

2022 PREVIEW

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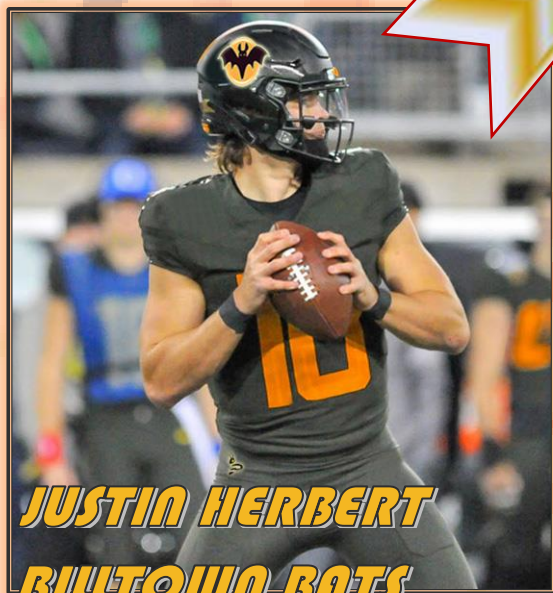
How sweet it is.



JOE BURROW
SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES



PATRICK MAHOMES
VIRDEN VIONTORS



JUSTIN HERBERT
BILLTOWN BATS



KYLER MURRAY
ERIEAU CADILLAC

YOUNG GUNS...



...COMING OF AGE!

CANTON (AP) – Happy Birthday, EFL! You are now sixteen years old and about to enter your young adult years. How sweet it is to be finally 16!

Of course, you are still somewhat of a tempestuous teen compared with your aged forefather, the NFL, which passed unexpectedly after 87 years of gradually building gridiron football into America's true national sport. The NFL was certainly not perfect – the Federal Prosecutor's Office has scrupulously detailed that reality in its RICO Act prosecutions of NFL officials, owners and organized crime syndicates in Las Vegas and Atlantic City – but the old league did establish a legendary mystique around the game that such an unprecedented criminal scandal could not extinguish. North Americans, and now many Europeans and Chinese, simply *love* American-style pro football!

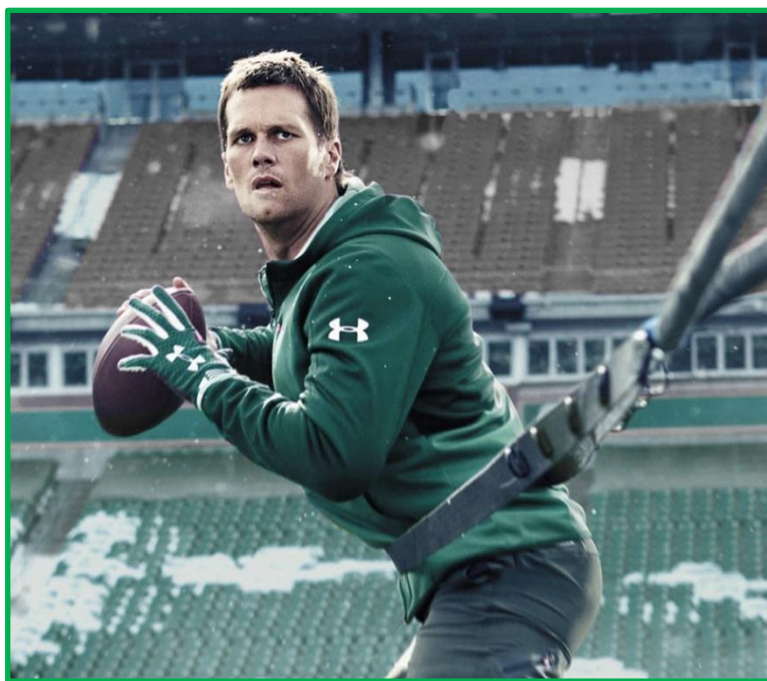
The EFL is keeping that football flame hot and allowing the game to grow, despite another franchise upheaval on the eve of the regular season. While sixteen years traditionally marks the beginning of a child's transition to adulthood, adolescents can remain quite impetuous all the same. And it appears that the EFL has again “broken up” with another franchise.

The Las Vegas Assassins, to the sudden shock of fans and media, fell from the status of prized possession to toxic hazard overnight when the FBI announced that it had taken Assassins President/GM/Coach, **Anthony Holguin**, into custody, charging him with the first-degree murder former President/GM/Coach of the Los Angeles Knights, **Jeff Dohrn**.

The abrupt departure of Dohrn from the Knights in 2020 for “personal reasons” and the sad discovery of his lifeless body in a Las Vegas hotel room three months later had brought the history of the LA incarnation of that franchise to a tragic end. The apparent cause, an overdose, had led many people to form the conclusion that Dohrn had been in a state of depression in his final years, possibly

caused by the up-and-down (mostly down) fortunes of the Knights over many seasons and a rumoured dependency on cocaine to get through Sundays. It had all caught up to him, it seemed. Out of respect, publicity around his death was muted. As a result, the news that he may have actually been murdered hit the press like a bomb – many people did not even know he was dead.

Once the league had absorbed the shock, it moved quickly to disassociate itself from the Assassins' franchise. After all, the official ownership of the team, the Estate of **Sheldon Adelson**, brought its own type of controversy. Adelson was the principal doner to Donald Trump's



The modern game is gearing up to phase out pocket passers like **Tom Brady**. Yet, after 22 pro seasons, 15 of those in the EFL, and 343 career TD passes, the ageless York veteran refuses to bow to Father Time and continues to show that pocket awareness, a quick release and accuracy bring rewards.

Presidential election campaign. The narrative around the former President had turned quite odious in the past year, with allegations of inciting insurrection and misappropriation of secret government documents swirling around him.

In addition to Adelson's controversial politics, it had been an open secret that mob connections lay underneath the surface and influenced the team's Board of Directors. In the case of **Nathan "The Barber" Siegel**, grand nephew of infamous mob boss, **Bugsy Siegel**, and Team Treasurer, the connection to casino skimming and rigged betting was blatant.

Of course, Holguin himself had risen to football prominence from a murky past shrouded in official secrecy. He had done nothing to quell rumours that he had been a "black ops" Special Forces soldier at some point in his career and even hinted that he could "*take care Nazar for keeps if I really wanted to*" when discussing the Convict coach with whom he had an intense rivalry. People who met him generally did not like him, giving him few allies in the EFL Head Office.

So, apart from losing a state-of-the-art stadium and a prime untapped market, the EFL had nothing more to lose and much to gain in the long run from a swift disconnection with a team that level heads agreed was a ticking time bomb. But with the arrest coming in the middle of training camp, there were practical limits to how quickly the EFL could sever all ties with the "Franchise of Death." The league announced in a press conference that it would be seizing control of the team's operations, pending its sale to a new owner, but that for the 2022 season, at least, the team would likely remain in Las Vegas under a different name.

Enter billionaire industrialist and notorious playboy, **Stephen Michael** of Michael Enterprises. This relatively obscure tycoon, ranked 101st on the Forbes list of wealthiest individuals, vaulted to the front of the prospective owners waiting list with his promise to build a new state-of-the-art football stadium in Pennsylvania near his childhood home of Williamsport. Situated on the north bank of the western branch of the *Susquhanna River*, with a population of a little less than 30,000, Williamsport is strategically located almost equidistantly between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, two iconic football cities of the old NFL. While Las Vegas has all the glitz and glamour, Pennsylvania has history and two football-starved markets in its corner.

The league did not take long to deliberate. Michael was awarded the rights to acquire the Las Vegas Assassins and time to work out a deal with the Adelson estate. While final details were worked out, the two parties reached an interim agreement allowing Michael to rename the team, redesign the logo, take on head coaching duties and hire a new staff of assistants. The team would remain in place and honour all local contracts while the new stadium was being constructed. Thus, the Billtown Bats of Williamsport, PA will play in the Assassin's Den in Las Vegas, NV in 2022.

"Only in the EFL!" quipped **Cowan Bullherd**, host of the syndicated talk show, *Morning Bull*. "Remember, folks, this is a league with a bizarre history – among other things, a franchise that suffered its own veritable *Zombie Apocalypse*, another that never existed except on paper, another that imported fans from Mexico to snub the Mohave locals, another that skulked off in the night to Budapest, and another that plays its games in an artificial micro climate with genetically-modified monsters lurking around its parking lots. This is the league that attempted to establish a supportive fan base in North Korea, for goodness' sake! Does it surprise me that they had a coach who literally lived up to his team's 'Assassin' nickname and is accused of murdering another coach? It disturbs me greatly, but it does not surprise me!"

The buzz around the franchise upheaval is accompanied by questions few can answer about why Holguin would want to murder **Jeff Dohrn**. The media's most intrepid and controversial football columnist thinks he knows the answer.

"According to records leaked from Adelson's private correspondence, the now deceased Assassins owner had expressed concerns to the Executive Director of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation about Holguin's mental stability," writes investigative journalist **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** of *Deathspun*, in his article 'Behind the Assassin's Veil.' "About Holguin, he wrote, 'He's smart – cunning is a better word. But he could also be nuts.' This message came at a time when Holguin was competing for the job he would eventually land. Who was his top competition? None other than Jeff Dohrn, according to a list of candidates dug up from private files. It is likely that Dohrn regretted leaving football almost immediately after resigning from the Knights. With a Gale Sayers Trophy in his resume, he certainly would have made a strong candidate for the Las Vegas gig. Much stronger than a former Black Ops operator who had learned most of this football from a military rehabilitation program for patients suffering from PTSD."

The truth will likely be revealed during Holguin's trial, scheduled for next year. In the mean time, football analysts are attempting to steer clear of the strange and discomfiting controversy and focus on what kind of team the now 'Billtown Bats' will be on the field.

"Without factoring in intangibles connected to the sudden loss of their coach, we project the Bats to win the West Division and compete in the top tier of a much stronger Pacific Conference," writes **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org, in his Pacific Conference Overview in the 2022 edition of *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*. "With the Cubs signalling that they are moving toward a rare rebuild and the Pilots still years away from being a serious contender, only the Convicts stand in the way of a Bats division title. Chino will be competitive, thanks to **Dak Prescott**,

but they don't have the strength in the trenches or the elite defence that the Bats have."

Schultz's complex algorithms establish a data-driven baseline for what is accepted as the conventional view of the pecking order in the West Division. But some prominent media analysts are not willing to ignore the intangible impacts of a new coach and the shock of a murder charge hanging over a mongrel franchise.

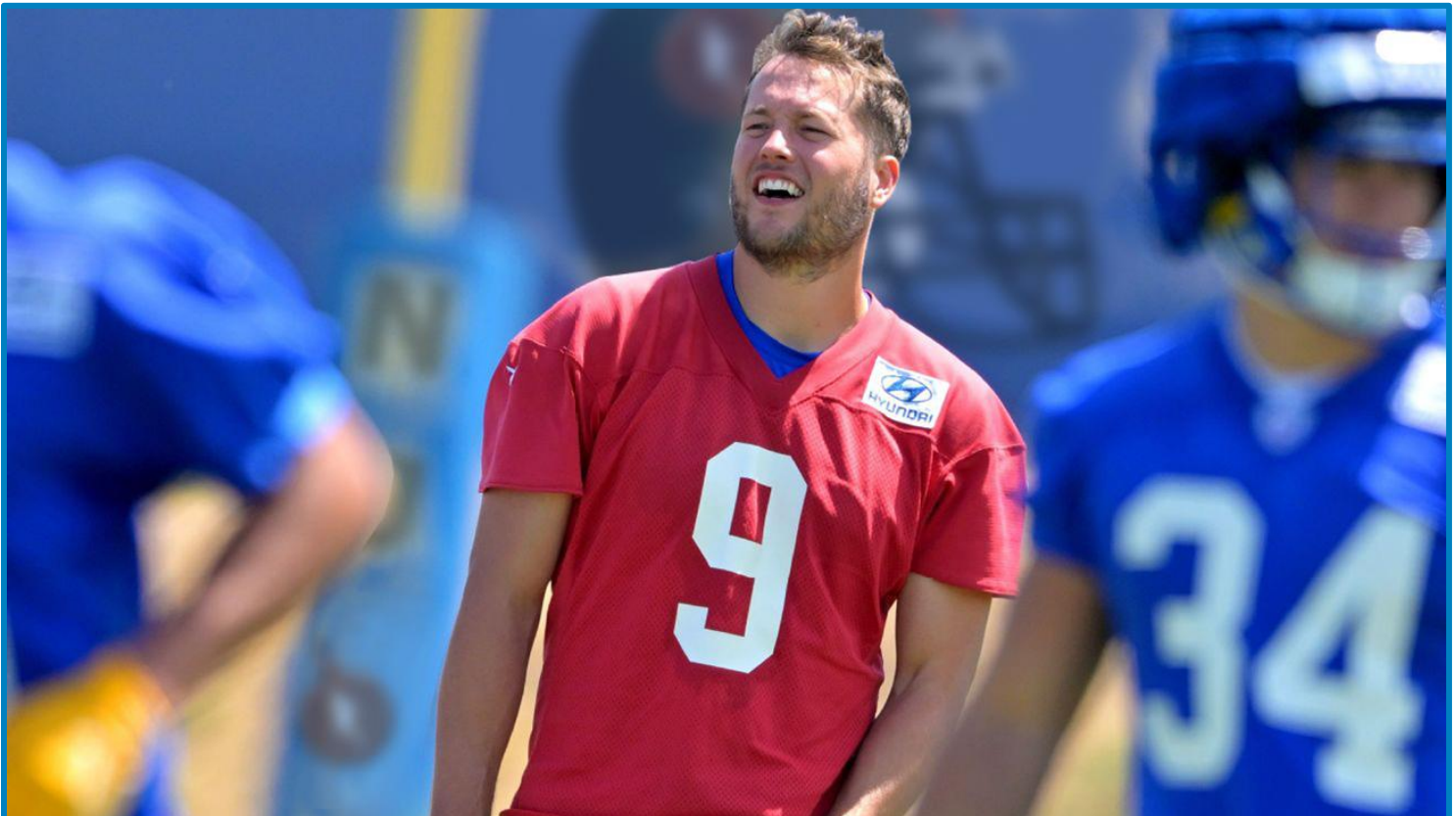
"Another year, another sudden coaching change before the start of the season with potential playoff implications," led **Kris Hortenson**, host of ESPN's Sports Central, and moderator for this year's expert roundtable, '*Lay It on the Line*.' "Anyone here willing to lay it on the line and predict the fate of the Bats this year?"

"Before Russ brings it up, I want to be the first to admit that I laid an egg thinking that the loss of Rich Liotta would not have a big effect on a team with the likes of **Matt Ryan** and **JJ Watt** on the roster," **Will Simons** jumped in, recalling his confident prediction last year that the former Mustangs veterans would smooth the transition to a new city and coaching staff in Oshawa. "My bad! I guess we now know how delicate the balance is when weighing the reasons for a team's success. The Pink Panthers forgot how to win, it seems, without their confident and calm coach on the sideline. How will these Bats do without the dark overlord threatening them? We can't assume they'll be the same team."

"You're not getting off that easily, Will," interjected the high-strung **Russ Flont**. "You did more than lay an egg. You laid a Humpty Dumpty that fell off the wall and smashed into an omelette that all the King's Men wouldn't eat." He paused for a laugh that never came. His face reddened and he went on the attack once more. "You blew it. And now you're saying you don't know. What kind of prediction is that? I'll lay it on the line and go on the record that the Bats will be rejuvenated with this change. They will not only win the west they'll take the conference as well!"

"Whoa there, Russ! Settle down...take a reality pill!" said **Skope Boylezz**, raising his voice above the burble of surprise from the rest of the panel. "The Bats have a defence on par or better than anybody's. But the right side of that offensive line is really vulnerable and you have to wonder if their offence scares anybody with **Cole Beasley** as the number one target for **Justin Herbert**. Meanwhile, the Wrecking Balls have quietly built a more complete and dangerous roster on the other side of the continent. We're all so used to laughing at New Jersey, for good reason, but I think this time they have a shot, a real shot, at the Pacific Conference Championship."

This dawning of new respect for the ever-bumbling Wrecking Balls heading into 2022 is not confined to ESPN's Boylezz and local New Jersey beat reporter, **Dave Hodge**. Despite a history of under-achievement and outright bad luck, no less than the venerable **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* recently went on the record projecting a serious run by the Wrecking Balls toward an appearance in the Conference Championship.



Wrecking Balls quarterback **Matthew Stafford** is pictured here showing his jocular side at training camp. The veteran has good reason to be happy with his current situation in New Jersey. The team that has never lived up to its hype will be hard-pressed not to succeed with a full range of offensive weapons and a defence that will be able to keep opponents honest.

“Why not?” writes Prince in his article, ‘It’s a Brand-New Year.’ “There is a rotation of the guard taking place in the Pacific Conference this year with the Coyotes and Cubs taking a step back to regroup and the DeShaun Watson situation in Charleswood blowing up the quarterback room there. The Wrecking Balls have improved their roster around Matthew Stafford and we all know what he is capable of when healthy. There is an opening for New Jersey to clear the dark cloud over their franchise. They will likely have to go through Patrick Mahomes to get to the final but I expect them to get their opportunity.”

Jim Miller of *Sirius XM EFL Network*, a former quarterback himself, praised Stafford during an on-air visit to New Jersey training camp. “Matthew has that look in his eye, Pat,” Miller said to his co-host **Pat Kirwan**. “He knows there is a real chance with this roster, with **Deebo**, **Keenan Allen** and **Terry McLaurin** and that revamped offensive line. He’s firing dimes out there – deep downfield, on the money – he looks determined not to pass up this chance.”

Indeed, **Matt Stafford** is the principal piece on which the fortunes of the Wrecking Balls’ fortunes hinge. If he can deliver results remotely close to his career performance in 2012 with Virden, the Wrecking Balls’ offence will be virtually unstoppable. When matched with a much-improved roster on defence, the parts are in place for success. All the same, this is not the first time New Jersey has looked like a contender heading into the season, only to fall flat.

“I agree with you, Skope,” **Ryan Clark** weighed in, treading lightly as a newcomer to the ESPN roundtable. “GM Jeff Cohen made all the right moves in the off-season: beefing up that offensive line by trading for **Ali Marpet** and drafting **Ikem Ekwonu**, acquiring **Arik Armstead** from Durham and signing **Matt Milano** in free agency. But weren’t people saying the same thing last year about the Wrecking Balls? That they were going to compete? And look what happened. Until they show up consistently on the field, where it matters, it’s always only going to be just potential.”

“So, you’re basically saying this is almost a do-or-die year for **Jeff Cohen** and his coach **Sean McDermott**,” roundtable moderator **Kris Hortenson** summarized before redirecting the topic. “But would you all agree that there is similar pressure on Virden after last season’s failure and the moves they made this off-season to rebuild on the fly? I know **Patrick Mahomes** is still young and nowhere near finished, but the trades of the front office last year did not sit well with fans and local media. They need a big turnaround that is more than just winning the Central Division and a playoff berth.”

“I don’t think they have near the same pressure on them,” **Skope Boylezz** was the first to respond. “Patrick Mahomes is one of the league’s ‘young guns.’ He’s in it for the long haul, while this might be Stafford’s last hurrah. Virden will always have a shot as long as Mahomes remains healthy. And...they clearly have an informal arrangement with their supposed rival, Charleswood to keep their roster competitive if necessary – which is just bizarre by the way, but it *is* Canada after all and they’re neighbourly that way. If in five years from now, the Violators still haven’t won a championship with **Patrick Mahomes** at the controls, that’s when the pressure will really be on **Lance Barrate**.”

Virden fans may not have to wait that long. A sampling of opinions from analysts and former coaches both in and out of the mainstream media places Virden in the top three teams in the Pacific Conference this year. For most of these analysts, **Patrick Mahomes** will be the decisive factor in the Violators’ return to the Gale Sayers Game. But no reputable pundits believe he can do it all by himself.

“Some young coaches – the whizz kids, the offensive gurus – are coming to realize that they can look a lot more brilliant if they have a quarterback who can bail out a failing play with a quick outlet throw or by moving around in the pocket to buy time,” writes **Severin Handfottner Jr** of ‘Coaches Call.’ *“A quarterback with the skills of a **Patrick Mahomes** or a **Kyler Murray** can make up for a lot of flaws in execution by the other ten players on the field. Yet there are limits on what a talent like Mahomes can achieve if the coach relies too heavily on his skills. We saw that with **Lamar Jackson** in Buffalo last year and at times with Mahomes as well. If Lance Barrate cannot incorporate **Ezekiel Elliott** into the game plan as more than just a rest stop, and the defence cannot stop anybody, the Violators will not make the most of their quarterback.”*

*“In a team sport with 22 players on the field at the same time on every play, it is mathematically impossible for any single player or coach to determine all outcomes. But with the quarterback possessing the single biggest influence on the field and the coach setting the tone for everything, our simulations clearly show that removing **DeShaun Watson** from the equation in Charleswood opens the door wide open for the Violators, with Mahomes and veteran coach Lance Barrate, to cruise to the top of the Central Division nearly unopposed,”* writes **Harry Schultz** in the 2022 edition of *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*. *“As of this writing, **Kenny Pickett** will be the starter in Charleswood. Unless he surprises and exceeds expectations, the Patriots will be an afterthought this year. Expect to hear more noise from a much-improved Peg City and from the Triumph, with **Trevor Lawrence** finally getting his chance, but neither are likely to challenge Virden.”*

With the Patriots performing like a *NASDAQ* stock over the past 10 years it is not surprising to see them heading for the tank yet again just one year after appearing in the Conference Championship. However, this time the reason is unique. While dips in Patriots performances can be often be tied to self-inflicted wounds in the off-season, this time **Jason Findlay** appears to have been victimized. That is, if one accepts his claim that he and the team were “100% unaware” of alleged

misconduct by **DeShaun Watson** during massage therapy sessions over the course of 2021 and late 2020.

The news dropped like a bombshell mere weeks after the Gale Sayers Game when twenty-four women and a goat from a Winnipeg petting zoo came forward with accusations of sexual assault against the Charleswood quarterback. Watson denies the allegations, but his lawyers are already mobilized in an effort to keep the situation from spinning out of control and ending up in criminal court. Meanwhile, the team issued a statement within 24 hours of the news breaking expressing shock and denying any knowledge of impropriety on the part of their quarterback (especially the part about the goat). This in spite of the fact that three of the complainants were actually employed by the team and the petting zoo outing had been organized by the coaching staff as a team bonding event.

"A reliable source inside the Patriots claims that rumours swirled inside the clubhouse all season about what was known as Watson's 'special massages,'" writes Tarkin Smith-Abdullah of Deathspun. "There was some type of 'incident' after the home loss to Las Vegas involving one of the team masseuses that was apparently witnessed by at least one team official. The identity of that official has not been revealed, but the source claims that members of the training staff and at least this one official knew there was a problem but did not do anything about it because Watson was playing so well."

In an interview with *Sirius XM EFL Network's Alex Marvez*, local Patriots' beat reporter **Charlie Wood** attempted to separate rumour from fact from his vantage point close to **Jason Findlay** and the team.

"I would be surprised if Mr. Findlay knew about any of this," Wood stated when asked if the team shares any potential culpability if the allegations prove to be true. "And we have to keep in mind that they are only allegations at this stage. Nothing has been proven, although at least two independent witnesses have come forward publicly claiming that DeShaun spent an inordinate amount of time with a goat at the petting zoo. Even then, we have to be very careful. Maybe DeShaun had never been to a petting zoo before in his life. The goats can be quite cute and captivating the first time you see them."

The EFL stepped in immediately and suspended Watson indefinitely. The allegations may be unproven, but twenty-four allegations coupled with the involvement of a goat was too much smoke to ignore. The fire alarm was sounded and the repercussions on the football field will be severe.

"The Patriots appear to be planning for a future without their stud quarterback," writes Lazor Ponk of Scouts Ltd., "They drafted an unprecedented three quarterbacks – Malik Willis, Kenny Pickett and Bailey Zappe – in a year when the rookie quarterback pool was dry. Even if one of these three emerges in training camp as a viable option it won't be enough to offset the talent and experience of a DeShaun Watson. Without him, it is hard to imagine the Pats' offence going far."

So, it appears the EFL media-sphere agrees that the Patriots will be a non-factor in 2022. That makes the Central Division title easy pickings for Virden, unless the Crusaders and the Triumph can rise from also-rans to in-the-running, a possible but unlikely occurrence.

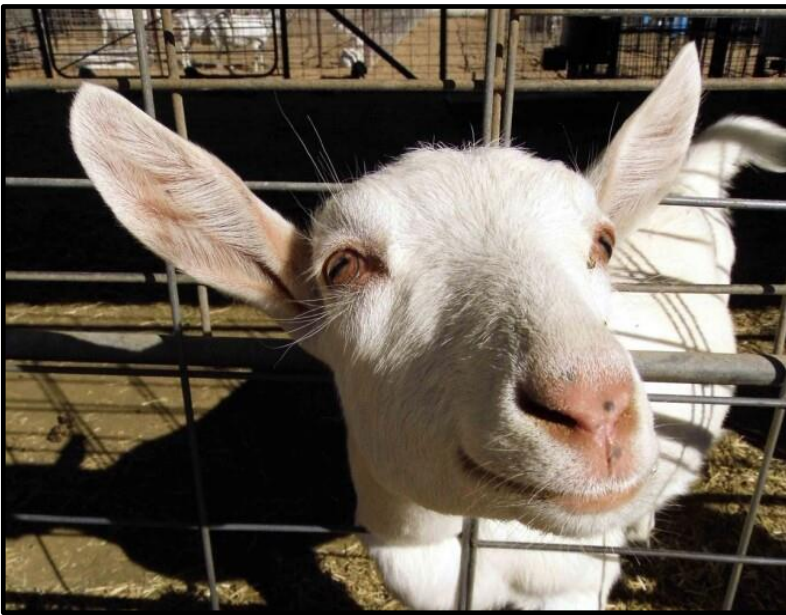
"They won't be counting down a win-less season in Peg City this year," opined **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org in a feature interview with **Alex Marvez** on *Sirius XM EFL Network* radio. "The Crusaders made some gain out of all that pain in 2021. They were the only team to put their first-round rookie quarterback on the field every day. That experience will pay off for **Mac Jones** in year-two. Our team projects Jones to be a solid starter in 2022 and the second-best quarterback in the division. Yes, even ahead of **Trevor Lawrence**. And now, I hear, the Triumph are going to begin the season with **Jameis Winston** under center. This came as a surprise to our team and we had to re-run our projections. In doing so, we gave Winston the veteran bonus but did not presume that he has corrected his turnover issues by sitting on the bench for a year. The result is not much different from our original data run: the Triumph will be engaged in a struggle with Charleswood to stay out of the basement, while the Crusaders will surprise a lot of people with the strength of their defence, especially since they paid over \$50 million in free agency for star SFL corner **JC Jackson**. In the end they are probably not a playoff calibre team, but you never know."

So, if a much-improved Peg City is unlikely a playoff calibre team, which teams in the Pacific not already pegged for divisional supremacy are among the top wildcard contenders? According to **Caleb Cogger** of *EFL Magazine*, two teams stand head and shoulders above the rest of the pack:

"Buffalo can never be afforded the benefit of the doubt as long as Daryl Brothers insists on coaching his team," writes Cogger in his article, 'Breaking Down the EFL's Second Tier.' "Yet the roster he manages is made up of undeniable talent on the defensive front led by Aaron Donald, is deeper at the skill positions – notably at running back – and of course has the ultimate 'X-Factor' in Lamar Jackson. It will take exceptionally bad coaching to push this team below five-hundred, which cannot be ruled out, of course, but cannot be assumed either if Brothers has learned anything at all from last year's film."

Cogger shifts to the West, where he sees a potential challenger to the Bats in bad boy **Rob Nazar's** Chino Convicts:

"The Convicts are never out of the game as long as Dak Prescott is their quarterback and Christian McCaffrey stays healthy. Their defence always seems to overachieve, so one can expect the defensive front-seven to punch above their declining weight, while AJ Terrell puts leg irons on their opponents' top receiver. The Bats are more talented, the Convicts more



Daisy the goat poses for cameras during happier times, prior to her encounter with Patriots' QB **DeShaun Watson** during a team event last year. Daisy has become a recluse and refuses to go out in public after allegedly receiving an "extra long" pat on the backside from an adoring, coo cooing Watson.

experienced and battle-tested. One thing is certain: Chino will finish no lower than number two in the West Division."

If Cogger and Schultz are correct in their prognostications, that leaves four Pacific Conference teams unaccounted for in the post-season discussion. One of those, Seattle – with another year of quarterback dysfunction set to again paralyze the franchise – is no surprise. Another, Bruxelles, is a defence and a quarterback away from being a factor again in the East. The other two are somewhat surprising.

The high-water mark in the short and astoundingly successful history of the Knights' franchise in Cobb County may have already come and gone with the team's appearance in last year's Gale Sayers Game. The decisive loss to Budapest in the final was followed shortly thereafter by a surprise striking down in the Georgia Supreme Court of a government Bill to declare the Coyotes "Georgia's Team" and simultaneously banish the Gladiators from playing in Georgia.

"The Court ruled that the *Reclaiming the Honour of Georgia Act*, tabled by the Representative for Marietta,

John Carson 'grievously violated' the Constitution of Georgia," Professor **Delmore Hayward**, a political scientist and an expert in Georgia constitutional law at Georgia State University, explained to viewers during an interview with **Kris Hortenson** of *ESPN's Sports Central*. "It was a very aggressive Bill backed by powerful forces in the Georgia Establishment. That the Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favour of the Gladiators came as a bit of a surprise, as these same powerful forces exert a great deal of influence over the courts. A groundswell of negative public sentiment toward the Bill emanating from the eastern half of the State and Dave Birdsall's threat of a federal lawsuit almost certainly acted as strong influencers on the Court's decision to arrive at what almost all independent lawyers agree is the proper legal decision. It would have been a dark day for Georgia had hidden power-brokers in the Gridiron Secret Society successfully railroaded a football franchise out of the State for not being good enough to compete for a playoff spot. The Gladiators are, after all, one of the founding franchises of the most successful of the professional football leagues since the collapse of the NFL. It is the Coyote franchise that is the interloper, if indeed there is only room for one professional football team in the State of Georgia."

The irony is that it is very possible the Gladiators, returning from exile in Pittsburgh to a new home in Richmond Hill, GA, 22 miles south of Savannah, will be the better Georgia team in 2022. After posting 25 regular season and 3 post-season victories in two seasons since coming to Cobb County from LA, the Coyotes signalled a retreat from the high ground by dealing away prime assets for a bevy of draft picks in the off-season.

*"The dealing away of **Joe Thuney**, **Damien Harris** and **Markus Golden** for draft picks were early and clear warning signs that the 2022 edition of the Coyotes would not be as predatory as the pack of ravenous canines that tore up the East Division for the past two seasons,"* writes senior ESPN analyst, **Jon Claytown**. *"The roster has gotten much younger virtually overnight, with 14 rookie draft picks competing for spots on the roster. **Ryan Tannehill** is the oldest of the returning starters by a long shot. They made one splashy free agent signing by prying SFL all-pro center **Brian Allen** away from the Mississippi Rebels for big money, but this can be viewed in the context of a mid-term rebuild of the offensive line for the eventual ascendancy of third round pick, **Desmond Ridder** at quarterback. The expectations in Marietta have clearly changed. The team is now looking to establish a foundation for long-term success instead of fitting the best player available around Tannehill and hoping to compete."*

*"The pressure on **Eron Osman** to win now is off for the moment,"* writes **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** of *Deadspin* in his article, 'The Deep State of Georgia Football.' *"The youth movement in Cobb County could only have been approved by the hidden hands that guide the Coyotes behind the curtain. Osman is empowered to work out the details, but the strategic direction of the team is determined behind the scenes by old men in three-piece suits who eat red meat and smoke big cigars."*

Another team seemingly in withdrawal from the glare of the post-season limelight is **Deron Redding's** Iowa City Cubs. The franchise that, in fifteen years since the start of the EFL, has compiled one conference championship, seven division titles, eleven post-season berths, and eleven winning seasons – nine of those consecutive up until this year – is making the first



Top unrestricted free agent, cornerback **JC Jackson** is shown here as a member of the Torrance Tigers in 2021 SFL action. The Crusaders shelled out nearly \$50.5 million over 5 years, \$20 million guaranteed, to lure the all-pro corner away from the SFL. Jackson will perform “lock down” duties on a Peg City defence thought good enough to propel the team into the playoffs.

deliberate step to retool the roster in years. Similar to Cobb County, the Cubs play began by packaging off ageing and peaking talent and cap space for younger players and draft capital. They eschewed free agency, with the exception being the acquisition, for spare change, of **Russell Wilson**’s back-up in unsigned Notre Dame alumnus, **Ian Book**.

“Russell Wilson will be in charge of a daycare in Iowa City this year!” **Will Simons** declared with a grin as the subject of the ESPN roundtable turned to the teams that will be conspicuously absent from the post-season discussion in 2022. “Or are the Wilson-apologists going to claim it doesn’t matter that a big chunk of the Cubs’ roster was born at the turn-of-the-century and that Russell can wave his magic wand and make it all work somehow? I’m looking forward to destroying that argument!”

“I’m not claiming that Wilson can work miracles every week over 17 weeks,” commented a relatively subdued **Russ Flont**, a long-time vociferous Wilson supporter. “But need I remind you all again – as I do every year – that Wilson may be one of the best quarterbacks of all time. He is also coming off his most productive season in 2021, at the age of 32, and he is nowhere near done. I am laying it on the line right now: the Cubs will be the most successful of the rebuilding teams in 2022 and play a spoiler role in the West!”

“*The rebuild is long overdue for the Cubs,*” writes **Schrell Partisian**, principal contributor to the national fan forum, ‘Bleacher Feature.’ “*This was an ageing roster that had been running on fumes in the post-season for several years before failing to make the playoffs last year for the first time since 2014. The timing of this from a team promotional angle is not great. This will be the first season the Cubs will play in the brand-new Iowa City Superplex. Fans call it the Fergy Dome, but whatever you call it, the venue is impressive and expensive. Unfortunately, it will be launched with great publicity and fanfare in an off-year for the Cubs competitively. At least fans will be able to get an In-N-Out burger with their tall boy beer.*”

While the Pacific Conference looks to break new ground with New Jersey and Billtown vying for never-before top-level success over veteran contenders like Virden and Chino, the Atlantic Conference discussion is pre-occupied with whether or not Budapest will make history with a three-peat.

“**Aaron Rodgers** is showing no signs of age heading into his eighteenth season of professional football,” reasons

Peter Prince of *North America Today*. “He is coming off his best season as a pro at the ripe age of 37, a year that was capped by his third championship win – second with Budapest – tying **Matt Ryan** for most Gale Sayers trophies for a quarterback and the only one in the EFL to do it with two teams. There is no reason to think he will slow down with **Justin Jefferson**, **Stefon Diggs** and **George Kittle** as his primary targets, and an offensive line more than good enough to get the job done in front of one of the savviest quarterbacks to ever play the game. This is the defending champ’s conference to lose at this point.”

“Turning to the Atlantic Conference and the subject on everybody’s mind: Is **Aaron Rodgers** unstoppable wearing Budapest brown? Is he destined for an unprecedented three-peat?” teased ESPN roundtable anchor, **Kris Hortenson**. “Who here is going to be the first to lay it on the line with a prediction?” he smiled and turned surveyed the table.

There was a pregnant pause before **Will Simons** broke the ice:

“Well, you know how I feel about **Darrin Jones** and the North Stars,” Simons began. “There is no more detail-oriented coach in the league and no prouder franchise at the moment than the one he leads. Until another team steps up and shows me that they are hungrier than Jones and his players, I think Budapest has to remain the favourite to claim another Gale Sayers trophy this year!”

“I agree you have to give Budapest and Jones the benefit of the doubt,” added **Skope Boylezz**, “But that dominant defence which has been such a big part of their success is starting to show cracks. The only reinforcements Jones brought in in the off-season was the veteran pass rusher **Markus Golden**, giving **Cameron Jordan** some help putting pressure on the quarterback. I am not convinced that **Jamel Dean** is a stout as advertised by *Pro Football Focal Point* and **Joe Haden** has definitely lost a step. Unlike last year, this is a defence that can be beaten through the air And we know that **Darrin Jones** does not like an ‘open’ game where his secondary is not in full control!”

“Teams will be gunning harder than ever for the North Stars!” pronounced panelist **Ryan Clark**, looking to establish his own edginess in the discussion. “We saw what ‘no fear’ did for the Sebastian offence in the playoffs. Believe me...other teams took note. Jones was out of his comfort zone in that game even though they won by a comfortable margin. We, the panel, are giving Budapest the benefit of the doubt, but their opponents won’t be so generous!”

The challenge of maintaining a cutting edge over two punishing seasons is impressive enough. Carrying that intensity into a third straight season is even more daunting. So daunting that the bookies in Vegas are not on board with the mainstream media’s assessment that **Aaron Rodgers** is a football god and **Darrin Jones** is the reincarnation of Vince Lombardi.

“The North Stars will crash and burn this year,” **Jimmy the Geek** stated flatly when asked on his show, ‘*Odds ‘N Suds*,’ about the prospects of a Budapest three-peat in 2022. “They are not as good as they were in 2021 and there are other teams that have been quietly preparing to ambush them in 2022. A lot of people have forgotten about **Tom Brady**, but I haven’t. The Irish look solid. Durham has not disappeared. People underestimate the Cadillac and **Kyler Murray** – with much justification – but I do not. There will be some serious surprises in the Atlantic Conference this year.”

The Godfather of Prognostication is not the only senior member of the analytical elite who foresees a changing of the guard in the Atlantic Conference. **Harry Schultz** weighs in from the depths of data-driven analytics.

“It came to us as a surprise when all the data was loaded and we ran the algorithms to find York consistently in the running for the Coastal Division title, finishing more than 60% of the time at the top above Budapest and Pickering,” Schultz writes in his Atlantic Conference Overview in the 2022 edition of ‘*Outriders Pro Football Almanac*.’ *“Our bias against a run-heavy, ball control offence being able to dominate in the ‘Passing Age’ made us QC the data and the scouting assumptions ten-fold. Eventually it became clear to us that Derrick Henry was not the deciding factor in York’s predicted ascension. It was the defence and a rejuvenated receiving corps that tipped the scales. Tom Brady has weapons to throw to this year. Success in the passing game is no longer predicated on Henry running the ball 30 times a week and catching defences off guard. On the other side, the defence is not only disciplined, but one of the most predatory in the league. It is not that Budapest has taken any big steps backwards heading into 2022. Their opponents, rather, have gotten much better.”*

“The playbook just got bigger for Tom Brady,” asserts **Severin Handfottner Jr** of ‘*Coaches Call*.’ *“The anticipated emergence of the enigmatic Amon-Ra St. Brown and the drafting of Treyton Burks of Arkansas in the first round gives big-play threat Mike Williams some cover. Tight end Cole Kmet is a solid safety net and Javonte Williams is no normal no.2 running back. The bottom line: York can pass to set up the run if it chooses – an option Brady has not had in recent memory.”*

“Imagine having two Minkah Fitzpatricks in your secondary,” stated **Rhampook Chawdry**, defensive systems analyst for rating agency, *Pro Football Focal Point*, in an interview with **Amber Theoharis** and **Alex Boone** on the *Sirius XM EFL Network* show, ‘*The 25th Team*.’ “That’s what **Jordan Poyer** and **Kevin Byard** mean for the Excalibur defence. Then picture being able to bring pressure from any point at the line of scrimmage. That’s what **DeForest Buckner**, **Greg Rousseau** on the line, and **Rashan Gary** and **Azeez Ojulari** on the edges, do for York. This is a defence with traditionally good gap discipline as well. We project the Excaliburs to have a top-five defence in 2022 and that will translate into a lot of wins.”

There is no doubt that **Tom Brady** badly wants to join his former Dragon and championship-winning teammate **Aaron**

Rodgers in the ranks of the rejuvenated multi-titled quarterbacks and, in the process, become the first signal-caller over 40 years of age to win the big one. But there is hungry young blood in the field that has equal and more recent motivation to take aim at the defending champs and their veteran quarterback.

"Imagine how it felt to be **Josh Allen** this off-season!" brayed **Cowan Bullherd**, host of the syndicated talk show, *Morning Bull*. "For over seven months you've had that bad taste in your mouth from that humble pie you ate in the Conference Championship that even plain Listerine can't wash away. You're the up-and-comer! You're younger, bigger, stronger, arguably more mobile than that late 30-something guy on the other side...you got the *BIG ARM*...but when the pressure was on and the lights were the brightest you shrunk in the moment and the old guy gutted out the win. That has to be a teaching point. Hey, I like Josh Allen. I like him a lot. But he *has* to take a step forward this year. And we won't know if he takes it until he is back in that situation again. We all know he can play during the regular season. Can he deliver in the post-season?"

"We can all agree that Durham still has the talent to take down any team in the league," **Skope Boylezz** declared at the ESPN roundtable. "At least I think we can agree, right Will?" he turned to Budapest-booster Simons, who smiled and nodded. "But until Josh Allen proves he can deliver in the clutch, he will be just another young gun firing blanks when the real shooting starts in the playoffs."

"Now that was quite an analogy, Skope!" chuckled moderator **Kris Hortenson** as the other panelists hooted and guffawed in the background. "But is it fair to put it all on the kid's shoulders heading into his fifth season? When was the last time a so-called 'young gun' won a championship? Even Patrick Mahomes hasn't done that yet."

"**Carson Wentz** did it in 2018 with St. Charles!" jumped in **Ryan Clark**, mooted the host's developing point and temporarily pausing the conversation.

"That as a fluke!" an agitated and reddening **Russ Flont** blurted out. "The whole Charger season was a fluke if you ask me. They won in spite of Wentz."

"The exception that proves the rule," injected Hortenson, trying to rescue his argument.

"Wentz will get a chance to prove you both wrong this year," **Will Simons** needled. "The Irish, as a team, are for real. They decided that **Baker Mayfield** was not going to get the most of that roster and made the switch. This is an opportunity for **Carson Wentz** to build up the narrative that he is a 'winner' by hitching a ride on that impressive-looking roster."

"I don't see much separation between Mayfield and Wentz in terms of clutch play," snickered Boylezz. "And the Irish took on Wentz's huge salary on top of that. If Wentz fails to lead this team to the playoffs and to win at least one playoff game, that trade will look messy. That's the last thing Irish coach **Archbishop Thomas Molloy** – he who traded Aaron Rodgers for said Baker Mayfield – needs on his resume as the Monks show him the door."

The roundtable discussion descended into a muddle as the panelists cautiously jockeyed for position to be the first to lay it on the line with a bold prediction centered on teams that have rarely, if ever, garnered national interest early in the season. A general consensus was forming around the idea that the South Division would be much better in 2022. But how much better? And who would be the first to mention the team that had never before made the playoffs in its history?

"*Erieau. E-R-I-E-A-U. Learn how to spell it. Learn how to pronounce it. Ee-ree-ō. It's easy once you get the hang of it,*" writes **John Maximillian Ginsberg**, sports satirist of 'Football Unplugged.' "*You likely have not heard of Erieau. You may not even be aware there is a professional football team located there. A friend of mine who plays the odds*



Micah Parsons celebrates a sack in his rookie season with the Irish. Parsons was one of the major success stories of the 2021 draft and is slated to lead a strong Irish team back to the post-season in 2022.

every week recently expressed surprise when I gave him an “insider tip” that Erieau would win the South Division. ‘Erieau? Which team is that?’ he replied in confusion. ‘You know, the team named after a car with the riverboat on its helmet,’ I explained. He paused to think for a moment and his eyes lit up. ‘You’re right, I’ve seen that helmet before.’ The eerie awakening to the existence of Erieau, an unknown land, not fabled yet secret and mysterious all the same, is a disquieting experience for football fans. How could such a team exist? How had it navigated 16 weeks of the EFL schedule every year for six seasons, on television, without anybody really noticing? The team’s strange obscurity is tied inextricably to the phenomenon of the Erieau peninsula itself. Languorous and dreamy, the ‘ha-ha’ of seagulls circling, the knock of boats in the marina, the gentle waves lapping the shore, the burble of groups of friends enjoying a pint of Bayside, the clinking of cutlery over a grilled perch at Molly & OJ’s, the allure of quaint gift shops stocked with decorative mugs, the impressionist art galleries, the marked stillness of one of the last volunteer libraries on the planet...all these sights and sounds serve together to sedate the visitor, to knock out any testosterone stored up for the release of unbridled boisterousness at little Kelly-Burke Field. It is a place where players eventually lose their athletic talent to pursue pottery, sailing and rug hooking. It is where Football goes to die.”

The Cadillac have yet to hit overdrive in the team’s six-year history and enter their seventh season without much of a reputation of any kind with which to barter for publicity. However, if a steadily growing group of analysts is correct, this might be the season where everything changes. The lynchpin for success, no surprise, will be at the quarterback position.

“This is a make-or-break year for young gun, **Kyler Murray**,” stated **Kevin Kolb** on his weekly show, *Sunday Signals* on ESPN. “The Cadillac made him the third pick of the 2019 draft because they believed he has all the tools to lead their team to the playoffs and, hopefully, to a championship. His toolkit is impressive and he has a kind of natural ‘feel’ for the game that makes you think he could go all year without looking at a playbook and still move the offence. But I think the pressure of having those big expectations on his shoulders may have worked against him the past two years. He must learn to trust his teammates to make plays. Not take on too much himself. He should not be running 152 times as he did last year. Fortunately, he has help this year with big weapons at wide receiver, two steady running backs, an all-pro calibre tight end, and a defence that will be better-manned in the secondary while retaining the strong pass rush of the team’s front seven.”

Defence has never been the main problem for the Cadillac, though. Failures of the back end are usually attributable to a chronically stagnant offence putting it back on the field before the players have caught their breath. If the offence can hold on to the ball longer and post a couple of extra scores a game, the Erieau defence has a chance to join the elite.

“Reducing the pre-season to three games from four to accommodate the league’s new 17-game schedule and the reluctance of coaches to play their starters for fear of injury decreases the reliability of pre-season results as a predictor of regular season success or failure,” begins **Mumbar Thakar** of *Pro Football Focal Point* in his essay, ‘Pre-Season All-Stars.’ *“However, individual performances can be graded on their own merit and sometimes the tape just jumps out at an evaluator. This was the case with three of our Defensive All-Stars, each a member of the Cadillac. Corner, **Trevon Diggs** shutout opposing quarterbacks, allowing no completions and making three interceptions in four series. If not for a missed tackle on a running play and an illegal contact penalty, he would have registered the first perfect rating in PFFP history. **Myles Garrett** looked larger than life in limited action against second-string tackles and **Joey Bosa** was Joey Bosa-plus.”*

“Okay guys, now hear me out on this!” **Skope Boylezz** submitted as the ESPN panel was about to disintegrate into a frivolous debate over whether or not **Tua Tagovailoa** can be taken seriously as a quarterback because he’s left-handed. “I am going to lay it on the line right now! The Cadillac are going to be the surprise team of 2022. They have the defence, the skill players and the quarterback to win the South Division this year!”

An instant of shock-absorbing silence followed Boylezz’s pronouncement. Then the panel erupted into a cacophony of chuckles and jeers. The first to express his shock and outrage was none other than **Russ Flont**.

“There you go again, Skope! Trying to get attention by saying the most ridiculous things. Have you no shame?” Flont shouted, his eyes wide and his lips quavering, a fleck of foam visible in a corner of his mouth. “The Cadillac have done nothing for six years. They have no plan, no football culture and no fan-base. That’s not going to change because they drafted **Kyle Hamilton**. And, typical of you, you are discounting the impact of the best quarterback in that division, **Matt Ryan**, who may be the best quarterback to ever play the game. The guy *only* has three championship rings. So, what if the Pink Panthers were traumatized last year and fell apart on the field? That means they will be highly motivated to turn things around. They have the veteran talent to do it. Erieau win the division? They might not even climb over the Gladiators to avoid the basement.”

The sharp turn of the debate over who will win the South Division is reflective of the polarizing positions of pundits across the nation and beyond as data, scouting reports, injury reports and team storylines point to a potentially wide-open field of playoff-calibre teams in the Atlantic Conference. Once again, we must turn to FootballOutriders.Org to begin to understand the complex dynamics at play.

“If you wish to understand the situation in the Atlantic Conference, throw out any devotion you may have to the

theory of past behaviour being the best predictor of future performance. Take, for example, the Pink Panthers last year. Nobody predicted such a drop-off from their performance in Aurora, even though moving to a new city at the eleventh hour and integrating a completely new coaching staff are big changes. We all had a logical bias toward believing in their continued success, or at least a version of it in 2021. That did not transpire. 'It is a brand-new season' as the saying goes," **Harry Schultz** writes in 'Outriders Pro Football Almanac.' *"This one will be no exception. Among our many surprises when we ran the data through our system was the lack of a clear-cut division-winner in any of the three Atlantic divisions. There was also was a near-open competition for the two wildcard positions due to the lack of any true pushovers. While in the end there will be teams that finish in last place and well out of the playoffs, it will not necessarily be because those teams were never good enough, it will be because they simply lost and another good team won."*

The high-level assessment above is reflected in the great disparity of division title forecasts in the mainstream media landscape. A razor thin conservative majority tends to side with the status quo of Durham in the North, Budapest in the Coastal, and East Elmhurst in the South – the same three winners as last year. However, virtually none of these forecasts are as confident in the first two as they were last year and for those willing to admit that they underestimated the Irish in 2021, forecasters are making a point not to over-estimate them in 2022.

"East Elmhurst did some good things in the off-season to patch up and consolidate last year's surprisingly competitive roster," explains **Jim Miller** of *Sirius XM EFL Network* radio. "They bolstered the safety position with two high profile signings: **Kamren Curl** and **Bobby McCain**. Added impact and depth at LB with **Troy Reeder** and **Mykal Walker**. Added a rotational body on the defensive line in **Carl Granderson** and a potential starter on the offensive line in **Nate Solder**. They even added kicker **Eddie Pineiro** of the Tex-Mex League's Tijuana Tacos, to boot. Get it – to boot? <ha ha!> Then they lured veteran guard **Andrew Norwell** away from New Jersey. It is a more complete roster this year. But I think that making such a bold switch at quarterback was risky and it will make or break their bid for a second straight division title. They must have seen something in Baker that made them nervous, or something in Carson that lit up their eyes. Whatever it was, I don't see it, and the proof of their instinct, or impulse, will play out on the field this year, for better or worse."

For those analysts on the cutting edge of analysis or sliding off the edge of sanity, some intriguing possibilities have been offered up as potential candidates to knock off the three front-runners, Durham, Budapest and East Elmhurst. In addition to the near-mainstream view that **Tom Brady** and the Excaliburs are due for a resurgence, a strong minority of commentators favour **Jalen Hurts** and the Spartans to upend the Budapest behemoth in the Coastal Division.

"The Philip Rivers era is over in Pickering and now the Spartans have an entirely different type of quarterback in declared starter Jalen Hurts and back-up prospect Zach Wilson," writes **Caleb Cogger** of *EFL Magazine*. *"Both of these young guns are unknown quantities. Hurts has only attempted 19 passes in two EFL seasons while Wilson had a redshirt year in 2021 and has yet to see the field in regular season action. From what we have seen in the pre-season though, both possess the kind of skills that give them very high ceilings in the modern game, where so much value and emphasis is placed on the quarterback's mobility and so-called 'off-schedule' plays. Certainly, Hurts can run. How often he has to will depend on whether Gus Konstantakos' traditional offence, built for years around a pocket passer, can adapt to the new skill set Hurts brings. It also will depend on how well Hurts can make his reads on play-action, a staple of the Spartan attack. If Hurts can pass the ball effectively on script and run and throw effectively off-script, this Spartan offence could bloom rapidly. The defence still boasts takeaway potential and can bring pressure on the opposing quarterback. All together, this is certainly a team that cannot be discounted as a factor in the Coastal Division, as well as a playoff contender."*

The same type of case can be made, however, about all but a couple of longshots in the Atlantic Conference – Brooklin and Georgia. But even those two have their defenders. One of those, the terminally demented **Sperl Sponefritter** of *Sperl's World of Sports* – whose off-the-wall predictions of a Brooklin playoff run in 2020 and a division win for East Elmhurst in 2021 both came true – cannot be discounted either when he weighs in with another vote for the Hawks in 2022.

"In the quiet time between wars, wise old Tom Jones paid a visit to the Great Blue Heron Casino on the reserve of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island. He came in peace and stated his intention by placing a two-hundred dollar bet on '2' in roulette. He lost the bet but he got the attention of the Elder in charge of the casino, Kelly Abooksigun, who understood that by placing his bet on '2' Jones had surrendered his will to the duality of man in order that unity may be achieved, a clear peace offering," began Sponefritter in his article 'Mother Spirit Hawk.' *"The two equals sat down and shared Budweisers over a plate of sacred wings – these two, symbolic offerings of the power of the Hawk and a relinquishment of control to the wisdom of the Spirit Mother. And it was thus that the curse placed upon Hawkeye Park by Albert Hawk Eye was lifted by the Ancestors of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island, freeing the spirits to imbue its warriors Derek Carr, DeAndre Hopkins and Austin Ekeler with the power of the Hawk, making them invincible at home. With nine home games this year in a 17-game schedule, the Hawks are virtually guaranteed to make the playoffs and, with two or three road wins, perhaps win the division."*

Back at ESPN's 'Lay It on the Line' roundtable, discussion was heating up around the subject of the South Division, with **Will Simons** taking exception to **Russ Flont**'s cavalier dismissal of Georgia.



Offensive guru, **Russ Lemmon** of the Swordfish puzzles out how to keep the league's two best running backs happy while at the same time setting passing records in a bid for the North Division in 2022.

"It's funny how you are so quick to defend **Matt Ryan**, Russ, while dismissing a team led by **Ben Roethlisberger** as a shoe-in for the basement," Simons interrupted, as Flont continued his anti-Cadillac diatribe. "Look, I'm not saying the Gladiators are going to win the South Division, but I think it would be stupid to look at them as a lost cause. Even if Big Ben's arm isn't that 'big' anymore, the team has arguably the best trio of running backs in the league, a decent number-one wide receiver in **Diontae Johnson**, a prolific tight end in **Zach Ertz** and a pretty good, unsung offensive line. The defence is not going to win any awards but it is improved over last year and **Dave Birdsall** is an excellent defensive coach. The Gladiators aren't great, but they certainly aren't bad."

If there is a safe seat at the top of any of the three Atlantic Conference divisions, it probably belongs to Durham. But that is a big "if" according to **Harry Schultz**:

"The divide between the Thunder Lizards and their fellow contestants in the North Division is not as wide as last year," writes Schultz in his 2022 *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*. *"Durham's defence*

*must still be considered a top-five defence, despite some chinks appearing in the secondary and the linebacking corps with the departures of **Richard Sherman** and **Bud Dupree**, but it will not be the prohibitive force that it was last year. On offence, there is no true slot receiving threat, unless one counts **TY Hilton** as being at full strength which, if he was, one can assume Sebastian would not have released him. Also preying on the minds of fans and factoring into our analysis as an intangible is **Josh Allen**'s poor performance in the Conference Championship. How did that affect his confidence?"*

If Durham has taken a step backwards, have any of the other three teams in the division made noticeable improvements? Schultz equivocates on that point, but implies they have:

"Heading into the final week of the pre-season the Swordfish appear to be the popular favourite to overthrow Durham for the division title," Schultz continues. *"It is easy to understand why; their offence was at times unstoppable last year and they have only improved it with the acquisitions of **Dalton Schultz** – boosting the receiving threat at the tight end position – and veteran wide receiver, **A.J. Green**, who appears to have at least one more productive season in him. They still have two of the best running backs in football, **Jonathan Taylor** and **Nick Chubb**, sharing the backfield as well as **Kirk Cousins**, who continues to defy the naysayers with elite quarterback play. However, we don't agree that any of this will make them more dangerous in 2022. What people don't understand is just how lucky the Swordfish were, statistically, to have had a winning record last season. They had the highest fourth-down conversion rate of any team in the league by far and a significant number of those came in high-risk situations. We calculate that had they converted at just an average rate in those, what we call, 'high-leverage situations,' they would have finished with at least two fewer wins and a corresponding two more losses. They also declined defensively a bit this off-season, if that is possible. They traded their best defensive player, **Budda Baker**, in the deal for Schultz. **Russ Lemmon** is going all-in on offence this year, apparently willing to live without a defence. We predict that will cost the Swordfish dearly in the end."*

So, if Sebastian is unlikely to repeat its extraordinary fourth down fortune in 2022, who will take their place in the anti-Durham coalition? Schultz won't risk the well-earned reputation of FootballOutriders.Org with a straight answer, but suggests an old hated rival might have the best shot:

"If the Corn Kings can get their quarterback situation stabilized, they could surprise some opponents with a more consistent and more explosive offence. At its best it will probably not break into the top quarter, but it does not need to be much better in order to improve the team's bottom line," Schultz explains. *"A better offence will mean less time on the field for **T.J. Watt**, who is the heart and soul of the defence. Cowtown invested a lot of money in Watt this off-season because he makes everyone else around him better. His supporting cast, led by **Roquan Smith**, is solid when healthy. Nagging injuries this pre-season may return to haunt them down the stretch, but if they manage to keep that defence on the field through 17 weeks, they could very well nose past the Lizards."*

So, what does Schultz mean by getting the quarterback situation “stabilized?” The quarterback situation in Cowtown appears to be, as often it is, the product of small-town politics. There is certainly no ready football explanation for why Cowtown owner, **Farmer Brown**, would sign unproven second-year quarterback **Davis Mills** to a long-term deal at almost triple the salary of starting quarterback, **Jimmy Garoppolo**.

After drafting Mills as an insurance policy behind the chronically fragile Garoppolo and geriatric journeyman, **Ryan Fitzpatrick** in 2021, Mills made just five appearances in 2021, all in relief, attempting just 33 passes. His performance was unnoteworthy apart from the fact that he did not stink. With Garoppolo apparently healthy heading into 2022, the question of why the team would invest heavily in an unproven back-up has yet to be addressed head-on by Cowtown coach, **Jim Coughlin**. The only person in a position to penetrate the mystery and who will speak about it, is octogenarian beat reporter, **Orville Smucker** of the *Cowtown Plain Dealer*, who appeared with **Alex Marvez** on *Sirius XM EFL Network* radio to explain, rather ambiguously. A portion of the interview is repeated verbatim here, so that the reader can draw their own conclusions:

“Well, you know...Jimmy has a reputation around town as a bit of a...a bit of a rascal, you see,” Smucker explained in his slow southern Ontarian drawl. “He was dating the Appleton girl...Penny...the one who works in the back office at the cheese factory. That...as some of you know...did not sit well with Missy, Farmer Brown’s daughter, Missy...as she’s known. I don’t know if that’s her real name or the name they call her. But anyway...Missy didn’t like it.” A long pause followed...

“Okay, so Orville, Missy didn’t like that Jimmy G was dating this girl, and Missy is Farmer Brown’s daughter, who owns the Corn Kings and pays Jimmy G’s cheques, correct?” Marvez prompted, while recapping the interview to that point.

“I said I don’t know if Missy is her real name...but we can call her that for now...because that’s what everyone calls her in town,” Smucker replied, slightly irritated. “So, Jimmy stopped seeing this Appleton girl in, I guess it was back in 2020 season...I think...and he got his job back that year. Played pretty well by all accounts...and things looked pretty good for Jimmy...he signed a contract and they gave him a house in the north side of town...and a tractor, too, I think. Or maybe it was a pick-up...can’t recall exactly what they gave him extra in addition to his salary...” Orville trailed off and paused.

“Okay, so Jimmy G stopped seeing the Appleton girl and Farmer Brown rewarded him with a contract and a free house and car, is that correct?” Marvez asked, cueing his guest to continue.

“Yes...that sounds about right...but like I said, I don’t think it was a car...it was some kind of vehicle the Appletons sell...like a tractor or a pick-up...could have been a giant lawn mower, because the yard was a big yard,” Smucker replied.

“Okay, so what happened then? Why would they want to move on from Jimmy G after that?” Marvez inquired, trying to put the interview back on track.

“Well...that was the thing, you see!” Smucker chuckled. “They gave him that house in North Cowtown...and that’s the neighbourhood where Penny Appleton lives...just one block east of Jimmy’s new place!” Smucker burst into a laugh. “Farmer Brown didn’t deliberate too finely on that point I reckon...because he put Jimmy right back in the arms of that girl! You know...from what I hear, Penny ain’t really a bad girl...she just done skulked off with that Dean Smith back when she was too young to know any better and nobody will forgive her for it...poor young soul.”

“So, are you saying, Orville, that Jimmy G is back dating Penny Appleton? And that’s why the Corn Kings are planning to move on from Jimmy G as soon as Davis Mills is ready?” Marvez asked, tying it all together.

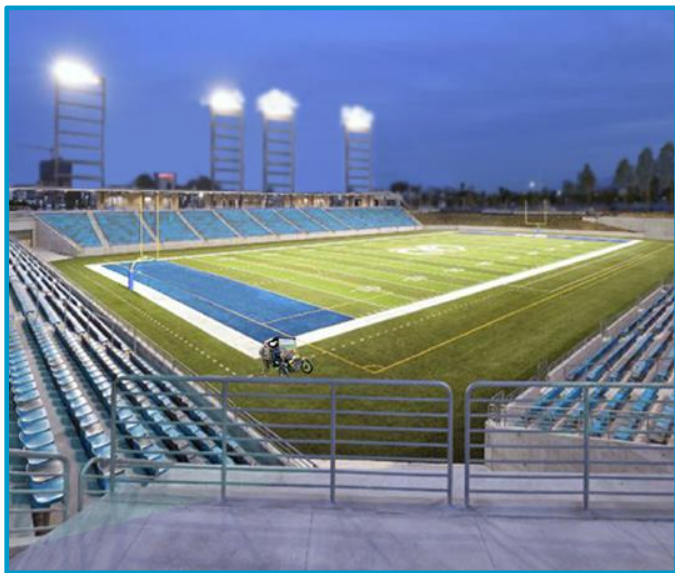
“I’m not saying that...not saying that at all!” Smucker replied testily. “I’m telling you that Farmer Brown made a mistake by buying Jimmy a house in the north side of town. It’s not Jimmy’s fault he’s smitten by that Appleton girl.”

“Okay, so help me to understand, Orville,” Marvez asked, proceeding cautiously. “If Farmer Brown made a mistake by buying Jimmy G a house in the same neighbourhood as his old girlfriend, resulting in them getting back together, does that mean that Farmer Brown is unhappy with Jimmy G getting back with her and that might explain why he wants to get rid of him?”

“People can say what they want about it, I guess...,” Smucker replied. “It’s not really anyone’s business who Jimmy sees...but the fans, you know, some of them care about that. Cowtown is a religious town and all that...not that there’s no tomfoolery in the place...there is shenanigans...but people like to keep those to themselves and don’t like it when people make it too plain, you know. Jimmy kind of does his thing without caring what other people think...that’s his problem.”

So, while **Jimmy Garoppolo** appears to be playing on borrowed time in Cowtown – to the likely detriment of the team’s chemistry – it is unabashedly ‘Burrow Time’ in another North Division locale. And those who get paid to guess think this could very well be the year that the Scarborough young gun finally realizes his potential.

“The Blue Eagles are very much in the hunt this year, but they face a precarious path to success,” writes **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org. *“Joe Burrow gives them hope. He worked through his sophomore year with poise and purpose on a team that was not ready to compete. This year, the offensive line protecting him is one of the best on paper at both run and pass-blocking, giving him the protection that he needs to make the most out of what is admittedly a lackluster group of receivers and a patchwork committee at running back. Our models project an efficient Burrow, who gets the ball out of his hands a little quicker than he did his first two seasons, gets streaky at times and that allows the offence to generate*



A study in contrasts: On the left, tiny Kelly-Burke Field in Erieau, the smallest venue in the EFL with a seating capacity of 28,740. On the right: The shiny brand-new Iowa City Superplex, also known as the ‘Fergy Dome,’ with a seating capacity of 75,600, the second largest in the league. The EFL is diverse and full of discrepancies like the above, which makes it fun.

*enough points to win in games where the defence holds its own. Having said that, the defence is so leaky in the back end that pass-rush pressure from **Nick Bosa** and **Travon Walker** up front will not be enough to plug the holes consistently. Fans can expect to see plenty of ups and downs throughout the season but if Burrow can keep it together, a few more ups might be enough for a playoff spot.”*

Hope springs eternal for the Blue Eagles but history cautions against holding high expectations. Fans in Scarborough are so accustomed to disappointment that they rarely threaten owner, **Chris Dickinson** with death anymore. The move of the team’s front office to the renamed Eagle’s Nest in West Toronto’s CNE grounds has also removed a convenient target of vandalism from close proximity to the most volatile and vengeful hooligans among the so-called Blue Eagle Faithful. The presence of Burrow also helps to cool the temperature. Despite just nine wins in two seasons since being made the number-one pick in the draft in 2020, the trajectory of one of the league’s prized “young guns” is rising. Fans believe it is only a matter of time before their talented young quarterback turns around the team’s fortunes for a long time.

Quarterback is doubtless the most important position in the game. It sounds hackneyed to say so. However, it is worth restating as the league moves into its sixteenth season with so many eyes on the quarterback position. The growing ranks of the so-called ‘Young Guns’ are aiming to unseat the veterans now – not content to wait their turn. They are an intriguing mix of the more traditional pocket passer styles, exemplified by **Joe Burrow**, **Justin Herbert** and **Mac Jones**, and the more mobile “dual threat” style epitomized by the likes of **Kyler Murray**, **Josh Allen**, **Jalen Hurts** and, its fully-developed form, **Patrick Mahomes**. Will the grizzled veterans be able to hold on to their dominance in the playoffs for yet another season? Will **Tom Brady** finally break through and end his personal championship drought of 13 years? Will **Aaron Rodgers** continue to toy with star-studded, young defences and deliver an unprecedented third consecutive championship to his Hall-of-Fame resume? Will **Matt Stafford** finally express his great arm talent in the form of Gale Sayers trophy and remove the hex of doom hanging over the Wrecking Balls? These are questions that cannot be answered now. These questions, and many others, will be answered over the next 17 weeks of regular season action and 4 weeks of playoff clashes in the EFL’s sixteenth glorious season. Happy Birthday EFL! Sixteen promises to be sweet indeed!





It is written

The Football Oracle

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

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

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

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

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

PACIFIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



15-2

NEW JERSEY WRECKING BALLS

COACH: Jeff Cohen

OFFENCE: A+ DEFENCE: A-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B TOT: A

The combination of **Matt Stafford**, two top-tier WRs, the secret “**Deebo**” weapon and a strong pass-blocking line fuels a high-powered offence that will dominate most competition. **Chidobe Awuzie** and **Antoine Winfield Jr.** lead an A-grade, comeback-stifling secondary. **Chris Boswell** is a money kicker in the clutch. This is team to be reckoned with.



9-8

BUFFALO DERAILERS

COACH: Daryl Brothers

OFFENCE: B DEFENCE: B

SPECIAL TEAMS: A- TOT: B

Lamar Jackson has new help in the backfield with change-of-pace back, **AJ Dillon**. Rookie **Wan'Dale Robinson** spruces up a waning receiver corps that will give-up targets to TE, **Noah Fant**. **Aaron Donald** is most of the defence but **Kayvon Thibodeaux** and **Amani Oruwariye** will be noticed. **Jake Elliott** leads a well-rounded special-teams group.



5-12

BRUXELLES BOMBERS

COACH: Ken Main

OFFENCE: B DEFENCE: C

SPECIAL TEAMS: A- TOT: C+

Joel Bitonio and **Jordan Mailata** anchor the best offensive line in football. **Chris Godwin** is a stud at WR and **Elijah Mitchell** has pro bowl twitch at RB. Can **Jared Goff** live up to his support? **Darius Slay** and **Robert Quinn** bring star power to 'D' but lack of depth will be felt late in the season. **Matt Prater** and slippery **Andre Roberts** boost special teams.



2-15

COBB COUNTY COYOTES

COACH: Eron Osman

OFFENCE: C+ DEFENCE: C-

SPECIAL TEAMS: D- TOT: D+

To avoid a win-less season, the Coyotes will rely on **Ryan Tannehill** getting time to throw to **Brandin Cooks** and **Michael Pittman Jr** behind a fine pass-blocking O-line. A fairly talented secondary will be hung out to dry behind a front-seven still under construction. Punter, **Jordan Berry** is the best piece of a shockingly decrepit special teams group.

CENTRAL DIVISION



13-4

VIRDEN VIOLATORS

COACH: Lance Barrate

OFFENCE: A DEFENCE: B+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B- TOT: A-

Patrick Mahomes elevates a splendid quartet of pass-catching threats, starting with deep threat **Ja'Marr Chase** and finishing with stalwart safety valve **TJ Hockenson**. **Ezekiel Elliott** hopes to get enough carries to feel part of the movement. **Derwin James** is the enforcer in a “just good enough” defence. With all that, who needs a kick returner?



8-9

PEG CITY CRUSADERS

COACH: Stephen Katopodis

OFFENCE: C+ DEFENCE: A-

SPECIAL TEAMS: A TOT: B-

Mac Jones will need help from the run game to succeed consistently with **Courtland Sutton** as his no.1 wide target and **Kyle Pitts** likely to face double-teams. Don't expect **Chuba Hubbard** to help much. The defence, led by **Chris Jones**, will save the day week-to-week, keeping them in the hunt. Return game is aces and **Younghoe Koo** is quite cool.



6-11

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

COACH: Guy Williams

OFFENCE: C+ DEFENCE: A-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B+ TOT: B-

Jameis Winston or **Trevor Lawrence** – it won't make much difference to an attack with only **DJ Moore** and (fingers crossed) **Breece Hall** as autograph-worthy participants. The defence, led by **Bobby Wagner** and **Kenny Clark**, will be the stabilizer capable of turning games around. **Devin Duvernay** is an elite returner in a down year for such assets.



1-16

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

COACH: Jason Findlay

OFFENCE: D DEFENCE: C

SPECIAL TEAMS: C+ TOT: D+

Give the Pats credit – when they rebuild, they don't mess around. Unproven rookie **Kenny Pickett** will try, and fail, to replace **DeShaun Watson** at QB. **Alvin Kamara** and **Jakobi Meyers** will wish they were dead. The defence will play well for one half before giving up. Punter, **Riley Dixon** needs to be better for a guy who will see a lot of action.

WEST DIVISION



11-6

BILLTOWN BATS

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

Davin Cook will provide a solid go-to option for an offence that needs to carefully set up its deep shots in the passing game. **Justin Herbert** will keep hopes alive for the offence, regardless. **Darius Leonard** and **Cameron Heyward** lead a run-obliterating defence that should hold its own against the pass. Weak special teams could cost a game or two.



10-7

CHINO CONVICTS

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

Dak Prescott will lean on **Christian McCaffrey** until he can't. **Ronald Jones II** is a solid second option in the backfield. **Darnell Mooney** will provide pleasant shade for **Marvin Jones**. **AJ Terrell** is a much-needed security blanket in the secondary and **Von Miller** a steadying influence in the second level. Special team kick returners are a scoring threat.



5-12

IOWA CITY CUBS

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

Russell Wilson, guard **Quenton Nelson** and WR, **AJ Brown** will be relied upon to keep this season from being embarrassing. With just two running backs on the roster...well, do the math if there is an injury. The defence, once a source of pride, looks like the worst in the league. **Justin Tucker** is there as well as a much-needed good kick-coverage team.



5-12

SEATTLE PILOTS

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

Quarterback, or lack thereof, will be what draws the Pilots' offence down into the pit of pitifulness this season. Expect **Hunter Renfrow** and **Ceedee Lamb** to be grey-haired by year's end. The defence has names in **Khalil Mack** and **Marshawn Lattimore** but they will fold by Week 9 with no support. Best gunner group in the league helps...a touch.

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



13-4

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

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

Josh Allen to **Cooper Kupp** is a match made in Hell for opponents. **Rashaad Penny** is the secret weapon of a productive running back committee. **De'Vondre Campbell** and **Justin Simmons** command the center at the second level of the 'D' as **Trey Hendrickson** and **Brian Burns** pressure the edge. Rookie kicker and lack of punt returner will hurt a bit.



9-8

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

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

Jonathan Taylor and **Nick Chubb** form the top backfield in football, setting up deadly play-action opportunities for **Kirk Cousins** to an ageing group of WRs still able to get the job done. Lack of depth on defensive line is sure to undermine the rest of a shaky defence. Solid trio of gunners and kicker, **Daniel Carlson** boost the special teams grade.



9-8

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

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

Jimmy Garoppolo will need to be more than a game manager to turn **Mike Evans** and a thoroughly average set of skill players into a consistent threat. **TJ Watt** and **Roquan Smith** lead a pretty good defence that could punch above its weight if healthy over the long haul. **Joey Slye** is a bit erratic but the return game is better than average and deep.



8-9

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

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

An excellent offensive line, anchored by **Zak Martin**, gives young stud QB, **Joe Burrow** the best chance to succeed with a lackluster receiving corps and run-of-the-mill running backs. **Nick Bosa** and **Trayvon Walker** are studs in an otherwise patchwork defence that will give up plenty of yards. **Mason Crosby** looked a little creaky in the pre-season.

COASTAL DIVISION



14-3

YORK EXCALIBURS

COACH: Jay Hammond
OFFENCE: A DEFENCE: A-
SPECIAL TEAMS: B- TOT: A

Derrick Henry needs no introduction but his capable back-up *Javonte Williams* may. *Tom Brady* finally has the receivers to inflict lasting damage on opposing secondaries. *Jordan Poyer* and *Kevin Byard* form the top safety tandem, perhaps ever, while *DeForest Buckner* wreaks havoc on the line. ST coverage is good but lack of kick-returner will hurt.



13-4

BUDAPEST NORTH STARS

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

Aaron Rodgers is locked & loaded with *Stefon Diggs* and *Justin Jefferson* forming an elite passing combo. All wait and see how the experiment with *Cordarrell Patterson* at RB will go. *Quandre Diggs* is emerging as rival to *Minkah Fitzpatrick* on a defence more reliant than ever on *Cameron Jordan*. Fumble-prone *Amari Rodgers* is only chink in ST.



9-8

PICKERING SPARTANS

COACH: Gus Konstantakos
OFFENCE: B+ DEFENCE: B
SPECIAL TEAMS: C+ TOT: B

Jalen Hurts brings extra legs to a strong run game prepared by All-pro tackle *Trent Williams* and powered by *Miles Sanders* and *De'Andre Swift*. *Marquise Brown* will be tested as a no.1. *Micah Hyde* captains a strong secondary that boasts ballhawk *Xavien Howard* but is light at linebacker. *Greg Zuerlein* may be nearing the end of a nice career.



6-11

BROOKLIN HAWKS

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

The offence has a chance with *Austin Ekeler* at RB, *Derek Carr* at QB and emerging young receivers in *Drake London* and *Van Jefferson* complementing *DeAndre Hopkins*. They must produce as the defence, weakly led by *Jessie Bates*, will vie for the basement in yards surrendered. Unsure who, if anybody, is returning kicks for this team.

SOUTH DIVISION



12-5

EAST ELMHURST

COACH: Chris Ferraro
OFFENCE: B+ DEFENCE: A
SPECIAL TEAMS: BTOT: A-

Tyreek Hill is a super-star, *Tyler Lockett* is a star and *Aaron Jones* is underrated. Can *Carson Wentz* make it all come together? Stud tackle *Andrew Whitworth* will help give him a chance. Robust defence boasts all-pro talent at each level, with Jalen Ramsey and Micah Parsons leading the golden horde. Kicking durability may be Achilles Heel of ST.



10-7

ERIEAU CADILLAC

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

The offence rides on *Kyler Murray*'s ability to take a step up to the next level. If he does, this could be one of the top offences with *Mark Andrews* and *Jaylen Waddle* as prime targets. *Trevon Diggs* is a voracious ballhawk who will win games, while *Myles Garrett* and *Joey Bosa* terrorize opposing QBs. Top end Kick and punt coverage props ST grade.



8-9

OSHAWA PINK PANTHERS

COACH: Scott Dennis
OFFENCE: C+ DEFENCE: A-
SPECIAL TEAMS: A- TOT: B-

Matt Ryan to *Davante Adams* still one of the league's dangerous passing duos. RB *Melvin Gordon* still has pop in his stride. *Jason Kelce* anchors a sketchy offensive line that is too weak on the edges. *Jeffery Simmons* is a stud on a sturdy D-line, while *Hasaan Reddick* threatens the QB from the edge. *Braxton Berrios* is a dangerous returner.



3-14

GEORGIA GLADIATORS

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

Big Ben or *Tua* at QB – either way it will be tough for this offence to come from behind with just *Diontae Johnson* and *Zach Ertz* as go-to options. Clock and chain action with *James Robinson* and *Josh Jacobs* gives best chance to preserve the energy of a developing but green defence. Average kick & punt returns weak spot in solid ST group.

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Jimmy's WEEK ONE PICKS

NEW JERSEY @ BUFFALO (line – WRECKING BALLS by 2)

This is a major clash to begin the season...at least in theory. Many analysts and most fans fancy Lamar Jackson as a crucial equalizer in any match-up in which the distribution of talent between the combatants is roughly equal. That may be true for the first half of the season – before Lamar's coach squeezes the juice out of his mojo – but that is not the case here regardless of the freshness of his legs. The Wrecking Balls are assuredly the most talented team on the field. They have better offensive weapons at the skill positions, a veteran quarterback who knows where to go with the ball, and a superior, more well-rounded defence. On the other side, AJ Dillon brings some grind to the ground game to complement Lamar's dodginess but that is the only improvement on an offence that has regressed. The health of Robert Woods is a concern and after him there is no clear no.1 target in the pass game. This means Lamar will carry most of the burden, even more so than usual. Barring a highlight-reel display by Lamar, this game can logically only go one way. Give the points and take the visitors but cross your fingers and hope the Cohen Hex fails to manifest. **PICK: NEW JERSEY**

BRUXELLES @ COBB COUNTY (line – COYOTES by 2)

The action is trending ever so slightly toward the home town Coyotes here for no apparent reason other than negligence. Two years of playing above expectations carries an echo into year three, it seems, as bettors discount clear evidence of a widespread roster teardown in Cobb County. On the other hand, they are facing the Bombers, who are coming off their last frustrating hurrah with Drew Brees at the helm and have done next-to-nothing since to really improve their roster to win now. Ryan Tannehill is certainly more accomplished than Jared Goff at this stage but has less to work this year. The Bomber's offensive line is top-quality and that can go a long way toward helping the running game with Elijah Mitchell smooth out the transition to the passing game when needed. Factor in a Bruxelles defence that is stouter than those who remember last year's sieve might think, and there is not much to like about the Coyotes' prospects here. Expect Darius Slay to hamper Brandin Cooks enough to leave Michael Pittman Jr as Tannehill's only exploitable threat and watch the Bomber offensive line pulverize the Coyotes defence to dust. **PICK: BRUXELLES**

TWIN CITIES @ CHARLESWOOD (line – TRIUMPH by 3)

I am somewhat surprised that the line is not a bit bigger in favour of the visitors. That may be less an expression of confidence in the Kenny-Pickett-led Patriots and more of skepticism about Jameis Winston being up to the starting assignment over Trevor Lawrence. The preservation – some would say babying – of the jewel of the Triumph franchise is frustrating to fans and analysts alike, as it deprives us all of a chance to see what this supposed phenom prospect can do. Instead, we get to see Winston again, whose turnover history makes sensible Triumph fans shudder and who has done nothing apparent to any outsider to warrant his coach's faith in him. All the same, if a coach was looking to build back a quarterback's confidence or possibly generate trade value, one could not have hand-picked a more suitable opponent to "get right" against. The Patriots are by design a shambles in almost all areas of the roster one year after making it to the Conference Championship. They are at least indifferent about winning and likely secretly opposed to it. This is a lay-up game for Winston and one in which he could survive a couple of picks and still win handily. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

VIRDEN @ PEG CITY (line – VIOLATORS by 5)

While this game is not likely to factor into the Central Division title down the road, it will likely prove to be the toughest division game that Virden has on its schedule this season. Strange as that sounds one year after the Crusaders very nearly joined the shameful ranks of the win-less, it is nevertheless true. The youth talent movement in Peg City is bearing early fruit with a defence that is more than respectable with the return of a healthy Chris Jones and the acquisition of shutdown corner JC Jackson. Mac Jones, who is one year wiser after acquitting himself honourably in his rookie season has attractive prospects to throw to in Brandon Aiyuk and Kyle Pitts and the offensive line isn't bad, even if a touch weak on the right side. Of course, all of this will not be enough to stymie Patrick

Mahomes and Ja.Marr Chase or overcome Derwin James and a steady Virden defence but it's nice to see the Pegs won't be pushovers this year. Expect to see some of that pushback in the early going with Virden pulling away at the end. **PICK: VIRDEN**

CHINO @ IOWA CITY (line – CONVICTS by 4)

The bitter history between these combatants creates a dramatic allure of its own regardless of where either of these teams sit in the standings. Traditionally that has been neck-and-neck with each other but not this year. Week One in Iowa City marks the opening of the Cubs' brand-new stadium as well as the first week of its descent into a hopeless, double-digit loss campaign as the team looks to rebuild around Russell Wilson for one final shot at glory a year or two from now. The Convicts, almost by default, find they are, at worst, the second-best team in the West Division and, at best, a viable contender to beat out the Bats for the top spot. Chino has a strong offence with Dak Prescott having multiple targets to throw to on the outside and an elite outlet threat, as long as he remains healthy, in Christian McCaffrey. The Cubs have Wilson and that's about it. The Iowa defence is likely to be in contention for the worst in the league by season's end. Apart from 'opening day' energy, not much to like about the home team here. **PICK: CHINO**

SEATTLE @ BILLTOWN (line – BATS by 8)

Provided the distractions around the Bats playing "at home" in the stadium of the former Assassins franchise are not too severe and the fans not too acrimonious, this should be a nice opening-day tune-up for the team's new coach and staff. Their opponent, the Pilots come into the season with multiple options at quarterback, none of them too enticing in the short term, and not much to support them in the form of weapons in any case. The Seattle defence, known for its ability to keep the team in games, appears about to lose its edge, or it may be that Khalil Mack is just getting frustrated and not playing with the same intensity as he looks at the hopelessness of the offence. Whatever is ailing the Pilots will make things a little easier for Justin Herbert as he meets the pressure of great expectations heading into his second year as the starter. He has an embarrassment of riches in the backfield in Dalvin Cook and Damien Harris and a decent receiving corps that should be able to take advantage of the space such a run game provides. Of course, it is the Bats' defence that really owns the show in Vegas. Expect them to make a big statement on opening day. **PICK: BILLTOWN**

SEBASTIAN @ COWTOWN (line – CORN KINGS by 1)

The Corn Kings get a razor's width of a homefield edge here, which means the oddsmakers think the Swordfish are the better team. They may be right but it is too early to say. Sebastian lived on the edge of disaster last year and came out a winner. Whether they can do it again and get away with it remains to be seen. Cowtown should be better offensively with Jimmy Garoppolo healthy while the Swordfish defence took a step back from last year's questionable state. Cowtown should put points on the board, compelling the Swordfish to keep pace. Much fanfare has been directed at the danger posed by Jonathan Taylor and Nick Chubb sharing the backfield duties, but there are only so many running plays in today's pass-driven game. At some point, Kirk Cousins will likely have to put the offence on his shoulders and you can bet that TJ Watt will be waiting eagerly for that moment. The Cowtown secondary is not too worried about the Swordfish receivers. Expect at least 24 points a side in a narrow home win. **PICK: COWTOWN**

SCARBOROUGH @ DURHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 8)

The Thunder Lizards get thrown a softball on their home turf to start the season. It is not that the Blue Eagles are certified weaklings or grossly overmatched, it is just that Durham is better than them in every area with the exception of the offensive line, which is something the Lizards need less because of Josh Allen's mobility and the Eagles need more because of Joe Burrow's lack thereof, making it an effective wash. Now that does not preclude the Blue Eagles from getting lucky, or Josh Allen playing like he did in the Conference Championship last year, making this game too close for the home team's comfort. However, the luck trend tends to go against Scarborough more often than not and Josh Allen has been waiting all off-season to wipe away the memory last year's finale, which brings us back to Durham being better than them in every phase, all things being equal. This is the largest line of Week One, making it an opportunity for those who like the underdog. I see the attraction...but not this game, not this week. **PICK: DURHAM**

PICKERING @ BUDAPEST (line – NORTH STARS by 4)

There is a big grassroots pro-Pickering movement afoot centered on the idea that the dual threat of Jalen Hurts and the deep threat of DeVonta Smith will turn this Spartan attack into the football equivalent of some kind of irresistible Mongol Horde. Could be, but I will have to see it more than once to believe it. The Budapest defence will be a tough but predictive test for the Hurts Era offence. If they can put big air points on the board against Minkah Fitzpatrick and Quandre Diggs it will be a very good sign. If not, they may just be another one of those high-ceiling offences that never reaches the top of the ceiling or even gets off the floor. The North Stars, on the other hand, have that kind of irresistible Mongol Horde attack already with Aaron Rodgers at the controls that the Spartans will be hard-pressed to turn away. They will not want to fall into a shootout and so will seek to get the ground game going with

Miles Sanders and Hurts option plays. Expect the Spartans to vigorously test the “championship hangover.” **PICK: PICKERING**

YORK @ BROOKLIN (line – EXCALIBURS by 4)

This scanty line is a product of the off-season moves not sinking in with many people and the bias against York being able to run away from anybody on the scoreboard. It could also be because Derek Carr plays well at home and the Hawks are now counted on to play over their heads against tough competition. Let me be the first of the hard-nosed realists to flatly state that the Hawks’ defence will be on the field for as long as Tom Brady and the York offence chooses to keep them there. There is no place for the Hawks defenders to hide and, frankly, no defence they can muster that will do anything more than occasionally push York into third-and-short. As for the respectably-tooled Brooklin offence, it will need to be patient and confine itself to short and steady advances as Kevin Byard and Jordan Poyer are already busting at the seams waiting for DeAndre Hopkins and Van Jefferson to test them deep. The only real hope for Brooklin is that the York coach has not caught on to how good his offence can be and uses last year’s playbook. **PICK: YORK**

GEORGIA @ OSHAWA (line – PINK PANTHERS by 3)

This season is take-two for Scott Dennis and his Pink Panthers and we all hope, for the sake of football, that the second year goes better than the first. Clearing away the emotional wreckage of last year’s disaster one can see a good Oshawa roster this year led by veterans on the field and an intellectually sound head coach who may have been even unluckier last year than Jeff Cohen of the Wrecking Balls, if that is possible. On paper, the trio of Matt Ryan Ryan, Devonte Adams and Josh Gordon should be able to handle the under-developed Gladiator defence, notwithstanding the Georgia coach’s reputation as a shrewd defensive coordinator. A Matt Ryan interception or two could easily change the equation, but there is no need to force the ball against the Glads, making it less likely that will happen. The Gladiators’ offence will need to be balanced in order to keep the robust Oshawa defence off balance, as there are no glaring weaknesses to exploit there. Big Ben is reportedly the starter for this game, although Tua has been mixed into the offence this pre-season enough that we may see him make an appearance. It should not matter to the bottom line. **PICK: OSHAWA**

ERIEAU @ EAST ELMHURST (line – IRISH by 2)

One year ago, this would have been no contest. This year, the outcome is very much in doubt and could well have implications for the South Division title down the stretch. The Irish will readily take homefield advantage here and will count on their bevy of defensive stars, led by Micah Parsons, to make life difficult for Kyler Murray and the Cadillac offence in a hostile road environment. On the other side, Myles Garrett and Joey Bosa will aim to quiet down the home crowd by forcing Carson Wentz into off-target throws and bad decisions, hoping that Trevon Diggs will be waiting to mop up the mess. Get the message? This will be primarily a defensive struggle, with any turnover differential and the big-play ability of a Tyreek Hill or a Tee Higgins factoring more than usual into the outcome, as both defences will be going after the ball while making it tough for the offences to hold long drives together. This is as tough a call as it will be a game. Expect the home field to be decisive. **PICK: EAST ELMHURST**

