



2009

PLAYOFF EDITION CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

February 28th. 2010

UNSTOPPABLE!

MVP WILLIAMS CARRIES DRAGONS TO SAYERS TROPHY REPEAT



FLORIDA

23

QUICK TAKE

DeAngelo Williams kept the Florida offence on track, breaking a 75-yard run and gaining tough yards in key situations. The defense forced turnovers in the first half and shut down LA in the second half, allowing the offence to overcome a 1-point deficit.



DeAngelo Williams is hauled down near the goal line after running 75 yards on the game's first play from scrimmage. Williams carried his season-long MVP performance into the league's ultimate game, scoring the first touchdown to lead the Dragons to a 23-17 win over the Knights and their second consecutive EFL Title.



LOS ANGELES

17

QUICK TAKE

The Knights turned the ball over 3 times to give life to a struggling Dragons' offence. An injury to Nnamdi Asomugha opened up the passing game for Aaron Rodgers. The Knights' offence stalled in the second half after scoring two TDs in the first half.

CHINO – To most of the sports world the appearance of the LA Knights in the EFL Championship Game had come as a surprise. Then, once the general astonishment had dissipated, most of the sports world was not ready to give them much of a chance against the Florida Dragons juggernaut that had gone 35-2, including playoffs, in the past two seasons. Before either team had even arrived in Chino, experts were already writing a pre-game script that read very much like last year's final tilt between Iowa City and Florida, with the Knights playing the Cubs' previous role as foil to the Florida dynasty. The only person who had appeared unwaveringly confident about the Knights' prospects of victory during two weeks of determined but unconvincing media hype was the LA coach himself, **Jeff Dohrn**.

The obvious strength of the LA squad was their defense. The "Blue Shield" was arguably the best group of 11 defenders in the EFL. Always talented, in 2009 they had been transformed from a reckless, gambling gang of

thugs into a sure-tackling, tactically disciplined machine. But the real marvel of the 2009 campaign for the Knights was their offence – not because it was dominant or terrifyingly dangerous, but because it was effective and consistent despite a quarterback juggling act that had looked chronically dysfunctional. Dohrn had assembled a great group of defenders, but the reason his Knights had made it to the league’s marquee game, instead of fading in the first round or missing the playoffs entirely, was because of his knack for getting the most out of a no-name group of skill players and, at best, an average offensive line. He had done magician’s work all season, but his most daring trick had yet to be accomplished. He would have to pull more than a rabbit out of his hat this week against the Dragons, but he looked unabashedly confident that he, with the help of his team, would do so. “I like the shirts,” he said, referring to the ‘NO PASS ZONE’ T-shirts made for his shutdown secondary. “If I were them (Florida)

* **Championship** * 02-27-2010 Temp: 59 Wind: 0-5 None MVP: **DeAngelo Williams**

2008 **Florida** (1-0) 7 6 0 10 - 23
 2008 **Los Angeles** (0-1) 7 7 0 3 - 17

1 12:56 **Florida** TD Williams 1 run (Elam,J) (4-77-2:04) 0-7
 1 5:50 **Los Angeles** TD Campbell 7 pass to White (Brown,K) (13-62-7:06) 7-7
 2 11:35 **Florida** FG Elam 27 (7-18-3:57) 7-10
 2 7:52 **Florida** FG Elam 28 (6-18-3:39) 7-13
 2 2:41 **Los Angeles** TD Campbell 7 pass to Smith (Brown,K) (3-15-1:39) 14-13
 4 15:00 **Florida** FG Elam 42 (10-43-4:22) 14-16
 4 6:25 **Florida** TD Rodgers 13 pass to Marshall (Elam,J) (11-57-7:02) 14-23
 4 0:25 **Los Angeles** FG Brown 28 (10-74-1:20) 17-23

	LAK	FLD
First Downs	14	15
Rushes	25-77	32-162
Passes	31-20-194	28-16-137
Sacked	4-23	2-11
Fumble	3	0
Penalties	5-45	8-85
Turnovers	3	1
Time	27:47	32:13
Third Down	4-15	5-15
Fourth Down	1-3	1-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	5/2/1	4/2/2
Net Offense	248	288

< **Los Angeles** >

Passing

Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate
Campbell	25	17	150	4	0	2	110.4
Jackson	5	3	44	0	1	0	88.8
Bradley	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.0

Rushing

Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD	
Bell	4	29	7.3	1	1	18	0
Greene	8	27	3.4	0	0	8	0
Charles	8	16	2.0	1	0	6	0
Young	3	3	1.0	0	0	5	0
Benson	2	2	1.0	0	0	1	0

Receiving

No	Dp	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
White	8	0	68	8.5	2	0	11
Smith	4	0	33	8.3	3	0	11
Heap	3	0	46	15.3	2	1	29
Benson	3	0	32	10.7	1	0	17
Charles	2	0	15	7.5	0	0	9

Defense

Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	INT
Williams	12	1	0	0	1	0
James	8	0	1	0	0	0
Cooper	6	0	0	0	0	0
Hope	4	0	0	0	0	1-39
Harris	4	0	0	0	0	0
Porter	3	1	0	1	0	0
Woodson	3	0	2	0	0	0
Asomugha	3	0	0	0	0	0
Pace	3	0	0	1	0	0
Allen	2	0	0	0	0	0
Bethea	1	0	1	0	0	0
Economos	1	0	0	0	0	0
Taylor	1	0	0	0	0	0
Bryant	1	0	0	0	0	0
Smith	1	0	0	0	0	0
Kelsay	1	0	0	0	0	0
Wimbley	1	0	0	0	0	0
Anderson	1	0	0	0	0	0

< **Florida** >

Passing

Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate
Rodgers	28	16	137	2	0	1	67.1

Rushing

Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD
Williams	28	155	5.5	7	2	75
Rodgers	4	7	1.8	0	0	8

Receiving

No	Dp	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Marshall	6	1	64	10.7	4	0	15
Houshmandza	5	0	38	7.6	3	0	11
Williams	2	0	10	5.0	0	0	8
Miller	2	0	16	8.0	1	0	10
Jackson	1	0	9	9.0	0	0	9

Defense

Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	INT
Goodman	8	0	1	0	0	0
Hawk	8	0	0	2	0	0
Tuck	7	2	0	0	0	0
Tatupu	7	0	1	0	0	1
Suggs	4	1	0	1	0	0
Landry	4	0	0	0	0	0
Bunkley	3	1	0	0	0	1
Cromartie	3	0	0	0	0	0
Henderson	2	0	1	2	0	0
Jackson	2	0	0	0	0	1
Revis	2	0	1	0	0	0
Burnett	2	0	0	0	0	0
Williams	2	0	0	0	0	0
Griffin	1	0	0	0	0	0
Rubin	1	0	0	0	0	0
Williams	1	0	0	0	0	0
Demps	1	0	0	0	0	0
Freaney	0	0	0	0	3	0

FUMBLES/LOST: **LA**– Campbell 1/0, JFigs 1/1, Charles 1/1; **FLA** – None. FUMBLE RECOVERIES/TD: **LA**– Campbell 1/0; **FLA** – Tuck 1/0, Freaney 1/0. KICK RETURNS: **LA**– Figs 6-137; **FLA** – Demps 3-79, Stewart 1-0. PUNT RETURNS: **LA** – Figs 3-17; **FLA** – Jackson 5-52. FIELD GOALS: **LA** – Brown 1-1; **FLA** – Elam 3-3. PUNTS: **LA** – Weatherford 5-219; **FLA** – Turk 5-191.



GAME MVP
DEANGELO WILLIAMS
FLORIDA DRAGONS

AFTER THE GAME

“It feels great. There’s no feeling like this in the world. We worked hard as a team for this moment. This is a great team and a great franchise. All year we’ve been working, working. I am looking forward to the future here with the Dragons. Coach Heaton has a system. We each got our part to play in it. I’m glad I played my part and I’m excited. I think we proved we are the best team and I say to you now we’re going to be back here next year. I promise you, and I’ll be a part of it.” – **DeAngelo Williams**
Game Line – 28 Carries, 155 Yards, 5.5 Avg., Long 75, 1 Touchdown.

I would be worried about throwing the ball...with all due respect to Rodgers, of course,” Dorhn added with a smirk.

The Dragons, conforming to last year’s practice, were very taciturn with the Media. They held one Press Conference on Monday, the week before the game, attended by **Jim Heaton** and a few select players, including **Aaron Rodgers**. They said little and did not stray off message. Heaton said all of the “correct” things, recognizing the Knights’ defense and suggesting that the LA offence was underrated. He prompted the only laugh from the gallery when he suggested that most of the Media were hoping for a Dragons’ loss by predicting a Dragons’ blowout. “I think one of you predicted 42-7 or a crazy score like that. That would be nice, of course, but that’s not what we expect. The Knights did not win a lottery to get here, they earned their place and we expect them to make us earn every yard we get this week. And now you’ve fired them up!”

Prophetic words, as it turns out, from both coaches. This year’s contest for the right to hoist the **Gale Sayers Trophy** would be a lot more competitive than advertised.

FIRST QUARTER (Florida 7, Los Angeles 7) – The Dragons won the toss, which prompted a cheer from the east side of the stadium where many of the Florida supporters were sitting. The predominantly West Coast crowd at ‘The Big House’ favoured the Knights by a margin of about 3 to 1, judging from an informal jersey count made by TV announcer, **Phil**



LA Knights cornerback Al Harris ponders how to stop Florida deep threat Brandon Marshall. Harris was pressed into action opposite Marshall in the second half after Nnamdi Asomugha sprained his knee on the second to last play of the first half.

Winterall. “I see a lot of dark blue out there, Bill,” he said to booth colleague and colour commentator, **Bill Badden**.

“Those are real football fans out there, Phil,” replied Badden. “They’ve got the jerseys, they’ve got the face paint, they’ve got those funny wigs and hats and stuff. Those sure are fans and you know they’re going to be jumping and hollering for their team!”

Phil noted that the winner of the coin toss had won 50% of the time in previous EFL Championship Games, to which Bill added, “The players aren’t thinking about that right now, Phil. They’re focused on football right now and how they’re going to play it. They’re itching to get that first hit in so they can get into the game.”

The kick from **Kris Brown** was high and down the middle, landing at the 6 yard line where **Will Demps** fielded it and brought it back 17 yards to the Florida 23 yard line. The Dragons’ offence took the field sporting their white jerseys with aqua blue and orange trim and formed up in their standard basic ‘pro’ set with MVP **DeAngelo Williams** lined up in the backfield behind H-back, **Billy Bajema**. The unheralded blocking back had done nothing all year except throw key blocks on 13 big runs by Dragons running backs. He was about to throw

another one on the very first play of the biggest game in his career. Attacking the weak side of the LA line, **Aaron Rodgers** pitched right to Williams. The Knights, expecting to see a lot of Williams, over-pursued to the outside and the Dragons star cut back into the path of linebacker **Joey Porter**. But before the Knights’ Pro Bowler could get his hands on Williams, Bajema wiped him out with a block at full steam that Porter didn’t see coming. Williams was suddenly loose and only the secondary, which had fallen back deep to cover **Brandon Marshall**, stood between him and the end zone. Williams bolted 75 yards before he was finally stopped by **Nnamdi Asomugha** at the Knights’ 2 yard line. With the Knights expecting him, Williams took three plays to finish what he started, finally busting into the endzone behind right tackle **Jammal Brown** from one yard out to draw first blood for Florida. Only three minutes had passed and it was already 7-0 Dragons – not the kind of start the Knights wanted and all the more disheartening because the player they had game-planned for had shoved it in their faces.

“This is not how the Knights wanted to start,” observed Bill. “They needed to stop the Dragons and get the ball in the hands of Jason Campbell and the offence.”

“They’re already playing catch-up,” added Phil.

“And that’s definitely *not* what they wanted, Phil,” declared Bill, with a big emphasis on the ‘not.’ “But you can bet that Florida wanted it. They came into this game wanting to score first. If anyone out there doubted that DeAngelo Williams is the league offensive MVP, well they can stop doubting it right now. That was an amazing run and a great block by Billy Bama. That’s a great name, ‘Bama.’ Like, ‘bam bam!’ That’s a blocker’s name. Billy Bama!”

The Los Angeles offence came onto the field for the first time starting at their own 38 yard line after a 28-yard kickoff return by **Yamon Figurs**. For Figurs, this was his second consecutive EFL Championship Game, but last year he was on the other side, wearing the aqua blue and orange. The Dragons had released him because of problems holding onto the ball

and so far this season Figurs had done nothing to dispel that bad rap. He had fumbled 6 times during the regular season and twice more in the playoffs, but at that moment he had just given the Knights good field position and he was in a trash-talking mood, gesturing at the Dragons' bench and bobbing his head with unconcealed pride and aggression.

Jason Campbell, the designated starter at QB for the Knights, took the field and stood under center with **Cedric Benson** behind him replacing the injured **Steven Jackson**. The Knights came out throwing, Campbell connecting with **Roddy White** for 9 yards, then **Steve Smith** for 6 yards to get a first down. The LA part of the crowd cheered with nervous exhilaration – if one were listening from beneath the stands one might think the Knights had just scored. Three plays later, however, the Knights faced 4th down and 2 at the Florida 39 yard line and **Jeff Dohrn** would elect to throw the dice. With Florida flooding the box looking for the run, Campbell withstood the blitz pressure and got the pass away to **Steve Smith**, who ran with it 11 yards for a first down. The Knights would face another challenge after guard **Justin Blalock** was flagged for holding. Facing 3rd and 10 Campbell threw a 17-yard pass in the flat to Benson that brought the ball to the Florida 11 yard line. Three plays later, Campbell connected with Smith for a 7-yard TD pass that evened the score at 7-7 after the extra point. It had taken them a little longer than Florida had taken, but the Knights had nonetheless tied the score with 5:50 remaining in the first quarter.

The immediate reply for a touchdown by the LA offence was not what the Dragons, or most of the fans, had expected. A 10-yard pass from Rodgers to **Brandon Marshall** was all Florida could muster positively in response and **Matt Turk** was called out to punt for only the fourth time in the post-season. His 44-yard kick was fielded at the 11 yard line by Figurs, who returned it to the 20, where Campbell and the offence took over. The Knights' quarterback looked confident as he completed consecutive passes of 9 yards to Smith and 10 yards to **Todd Heap** before the Florida "Firewall" shut down two rushing attempts for no gain. Facing 3rd and 10, Campbell coolly tossed a ball in the flat to **Jamaal Charles**, who slipped a tackle and turned up field. As he approached the first down marker he reached out with the ball only to have it knocked out of hand by a trailing **Lofa Tatupu**. **Dwight Freeney** recovered and returned it 20 yards to the LA 28 yard line. Turnovers had been the Knights' Achilles heel all year while the Dragons had feasted on them. Suddenly, LA was back on their heels and the Dragons were threatening.

SECOND QUARTER (Los Angeles 14, Florida 13) – A holding penalty on **Matt Light** before the last play of the first quarter pushed Florida back and out of **Jason Elam's** range. But carries of 8 and 5 yards by Williams against the LA nickel package brought them back in and made it a manageable third down and 7. Rodgers converted with an 8-yard crossing pass to **TJ Houshmandzadeh** and the Dragons were back in business with a fresh set of downs. Florida continued testing the left side of the LA defense by sending Williams against the nickel formation, but massive tackle **Kevin Williams** stepped up with two fine individual plays to hold the Dragons workhorse to one yard. The third down conversion attempt came up short and Florida had

to settle for an easy 27 yard field goal by Elam for a 10-7 lead.

The Knights had not exactly dodged a bullet, but they had sustained only a minor wound and aimed to answer with at least a field goal of their own. However, return man Figurs, known derisively on the Florida bench as "Fumble Figurs," coughed up the ball on the ensuing kickoff return and suddenly it was 'déjà vu,' with the Dragons again sitting pretty inside Elam's field goal range at the LA 29.

The Dragons once more hammered the left side of the "Blue Shield" with Williams, who gained 16 yards and a first down on three straight carries. But, as before, one first down was all the Florida offence could manage against the resolute LA defense. An attempted screen pass to Bajema on 3rd and 8 was nearly picked off by **Bradie James** and the Dragons were content to attempt another field goal, with Elam striking true from 28 yards away to increase their lead to 13-7.

The Knights took over at their 36 yard line after a short kickoff was returned 22 yards without incident by Figurs. **Tatum Bell**, one of five running backs the Knights would use in the game, broke free around the left side on a pitch and dashed for 18 yards to cross into Florida territory. A 9-yard pass from Campbell to **Roddy White** got them closer before the Florida "Firewall" flared up and pushed them back. **Broderick Bunkley** broke through to sack Campbell and force a fumble on 2nd down and 1, but the Knights recovered. Obviously rattled, Campbell misfired to an open Charles on 3rd down and 4 at the Florida 40 yard line. But **Jeff Dohrn** was apparently not concerned about his quarterback's confidence. He kept Campbell and the offence on the field to attempt 4th down and 4 at the Florida 40 yard line. The fearsome **Justin Tuck**, smelling blood, made a move around left tackle **Joe Thomas** and brought Campbell down for the second time in three plays for an 8-yard loss.

It was as good as a turnover for the Dragons and it might have been the definitive turning point of the game in their favour if not for two big plays by the

AFTER THE GAME

"It's disheartening. We came a lot closer than people thought. But we believed in ourselves, we believed in our team, we have all year. We don't believe in fairy tales, we believe in kicking butt. It was never about Cinderella, we deserved to be here. We came here to win. We came up short and it hurts, because we know we should have had it. A few of their guys made some plays...key plays. Take those away and maybe it's a different story. – **Stephen Cooper, linebacker, Los Angeles Knights**

AFTER THE GAME

"They were the toughest defense we've faced, certainly, but we kept attacking them and finally got them guessing. You can't keep someone like Marsh (Brandon Marshall) down all day. They went after Ange hard and Marsh got free for the score. That was a big one!" – **Heath Miller, Tight End, Florida Dragons.**

LA defense. First, **Kevin Williams** sacked Rodgers on 2nd down, bringing up third and 14. Then Rodgers, trying to make a play to his secondary receiver, did not see charging safety **Chris Hope**, who jumped the route and picked the ball off, returning it 39 yards to the Florida 15 yard line. The sudden turn around appeared to pump up **Jason Campbell**. After Bell was stuffed for a 3-yard loss by **AJ Hawk**, Campbell threw two nice passes; an 11-yard cross to White and a 7-yard cross to Steve Smith for a touchdown. The Knights, who had appeared to be losing their grip on the game two minutes earlier, were suddenly in the lead for the first time, 14-13.

The Dragons took over in good field position after a 37-yard return by Demps, but the Florida drive stalled when a short slant from Rodgers intended for **DeSean Jackson** sailed high. Punting from his own 46 after a holding penalty on **Ryan Kalil**, Turk shanked the kick off the side of his foot, sending it out of bounds only 21 yards from the line of scrimmage.



An indignant Jason Campbell steams on the sideline after being sat down for the final drive in favour of back-up Tarvaris Jackson. Campbell started well, driving his team to 2 TDs in the 1st half, but failed to generate points in the second half while trying to cling to a 1-point lead.

An exciting and competitive first half appeared to fizzle out with the Knights botching a one-minute drill and punting to the Florida 29 yard line with 28 seconds left. But one more thrill remained. Catching the Knights inexplicably in a standard 3-4 alignment, Rodgers threw deep to **Brandon Marshall** on the fly. But the ball sailed just out of reach of the streaking Florida receiver and the Dragons missed their chance. Or had they? Ominously, Knights' shut down corner **Nnamdi Asomugha** was seen limping off the field after the play after twisting his knee while breaking to cover Marshall. Rodgers knelt down to burn the remaining seconds of the first half and head to the locker room, his Dragons trailing for only the third time all year. The last time they had trailed at half time had been in this very stadium, down 10-7 against the Chino Convicts, in what had turned out to be the Dragons' only loss of the regular season.

THIRD QUARTER (Los Angeles 14, Florida 13) – The third quarter was a cruel and ruthless battle between titanic defenses. The offences on both sides struggled to get anything going. The Knights managed just one first down, thanks to a 15-yard unnecessary roughness penalty on Tuck, while the Florida offensive line barely held off the charging Knights' pass rush. Three holding penalties scuttled Florida's first possession and turned what had looked like a promising drive into a 4th down and 29 punting situation from their own 36 yard line.

As the period limped towards its final minutes, the Dragons got a lift from a player that had almost been forgotten. With **Al Harris** pressed into service to replace the injured Asomugha, wide receiver Marshall found a little more room to move and made the most of it. On 3rd down and 12 from the Florida 40 yard line, Marshall broke from his coverage just long enough for Rodgers to find him crossing the middle of the field. Marshall made the first down and more, gaining 15 yards to move the ball into LA territory. A short pass in the flat and a rush by Williams earned 11 yards and another first down. But the Dragons came up one yard short on their next set of downs as time wound down in the third quarter, forcing an important decision.

FOURTH QUARTER (Florida 23, Los Angeles 17) – Facing 4th down and 1 at the LA 25 yard line, the Dragons' **Jim Heaton** had to make a choice: go for it, or trust in **Jason Elam's** leg. Elam had hit on 83% of his field goal attempts and 62.5% of those from 40 to 49 yards in the regular season. A 42-yard kick was no long shot, but were the odds of making it better than the odds of Williams busting through for one yard against the weak side of the Knights' defensive line? Showing uncommon respect for his opponent's capabilities, Heaton elected to trust in his kicker and it turned out to be the right decision. Elam was accurate from 42 yards, with about 10 yards to spare, and his three points put Florida back on top, 16-14.

The Los Angeles offence that had ground it out with success in the first half continued to struggle in the second half. They went three-and-out for the third time in the half (it would have been the fourth time except for Tuck's penalty) and punted the ball away to **DeSean Jackson**, who made a nice return of 15 yards to the Florida 43. Rodgers immediately looked for Marshall and found him for 13 yards. Then the Dragons inflicted the "Williams treatment," pounding the left side of the Knights' line five straight times with the league MVP for a meager total of 11 yards. However, they were tough yards – one of which was earned in the face of the aggressive, run-keying "Blue Shield" to convert 4th down and 1 at the LA 34 yard line. It was a key conversion and it seemed to drain some of the vitality from the LA defense. A mix of short passes and more runs by Williams gave the Dragons a first down at the Knights' 13 yard line. Expecting more of Williams, the Knights added a fifth down lineman and keyed on the run, leaving their corners in single man coverage. Rodgers dropped back and tossed a high spiral toward the end zone. Marshall reached up and grabbed it on the run, inches beyond the outstretched arms of corner Al Harris and crossed the goal line for 6 points.

The white-and-aqua clad crowd in the east seats rose to their feet and made a resounding noise like they had not done



since the opening score. The Dragons were up 23-14 with the momentum and only 6 minutes remaining. The Florida fans sensed the game was finally under their control and chants of “burn baby, burn!” filled the air as the “Firewall” took the field to deny the Knights’ final charge.

But Campbell was not quite done yet. An 11-yard pass to White on 3rd down and 7 put the ball near mid field and after four more plays the Knights were threatening, facing 3rd & 2 at the Florida 31. It was the high point of the drive for Los Angeles as disaster struck soon after. First, **Roddy White** was called for holding to push the Knights back to the 41. Then, facing 3rd & 12, a blitzing **Terrell Suggs** bagged Campbell for a 9 yard loss to bring up 4th down and 21 with 3 minutes left in the game. The Knights had no good choices at this point, but the one they decided upon was one that practically guaranteed spectacular success or dismal failure. Campbell handed the ball to **Jamaal Charles** who tossed it to receiver **Mark Bradley** as if about to execute a reverse. But Bradley kept the ball and looked down field, trying to find the two Knights receivers in the midst of 6 Florida defensive backs. It was a must pass situation and Bradley did his duty by heaving the ball in the general direction of a dark blue jersey. It was an easy pick-off for Dragons’ corner, **Andre’ Goodman**, who wisely fell forward for 1 yard and held on to the ball.

It was all but over and everybody in the ‘Big House’ knew it. **Jeff Dohrn**, perhaps two possessions too late, sent closer **Tarvaris Jackson** in at QB to finish the game. He drove the Knights to a late field goal to pull within one TD, but when **Jonathan Stewart**, the goat of the Conference Final game against Durham, snagged Brown’s onside kick attempt and weathered the blue mob swarming him to force a turnover, the Florida fans and the players on the sideline finally let loose in happy celebration, tossing a glass pitcher of iced tea on Jim Heaton’s head. The Dragons had done it again!

A relaxed Aaron Rodgers (left) enjoys taking questions after leading the Florida Dragons to their second consecutive Gale Sayers Trophy. Rodgers emerged from the long shadow of Tom Brady to become the first quarterback to lead an EFL team to a championship repeat.

POST GAME

The 2009 EFL Championship was one of those games that will be remembered for its historical significance more than for the play on the field. In many respects it was a great game – hard fought and closely contested for 3½ quarters. Students of defense will study it for years as an example of contrasting, but equally dominating, styles. However, the fact is that history tends to remember offensive stars more than big defensive tackles like Kevin Williams, or shutdown corners like Darrelle Revis or Nnamdi Asomugha. This game had only one ‘bona fide’ offensive star: De Angelo Williams. He will be remembered for his highlight reel 75-yard run on the first play from scrimmage and for his touchdown to open the scoring for Florida. For the remaining 90% of his game, however, Williams found progress tough and unspectacular even as he slowly, but surely tilted the game in the Dragons’ favour. Jason Campbell quietly posted good passing numbers but the team he led had lost the game. The Big Play Scrapbook from Championship III will be a subtle one – attracting the football connoisseur, not the casual fan.

History also tends to remember landmarks and the 2009 EFL Championship was definitely an historic event as it marked the birth of the league’s first dynasty. The Heaton Dragons rule for a second straight year, marking the high point so far of a regime that may not yet have reached its peak. Will they be able to continue their run of dominance in 2010? It is too early to tell and too early to ask the question. After a year of sober, hard work, carrying the weight of the highest of expectations, the Dragons players, coaches and fans deserve some time to savour their well-earned victory.

The often severe and fastidious Jim Heaton flashed the briefest of smiles as he addressed the Media throng after the game. He withstood the temptation to publicly analyze the finer points of the game’s match-ups, admitting that he would review the game film after spending some needed time with his family, “*who have missed me, I think, these past 8 months.*” He congratulated Jeff Dohrn and his team for “*posing the biggest challenge we’ve faced since the last time we came to this building;*” an oblique reference to Florida’s only loss of the regular season against Chino. The Florida dressing room was more relaxed than it had been all year, but still retained a whiff of the air of business that had permeated it all season. There was a feeling that they were ready to play again, ready to win a second time if needed, to cement the legitimacy of their triumph.

Contrast the attitude of measured and controlled satisfaction in the Florida locker room with the dejection and gloom of the Knights locker room. The emotionally depleted Knights were barely able to articulate the magnitude of their chagrin. Unlike most of the football world, the players themselves had expected to win. They respected, but did not fear the Dragons. The loss was a devastating blow. “*We let it get away!*” a sullen and defiant Joey Porter spat. Perhaps, but history will more likely declare that the better team took the game away.



AT THE EFL CHAMPIONSHIP With Spats McChad

CHINO – The Department of Homeland Security could take a few pointers from the Big House guards here in Chino. If Big House Warden, **Rick “Cattle Prod” Nazar**, (younger brother of Convicts’ owner and GM, **Rob “Pen is Mightier than the Cattle Prod” Nazar**) were put in charge of airport security, not only would there be no terrorist attacks on the airlines, but most people would be afraid to go to the airport.

I know its America’s “Big Game” and everything – a juicy, high value target for those who hate us – but how much security is *too much* security? Apparently “Cattle Prod” thinks there is no such thing. Check points and searches at every turn meant that fans had to arrive at least 3 hours before game time just to make it from the parking lot into the stadium. Accredited Media were “expedited,” cutting that movement time in half, but that “convenience” came at a cost of weeks of pre-event screening, background checks, and a personal interview just to receive a Media Pass. Mine finally arrived at my office by courier a mere 6 hours before my scheduled flight to California.

I am confident that not a single beer or other illicit substance made it into the ‘Big House’ prior to the game. By the time the average patron had undergone at least 6 security checks, everything designed for oral consumption, including gum and breath mints, had been confiscated. That meant that everyone was at the mercy of the grossly inflated prices at the concession stands. A “large” beer (12 oz) cost \$12.50, while a “jumbo” hot dog (6 inches) went for \$8.00. Factor in the savings from having genuine convicts preparing and serving the food and it is certain that the stadium made a killing in profit (in addition to the real killing that occurred when a guard shot dead a convict who tried to sneak away with a tray of popcorn valued at \$240.00 retail).

Having grown accustomed to tossing back the brewskies without a care while getting the occasional freebie at Mickey’s, I was appalled to find I had blown my expense account for the game midway through the second quarter. That’s when I started spending more time with my Florida buddy from last year’s championship game, *Swampland Proof* writer, **Jean Boisvert**.

A war between the Florida papers for original story angles as the Dragons marched determinedly, but boringly, towards a repeat had inflated “hospitality” budgets for almost all Florida sports journalists. But Boisvert, like his counterparts, was getting frustrated. Getting inside information out of the Florida coaching staff, or anyone connected to the organization for that matter, had been like trying to seduce Mother Teresa. Nobody on the staff drank in sufficient quantities to get drunk and nobody seemed to have an appetite for anything more exotic than sloppy joes. It was all business in the Florida camp, apparently.

The closest thing to a scandal in the two weeks leading up to the Big Game was a report from a Big House guard that **Jonathan Stewart** was being punished for his costly fumble in the Conference Championship against Durham by having to carry a football with him at all times without letting it touch any surface other than his own hands or body. Stewart, of course, had hid from the Media so it was nearly impossible to confirm. “I may have to invent a story,” Boisvert said ruefully as he downed a beer.

Contrast this with the never-ending party in the Knights camp. LA journalist and former gossip columnist, **Gabriele Laurent-Vainluven** had convinced her friends in Hollywood to sponsor a 24/7 Entertainment Lounge at the Ayres Hotel in Ontario for the sole purpose of greasing the rumour mill. It had been packed solid for nearly two weeks and the stories that had started to emerge after a few days of endless intoxication were too hot and far out for the regular press. Had I known, I would have left for the Left Coast earlier. Instead, I had to hear fourth hand about “Naked Night” and the infamous “offensive line” of coke that went unbroken along the entire length of the buffet table and was continually replenished by guys in tight pants and unbuttoned shirts at Brent Bolthouse’s “Blue Pajama Party.” **Jeff Dohrn’s** midnight curfew for his players had been ignored more than once apparently, but nobody was

willing to go “on the record” to say exactly who had transgressed.

Boisvert took care of my beer tab for the rest of the game after I agreed, in the moment, to be his “source” for the story he was about to invent about **Jim Heaton’s** eccentric pre-game rituals and debilitating addiction to jelly beans.

KNIGHTS CHARGE AT THE FEARSOME DRAGONS!

To the bitter end I underestimated the Knights. After a season of disrespecting their offence, it would have been hypocritical of me to profess that they would shine in the biggest game of the year against the most dangerous defense in football. My fearless prediction of a 42-7 Florida blowout was declared more for effect than for serious consideration, but the basic truth remained that I did not expect anything from **Jason Campbell**, **Tarvaris Jackson** or any member of the gang of running backs the Knights use interchangeably to move the ball on the ground. I expected one big play from **Steve Smith**, accounting for their only touchdown, and nothing more. I did not expect much from Florida’s offence either, despite their season-long dominance, but I expected more from them than the Knights’ offence would produce. The famous Florida “Firewall” would take care of the rest.

As I watched the game it dawned on me, finally, that these teams were much more closely matched than I had believed. Maybe it was actually watching the entire play unfold *live* (instead of just the television camera view) that made me see and realize just how good the LA defense was and how nifty their offence could be. **Jason Campbell** shone with surprising brightness in the first half; moving the ball effectively and throwing two touchdown passes against a scary group of defenders. Except for a couple of telling lapses, the Knights’ defense was disciplined and, at times, dominant against the league’s second highest ranked offence.

No question, the strength of the LA defense is their secondary. Not many teams can get away with putting single coverage on **TJ Houshmandzadeh** and **Brandon Marshall** and not give up a big play or two through the air. That luxury of the “Blue Shield” defense meant less room for **DeAngelo Williams** and a stronger pass rush on **Aaron Rodgers**. Williams made the play of the game with his 75-yard run to start things off, but managed a total of only 80 yards in 27 carries after that for a pedestrian 2.9 yard average.

With that in mind, the freak injury to **Nnamdi Asomugha** may have been pivotal. In the first half, while Asomugha was in the game, **Aaron Rodgers** completed only 6 of 13 passes for 39 yards and 1 interception for a QB rating of 21.0. In the second half, with Asomugha out, Rodgers went 10 of 15 for 98 yards and a touchdown for a second half QB rating of 107.1.

Fumbles, which had plagued the Knights all year, were a factor as well. **Jason Campbell’s** sound decisions in the passing game were offset by careless ball control by players who forgot the fundamentals in their eagerness to make the big play. **Yamon Figurs** and rookie **Jamaal Charles** both lost the handle on balls they should have controlled, leading to 6 points for the Dragons that the Knights could ill-afford to give them.

As competitive as the game was, it was still clear in the end that Florida possessed the weapons, discipline and depth necessary to weather almost any storm. An injury to star linebacker **LaMarr Woodley** was hardly even noticed as back-up **AJ Hawk** played like a rock against the run. A “Hawk Rawks” sign spontaneously appeared in the stands in the third quarter.

A game effort by the Knights made it a game they could have won with a little extra good luck. But Lady Luck was a neutral party on this day, leaving bare the talent differences (albeit slighter than I thought), and slowly slanting the game in favour of the superior squad. Oh, and I almost forgot! Something else may have come into play. Read on.

LIFE IN THE ALTERNATE UNIVERSE

My siblings produced some strange kids. The strangest of the bunch, my pimply four-eyed, geek nephew, Byron, accompanied me to the Big Game. I brought him along because his parents asked me to – they felt he needed to get out of the house. But when I picked him up to go to the airport I took one look at his pasty white complexion, impossibly frail arms, coke bottle spectacles and ill-fitting shoes and blurted out that Byron might be a lot safer if he stayed in the house. Wouldn’t the boarder Jessica, that 21-year old community college Phys Ed student who passed by the door on her way to the gym, like to go instead?

It turns out that Byron was the perfect companion for somebody who has to do his brother a favour, but has no natural inclination toward supervising, entertaining, or chatting with a juvenile – somebody like me. Byron stuck to me like a barnacle but played quietly on his laptop without saying much apart from the occasional, “*I’m hungry,*” “*can I borrow \$20?*” and “*where’s the bathroom?*” Eventually I found his silence a little unnerving and tried to make small talk with him. I became slightly humiliated

when I suddenly realized that *I* was actually bothering *him*. That is, until an innocent question opened up the floodgates of his wild imagination.

The night before the game, craning my head to spy on his computer monitor, I was baffled by what I saw. He didn't acknowledge me, seemingly oblivious to my interest, so finally I spoke up. "What's that you're up to, Byron?" I asked.

"Checking the alternate universes," he replied.

"Pardon?" I asked, after pausing to consider what else he might have said that I might have misheard.

"I hacked into this neat program in the Pentagon, it's a reality simulator. They input data into this mega computer processor and it spits out what the world would look like if certain things happened. It's kind of like 'Sim City' but for the whole world. I've got the password so I can input my own scenarios."

I was slack-jawed for a moment but soon recovered. I sized him up. "You're serious aren't you," I said. "Of course you are – you have no sense of humour," I added after a brief pause.

He ignored the jab or else he didn't hear it. "See, I changed the result of Figurs' fumble on the kickoff return so that Charleswood recovered at the Los Angeles 22 yard line. Look what happened!" He exclaimed as he pointed to the screen. I caught on that he was referring to the PAC Final game.

I looked, but all I saw was a jumble of incomprehensible symbols and numbers.

Before I could say anything, Byron continued, "Charleswood wins 23-7 and goes on to play Florida in the Championship. Do you want to know who wins?"

I shrugged.

"Charleswood wins 16-13. *Aaron Rodgers* completes only 6 passes and finishes with a QB of 4.9 on the day. *DeAngelo Williams* rushes for 135 yards but can't overcome the horrible passing of his quarterback. The Pats' *Peyton Manning* doesn't do so well either, finishing with a 66.2 QB rating, and gets picked twice but he throws the only offensive TD of the game. *Adrian Peterson*, with 167 yards rushing, wins the MVP. The Florida coach jumps off a bridge two days later. Wow!" he rattled excitedly. "You want to try another one?" he actually looked up at me as he asked the question. Eye contact – a rare thing with Byron.

"Sure, what if Durham had beaten Florida?" I asked.

"It doesn't work exactly that way," he said with a little irritation. "You have to change an event and go from there. There are too many unknowns if you simply plug in a different outcome. It's less realistic. How you get to the outcome is important. It's more accurate if you change one little thing and watch what happens. It's possible that nothing could have changed the outcome of the Florida – Durham game, you see?"

He spoke at a pace I could hardly keep up with, but I gathered from what he was saying that small events had big consequences. I thought for a moment, trying to remember the pivotal point of the Durham – Florida game. "Okay....what if Rodgers misses that 3rd down conversion in the final minute?" I asked.

"One second." He studied the screen. "Okay I got it here. How do you want him to miss it? It's more realistic to pick something probable. For instance, on that play, the most probable outcome was the 7-yard completion to Houshmandzadeh. But the next most probable outcome was a drop. According to this probability matrix, Rodgers was very, very accurate at that time in the game, so he's going to be on target in almost every scenario. So, I'll plug in a drop by Houshmandzadeh." He looked like he was having a lot of fun. He smirked and chuckled as his fingers flew over the keyboard. Several minutes passed.

"What's taking so long?" I asked.

"I had to change some of the events," he answered.

"Why?" I asked.

"Florida keeps winning the game," he replied flatly. Then his eyebrows suddenly rose "Ah, there we are!" he shouted. "Durham wins in overtime, 20-17." He looked at me and smiled. "In order to get this I had to injure *DeAngelo Williams* in the first quarter and give *Darrelle Revis* a severe leg cramp in the fourth quarter. Both events were unlikely, but possible." He turned back to the screen and focused. "Do you want to know what happens next?"

"Sure, not that I believe any of this," I answered, trying to regain some of my adult realism.

"In this alternate universe, which I'll nickname 'Spats,' after you, Uncle; Durham squeaks by LA, 3-0 to win the Championship on *Mason Crosby's* 44-yard field goal in the second quarter. The teams combined for 15 punts and *James Farrior*, with 12 tackles and 1 sack, is the MVP. In this particular Alternate Universe, if you carry it further into the future, there are no alcoholic beverages, Dinosaurs rule the surface of the Earth while humans live in underground complexes, cheese is made from bat's milk, and *Celine Dion* is Empress of the Underworld and controls an army of genetically engineered cyber soldiers with perfect pitch and French accents." He giggled, "To get this result I had to give one of those genetically engineered Dinosaurs in Jurassic Park super intelligence and let it escape from the park with a couple of fertile female specimens." He seemed to

think this last particular twist was hilarious because he started to shake with laughter. After about a minute he looked up and saw the incredulous look on my face. "Okay I'm kidding about the French accents."

I wasn't sure what to make of all of this, but for no particular reason apart from idle curiosity, I asked, "What is going to happen tomorrow?"

"Hmmm, that's difficult because there's too much we don't know about what's going on with the players right now," he replied, his brow furrowing as he started to type on the keyboard. "Give me a minute to see if I can interface the program with the Q-1400 'Espa' secret stealth satellite network. It can actually look through walls and things. It's *super top secret!* The President doesn't even know about it!"

About 15 minutes passed. I went and grabbed a beer from the mini-bar while Byron swigged back another bottle of Coca-Cola. "Yeah!" he suddenly yelped. "I think I've got it! I'm not sure what the satellite is feeding the program, but it's taking its time to download. We may have to wait until the morning."

"Whatever, Byron! I must admit, you have quite an imagination my young nephew," I patted him on the shoulder. "I'm going to hit the hay. Don't stay up late."

I went to bed and got up at my regular time. I made some phone calls and e-mailed the office and took Byron out for breakfast. In the light of day I didn't bother to follow up on my question about the game. *Probably one of his Sci-Fi games*, I thought.

After breakfast, Byron, who had returned to his usual quiet self, looked up from his computer and asked, "Uncle, where are we sitting?" I replied that we were in a Private Press Box next to the Spanish language telecast and the Florida coaching staff. He looked back at his computer screen and typed a few lines. His eyes abruptly widened.

"Interesting!" he exclaimed. "Who do you want to win the game, Uncle Spats?" he asked.

"Florida, of course. Why?"

"Just for fun, I tried a few different scenarios using events *we* can control. In every situation, Florida wins, usually by a score of 23-17, except when I make us late for the game. If I make us at least 10 minutes late for the game, the score changes, LA wins 17-16. So if you want Florida to win, we'd better hurry up and catch that shuttle bus!"

I stared at him. He was serious. "You've been playing too many computer games, Byron." I was seriously starting to worry about him, and about me for even entertaining any of this.

We entered the stadium over one hour before game time but about 9 minutes before security closed the gates to the Press Level (for security reasons of course, so another search could be conducted) and I fell into the moment and forgot all about my crazy little nephew. When I remembered to notice him during the game I was pleased to see that he was spending more time looking at the field than at his computer. *This outing is good for him, socially*, I thought.

By the fourth quarter I was pretty drunk and loud and my buddy **Jean Boisvert** was trying to quiet me down because I was apparently audible in the background on the Mexican broadcast. The Dragons were leading 16-14, but they were playing it safe and running the ball with **DeAngelo Williams**. He wasn't getting big chunks of yardage, but he was getting enough to move the chains and this was obviously causing the Knights frustration. On 3rd down and 3 at the LA 17 the Knights added a fifth down lineman and crowded the line. Williams broke through for four yards and a first down. I pumped my fist in the air, and yelled, "Yeah! Now go to Marshall! They've got to go Marshall. The Knights are going to want to kill Williams, now's the time to go to Marshall!" I grabbed Jean and shook him. "You hear me, man?"

"Spats, everyone hears you!" Jean raised his finger to his lips. "Those guards are going to throw us in a cell if you don't shut up!"

On the next play, with eight Knights defenders charging at Williams, Rodgers dropped back and lobbed a perfect pass to **Brandon Marshall** that he carried across the goal line for what would turn out to be the game-winning touchdown. The part of the crowd that supported Florida jumped to their feet, as did I. The rest of the afternoon was a blur of activity. As soon as the game ended, I grabbed Byron by the arm and whisked him away to try and catch some of the post game Press Conference live. He protested as I dragged him along, but I didn't pay attention to what he was saying. There were people to chat with and interview. It wouldn't be until the next day that I started to put the pieces together.

[Flash forward to the next morning as I reviewed my tape of the game and the post game Florida Press Conference:] **William Wyrmwright** asks **Jim Heaton** about the play to Marshall for the winning TD.

"That was a booth call," Heaton replied. "We felt the Knights had to respond to the ground game. Frankly, they probably wanted to kill DeAngelo. They noticed upstairs that the corners were cheating to stop the run and we thought there might be some room for the receivers to get free. We felt it was time to go to Marshall. Aaron made a great throw and Brandon had no trouble handling it."

My jaw dropped. A queasy feeling slowly crept into my stomach. *"Spats, everyone hears you!"* Jean's words, echoed in my memory. I jumped from the chair and ran over to my nephew, who was still asleep. I shook him awake.

"Byron, wake up! Where's your computer?" I shouted. "I need to ask it a question! Wake up!" I wanted to know what would have happened if Florida hadn't run that play to Marshall for a TD.

My nephew rubbed his eyes and snarled, "I don't have it, Uncle Spats!"

"What do you mean you don't have it?!" I barked. "You never go anywhere without that damn computer!" I was frantic and still feeling the affects of Jean Boisvert's generosity.

"I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen! You grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the booth. I left it in the room!" he protested.

I called the 'Big House' to see if anyone had turned in Byron's computer to the Lost and Found. The prison guard I spoke to laughed out loud, "If it was there more than one hour after the game, it's probably gone. The convicts do all the cleaning. I'll check, but don't hold your breath, buddy."

"That's outrageous!" I barked.

"Hey, we warned you. Check your ticket stub. We aren't responsible for valuables left unattended and you absolve the 'Big House' of all liability when you enter the stadium with that ticket. Sorry, Mr. McChad."

My nephew Byron was pretty upset. He had bought the computer second hand from a shop. It turned out that the computer was a piece of military hardware that had somehow ended up in public circulation in a repair shop in Connecticut. It had a built-in encryption key that enabled it to plug into the Pentagon's intranet through a special portal. Some hacking had been involved to access the simulator, but not much. It was now highly unlikely that Byron, little genius that he was, would be able to find his way back to the reality simulator.

Unfortunately, I'll never be able to prove to you, my dear readers, that this is story is true. Only my nephew Byron and I know the truth, and he refuses to speak to me now.

GAME DAY SIGHTINGS

Interim Outlaws owner, **David Neely** attended the game as a guest of the EFL and occupied a seat in one of the league's corporate boxes. The word from inside the league office is that Neely impressed the EFL's co-commissioners with the stability he brought to the day-to-day operations of the previously volatile Winnemucca franchise. Although relations continue to be cordial, Neely's appearance at the game is likely to be the last public one as a member of the EFL ownership fraternity. The league has apparently rejected Neely's \$0 bid for the Winnemucca franchise and is actively seeking another prospective owner.

ANOTHER SEASON IN THE BOOKS

It's been fun readers, but that's all from Spats for another six months. Have a great summer!

BUG THE BOOKIE!

JIMMY THE GEEK REVIEWS HIS EFL PICK RECORD IN 2008

YOUR SOURCE FOR FANTASY AND ON-LINE BETTING SOLUTIONS



JIMMY'S EFL PICK RECORD

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

HOW I'M DOING AGAINST THE SPREAD

Not as well as last year's 100-35 record but still good enough that if you listened faithfully all season, you'd be able to buy yourself a new boat. Or a BBQ at least.

LAST WEEK: 1-0-0

OVERALL: 89-43-3