shutting him down and getting help in key situations. Ken Main has to try to get the ball to his big playmaker at some point, but that was an unfortunate decision by Philip Rivers there. He locked onto Gordon from the start and the pressure from Henderson forced an early off target throw that had no chance. It all starts with a shutdown corner, Phil. Then you have a big guy like JJ Watt over there, and a punisher like NaVorro Bowman over here and a kid like Boykin playing out of his shoes, and there you have a league-leading defence! But it all starts with the shutdown corner! Without that, your defence can't function at this level!"

The Mustangs sent Forte on the sweep but David tracked him down and stuffed him for a 3-yard loss. Figuring that yardage was more important than taking time off the clock, the Mustangs went right back to the pass. Ryan looked to uncork a bomb to Boldin but wisely checked down to Kerley for 10 yards. With the Mustangs facing 3<sup>rd</sup> and 3, the Cannibals played tight coverage, expecting a conservative play call. Ryan dropped back and faked a handoff as David came through on the blitz. Somehow he got the throw off and it was a bulls-eye that found its way through Arrington's tight coverage and into Boldin's bread basket. The powerful Aurora receiver turned up field and galloped another 20 yards for a 43-yard pass play to the Carthage 23. Another big cheer erupted from the Mustangs' fans in attendance as they sensed their team's grip tightening.

"That was an unbelievable throw by Matt Ryan!" shouted **Bill Badden**. "With Lavonte David in his face he threw a perfect pass and Anquan Boldin is so dangerous after the catch! It was a long time coming and what a time for it to come! The Mustangs are trying to put this game away right here, right now!"

A short slant to Boldin brought the Mustangs inside the red zone but an 8-yard sack by defensive tackle **Domata Peko** on 3<sup>rd</sup> down and 1 brought on the field goal unit for Aurora. **Nick Folk** kicked it true from 40 yards and the Mustangs were now ahead by exactly two converted touchdowns, 31-17, with 10:35 remaining in the game.

Starting at their 27 yard line, Rivers opened with an 11-yard pass to **Jared Cook**. **Ken Main** then turned to Lacy and the hurry-up offence to move the chains against a two-man Mustangs' line. The Cannibals' bell cow running back gained 54 yards over 9 straight carries and brought his team to the Aurora 8 yard line where they faced 2<sup>nd</sup> down and 6. A quick substitution by the Mustangs' defence added a third lineman and Rivers saw his chance. He threw into the end zone but the throw was a little high for Amendola. He came back with a quick slant to Gordon but Peterson was attached to his hip and nearly intercepted the pass. Facing 4<sup>th</sup> and 6, the Cannibals opted to go for it. But instead of attempting another pass, **Ken Main** sent Gordon on the end-around. With the Mustangs' defenders all playing tight, linebacker **Karlos Dansby** did not have to run far to lasso the speedy Gordon for no gain. There was 5:38 left in the game, Aurora now had possession, and the Cannibals were no closer to tying the game.

"What do you think of the play call, Bill?" Winterall asked.

"This is the league's best defence in the red zone, Phil," Badden replied wearily. "I don't blame Kenny Main for trying to get Gordon into the game, but not on 4<sup>th</sup> down that close to the goal line against this defence. The Mustangs are just too fast. It all starts with speed, Phil. Speed and pursuit. You have those two coming together, you have a tackle for no gain to seal a great championship win!"

The Mustangs defenders were animated on the sideline as the offence took to the field to burn time off the clock. The best defense in the league was celebrating with embraces, high-fives and fist pumps. A few started to position the Gatorade for the big moment when their efforts would be immortalized by the sound of the final gun.

The offence took three minutes off the clock before giving the ball back to Carthage for one final shot. It was over quickly. Rivers connected with Baldwin for 11 yards but as he was about to be tackled he pitched the ball back to Cook who was blasted by **Earl Thomas**. The ball came loose and was covered up by Dansby at the Carthage 44. The Cannibals burned their remaining timeouts in a desperate bid to stay alive, but when Boldin sprinted for 12 yards on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11 to gain a first down before the two-minute warning, even the Cannibals knew it was over. **Matt Ryan** knelt three times then raised his arms in triumph, as he had 18 times before, in final celebration of the biggest victory of them all.

### POST GAME

And so ends the first perfect season in EFL history! The "Holy Grail" of franchise finishes has been unearthed. For Mustangs fans in Garland the success came one year too late to save their team from moving north. For Mustangs fans in Aurora they will never know a better season than this one. If they are lucky – really lucky – they may see another one like it; but with the salary cap and free agency it is unlikely. With this rare accomplishment the Aurora Mustangs of 2014 enter the ranks of the best teams in EFL history and will be part of the discussion as one of the best professional football teams of all time. Although detractors may point to 8 games against soft opponents in the South Division as a factor in the Mustangs' regular season dominance, the reality is that they handled all comers with relative ease regardless of where or when they played. In the Championship game they faced a worthy opponent in the Carthage Cannibals – a team that had fallen short of earning the respect it deserved until a stunning Conference Final upset proved that its combination of talent in key positions and masterfully-executed game plans might be enough to upend the seemingly invincible Mustangs at the season's 11<sup>th</sup> hour. For one half it appeared possible. But even in that half of football in which Carthage outcoached and outplayed its powerful opponent, there were signs that the mighty Mustangs would eventually break loose. Brandon Boykin's pick-six kept Aurora in the game during a period when its offence was floundering. Matt Forte showed his hidden value during that time with an improvised TD catch then in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half with his hard-nosed goal line run for the winning score. Matt Ryan, leader of the offence, made key throws when his team needed them to complement a devastatingly predatory defence that forced four turnovers. It was the power of those turnovers that ultimately made the difference in this ultimate team achievement. For Rich Liotta's Mustangs, it may not have been a perfect game, but it was a typically perfect finish.



*Who was slick in the Championship?*

**"BRYLCREEM" THE EFL'S FIRST SPONSOR**



**Matt Forte**  
**RB**  
**Aurora Mustangs**

**12 Carries, 57 yards, 1 TD. 6 catches, 1 TD. Got the tough yards.**



**Brandon Boykin**  
**CB**  
**Aurora Mustangs**

**4 Tackles, 1 PD, 1 INT, 1 TD. Pick-six kept Mustangs in it in 1<sup>st</sup> half.**



# Carthage 17 Aurora 31



	1	2	3	4	F
Carthage	10	7	0	0	17
Aurora	0	14	14	3	31

**Complete**

\* Championship \* 03-08-2015 Carolina Slammer Temp:60 Wind:5-15 None No Line MVP: Boykin

1	6:16	Carthage	FG	Hauschka 30 (13-56-6:58)	0-3
1	0:50	Carthage	TD	Rivers 32 pass to Baldwin (Hauschka) (1-32-0:11)	0-10
2	11:02	Aurora	TD	Ryan 3 pass to Forte (Folk) (11-80-4:53)	7-10
2	10:01	Aurora	TD	Boykin 38 interception return (Folk)	14-10
2	3:27	Carthage	TD	Rivers 2 pass to Gordon (Hauschka) (13-73-6:27)	14-17
3	8:45	Aurora	TD	Forte 1 run (Folk) (8-41-4:28)	21-17
3	0:55	Aurora	TD	Ryan 3 pass to Boldin (Folk) (4-38-1:34)	28-17
4	10:35	Aurora	FG	Folk 40 (7-51-4:08)	31-17

**Player Stats**

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Rivers	32	18	171	1	2	2	2	66.0

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Ryan	34	21	203	1	2	2	3	73.5

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Lacy	34	163	4.8	9	1	19	0
Rivers	1	3	3.0	0	0	3	0
Gordon	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Forte	12	57	4.8	4	3	17	1
Polk	4	7	1.8	0	0	6	0
Young_D	3	1	0.3	1	0	4	0
Ryan	3	-3	1.0	0	0	0	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Baldwin	6	0	7	105	17.5	5	1	32	1
Amendola	3	1	10	24	8.0	1	0	12	0
Gordon	3	0	7	13	4.3	1	0	10	1
Lacy	2	0	2	3	1.5	0	0	2	0
Ellison	1	0	1	5	5.0	0	0	5	0
Rudolph	1	0	1	5	5.0	0	0	5	0
Cook	1	0	2	11	11.0	1	0	11	0
Sanders	1	0	2	5	5.0	0	0	5	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Boldin	7	1	13	94	13.4	4	1	43	1
Forte	6	0	8	16	2.7	2	0	6	1
Miller	3	0	4	31	10.3	2	0	16	0
Edelman	3	0	4	32	10.7	1	0	14	0
Kerley	1	0	1	10	10.0	0	0	10	0
Cooper	1	0	4	20	20.0	1	0	20	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Amendola	1	0	0
Baldwin	1	0	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Watt	1	0	0
Dansby	0	1	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Blount	4	82	20.5	31	0
Moncrief	2	30	15.0	15	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Boykin	1	24	24.0	24	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Moncrief	2	3	9	4.5	6	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Kerley	2	0	23	11.5	14	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Hauschka	1-2	30	2-2	5

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

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
McAfee	3	151	50.3	1	0	0	56

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Koch	5	235	47.0	0	0	0	51

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
David	8	1	0	3	1	0	0-0
Verrett	6	0	1	0	0	0	1-21
Whitner	4	0	0	0	0	0	1-42
Peko	4	1	0	0	2	0	0-0
Lewis	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Hardy	3	1	0	1	2	0	0-0
Arrington	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Babineaux	3	0	0	2	0	0	0-0
Beason	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Ellerbe	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Smith,H	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Fuller	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Gresham	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Reed	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Klug	1	0	0	1	0	0	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Harrison	11	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Bowman	8	0	0	1	0	1	0-0
Thomas	7	0	1	0	0	1	0-0
Dansby	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Boykin	4	0	1	0	0	0	1-38
Peterson	4	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Watt	3	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Weddle	3	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Henderson	3	0	0	0	2	0	0-0
Franks	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Carroll	2	0	0	0	0	0	1-3
Ellis	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Avril	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson	1	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Young,W	1	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Goodman	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Long	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Reid	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Breeland	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Davis	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0



**BRANDON BOYKIN**  
AURORA

4 TACKLES, 1 PD AND 1 PICK-SIX THAT SPARKED A COMEBACK.

	Carthage	Aurora
First Downs	18	17
Rushes	36-166	22-62
Passes	32-18-171	34-21-203
Sacked	2-13	3-22
Fumble	2	0
Penalties	4-44	3-13
Turnovers	4	2
Missed Tackles	0	4
Dropped Passes	1	1
Bad Passes	5	2
Passes	1	1
Runs 10+	1	3
Blitzes	39	25
Time	31:50	28:10
Third Down	8-16	7-14
Fourth Down	1-3	0-0
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/1/1	4/3/1
Net Offense	324	243



# AT THE EFL CHAMPIONSHIP With Spats McChad

COLUMBIA, SC – This is what passes for a big city in the Old South. Atlanta doesn't count. General Sherman burned the Old South out of Atlanta on his way to Savannah. Sherman burnt Columbia too, but the people of Columbia were slower to buy back into the Union. Maybe if Sherman had burnt *all* of Columbia to the ground, as he did to Atlanta, the people here might have learned a little quicker the benefits of being on the right side of history. Instead, he just burnt a lot of it and, depending on who is writing the history, retreating Confederate soldiers may have been partly to blame for some of the flames.

Considering the torturous history of this place relative to most North American urban centers, I found the regular residents of Columbia during my stay here to be extremely friendly and hospitable. Maybe they just didn't want to have their city burned again by Northern visitors. Or maybe they are simply nice people – descendants of other nice people who, except for the slavery thing, would have represented the epitome of Christian decency. As a New York “Yankee” I was particularly sensitive to the mood of the indigenous populace – descendants of those who *my* ancestors may have attempted to subjugate in an ignoble manner after winning a virulent civil war. Lieutenant **Oisín O'Shea**, a long-dead uncle on my mother's side, fought with the 9<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, better known as the “New York Zouaves,” during Burnside's North Carolina Expedition early in the Civil War. I don't think he committed any atrocities, but the record is sketchy after he contracted dysentery on Roanoke Island and began moving in and out of various field hospitals.

I soon realized that it did not matter where I came from when it came to good, old-fashioned ‘Southern Hospitality.’ The average Southerner has a way of compartmentalizing grievances so as not to interfere with an ingrained, semi-conscious chivalric code of conduct (long lost to New Yorkers) that places personal honour and social virtue above other considerations. So, while I might be a “damn Yankee,” I'm also welcome for dinner as long as I don't do something offensive with the utensils.

Unfortunately, the largest security operation in EFL Championship history presented a formidable barrier to visitors hoping to experience that famous Southern hospitality. As an accredited member of the Media, accompanied by a security-cleared local “handler,” I was able to move around a little easier than the average fan. But I was still subject to most of the same check points, even if I didn't have to drop my drawers at every one to prove I didn't have plastic explosives taped to my buttocks.

The renewal of bombing missions in Iraq had revived the spectre of terrorism in America. Except this time, the success of the *Jihadists* on the ground thousands of miles away and the gruesome beheadings of westerners by ISIS had spooked the public and the authorities to levels of panic that a thousand imaginary weapons of mass destruction could not produce. Everyone in Columbia had convinced themselves that an attack on the Carolina Slammer during America's biggest sports spectacle was being planned. To suggest otherwise was treasonous. To object to being stopped and searched every time you went somewhere was akin to burning the Stars & Stripes and could easily land you in jail. I had been warned by the Syndicate beforehand that security would be present in Columbia during Gale Sayers Week – I had had no inkling that it would have been *omnipresent*.

## THE HANDLERS

“The terrorists hate our freedoms,” stated **Rhett Butler** matter-of-factly. “That's one of the reasons they want to destroy us!”

Rhett was my “handler” and – yes – that was his real name. When he had first introduced himself to me at the airport, with a hearty handshake and a big grin, I had replied that I was **Scarlett O'Hara** and that, despite my vow to never go hungry again, I had only had a tiny bag of pretzels and about 4oz of Coke on the plane and I was starving for some fine Southern cuisine. The smile he had sported vanished in a flash as he pulled a piece of paper from a slim briefcase he was carrying and perused it for a few seconds. He then held the paper up to my left ear and had looked at me then at the paper with an unnerving steadiness. “It says here your name's **Spats McChad!**” he had said warily. I had paused, briefly considered making another crack, then thought better of it – Rhett clearly had never seen *Gone with the Wind* and he didn't have a sense of humour.

Now we were in the car, a sleek black Ford Traverse, driving to the Hampton Inn not far from Fort Jackson, which was, I later discovered, a beehive of activity as the Command and Control Center for ‘*Operation Regulation*’ – the integrated security

plan for what city planners had dubbed “Gale Sayers Week” in Columbia. With me were Rhett, another “handler” named Clem (who wore an NRA ball cap with a young boy holding a rifle and the words, ‘FOR OUR CHILDREN’S FREEDOM’ stitched over top), **Johnny Rebb**, a sportswriter who covers the Regulators for *The State*, and **James Duthie**, a sportscaster for TSN and an occasional contributor to *The Auran*.

Duthie had flown into Columbia Metropolitan Airport on an Air Canada flight that had arrived about three hours before mine. But he had been unexpectedly held up at a makeshift U.S. customs checkpoint set up in the international terminal. The fact that Duthie had already cleared U.S. customs at Pearson Airport in Toronto was of no consequence to zealous officials on the ground in Columbia, who had explained to an irritated Duthie, while conducting a thorough search of his luggage and his clothing: “That was U.S. Customs in Canada, sir. This here is U.S. Customs in the United States! Canada is a foreign country and a communist state. We are on high security alert for terrorists. Now bend over, please!”

The drive to our hotel took about 30 minutes. As I attempted to engage my fellow journalists in light conversation, Clem flashed a series of playing cards at Duthie, pausing for about 10 seconds at each one before slowly and deliberately moving on to the next. About half way through the deck, Duthie’s irritation flared: “Why are you showing me playing cards?” he hissed.

“I’m testing you for triggers,” Clem drawled. “Trust me – if you’ve been programmed to commit a terrorist act by your KGB handlers in Canada you’ll thank me for this later.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Duthie asked indignantly, glancing inquisitively at the rest of us.

“Exactly!” Clem exclaimed. He turned to Butler, who was driving. “Exactly what I expected, Rhett; he has no idea.” He then turned back to Duthie. “Hang in there, I’m almost done. If you are a sleeper agent we have people who can deprogram you. But you must cooperate with us.”

“Let me out of this damn car! You’re crazy!” Duthie barked.

“Hey James, settle down,” **Johnny Rebb** said reassuringly. “I know it looks crazy and it probably is. But Clem means well and he is your handler while you’re here. So you’re going to have to learn to get along with him.”

Clem flashed a toothy, humourless grin. “Yep, we’re going to get to know each other *reee-aaaal* good Jimmy Boy!”

#### **THE NEW AMERICA**

Our handlers may not have been familiar with *Gone with the Wind*, but Clem appeared to have seen *The Manchurian Candidate*. He paused an extra few seconds as he flashed the ‘Queen of Diamonds.’ “Do you feel different? Do you feel anything strange *right now*?” he asked, scrutinizing Duthie intensely as he spoke.

“Yes, I do,” Duthie replied curtly. “I feel like you are all nuts and I made a big mistake taking on this assignment. Now when we get to the hotel you can drop off Spats and Johnny here and take me right back to the airport. I’ll do my piece on the Mustangs remotely, far away from this looneytown.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s too late for that,” Butler interceded. “You’re in America now, Mr. Duthie. You’re a security risk until we can vouch for you. We take our jobs as Regulators – *real* Regulators – very seriously.”

I later learned that there was another kind of South Carolina Regulator in Columbia that did not wear football gear. They were, as Rhett put it, “*a band of brothers and sisters united by a common purpose, which is to promote the security and well-being of the State of South Carolina within the Republic of the United States of America through good works.*” That was a long-winded way of saying they were a group of patriotic volunteers, the kind who can and do get in the way of security and law enforcement professionals whenever there is a crisis. They were a kind of volunteer FBI or ATF, if you can imagine such a thing and, therefore, were much hated by the FBI and ATF. They had been tacked onto the security plan at the very end and had been given “security deputy” powers for very limited purposes. The fact that they had been invested with any power at all spoke to just how far the real security forces were being stretched.

They also, it turns out, had an influential friend in a high place. In addition to being Team President and the head coach of the Regulators, **Hal Corson** also held the venerable position of Imperial Vizier of the *Honourable and August Society of Regulation*, the members of which were referred to as ‘Regulators.’ Corson had used his position with the football team to carve out a role for his Regulators assisting visiting media around a Columbia crowded by the influx of thousands of football fans during a period of heightened security. It was one way to ensure good press for the city and his team. But it also created a risk that these amateurs would actually get somebody hurt if a real threat materialized. Rhett was a driving instructor for the South Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles who had served in Iraq as a truck driver with the 143<sup>rd</sup> Transportation Command; and Clem was a bridge painter by trade whose main combat experience consisted of reaching Level 125 on Halo 4 and being a member of a local gun club.

The above – as well as other disconcerting information that I don’t have the space to divulge in this column – were all facts I became aware of over the course of the week leading up to the big game. Had I known half of them at the time that Rhett was driving us from the airport while Clem conducted his bizarre interrogation of **James Duthie**, I might have ditched them at the Hampton Inn at the earliest opportunity. I ended up glad that I didn’t, but more on that later.

Beyond the military checkpoints set up at the points of approach to every major commercial or entertainment venue, government building, or piece of critical infrastructure; past the countless plainclothes officers, security officials and bodyguards all trying in vain to blend in with the crowd; through the ubiquitous presence of uniformed police officers posted at every major

intersection and in every public park; and behind the mandatory private security guards controlling traffic in and out of residential zones, the beauty and charm of a city that had carefully preserved its heritage while reaching for the 21<sup>st</sup> century were apparent. But while there were obvious signs of modern development, a small town atmosphere lingered.

“We’ve got a convention center now!” Clem boasted that night as the five of us, joined by **Lars Odegard** of the *Valhalla Press* in Minneapolis, his wife Hilda and his handler, a car mechanic named Dirk, dined on calabash shrimp, fried catfish, black-eyed peas and other Southern delicacies at the Lizard’s Thicket restaurant. “It’s no. 3 on our list of prime terrorist targets after the stadium and the State House. So I recommend that we avoid it,” he added gravely.

I pointed out that Gale Sayers Media Days were being staged at the Convention Center and that it was our job to go to them. A look of worry washed over Hilda’s face – **Patti Sue Devereux** had organized a local arts & crafts display at the Convention Centre for Tuesday, as part of the Media Spouses Program for Gale Sayers Week. Clem shook his head, furrowed his brow and turned to Rhett. “This is going to be more difficult than I figured,” he said.

The Handlers had been tasked with keeping media guests safe as well as ensuring they were able to effectively navigate the tangled web of security that had brought regular life in Columbia to a near halt. Their solution to both problems was to discourage us from going anywhere.

“The Hampton Inn is safe,” declared Rhett as he stabbed a pointer in the vicinity of Clemson Road and I-20 on an 8’ by 4’ map of Columbia and the surrounding area. It was after dinner on the night of our arrival and we were receiving our first security briefing in one of the hotel conference rooms. **Quentin San Pedro** of the *Chino Champion*, **Randy the Desert Rat** of the *Mohave Torch* and **Charlie Wood** of the *Charleswood Banner* and *Charleswood Sun*, had joined the rest of us by then. **Orville Smucker** of the *Cowtown Plain Dealer* was reportedly also in the hotel but had gone to his room for a little nap.

The green areas on the map were considered to be safe; the yellow areas required a heightened state of alertness and escort by a local handler was recommended; and red zones were considered no-go zones. Most of the map was yellow and red, with a few tiny green dots scattered here and there.

“The Carolina Slammer is red,” Charlie Wood pointed out with alarm. “How are we going to cover the practices and interview the players?”



From left to right – **Charlie Wood**, **Rhett Butler**, me, **Clem Henson** and **James Duthie** drinking beer at the open patio at Solstice Kitchen & Wine Bar in Columbia. Our Regulator escorts turned out to be just regular guys looking for a good time in the lead up to the EFL Championship.

“The Slammer is the terrorist’s prime target,” Rhett said with an exaggerated air of authority. “Nobody is getting in before game day.”

“What is the purpose of all this security?” asked **Lars Odegard**, shaking his head in disbelief.

“To preserve our freedoms!” yelled Clem. “The terrorists want to destroy our way of life. We won’t let them!”

“What freedoms?” a clearly cantankerous **Charlie Wood** complained. “We can’t go anywhere except here....and....,” he leaned forward to look at the map. He pointed at one of the larger green zones. “.....and...what’s that there – a golf course?”

“You want our women to wear Biqabs?” barked the Regulator named Dirk. “You want to wear a towel on your head and not be able to drink alcohol or look at porn on the internet for the rest of your life? Is that what you want?”

“You mean *niqab*!” **James Duthie** said with disdain. “Or a burka.”

“You seem to know a lot about their ways, you commie Canuck,” Dirk said suspiciously.

Charlie paused for a moment at the mention of abstinence. “No alcohol?” he asked hoarsely.

“No porn?” a bewildered **Quentin San Pedro** gasped.

“*They can’t do that!*” they both said at the same time.

“Oh you bet they can!” countered Clem. “Once they start chopping your hands and feet off for doing the slightest little thing wrong you’ll dance to their tune! But it won’t be easy without any feet!”

“This is the New America, people!” Rhett announced with a dramatic flair, “a new and stronger and more secure America – an America where terrorists come to *die!*”

Sightseeing, partying and exercising one’s duties as a member of the Free Press in the ‘New America’ had its challenges. But by the end of the week most of the “*scribe tribe*,” (as a Regulator named Hunter had nicknamed the group of us), had had their share of entertainment and had managed to get at least one story back to their employer.

Having **Johnny Rebb** around really helped. He was well-known around town and was able to get us into places that our Regulator minders could not have, even with their security clearance passes. By Wednesday, we had begun to realize that our handlers were barely more than regular citizens. Only one of them, Clem, was actually armed; and I suspected illegally because he always volunteered to “guard the vehicles” whenever we went as a group to a place where metal detectors were in use (which was most places). It wasn’t easy to drive anywhere due to all the checkpoints and security barriers blocking off entire lanes of traffic, but when we got to where we were going we invariably had a great time – the people were very friendly once they knew you weren’t going to blow them up.

The Regulators seemed to lighten up a bit each day – they remained vigilant, of course, but became more receptive to spontaneity as *they* realized that *we* realized that, with **Johnny Rebb** there, we didn’t really need the Regulators to get us around town. We had decided to let them hang out with us anyway because they were actually decent folk and it appeared that they really, *really* wanted to hang around with us. Only Duthie wasn’t thrilled with the idea, because his handler, Clem, had continued to test his reaction to a wide variety of commonplace items, words, and symbols. The latest were a series of common traffic signs.

“I’m going to kill him. And I’m not a violent guy!” Duthie had said to me when Clem was off relieving himself while we enjoyed a few beers as a group one night at the Solstice Kitchen and Wine Bar. “The problem is he’s got a gun. Are we allowed to switch handlers? Do you want to trade?”

“I don’t think that’s going to solve your problem, Jim,” I replied. “I think you’re going to have to kill him.”

We all got some relief from the Regulators when we took a field trip on Friday night to Charlotte, across the State line in North Carolina. **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven**, or Gabby, official correspondent for the LA Knights, was hosting her annual *Championship Soirée* at the Ritz-Carlton Charlotte. She had spent one night in Columbia and that was enough for her.

“I can’t possibly host a proper party in this place,” she complained bitterly when she saw the security cordon around the The Inn at Claussen’s. “There are too many guns and half of my invited guests are on some *terror watch list* that some fascist Republican in the State Legislature fabricated. Imagine **Susan Sarandon** and **Martin Sheen** being considered threats to national security! It’s preposterous! They can’t even enter the city limits! I thought this was America! Did the South win the war, Spats?”

“It’s the New America, Gabby,” I answered ironically. “If something actually happens at this game (touch wood) you had better get used to it.”

A group of us pitched in and rented a limo to take us to Charlotte. We told the Regulators that it was an invite-only media event and that, sadly, they weren’t media and we could not get them all tickets. It turned out that the Regulators, while they were “on duty,” could not leave the State of South Carolina. On top of that, there would have been problems if the North Carolina Regulators had found out. The two groups didn’t get along, you see.

That is how we became free for a night in Charlotte – one precious night of freedom away from the sound of military trucks, the sight of soldiers and security barriers, the tedium of traffic jams and long lines at security checkpoints, the inconvenience of having to produce ID to go to the washroom in a public place, and the paranoid conspiracy theories of our Regulator handlers. I realized, to my great surprise, that the short week in Fort Columbia had taken its toll on my psyche when I reacted with alarm at the sight of no armoured car at the intersection of West Trade Street and the exit from Highway I-77. I guess I had never really appreciated our freedoms until I had lived, even for a short while, in what amounted to a police state.



The Aurora Mustangs cheerleaders, the *Northern Dancers* perform at half time under the watchful eye of the 218<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the National Guard at the 8<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game. Fears of a terrorist attack gripped the midlands region of South Carolina in the months leading up to the game. Despite unprecedented security levels, fans enjoyed a competitive match that saw Aurora become the first 19-0 team in history.

The party was a typical Gabby Gala. All the right people were in attendance and the atmosphere was glamorous but with an underground feel. That was what made it different from a typical Hollywood Establishment party – there was always a controversial element thrown in to make people talk later. It didn't matter that the party was over 2,000 miles away from LA; the proliferation of cameras and social media would ensure that the LA *'Glitteratti'* were aware and wished they were there.

The presence of the exotic and curious-looking **Kokopali Crimpton** of the *Carthage Carving* – the All American boy “gone native” in the South Pacific like a modern day Fletcher Christian – drew a lot of attention; as did **Merlin the Magician** of the *Round Table Chronicle*, whose magician's robes were an instant fashion hit. The **Marquis de Sade**, from the *Viriden Eviscerator*, usually popular at Gabby's parties, was ignored this year – the “Marie Antoinette” look being passé ever since Lady Gaga did it. The dark and ethereal synthetic tones of the Putin-inspired progressive Russian band *Electric Pancreas* added a surreal atmosphere in the ballroom of the hotel in this old Southern town gone big city and made sure that people would gasp at the impropriety of the politics while quietly admiring the accomplished musicianship.

“The rumour in LA is that Dr. Gunther Benghazi did JJ Watt's chest implants,” Gabby blabbed. She was in a gossip-spreading mood. “Do you think that's true, Spats?”

“How would I know, Gabby? I don't even know who Dr. Benghazi is,” I answered.

“But do you think JJ Watt has implants? They say he's a lot bigger than he was in college and it happened overnight!”

“Drugs,” I replied, trying to show that I was not overly interested in pursuing football talk with somebody whose idea of football talk was Hollywood-style chatter with football players as subjects. I loved Gabby, but when she was bored she reverted to what interested her most and I found that boring.

Near midnight the energy began to quickly drain from the room. It had been an exhilarating few hours but the realization that we had to go back to *Columbiastan*, (as **Randy the Desert Rat** had nicknamed it after his 12<sup>th</sup> Coors Light), was weighing everyone down. This was especially true for **James Duthie**, who was not looking forward to renewing contact with his handler, **Clem Henson**, and seemed to be still enjoying himself. He had renewed acquaintances with an old colleague from Carleton University in Ottawa who had worked for the CBC (the Canadian national broadcaster) but had left after a couple of years to



pursue an art career in Monterey, CA. His old buddy, **Jean-Luc Puissant-Putre** was now a famous (famous by *'avant-garde'* art standards) rust painter whose widely-acclaimed exhibitions (again, by *'avant-garde'* art standards) consisted of him destroying his works in solvent to the music of Béla Bartók. What he was doing at a football party in Charlotte, North Carolina was never made clear, but that was not of concern to Duthie, who claimed Jean had been a “great guy” back in school and was “pumped” to have run into him in such a freakish coincidence.

“We all knew he was going to work for the CBC because that was his only hope for a job in the mainstream,” Duthie joked as Jean-Luc smiled weakly. “Hey, Jean, are you still reading the collected essays of Enver Hoxha?” He tilted his head back and laughed loudly. “Thanks to Jean, I actually know who the guy is.”

We left Charlotte shortly after midnight for the 90-minute drive back to Columbia. Gabby would not be coming to the game; she didn’t want to be in the Slammer when it exploded because “it would ruin my outfit,” she said. The reality was that guns made Gabby very nervous and there were a lot of police and military with big guns in Columbia. She planned to follow the Titter feed and watch the game at the hotel in Charlotte. She had already booked a small ball room for her and her friends.

**Randy the Desert Rat** and **Charlie Wood** drank all the bourbon in the limo bar while **Lars Odegard** introduced **James Duthie** and **Johnny Rebb** to a Norwegian liqueur called *Akvavit*, a bottle of which he had stashed away for a special occasion on the trip. He considered this a special occasion and: “maybe the last chance I’ll get to drink it – I don’t trust it won’t get seized.”

We were relaxed on the drive back. I even nodded off for a few minutes. The atmosphere changed, however, when we entered Richland County. We got stuck behind a military convoy and the delay added a half hour to our return trip. When we hit the checkpoint at the exit for Clemson Road at 3:15 am, we were greeted by a familiar face.

“How ya’ll doing, boys?” Clem popped out from behind a National Guardsman who was perusing our driver’s licence. “We got word from the chopper that you were on your way. We all missed you! Welcome back!”

### ***THE SLAMMER***

The big day finally arrived and we were escorted into the Carolina Slammer by an armoured troop transport driven and guarded by soldiers from the 218 Infantry Brigade of the South Carolina National Guard. The Regulators were tucked in with us but served no official role that I could tell, although they were acting more officious than ever.

When we were unloaded at the gate **Rhett Butler** forced himself to the front of the line to speak to the Special FBI Agent in charge, who appeared to be overseeing security at our entrance.

“I’m Regulator number 62, sir, Butler’s the name! I have media with me. They’re cleared,” he yelled.

The FBI Agent, who was speaking with a heavily armed sniper wearing grey fatigues, glanced in Rhett’s direction then returned to his discussion. At the same time a police Sergeant approached us and barked: “tickets and credentials, please.”

Rhett stepped toward the officer, flashed his ID card with the big crimson ‘R’ and said: “Sergeant, they’re cleared. I’m with the Regulators. Butler’s the name, number 62!”

The Sergeant, whose name tag read ‘BATES,’ looked curiously at Butler’s ID card then asked, “What *is* this? Do you have a ticket and a media pass?”

“It’s a Regulators identification warrant card, Sergeant,” Butler declared loudly. “I am handling one of the Media personnel in this convoy – one Spats McChad. He is cleared for entry and I am accompanying him!”

The Sergeant turned to me and asked me for my ticket and Media card, which I presented. He glanced at them then waved me through. “Go ahead,” he said. I walked through the gate and handed my ticket to the ticket-taker. Rhett tried to follow me.

“Hey, where do you think *you’re* going?” snapped Sergeant Bates. “Where’s your ticket?”

“As I said, Sarge, I’m with the Regulators. We were assigned by Major Carson to the Media pool. I’m with him,” Butler explained, pointing at me.

“That’s nice, but no ticket, no entry. What do you think this, a church picnic?” Sergeant Bates sneered. “Next!”

It turned out that none of the Regulators had tickets to the game. They had assumed they would follow us in as part of their assignment. But whether by accident, or by design, they had not been given tickets and nobody at the gate knew who the Regulators were. Or if they did know, they didn’t care.

“I feel a little guilty,” confessed **Charlie Wood**, while we shared a beer at the Media Box in the 200 level while the players warmed up on the field. “They each took a week off work to make sure we got around their city and didn’t get paid for it. Now they don’t even get to see the game.”

“Screw them!” **James Duthie** chuckled. “They’re a bunch of losers and freaks!”

“The Regulators – the society, *not* the football team – aren’t very well known in Columbia,” **Johnny Rebb** explained, “but to the west of here they have a good reputation.” He turned to Duthie. “They’re sort of like Kinsmen in Canada,” he said then looked at me and added, “or a Rotarian in New York. They’re basically just good guys. The Regulators think they have a duty to protect, which means they tend to attract a more militaristic or police type of volunteer.”

“I was getting used to them,” **Lars Odegard** admitted. “Hunter knows his football, that’s for sure,” he added, referring to



Aurora coach **Rich Liotta** (top) and Carthage coach **Ken Main** (above) address the media after the game.

his Regulator handler, who was part *Congaree* Indian, owned a pawn shop on Two Notch Road, and who had won six figures on a bet on the Patriots to win the Championship last year. He could have easily afforded a ticket.

One hour before game time the authorities closed the gates to the Carolina Slammer. That was the cut-off time for entry. If you had a ticket but had arrived late, you pretty much had to know the President, or be a former President, to gain entry to the stadium.

As for the latter, it turned out that **George W. Bush** was an honoured guest at the Slammer for the 8<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game. It caught the collected EFL media by surprise, but the fact that it caught us by surprise was not much of a surprise since the tightness of security made it virtually impossible to know the planning in advance. When ‘W’ arrived in the booth next to us 15 minutes before kick-off, we still didn’t even know who would be playing the half time show.

It had been an unusual and difficult week leading up to the main event. But when we were all finally in place in the media gallery things ran smoothly and the security melted into the background. Since the collected media pool had arrived more than two hours early, we were treated to *Little Pigs BBQ* trucked in from the famous local buffet on Alpine Road courtesy of the **Hal Corson** and the Regulators’ football team. The food was top-notch, the drinks were flowing freely, and the waitresses were not only friendly but absolutely gorgeous. Like magic, the stressors of the previous six days vanished and we could all focus on football.

Unfortunately, the heightened security had taken its toll on the overall media attendance. In addition to Gabby, a number of distinguished journalists either declined, or were unable to attend.

An intoxicated **Kokopali Crimpton** had missed his limo ride back to Columbia and was arrested wandering the streets of Charlotte. He was eventually released, but too late to attend Columbia to watch his team play the biggest game of its brief history. **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven**, for reasons I mentioned earlier, decided to opt out of the largest sporting security event in US history and watch the game on a flat screen TV in neighbouring Charlotte. She was joined by the **Marquis de Sade** who, it was rumoured, had a creepy fixation on the LA sports columnist. **Aristedes Kalogiannis** of the *Pickering Post* had boycotted the game on the grounds

that any championship game played without the league’s offensive MVP was not worth following. And **Orville Smucker** of the *Cowtown Plain Dealer* had slept in again and had missed the shuttle to the stadium.

The National Anthem was performed in a unique way by the band, *Madison Rising*. America’s most patriotic band certainly had a peculiar way of expressing its patriotism, performing a free-form “grunge” version of the Star Spangled Banner that prompted groans and even a few boos from the capacity crowd of roughly 67,000 at the Carolina Slammer.

“Woah! That’s heavy, dude!” exclaimed **Michael S. Hickenbottom** of the *Orange County Register*, when the dreadful dirge mercifully came to an end.

“Terrorists sabotaged the PA system apparently,” quipped **Mike Myers** of the *Scarberian*. The room suddenly fell silent as a couple of heavily armed SWAT team officers and an FBI Agent in a raid jacket swooped in. One of the SWAT team zapped Myers with a TASER while the other covered him with a machine gun and the FBI Agent placed him in handcuffs. In less than 30 seconds he was out the door.

“Okay, so nobody should mention the ‘T’ word!” said Sebastian correspondent **Jean Boisvert** of the *Swampland Proof*, breaking the silence. There were murmurs and general nodding all around. Gradually the room returned to a close to normal volume level, but a pall had been cast over the gathering nonetheless.

“What else can’t we say, I wonder?” **Charlie Wood** said to me in a low whisper.

“Probably can’t say ‘bomb,’” commented **Quentin San Pedro**, who was standing next to me and had overheard Charlie’s comment.

Within seconds a large burly fellow in an ATF jacket and a man wearing a helmet and a heavy flak jacket with the words

BOMB DISPOSAL UNIT emblazoned on the front charged through the crowd of startled journalists. “Where’s the bomb!” he demanded. The room fell silent again. Everyone’s heads turned toward Quentin.

“Well, I was just saying that we probably can’t say ‘bomb.’ I didn’t mean there *was* a bomb,” he explained.

The ATF agent did not look amused. He spoke into his radio: “Yeah, this is 14-Bravo. Results are negative. We have a prank call here.”

Within seconds another pair of SWAT officers burst into the room accompanied this time by a female FBI Agent. They repeated the same arrest drill that they had for Myers but this time the FBI agent added a solid kick to the groin to send a message to the rest of us not to mess around.

Everyone was now petrified to say anything. We watched the game in near silence. Occasionally someone would order a drink or make a comment about the game with the roar of the crowd as cover.

“It would fit everything I have heard about the Mustangs from their days in Garland if they blew the championship and the perfect season in one game,” groaned **James Duthie** as Carthage fans cheered and **Doug Baldwin** celebrated after scoring on a 32-yard touchdown pass. The score gave the Cannibals a 10-0 lead. To that point their offence had been chipping away at the highly acclaimed Mustangs’ defence while the much maligned Carthage defence had looked like they were in the huddle with **Matt Ryan**.

“It won’t last, Jim. Trust me on this one,” I replied. “There are still three quarters left for Philip Rivers to screw it up!”

Sure enough, the Mustangs’ offence pulled it together for an 80-yard touchdown drive then **Brandon Boykin** added to his already impressive post-season with a 38-yard pick-six. It was now the Aurora fans’ turn to make some noise; their team had negated a full quarter of dominance by the Cannibals in the space of one minute to take a 14-10 lead. My colleagues took advantage of the din to add their two cents.

“They sure turned that around quickly!” **Lars Odegard** remarked while making notes on his I-Pad. “Did anyone see that coming?”

“I did,” said **Johnny Rebb** with an air of resignation. “I’ve been watching this team all year looking for a crack in the armour. This is what they do. Just when you think you might have ‘em, that Mustangs’ defence rips your throat out!”

But the Cannibals’ offence was not done for the day. **Eddie Lacy** took his team on his shoulders and carried them to the Aurora 2 yard line where **Josh Gordon** finally made his presence felt with an easy touchdown catch while the Mustangs chased a play action fake.

“That drive was huge!” an excited **Jean Boisvert** exclaimed under the roar of the Carthage crowd. After another season of futility in Sebastian, Jean was openly pulling for the Cannibals – an expansion team from the same graduating class. Management on the Treasure Coast would have no more excuses if Carthage won a championship 3 years into its existence.

“I dare say we are witnessing the beginnings of an upset, McChad!” **Sir Reginald Malcolm Clapham** of the *Durham Diggatel and Pick* had strutted over to me from his perch at the far end of the media box. “Could you be *wrong again*?” He emphasized the word “*wrong*,” knowing how much I hated that word when applied to me.

I had picked the Thunder Lizards over the Mustangs in the Conference Finals and, as my dear readers will recall, things did not work out for Durham in that game. I did not consider it my failing, however, as much as it had been a Durham failing. I had predicted an Aurora win in the championship, but the performance of Carthage in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game was posing the biggest challenge yet to the myth of Aurora hegemony and making the Dinosaurs’ performance in that 26-13 defeat look even more miserable by comparison. I had no ready explanation for what was going on to this point in the game.

“I am pleased that you consider the occasion of my miscalculation so uncommon that you need to point it out,” I replied. “However, you have some liability on your head for that, Reggie – your columns extolling the prowess of Richard Sherman and Kam Chancellor won me over. I won’t be so foolish next time.”

That shut him up; that, and the quieting of the crowd that now had the effect of silencing all of us in the media box. We watched quietly, as if **Tiger Woods** was lining up a putt to win the Masters, made notes, and occasionally cast each other knowing looks – even if we had no idea what the other was thinking we pretended we did. **Lanny McDonald** of the *Markham Economist and Sun* was a natural at that, having spent most of his life pretending to understand what was happening around him. He was swaying from all the booze he had quaffed down in the extra time we had before the game and stumbled about from chair to chair asking everyone in turn: “wazhappnin?” and moving on before hearing the answers.

**Jason Verrett**, a young Cannibal corner, picked off **Matt Ryan** with 37 seconds left in the half, killing the Mustangs’ chances of tying the game before half time. Ryan had thrown deep 8 times already and completed just one to his primary target, **Anquan Boldin**. As the Carthage fans screamed their approval, a skinny dark-haired 40-something guy came up to my table.

“Excuse me Spats, I’m **Drew Redwood** of the *Santa Clara Mercury-Dispatch*. I read your column with interest,” he said while extending his hand. The mention of interest in reference to my column got my attention and I paid him my undivided attention. “I am kind of new at this, and I was wondering if you had an opinion of why the Mustangs keep throwing that long pass?”

“Good question, Drew,” I began. “While I can’t get into the head of the Mustangs’ coach to say for sure, logic dictates that he thinks they can complete that pass. The fact that his quarterback and receiver are experiencing difficulty because the other team is ready for the pass has not sunk in yet. Or if it has, he still thinks he can complete it anyway. If he keeps trying, the odds are good

that they will eventually complete another one, maybe two long passes. But depending on when that happens, it might be too late. We can only wait and see. But so far, in my opinion, the effort seems to have set them back.”

“I agree with your assessment, McChad,” **Marcus Aurelius** of the *Gwinnett Tribune* waded into the discussion. “But I would add that, having observed the Mustangs in competition twice this year, there is possibly a level of hubris motivating such a strategy. But in fairness to Rich Liotta, it is a hubris he has developed incidentally over a season of easy victories.

“Well, I disagree,” **Sparky McGillicuddy** of *The Iowan* stated earnestly. “If you look at the big picture, you will see that Liotta expands and contracts the field widely and rapidly with long passes, short-to-medium passes, and runs. The difference is that he is willing to throw a higher ratio of long passes to runs. It knocks most defences off



*Hootie and the Blowfish* perform at the Carolina Slammer during half time at the 8<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game. Security restrictions made for a laid back, but pleasant and relaxing show for the 67,000 fans in attendance.

balance. The Cannibals are well-prepared and playing out of their socks at the moment, but it cannot last and the Mustangs’ coach knows it. All he has to do is hit on one or two big passes and it will be lights out for Carthage, if the Aurora defence doesn’t get them first.”

Before McGillicuddy’s theories could be validated the crowd was treated to a refreshingly down-to-earth Southern rock concert at half time. For obvious reasons, there was no smoke, no dazzling lights, and certainly no pyrotechnics. I didn’t miss any of that, to be frank. *Hootie and the Blowfish* headlined a show that included appearances by *Lynyrd Skynyrd* and a surprise encore appearance by *The Allman Brothers Band* after their last official show in the Fall. ‘*Ramblin Man*’ brought the crowd to its feet and even some of the soldiers and police could be seen tapping their feet. It was a serene moment in the middle of “crazy time.”

The second half started badly for Carthage. A couple of penalties set them back at their own 10 yard line for a 4<sup>th</sup> & 19 punt by **Pat McAfee** that Aurora’s **Jeremy Kerley** returned nicely to the Cannibals’ 41. After another failed attempt to go deep to Boldin, **Matt Ryan** completed passes of 16 yards to **Heath Miller** and 20 yards to **Riley Cooper** then **Matt Forte** finished off the drive with a hard run off tackle through a stacked line for the go-ahead touchdown.

“The Cannibals are cracking,” **Randy the Desert Rat** said laconically.

“Give the Mustangs some credit, Randy,” **Charlie Wood** chirped up. “They’re putting on the pressure.”

The pressure was being applied at both ends. Boykin and **NaVorro Bowman** combined to force a fumble by **Danny Amendola** that gave Aurora the ball at the Carthage 38. A pass interference penalty on **Donte Whitner** put the ball at the 3 and on the next play Boldin caught a pass on the end zone to make the score 28-17 for Aurora.

“That is a sick ‘D’!” **Michael S. Hickenbottom** said, obviously in awe. “Carthage had the league’s best offence this year.”

“And....they....are...go-ing....*DOWN!*” taunted **James Duthie**, to nobody in particular, but Carthage fans in general.

Upset was no longer in the air. Carthage fans, by far the noisiest supporters between the two teams, were suddenly deflated and sitting on their hands. Aurora fans were starting to relax, their pent up anxiety gradually dissipating. All that, combined with a raid by security forces on section 558 – where a few dozen Mustangs’ fans had let off firecrackers to simulate the sound of the gun that, back home, would start ‘Lucy the Mustang’ charging around Candlestick Park when the Mustangs scored a touchdown – had quieted down the stadium to the point where none of us in the media box felt it was safe to speak anymore.

With the commercial break over and the TV broadcast about to come back live, the giant scoreboard at the Carolina Slammer started flashing ‘**MAKE SOME NOISE!!**’ A moderately loud but short-lived cheer went up in the red sections where the vast majority were Mustangs supporters. It flashed again – the cheers got louder – and again – the Carthage fans joined in. Suddenly Duthie started bellowing, “*YEEE HHAAAWWW!* Let’s make some *NOISE!*” He stood up and started to pump his arms, his eyes bugged out and fixed straight ahead while he yelled: “GO ‘STANGS GO!” All eyes turned toward him in amazement and concern at the spontaneous antics.

Fearing another appearance by the FBI, **Randy the Desert Rat** and **Johnny Rebb** got up from their chairs and tried to settle him down: “Hey Jimmy, chill bro’!” Randy said in a soothing voice. “You don’t want to get zapped do you?”

Instantly, Duthie stopped his gyrations. “I think I’m drunk,” he said in a monotone. He turned and walked out of the room.

“He doesn’t look good,” commented **Charlie Wood**. “Somebody should go check on him.”

“I’ll go,” I said. “I have to go to the bathroom anyway. Don’t drink my beer, Charlie, you lush!”

I left the media box and headed toward the washrooms. I saw **James Duthie** ahead of me. He was approaching the entrance to the men’s washrooms where a police officer stood, looking bored. The officer wasn’t interested in checking credentials and waved him through. But instead of walking into the washroom, Duthie, without any warning and with blistering speed delivered

a sharp open-handed blow to the officer's neck, stunning him. As the officer slumped to the floor Duthie grabbed him under the arms and with one swift motion removed his pistol from his holster before letting him crumple to the floor. In total shock I froze on the spot and stared as Duthie checked the pistol and swiftly removed the two spare magazines from the officer's duty belt. He was oblivious to me at that moment but turned his head around as if looking for something.

"Jim! What the f\*\*\* are you doing?" I called out instinctively.

He turned toward the sound of my voice but looked right through me, as if I wasn't there. His eyes were glazed and he was muttering something unintelligible under his breath. He walked towards me. I wanted to run but a little voice inside my head told me to stay put. I did and he walked with a purposeful stride right past me and directly toward the special, private VIP Box, which was located beside the Media Box. A knot formed in my stomach. That was the box where **George W. Bush** was sitting.

There was a Secret Service agent chatting up a pretty blonde server at the entrance to the VIP box. She had a tray of drinks with her that she was ignoring as she fixated on the handsome young man in the dark grey suit. Duthie walked towards them at a measured pace. For a brief instant I was torn between loyalty to my friend of six days and what I knew was right. I did not hesitate long, but sadly it was too long. I called out to the Secret Service agent, "look out, he's got a gun!"

The agent and the pretty server immediately turned towards the sound of my voice. The distraction was just enough time for Duthie to close the gap and drive the butt of his pistol into the temple of the Secret Service agent. He collapsed as the server shrieked and tossed her tray of drinks into the air. Her scream was cut short by the grip of Duthie's left hand on her throat. She gurgled for a few seconds then fell unconscious on top of the agent. Duthie paused and looked down at them as if deciding whether or not to finish them off. Abruptly his head snapped up. He turned to the door to the VIP box, opened it, and stepped inside.

## CHAMPIONSHIP MVPS

I – 2007

*LaDainian Tomlinson*  
Chino Convicts

II-2008

*Will Witherspoon*  
Florida Dragons

III-2009

*DeAngelo Williams*  
Florida Dragons

IV – 2010

*Chris Johnson*  
Pickering Spartans

V – 2011

*Josh Freeman*  
Los Angeles Knights

VI – 2012

*Eli Manning*  
Markham North Stars

VII – 2013

*Jacoby Jones*  
Charleswood Patriots

VIII – 2014

*Brandon Boykin*  
Aurora Mustangs



Aurora cornerback **Brandon Boykin** flashes no. 1 at his post-game address to the media. Boykin won Gale Sayers Game MVP for his pick-six in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and overall great play on D.

I am ashamed to admit that, at that moment, I had no idea what to do. My self-preservation instinct was fighting my sense of duty which was appealing in vain to my intellect. The end result was that I followed nervously in Duthie's footsteps while raising my hands up above my head and screaming, "lookout Mr. President!"

I entered the VIP box in time to see Duthie elbow aside Billy Bush, (George W's nephew) and land a karate chop to the throat of a muscly fellow in a dark blue suit. **George W Bush**, who was sitting in the front row next to his son, Marvin, turned in alarm and faced **James Duthie**. The Canadian sportscaster stopped, raised his pistol and took aim at the former President of the United States.

The world slowed down. I heard my voice howl "NO-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O" as I reached out in slow motion to knock aside Duthie's gun. As I moved forward I could actually see his finger tightening on the trigger. Then, suddenly, the pistol exploded in his hand as I heard a loud <bang!>. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

I turned around and, to my amazement, saw **Clem Henson** standing behind me with a smoking gun levelled at **James Duthie**. "Get down Spats!" he barked. I immediately dropped and instinctively covered my head. But there were no more shots fired. Instead I heard cacophony of voices shouting directions. I raised my head, pulled

myself up and looked around. I saw **Rhett Butler** and **Hunter** placing **James Duthie** in handcuffs as Clem covered him with his gun. I saw **Jenna Bush** hugging her father. I saw a dozen soldiers and police officers flood the media box. I felt hands set me down in a chair and voices asking “are you alright?” My ears were ringing but I was alright – I knew the Regulators had saved the day.

#### **AFTERMATH**

As we know by now, the Aurora Mustangs went on to win the 8<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game, beating Carthage quite handily by a score of 31-17. But more importantly the United States had beaten the terrorists. It had cost a fortune, but we had won. The Soviet plot, hatched decades ago, to assassinate the President had failed in more ways than one. First, the original target, **Ronald Reagan**, had died of natural causes in 2004. Second, the serving President, **Barrack Obama**, was safe and sound in the White House and completely unaware of anything. Third, **George W**, the target of last resort, had survived thanks to the Regulators of South Carolina.

It turns out that **James Duthie** had been subliminally programmed in university by his “good friend” **Jean-Luc Puissant-Putre**, head of the *Carleton Friends of Albania Society*, to carry out an assassination of President Reagan. Funding shortfalls due to the collapse of the Soviet Union had placed the operation on hold indefinitely and an unwitting Duthie had gone on to a successful broadcasting career at TSN. In that time, the executor of Saddam Hussein’s last will and testament showed up at the CBC’s foreign office with a fat bankroll, bequeathed to “The Cause” by the Dictator prior to his execution. The original plan was re-activated with modifications made by Puissant-Putre, who was the only person who knew how to re-program the *Siberian Candidate*, Duthie. He did this in Charlotte while drinking cognac and playing billiards, reprogramming him to react to the sight and sound of ‘**MAKE SOME NOISE**,’ a *standard billboard slogan*.

The Regulators had regrouped after being refused entry into the Carolina Slammer and had formulated a plan that involved dressing up as caretakers, appropriating ID cards, and having their Imperial Vizier, **Hal Corson** sign work orders for the 200 level. This plan had taken time to realize, but luckily it was in place when the guy in charge of the big screen had decided that the stadium was too quiet for the biggest football game of the year and posted ‘**MAKE SOME NOISE**’ for the crowd. After a period of incarceration, **James Duthie** was completely deprogrammed and has, except for this article, no memory or record of his crimes while subject to Communist Russian-Albanian brainwashing techniques. As for the Regulators, they are doing fine and keep in touch.

#### **THE LAST WORD**

The Aurora Mustangs of 2014 are the best team in EFL history. There will be debate, of course, but that debate ends at 19-0. The Florida Dragons of 2008 and the Pickering Spartans of 2010 will enter the “best ever” discussion, but only to provide contrast to the pristine perfection of **Rich Liotta**’s Mustangs. The Cannibals under **Ken Main** were another big success story in 2014 – the first expansion team from the Class of 2012 to make it to the Final, they were a formidable opponent despite structural flaws in a defence held together by one player – co-MVP *Lavonte David*. As for Columbia, it taught me a valuable lesson about freedom. Beyond the stark reality of life in a city under threat there waits an inviting place to explore some day when it is calm again, hopefully very soon.

## **BUG THE BOOKIE!**

**JIMMY THE GEEK REFLECTS ON AN OFTEN  
UNPREDICTABLE 2014**

*Your source for fantasy and on-line betting solutions*



**FINAL RECORD VS THE SPREAD: 99-63-5**

### **JIMMY'S ROUND UP**

*If you went with all of my picks in 2014 you would have enjoyed another winning year! Slightly less lucrative than in 2013 and below my glory years of 2012 and 2011, but certainly enough to keep you in the lifestyle to which you have become accustomed thanks to my efforts. Last year the effects of parity affected the bottom line and this year was no different, but for a different reason; betting parity in 2014 yielded similar results to betting against it in 2013. In other words, teams were not as “equal” as they looked this year and favourites often delivered. Who knows what next year will bring. Enjoy the off-season and look for me next year!*



# ANCIENT HISTORY CHANNEL PRESENTS

*This Week in EFL History*  
With Professor Sterling Smitherman

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – 2008 – I decided to skip over my review of the final two weeks of the 2008 regular season since by then everyone just wanted the playoffs to come so there would be no more sight of the expansion teams. Of course the Pickering Spartans, by virtue of their “Loser Division” title, would have to hang around for at least another week. It was a scandal that, at 7-9, they drew the 2<sup>nd</sup> seed in the PAC, but the rules were the rules and everyone knew them in advance. The Iowa City Cubs (12-4) were seeded no. 1 while their Division rivals, the Chino Convicts (10-6) and Los Angeles Knights (8-8) were slotted at nos. 3 & 4 respectively. In the Can-Am, The Florida Dragons (15-1) were no.1 and the Charleswood Patriots (15-1) were no.2 while nos. 3 & 4 were, in order: the Mohave Hellfire (10-6) and the Gwinnett Gladiators (9-7).

The Quarter Finals in the Can-am were understood

to be an exercise prior to the long anticipated Conference Final between Florida and Charleswood. Neither wildcard challenger offered more than token resistance. The Glads fell to the Dragons 27-10 and the Hellfire were whipped by the Pats 37-10. In the PAC, the Spartans went down fighting, falling to Jay Cutler and the Convicts by a closer than expected 34-28 count. The best game of the Quarter Final round turned out to be the Cubs edging LA 30-27 on a late TD pass to Roy Williams.

In the PAC Conference Final the Cubs sat on an early lead over Chino until they fell behind 18-17 on a Jeff Reed FG with 5:09 left. But Jeff Garcia pulled out the win on a 13-yard TD pass to Larry Fitzgerald with 1:47 left to prevail 23-18.

In what many were calling the True Final, the Dragons won a 27-24 nail-biter over the Patriots. Mike Nugent kicked a 32-yard FG with 0:17 left to win it. The game turned on a 98-yard fumble recovery for a TD in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter by Florida’s Antonio Cromartie, after Terrell Suggs stripped the Pats’ Chad Johnson as he was about to score on an end-around.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Gale Sayers Game was an anti-climax after the thriller at Dragonmount. Florida dispatched the over-matched Cubbies 38-9 in a game that was never close. Tom Brady attempted just 16 passes, as the running game and two TDs by the defence took care of business. The Florida Dragons of 2008 had come within one FG of a perfect season and were a truly dominant force that year. I wonder how they would do against the 2014 Aurora Mustangs.....

## EFL ANNOUNCES MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS



### OFFENSIVE M.V.P.



**PEYTON MANNING**  
**PICKERING SPARTANS**

At the most important position in the game Peyton was a cut above the rest of a very strong pack of passers in 2014. He finished with the top QB rating, at 115.7 while throwing 42 TD passes and averaging 9 yards per pass attempted. He was the Spartans’ main weapon in a strong bid for the difficult North Division title.



### DEFENSIVE M.V.P.



**LAVONTE DAVID**  
**CARTHAGE CANNIBALS**  
**JJ WATT**  
**AURORA MUSTANGS**

AP writers could not decide which player made a bigger difference to his team. **Lavonte David** led the league in sacks with 20 and finished in the top 15 in tackles with 101 and 2<sup>nd</sup> in forced fumbles with 5. **JJ Watt** notched 11 sacks and a league-leading 17 stuffs to go along with 4 forced fumbles and 11 pass deflections while drawing frequent double teams.