

EFL 2020 PREVIEW



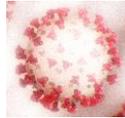
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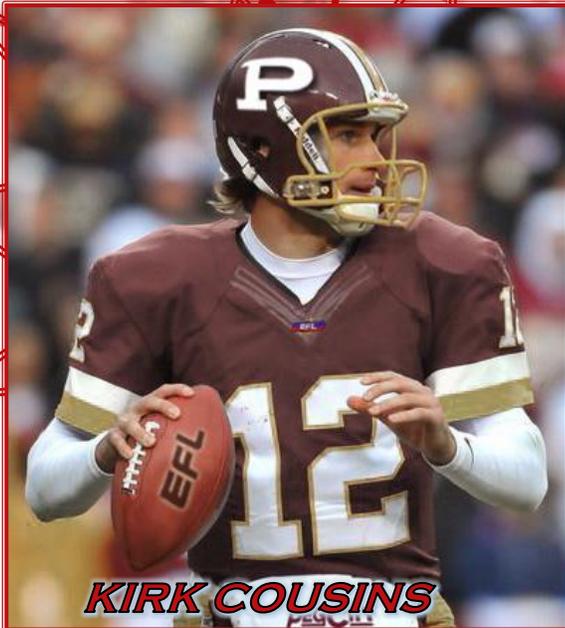
WHO WILL CATCH THE WINNING BUG?



PAT MAHOMES
VIRDEN VIOLATORS

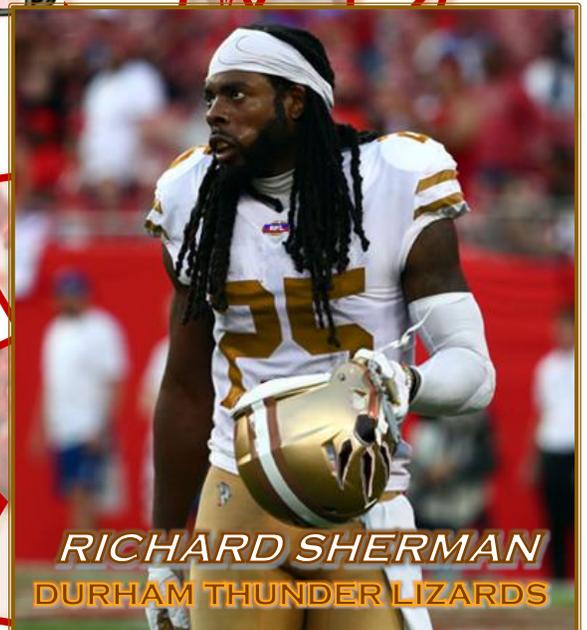


MINKAH FITZPARTICK
BUDAPEST NORTH STARS

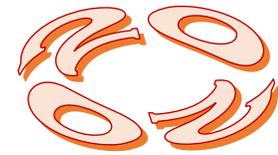


KIRK COUSINS

PEG CITY CRUSADERS



RICHARD SHERMAN
DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS



Troubled Triumph star receiver, **Antonio Brown** appears on the practice field wearing his custom-designed COVID-19 protective helmet. Brown has stated that he will opt out of the season if the league refuses to permit the use of his helmet.

CANTON (AP) – 2020 has been anything but normal due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The NBA and NHL retreated to a bubble. MLB shortened its season to 60 games. The Olympics were postponed. The PGA and LPGA postponed their spring tournaments. Annual marathon runs all around the world were cancelled. The CFL and SFL flat out cancelled their seasons. Even car racing and golf suffered setbacks before resuming with strict rules. The one big professional sports league that has remained relatively unaffected so far is the EFL. That will not hold, however, as State and Provincial governments impose various restrictions that will inevitably affect the appearance and feel of this year's games. The good news is that it looks like we will have games and they will be starting on time.

The EFL has been surprisingly nonprescriptive when it comes to imposing COVID-19 rules on its franchises. The league that attempted to impose without warning radical reforms on its TV broadcasts in 2018, reforms that no fans had wanted or had asked for, has backed off trying to micromanage team's responses to the pandemic. Apart from issuing an ambiguously-worded memo requiring

teams to *“Establish rules and guidelines and furnish the” necessary protective equipment to promote the health and safety of players and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic*” and negotiating a strict “team bubbles” protocol with the Player’s Association for the season, the league has not added any additional universal restrictions to the ones already in place locally in EFL venues. This has given teams a measure of freedom in determining their internal policies and, depending on the geographic location of the franchise, whether or not fans will be allowed to attend games.

In the Province of Ontario, where 7 EFL teams are located, the government has limited unmonitored social gatherings to no more 10 people indoors and 25 people outdoors. However, the rules around monitored events are less clear. Permits can be sought to increase this number provided appropriate measures are in place. In a uniquely strange circumstance, Cowtown is located in a rare ‘Historic Zone,’ meaning that Provincial Laws passed after 1905 can be overwritten by the regional government in Baxter County. The Region does not hesitate to overwrite Provincial legislation it does not like. That is why seat belts are not mandatory in motor

Vehicles in Cowtown, the legal driving age is 14, the legal drinking age is 21 and the sale of liquor is strictly controlled. At the same time the cottage industry of home-distilling corn whiskey (moonshine) is promoted and local home brews can be purchased at supermarkets. It is a bizarre situation, but the net result is that the County summarily overturned the Ontario Government's COVID-19 restrictions, making public gatherings there unregulated. Due to fan demand, Tillman Field will be open to near capacity in 2020, with a special segregated section for the elderly and immune-compromised. The other 6 teams aren't so "lucky," however. All except Pickering and Erieau have had to apply for special permits to open up portions of their stadiums. The Spartans will play to an empty Thermopylae Stadium this year, a decision owner **Gus Konstantakos** did not hesitate to make and strongly defends.

"The Spartan organization values the safety of its players, employees and fans above all other considerations," Konstantakos declared to the media in August. "We have a responsibility to our community to contain the spread of this dangerous virus. We are not going to expose our most vulnerable to unnecessary risk for the sake of a game. As a result, I have enlisted members of our devoted fan club, the '300 Spartans,' to guard the single entrance to Thermopylae Stadium throughout the 2020 football season."

Cadillac owner, **Jamie Rilett** has other motivation, however. "Why bother?" he replied when asked the question about seeking attendance waiver from the government. "Nobody comes to the stadium anyway."

In Winnipeg Manitoba, home of the Charleswood Patriots and Peg City Crusaders, masks are mandatory and gatherings are limited to 10 people as the government returns to early pandemic restrictions in order to stem a rise in cases. It is a situation expected to last at least one month.

"It is unfortunate, but we are living through historic change," Crusader owner, **Carling Thule Richardson** stated in a rare media appearance. "Rest assured that the Crusaders will be taking necessary measures to ensure a rich gameday experience away from True North Field." (Exactly what those measures consist of is entirely unclear, however).

"Patriot Place, the most intimate and sophisticated fan environment in the league, will unfortunately be closing its doors to fans due to government regulations and the recommendations of the Province's medical professionals," announced **Jason Findlay** during the final week of training camp. "The virus is larger than football. While there is no experience that equals game day at Patriot Place, our broadcast-friendly venue will promote the finest television coverage available."

It is perhaps fortunate for the prestige of the Patriots' organization that if there had to be a worldwide pandemic that prevents fans attending stadiums, it would be in a year when the team is expected to struggle on the field. COVID-19 restrictions will go a long way toward covering up what would have been a season of dwindling attendance in Charleswood.

Down the road in Virden, where local municipal restrictions are a little looser but still subject to Provincial regulations relating to large gatherings, a defiant **Lance Barrate** has vowed to challenge the rules.

"Without downplaying the risk posed by this virus, it is still the opinion of the Violators' organization that these measures by the government are arbitrary and unreasonable. Precautions can be implemented to promote a safe game-day experience in the stadium," Barrate contested at a lively press conference held in wake of Manitoba's roll back on restrictions. "We will petition the Premier and, if necessary, take this to court. Our team is on the verge of an historic season and the fans deserve to be a part of it!"

Barrate then introduced local medical expert, **Dr. Bones Grool**, who proceeded to demonstrate through a series of complex graphs and charts, how spread vectors of the virus can be disrupted by the wearing of medieval plague masks inside **TERRORDOME** while staggering seating three seats apart in alternate rows. A computer animation showed the arrangement along with ghostly figures dressed in white hazmat suits circulating up and down the aisles, waving incense burners to smoke out the virus.

In California, Washington, Minnesota and New York, where the Convicts, Pilots, Triumph, Derailers, Irish and Wrecking Balls play, State laws currently prohibit large gatherings at sporting events, so owners there do not have any choice or wiggle room to try and gain exemptions. However, due to a quirk in the regulations, the convict seating area at The Big House falls under the internal institutional rules of the penitentiary. A small number of convicts, approximately 2,000, will be able to watch the games live at The Big House.

In New Jersey, Wrecking Balls owner **Bruce Springsteen** and part owner/GM **Jeff Cohen** have taken the State restrictions several steps further and have erected a sanitary bubble over the field at Stone Pony Shore. The giant white airtight and waterproof tent, supported by poles, ropes and air jets, looks like a huge condom covering the stadium. The players and staff are tested twice daily and are subject to mandatory decontamination showers upon entry to the Wrecking Balls facility and at the end of every practice. Players are housed at the Berkeley Oceanfront and Ashbury hotels where they are confined to the rooms and are not allowed to visit family and friends. Practices were originally conducted with masks for the first week of training camp, but when the players complained and threatened to sit out camp, Cohen relented. But he doubled down on his enforcement of mask-wearing inside the facility when not actually working out in the gym.

"We have taken the guidelines and put them on steroids," Cohen stated, barely audible through his gas mask, further

protected by an enclosed hood and face shield. “If it were my decision, we would cancel the season. But since we are not, I am making safety the number one priority. The organization is doing everything it can to prevent the spread of this deadly virus that has killed over 1 million people across the globe. Our goal is that no Wrecking Ball player, staff member or employee will be part of that horrible death toll.”

In Iowa, Nevada and Georgia, where there are more guidelines than rules, some teams are opting for fans while others are not.

“The Cubs will be following occupancy guidelines established by the State Fire Marshall's Office and will be opening up seating for 8,900 fans to attend Joe Ferguson in person for games,” **Deron Redding** proudly announced, without a mask, at an Iowa City press conference. “The virus is real, but it’s not all that bad. We will still be taking all reasonable precautions to reduce the chance of contracting the virus at Cubs’ games. **Dr. Rodney Alberhasky** will be taking full charge of the virus reduction strategy.”

In Nevada, where the former champion Chargers have turned into Assassins, GM **Anthony Holguin** announced that he plans to take advantage of State exemptions that are being permitted for large stadiums like the Assassin’s Den. “We are nothing without our fans,” he declared to the media. “We will be letting in as many as they will let us.”

Although the same options exist in Georgia, both the Gladiators and the Coyotes will be closing their facilities to the public for the foreseeable future. “I’d like to keep as many fans alive as possible,” GM **Eron Osman** pronounced poignantly to the press in Marietta.

Across the ocean in Europe, travel restrictions barring US citizens from entering Belgium and the requirement for visitors to Hungary to quarantine for 10 days upon arrival posed serious concerns for the league. The league had to lobby

hard, to the point of enlisting the aid of Presidential hopeful **Joe Biden**, (who is not hated as Trump is in Belgium) to get the Belgian government to agree to accept negative test certificates as a waiver to the rules. But players are basically under quarantine for the entire time they are in Bruxelles and under police guard until game day.

Although most venues apart from nightclubs are open once again in Bruxelles, there is a flat cap on the number of spectators allowed at large sporting venues. 400 is the maximum number fans permitted inside The Fortress on game day. Those seats have been set aside for government officials to distribute, in appreciation of their indulgence in allowing players into the country in the first place.

In Hungary, the government waived the 10-day quarantine for visiting EFL teams, provided they agreed to be confined to their hotels and to use a designated visitor's practice field located at an abandoned artillery range northeast of Budapest, about 20 km from the stadium, prior to game day.

Interestingly, once inside Hungary, restrictions are quite loose and large sporting events may be attended at one-quarter capacity. The Stars have opted for maximum capacity. That means 8,685 tickets will be available for season ticket holders and the public to attend Ferenc-Liszt International Airport Stadium.

So, it is confirmed that 12 EFL teams will have no fans in their stadiums on game day. It is very likely that the rest of the Ontario clubs, other than Cowtown, will follow suit, unless they can convince the Premier to issue exemptions.

If one includes the 2,000 convicts at the Big House and the token 400 fans permitted in Bruxelles, at least 6 EFL teams will have some fans in the stands, but



Wrecking Balls GM and part-owner, **Jeff Cohen**, watches practice from the sideline inside the stadium at Stone Pony Shore. Cohen is taking COVID precautions to the next level.



Scenes like this one outside of New Era Field in Buffalo won't be happening for at least a few weeks as the State of New York locks down and restrictions on large public gatherings remain in effect.

the numbers being permitted everywhere but Cowtown will fall short of replicating the sound and fury of a fully riled-up crowd on game day.

There is no doubt that the sound and feel of games will be drastically altered from all previous seasons. But on the 24 practice fields of the EFL, players are shifting their attention away from the insanity of the outside world and focusing on preparing to play the season. With no pre-season games permitted, and few media passes available, it is difficult to get a good read on how the teams are looking heading into the season. But based on past performance and what can be stitched together from patchy reporting from the practice fields, a rough picture is emerging that shows the season will likely be dominated by at most 7 or 8 teams, with the rest playing the roles of also-rans and patsies. It is a return to the lopsided campaigns of 2008 to 2010, a situation the league wanted to avoid after the relative parity of the past several years, notwithstanding the overall superiority of teams like Aurora and Twin Cities

during that stretch of open competition.

“Heading into the season, it looks like the defensive prowess of Atlantic Conference teams like Durham and Budapest will contrast and compete with the offensive powerhouses developing in the Pacific Conference in Virden, Chino, Bruxelles and even Cobb County,” writes **Peter Prince** of *North America Today*. *“How this will play out in the final is anyone’s guess. But expect there to be a wider scramble for the Pacific Conference Championship than in the Atlantic, where Durham and Budapest appear to be locks to finish 1-2 in the seeding, with either capable of topping the other.”* For the first time since he started publishing the *Outriders Pro Football Almanac*, **Harry Schultz** of *Football Outriders.Org* is less certain that his usually reliable projections will hold up to the reality of the 2020 season:

“There is a lack of data on the rookies and the camp battles to round out the rosters. This data often makes the difference in projecting the middle or near-contenders. Virtual and in-house practices are no substitute for pre-season game evaluation,” writes Schultz in his prologue to the 2020 almanac. *“The unknowns are piling up, which affect the most complex algorithms. However, there are several constants in our modelling and analysts’ insights that allow us to forecast some things with a high level of confidence. Based on star power alone, the Durham Thunder Lizards and Budapest North Stars will finish with top five defences, with the high likelihood that they will finish no.1 and no.2 overall. Both have better-than-average offensive talent, so expect these two teams to dominate the Atlantic Conference to the point of excluding traditional powerhouse Aurora from the discussion about the no.1 seed in the Conference.”*

In a blockbuster pre-draft trade, the Thunder Lizards shipped off their 1st round pick at no.9, the Triumph’s 1st round pick at no.23 and their own 2nd round pick at no.33 to the Cadillac for the privilege of drafting Ohio state pass rusher, **Chase Young** at no.2 overall. Heading into the draft, with **Joe Burrow** projected to go (and actually going) no.1 overall and the Cadillac not in need of another stud on the defensive line, the trade allowed Erieau to drop down and address acute needs at wide receiver – **Henry Ruggs** at no.9 and **Tee Higgins** at no.33 – and to snap up highly-ranked Oklahoma linebacker, **Kenneth Murray** at no.23 to support their already powerful defensive line. This impactful trade is generally viewed as a win-win by most analysts.

*“The trade up to select Young was the single biggest move made by **George Kaldis** to address a pass rush deficiency in 2019,”* writes **Caleb Cogger** of *EFL Magazine* in his article, ‘The Return of Thunder to Jurassic Park.’ *“It was by no means his only big move. The Spartans, feeling some inexplicable need to shed one of their biggest talents, still under his rookie contract, put **Arik Armstead** on the block and Kaldis did not hesitate to move. He acquired an elite interior pass rusher for the bargain price of three draft picks, the earliest logging in at no.47 overall. The Spartans acquired two players in the draft directly as a result of that trade but Durham acquired the player in Armstead. It is difficult to see that trade as anything other than a steal for the Lizards.”*

With the development of **Brian Burns** and the acquisition of **Bruce Irvin** in free agency, the Lizards added blitzers capable of cranking up the pressure when they need it. The combination of a totally revamped pass rush and one of the best secondaries in the league will create serious problems for opponents’ passing attacks – a fact that was highlighted recently

on ESPN's 'Call It!' round table:

"Let's call it: The Lizards are on the rise. They got active and took advantage of some rare opportunities while the teams around them mostly sat on their hands," a tetchy **Will Simons** jumped in when the panel was asked which team will improve the most in 2020. "The back four of that Durham defence has always been strong, but with reports that **Richard Sherman** is fully healthy again and killing it in camp and the sudden emergence of **Justin Simmons** to complement veterans like **Tyrann Mathieu** and **Jason McCourty** it is clear that Coach Kaldis saw a chance to turn this squad into a full-service defence by grabbing the components for a great pass rush. But he didn't stop at the defence. Adding **Nick Chubb** was a masterstroke that will give young **Josh Allen** the elite type of workhorse run support the Lizards have not had since the early years with **Frank Gore** and **Michael Turner**. I'm calling it even further: The Thunder Lizards will not only be the most improved team this year, they will be the best team!"

Simons' opinion reflects an overall consensus amongst analysts, but not everyone has bought into Durham as the best team in the Atlantic. One analyst goes so far as to dispute that they will be the best in the North Division.

"It's easy to say that Durham will be the most improved team, but to say they will be the best team is a huge stretch!" countered ESPN's **Skope Boylezz**. "You are forgetting that the best quarterback in the North Division is in Sebastian, not Durham. Never underestimate **Drew Brees**, especially now that he has a solid running back behind him. I am not sold on **Josh Allen** – he is too inaccurate and makes poor decisions. He will cost Durham some games they should have won. And on the pass rush front, with all due respect to the young phenom from Ohio State, he has yet to prove anything, let alone that he can hold a candle to the likes of **Chandler Jones**, who is hands down the best pass rusher in the league right now. I'm calling it: The Swordfish will improve enough to challenge the Lizards for the division!"

The idea that the Swordfish could rise from 7-9 in 2019 to challenge for the North Division is not so off-the-wall, even if many mainstream analysts tend to disregard the views of mavericks like Boylezz. **Severin Handfottner Jr.** of *Coach's Call*, suggests as much when contrasting coaching styles of what he considers to be the main contenders in the Atlantic Conference:

"Russ Lemmon has a reputation for being an aggressive play-caller. He is not afraid of going for it on 4th down, even in low-reward scenarios," writes Handfottner Jr. *"But last year he was almost pushed into becoming a parody of himself due to the lack of a durable and reliable running threat to support Drew Brees. The Swordfish rushed the ball only 33% of all plays and were below the league average at 4.4 yards per carry. This put a lot of pressure on the passing game to sustain drives and resulted in as many play-call blunders as successes. The selection of Jonathan Taylor, the prolific running back from Wisconsin, in the 2nd round of the draft went unheralded on draft day, but will prove to be a strategic selection. Taylor is durable and can carry the ball 15-20 times a game. Add in an emerging talent like Damien Williams and the Swordfish will have a truly balanced attack for the first time since they went to the Gale Sayers Game in 2016."*

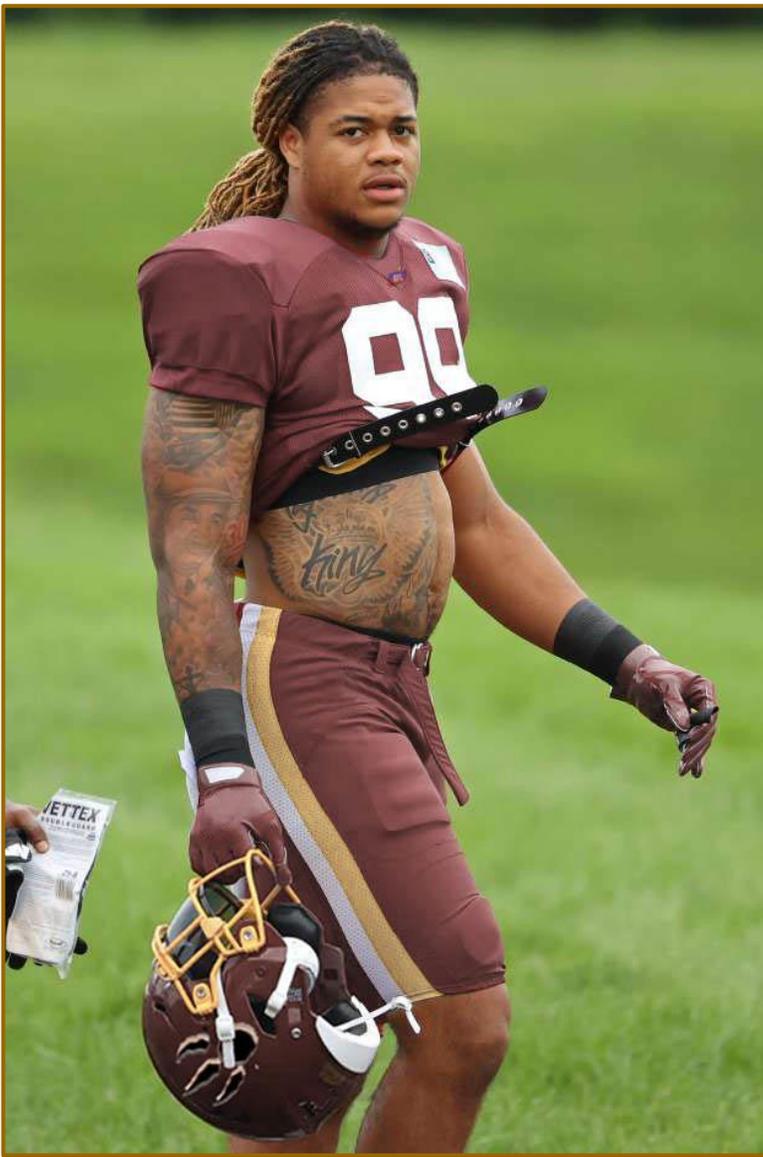
The Swordfish may be more than a "Darkfish" to challenge in the Atlantic. But even if they somehow manage to pass Durham, they will have a pair of heavyweights to contend with outside of the North Division, both of which are familiar to the post season.

"Of all the trades that turned heads in the off-season, none shook the football world more than the unexpected acquisition of Aaron Rodgers by Budapest," writes **Peter Prince** of North America Today. *"It was surprising for more than the sudden scrubbing of Baker Mayfield as the heir apparent to the franchise. It was equally astonishing that the Irish, under new management, decided to part with a former championship quarterback who showed definite signs of a resurgence last year, despite Toronto's disappointing 9-7 finish. The Irish will take the gamble on Mayfield while the North Stars ride Rodgers to the Conference Championship."*

Until that trade, the North Stars had been viewed as a solid runner-up to Durham to represent the Atlantic Conference in the Championship game. This was due to skepticism that Mayfield or his apparent back-up, **Ryan Fitzpatrick** would be able to prevail against the conference's top competition. And while that view did not discount the potential game-changing impact of the Budapest defence, it favoured the idea that, in the new era of football, offence win championships.

"We have witnessed over the past 50 years a steady but gradual shift in the way defences have performed relative to offences," writes **Harry Schultz** in his Almanac editorial, 'Is Defense Dead?' *"Since Bear Bryant coined the phrase 'defence wins championships' the role of a great defence has slowly shifted from literal shutdown dominance to speedy, aggressive ball-and-head hunters, seeking timely big plays to score outright or to set up the offence. It is no longer uncommon for a top defence to give up 400+ yards and three touchdowns a game. The great modern defence is now expected to make the big stop and the big play when it matters the most. It is not required that they completely shut down an opponent. This makes good offence, the kind that seizes and holds on to the initiative, the principal determinant of momentum. It is no wonder in such an environment that a quarterback who turns the ball over is not long for the league."*

"The North Stars have acquired in **Aaron Rodgers** ball security, supreme pocket mobility and the ability to deliver strikes deep down field," remarked **Kris Hortenson** of ESPN's Sports Central. "They gave up a first-round pick and a



Chase Young of Ohio State went no.2 overall in the 2020 EFL draft to Durham, following a trade that saw Eriean acquire 2 first round picks and a 2nd rounder. Was it worth it?

younger talent with a high ceiling and low floor to get him, but with all of the other pieces in place this year in Budapest, this move made a lot of sense. And Rodgers is not done after this year – he has a few good years left in him.”

Those other pieces Hortenson refers to are perennial All-Pro defensive ends **Calais Campbell** and **Cameron Jordan**, rock solid tackler and defensive quarterback **Lavone David**, and menacing ballhawk, safety **Minkah Fitzpatrick**. On the offensive side, **Stefon Diggs** and **George Kittle** give Rodgers two tempting targets in the passing game, while his blindside is protected by All-Pro tackle **Ryan Ramczyk**. The one chink in the armour is at the running back position, where five contenders for the starting job did not impress enough to earn it. A Committee will tote the rock for Budapest, and this will pose a challenge for **Darrin Jones**.

“Coach Jones will have to calibrate his running back rotation with precision and take a strategic approach to the ground game if he is to be successful balancing this offence,” writes **Severin Handfottnr Jr.** of ‘Coach’s Call.’ “It will not be an easy task because there is no single player capable of drawing the undivided attention of the defence. The better defences will probably let them run the ball. It won’t be easy, but if there is a coach who can bring two-bit players together to perform a symphony, it is Jones.”

You can see that there are many reasons to favour Durham or Budapest for the Atlantic Conference crown. But there are many reasons to include Aurora in the discussion for conference honours. Those reasons are three Gale Sayers Trophies and a high-octane offence that remains intact following its no.1 ranked scoring performance in 2019.

“I can’t believe my ears,” a visibly flustered, blotchy-faced **Russ Flont** boomed as attention turned his direction on ESPN’s ‘Call It!’ round table discussion. “None of you have brought up the red elephant in the room! That red elephant is a horse, a certain kind of horse we all know because, like that *Sea Cookie*, it’s won 3 of the last 6 races for Championship! I’m talking about the Mustangs and their jockey, **Matt Ryan**! His arm didn’t fall off in training camp from what I hear. And **Davante Adams** didn’t lose a leg or anything. I mean, we’re talking hands-down the best QB to receiver combo in the league right now, possibly of all time!” with flecks of spittle flying across the room, he continued: “That’s all the Mustangs need, guys! **JJ Watt** being alive and kicking is just a bonus! I’m calling it: Mustang Repeat. Easiest call I ever made!”

Flont forgot to mention **Kenyan Drake** and **Devin Singletary** in his diatribe, not to mention legendary shutdown corner **Patrick Peterson**. But while many of the familiar faces that made this franchise great are back for another stab at the cat., under the surface cracks are appearing in the foundation, as **Lazor Ponk** of Scouts Ltd points out:

“Aurora’s main acquisitions during the off-season were All-Pro **Travis Kelce** and Pro Bowl linebacker, **Eric Kendricks**, both snapped up in a fire sale trade with the Spartans,” begins Ponk in his pre-season guide. “These are valuable additions. They also acquired **Alejandro Villanueva**, also from the Spartans, to replace **Trent Williams**. One can see the beginnings of a plan to return to the Championship ring using Pickering as a springboard. But then the Spartans ran out of saleable talent and everything stopped. Too many huge contracts kept the Mustangs from firming up the defensive line around **JJ Watt** or acquiring any kind of talent at the outside linebacker. The secondary was left to grow and wilt on its own. The fortunate development of **K’Waun Williams** and **Charvarius Ward** into solid cover corners will not make up for the rapidly fading skills of former elite corners **Patrick Peterson**, **Jason McCourty** and **Josh Norman**. Yes, the offence

is mostly intact. That will keep them in the race. But defence is no longer better than average. This will put them in the unfamiliar position of losing shootouts they used to win.”

The relentless **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah**, investigative reporter for *Deathspun*, has another reason for believing the Mustangs may be in for a rougher ride than usual. His tenacious reporting on the mysterious futurist firm known as ‘Project Adam,’ a company with ties to Mustangs’ owner **Haus Beauregard**, has yielded another potential bombshell likely to be ignored by the league and almost every mainstream outlet.

“The trade war with China is affecting the supply of ultra-rare minerals such as Byzanium, Chlorophyte, Superstronium, and Element-99, the ultra secret power source for the Watt™ technology and the apparent inspiration for the JJ being assigned number 99,” writes Smith-Abdullah in his article, ‘Death of Superman.’ “The largest sources of these extremely rare materials are found in China or areas controlled by China. The bio-technologies, bionic enhancements and A.I. helmet implants that go into creating a gridiron super-athlete are not only expensive, but highly vulnerable to supply-chain disruptions that deprive engineers of the materials that make certain bionic enhancements possible or relatively cost-effective. According to my sources, the bio-engineers at ‘Project Adam’ have had to suspend new projects, such as Project JM and Project PP (hint: those are initials!) and to develop work-arounds to maintain the core functionality of their Watt™ and Ryan™ products heading into the season. Don’t be surprised if **JJ Watt** performs like an above-average defensive end but breaks down about halfway through the season, while **Matt Ryan** experiences a dip in accuracy. The lack of Byzanium will cause **Denico Autry’s** production to dip sharply and that will affect the entire pass rush. The secondary will have to cover longer. Expect the Mustangs to look like a much more ordinary team this season.”

Unlike the last three seasons, there is a steep drop-off in talent in the Atlantic Division after the Big 3 + Sebastian. The second wildcard spot will be a dog fight between a pack of starving mangey mutts, a few of which stand no chance of coming out on top.

“Georgia, Pickering and East Elmhurst are write-offs,” **Harry Schultz** of Football_Outriders.Org observes with uncharacteristic bluntness in his ‘2020 Football Almanac.’ “The projections, even with favourable variables plugged in for what we call the ‘COVID unknowns,’ show none of these three teams cracking 6 wins. Well, the Spartans managed it once, but only when we set the intangible ‘Never Surrender’ factor at maximum 10. That factor can take the team the other way, but in this instance the algorithm adjusted to the positive. Georgia starting a rookie quarterback coming off a bad injury with little to no support behind him is a recipe for disaster. The Irish threw in the towel by trading **Aaron Rodgers** and



Blue Eagles owner, **Chris Dickinson** steps on to the practice field to admire his young franchise QB, **Joe Burrow**, selected no.1 overall in the 2020 draft.

Saquon Barkley and the Spartans are not going far with free agent **Gardiner Minshew** at quarterback, a sparse receiving corps and only a single tight end. Projecting the bottom is easy. Figuring out which of the remaining teams will hold it together long enough to punch a ticket to the post-season is a real guessing game.”

Sperl Sponefritter of *Sperl’s World of Sports* was in his usual guessing mood when making his annual predictions in his seminal treatise on sports in the COVID-19 era, ‘Pandemia.’

“The new normal in the EFL will take us in a direction none of us expect. The virus is fickle and cruel. Its effects on society are less physical than psychological. The framework of our lives has been shattered by an invisible enemy that attacks by stealth – sometimes causing damage but more often simply causing discomfort and fear...always fear” Sperl begins with a touch of real insight into the ancillary effects of the response to the virus. But then he goes off the rails: “In the directionless and timeless world of COVID-19 a man who can set the course becomes a beacon of hope. Such a man is **Derek Carr** of the Brooklin Hawks. Marked with the number 4, he represents stability and mastery of the four directions. In a world where many have lost their way, his influence will ground those around him. The four posts of the foundation, the ability to focus on the task – these qualities will cause the Hawks to soar.”

The Hawks are certainly in the discussion for a possible post-season berth, if for no other reason than Carr seems to respond to **Tom Jones** and he has one of the top receivers in the league to throw to in **DeAndre Hopkins**. That duo and the running of **Matt Breida**

kept Brooklin respectable last year while the defence crumbled around them. But the defence did not improve during the off-season, as **Skope Boylezz** points out on ESPN's 'Call it!' Round table:

“As long as we are talking about the cellar dwellers, let’s throw the Hawks into the basement as well,” Boylezz sniped after **Russ Flont** suggested that **Derek Carr** could have a career year in 2020. “If you think that 2019 defence was bad, take a closer look at what they plan to field this year! If possible, it’s actually gotten worse. They blew the negotiation with their best defensive lineman, **Shelby Harris**, then gave him away for nothing – unless you count a 4th round pick in 2021 as something. When it was clear Harris was looking elsewhere, Brooklin panicked and took the first offer. Harris is going to the pro bowl some day, mark my words. The best player in camp is apparently a DB named **Jonathan Jones**. Now forgive me for not knowing who the heck he is! I like **Leighton Vender Esch**, but let’s face it:



Brooklin fans are counting on Hawks QB, **Derek Carr** to build on his career year in 2019 and take the Hawks to the post-season after missing out last year following a five-year franchise run going back to Santa Clara.

No team is building their defence around an outside linebacker with no pass rush skills. Their only hope is that the garbage around them stinks a little more.”

The ESPN round tables are getting more raucous as the years progress, and not every opinion can be taken too literally. The Hawks look like the best bet to challenge for the second wildcard spot, but if they do fall short, it will be because of a leaky defence that has not improved over the unit that ranked 17th overall last year.

“Cowtown, York, Scarborough, Erieau. Any ideas, gentlemen about who could emerge from this group?” ‘Call It!’ round table mediator, **Kris Hortenson** asked the panel. A relatively subdued **Will Simons** was first to respond:

“That’s a tough call, Kris,” he said to general laughter.

“Well, you have to *call it* on this show, Will, as you know,” Hortenson chuckled.

“In that case I’m going to call Erieau!” he declared self-consciously then flinched slightly at the derisive roars of disapproval and incredulity from panelists, **Russ Flont** and **Skope Boylezz**. “Hold on, guys, think about it! The defence is studded with top draft picks, they moved on from **Matt Stafford** and changed the entire dynamic with **Kyler Murray** at quarterback. There are actual weapons in the offence for the first time; two nice-looking tight ends and a pair of highly talented rookie wide receivers in **Henry Ruggs** and **Tee Higgins**. In a really bad South Division, the Cadillac are capable of winning a race for the last wildcard spot.”

A florid **Russ Flont** jumped in, as much to avoid having a seizure as to voice his opinion: “You are, again, forgetting the best player to ever play the game, **Tom Brady**! How can you put a raw, second-year quarterback over a master like Tom?” he thundered. “You - !”

He was interrupted by **Skope Boylezz**, who was in a particularly rancorous mood that nobody knew for sure was for show or for real. “Still living on that Gale Sayers Trophy Brady won in 2008, Russ?” he goaded. “Hey, nothing against **Tom Brady** – he is a great quarterback – but while he was trying and mostly failing to stitch together drives with understaffed receiving corps, it was **Von Miller** who kept this Excalibur team in crucial games. And there is no Miller this year. No Miller – no playoffs. It’s that simple.”

The usual arbiter of such disputes, the level-headed **Harry Schultz** and **Peter Prince**, have no firm answers for which team is most likely to sneak into the last playoff spot in the Atlantic. And the authority who often delivers a prescient observation or two thanks to his team of experts studying the tape, analyst **Mumbar Thakar** of *Pro Football Focal-Point* (PFFP), is hesitant to go out on a limb in his ‘PFFP Pre-Season Grades.’

“Cowtown is in trouble on the offensive line despite pouring draft resources into the position,” notes **Mumbar Thakar** in his pre-season feature. “Preliminary grades on stalwarts like **Rob Havenstein** are strangely low, while 1st round pick two years ago, **Andre Dillard** is still not EFL-ready according to scouts. This will affect everything the Corn Kings try to do offensively. The acquisition of **Le’Veon Bell** on waivers does nothing to dispel rumours that **Todd Gurley**’s knee problems

are acting up and that the problems are not injury-related but medical in nature. Even more than the offensive line, the absence of a full-force Gurley will degrade an offence that relied heavily on him to set up the play-action pass to **Mike Evans**. The loss of **Trey Burton** will also be felt. **Jimmy Garoppolo** takes over with the weapons stockpile nearly depleted. We give the Cowtown offence a 63.7 grade heading into the season and that is on the generous side.”

While Thakar refrains from predicting a finish for Cowtown, his slightly better grade of 67.9 for the Corn Kings’ defence puts them behind Scarborough and Erieau in his team rankings and only slightly in front of York. It appears that the “Burrow Effect,” combined with a deceptively talented but underrated defence and offensive line, has some notable commentators plumping for the Blue Eagles to make it back to the playoffs after consecutive and painful 2-14 seasons.

“**Joe Burrow** was selected no.1 overall for a good reason: He is EFL-ready,” writes **Caleb Cogger** in ‘EFL Magazine.’ “Unlike most bottom of the barrel teams that select no.1 overall, the Blue Eagles of 2019 were not a terrible team. They suffered from dreadful quarterback play. That burden that will not weigh them down this year, even if and when Burrow commits the inevitable rookie blunders. Joe is protected, he has two excellent wide receivers and a top notch running back. The Blue Eagles will catch some teams off guard this year, probably beginning in Week One when they visit Cowtown.”

Cogger’s view is not a peripheral one. It is shared by none other than **Peter Prince** of *North America Today*, who

describes the Blue Eagles’ situation thus in his article, ‘The Sure Thing:’

“**Joe Burrow** looks the part and plays the part,” writes Prince. “He will energize this Blue Eagle squad that for the past two years has been in desperate need of leadership at the most important position in the game. He will elevate the defence as well. **Ndamukong Suh** won’t need oxygen to get back on the field two minutes after he left it. Ball hawks like **Logan Ryan** will take a few more chances, knowing the offence has his back. How much Burrow raises the play of the Blue Eagles remains to be seen, but do not be surprised if it is higher than anyone expects.”

The playoff sideshow debate about the second playoff wildcard in the Atlantic will probably not be resolved until Week 16. Meanwhile, in the Pacific Conference the hot topic, as expected, is which of several closely-matched top teams will carry the Conference banner into the final.

“The potential logjam at the top of the Pacific Conference is in stark contrast to the very clear picture at the top of the Atlantic Conference,” writes **Harry Schultz** of FootballOutriders.Org. “The pecking order would be hard to determine in a normal year, but with pandemic restrictions in place the true hierarchy is nearly impossible to gauge. There is little to separate the 6 to 7 teams likely to emerge as real contenders. However, a couple of notable consistencies stand out in our modeling: A healthy **Patrick Mahomes** should drive Virden to the top of their Division, most likely farther; and the Cobb County Coyotes (former Knights) are vastly improved and much better than people think.”

The fans certainly would appear to agree with that assessment if a sampling of blog opinion around the league is a reliable indicator. **Schrell Partisian**, notable contributor to the national fan forum, ‘*Bleacher Feature*,’ and respected creator of



Cobb County acquired ageing but still dominant wide receiver **Julio Jones** from Buffalo in the **Lamar Jackson** trade. The trade may have made the Coyotes much better this year as well as in the long term.

influential fan blog, *'Signals from the Stands,'* sums up the popular view more eloquently than the average fan fanatic:

"If quarterback is really the most important position in the game; and if having a strong running game is the perfect accompaniment to game-breaking speed at wide receiver; and if having a solid defence that can take the ball away is an ideal force-multiplier for that top-tier offence; then there is only one team fans should be betting on to finish on top of the Pacific Conference and that team is Virden," Partisian writes in the opening of his column, 'No Violation if Virden Wins it All.' *"It all starts with **Patrick Mahomes**. If you asked all the GMs in the league, secretly, what quarterback they would want to build their team around, nine out of ten would probably say 'Patrick Mahomes' and the tenth would probably add 'or Patrick Mahomes' to that other choice. Yes, he does make mistakes when he is pressured. He is still developing. But that is the scary part. He led the league in passer rating and TD passes in 2019 as a developing quarterback. He is already performing at an elite level and still gaining altitude."*

A look at the Virden roster supports Partisian's position. **Amari Cooper** is a virtuoso route-runner with speed, quickness and sure hands. **John Brown** is the most underrated big-play wideout in the league now, but will not be underrated for long. Defences cannot ignore the power, dexterity and speed of **Ezekiel Elliott**, unless they want to be on the field all day. And barely noticed, but important, is the presence of pro bowlers **Lane Johnson** and **Marshall Yanda** on the left side of the Virden offensive line to protect the team's no.1 asset and fuel the run screen passing game. Top cornerback **Marcus Peters** is a professional thief, linebacker **Jamie Collins Sr** is a pass-rushing tackling machine with the cover skills of a safety and **Cameron Heyward** is a relentless disruptor and penetrator. All three come to Virden this year compliments of provincial rival Charleswood, a team that appears to local media to be more interested in Virden's success than their own.

*"Our Pats signalled to Patriot Nation early that they would be playing for the future when they traded the heart of their defence to neighbouring Virden to build an offensive line capable of protecting the worryingly obstinate **DeShaun Watson** from himself,"* writes **Charlie Wood** of the 'Charleswood Banner.' *"The idea is to keep Watson alive until the team is rebuilt around him. But there are still games to be played in the meantime. How will **Alvin Kamara** fit in with an offence that is forced to come from behind in most games? How much pressure will be put on the line if defences are pinning their ears back? Watson may end up being sacked anyway. The seeds of a future dominant defence have been planted with first rounders **Derrick Brown** from Auburn and **Patrick Queen** of LSU. But there is still a long way to go before this defence is ready to compete. Did it have to be this way? The GM will say yes, but the fans aren't convinced."*

For a majority of pundits, the Cubs are the next choice to compete for and win conference honours. The Cubs are viewed as a safe pick, thanks to **Russell Wilson** and...well...**Russell Wilson**. According to camp reports, however, **Tyler Lockett** has broken through to the next level of his development and **A.J. Brown** has been snagging deep balls that have the few outside camp observers 'ooing and awing' under their masks in appreciation. Whether this will translate into success on the field is another question. But the prognosis is good thanks, again, to Wilson. There are detractors, of course, and these cite a diminished Cubs' defence as the reason.

"There used to be depth in the secondary but that is gone," writes **Lazor Ponk** of 'Scouts Ltd.' *"Moving **Dee Ford** from linebacker to the line has created a gap at linebacker that has not been solved. The interior of the defensive line remains strong but it is no longer dominant. The Cubs might be good enough to outscore most of their opponents this year and not worry a lot about the defence. But when they face the top teams with depth in their receiving corps the spotlight will turn to a merely average defence."*

But it was not as if the Cubs neglected their defence in the off-season, as **Jon Claytown**, senior writer at *ESPN.com* points out: *"**Deron Redding** made a lot of minor, less consequential trades to manage cap space and tweak the roster. But he did address a need at inside linebacker by dealing his 2nd round pick for **Corey Littleton** and he shored up the secondary by taking the promising young cornerback, **Jaylon Johnson** from Utah in the first round of the draft,"* Claytown points out. *"The real problem is that much of their top talent in the secondary, apart from **Casey Hayward**, aged prematurely. **A.J. Bouye** is struggling in camp – a player they are paying almost \$7 million to – and **Xavier Rhodes** has fallen off a cliff. In the end, I see the Cubs advancing on the strength of their offence, and it is a good one. Don't count them out!"*

While the Cubs and Violators are the clear mainstream and fan favourites to dominate the Pacific Conference in 2020, in the ratings-hungry world of broadcasting, round tables like ESPN's 'Call It!' would be boring if they simply echoed the popular or conventional view. While not ignoring the clear talents of **Patrick Mahomes** and **Russell Wilson**, ESPN's panel managed to spice things up with controversial, but defensible positions on a couple of teams most casual observers likely missed.

*"While I have a lot of respect for **Russell Wilson**, I've seen this song and dance from the Cubs before,"* the peevish **Will Simons** declared as the panel switched focus to the Pacific Conference. *"I'll call the Cubs to win the West again, pushing off another strong challenge by Chino, but that's where the glory will end for Iowa. But that's not my main point!"*

"Do you ever have a main point, Will?" jabbed a blotchy **Russ Flont**, still sore from being gang-tackled earlier by

the other panelists.

“Listen and learn, Russ, because I’m calling Cobb County to win the East Division!” Simons proclaimed, a little thrown off his timing by the interruption. “And it’s a good thing for the Cubs and Convicts that when the Knights became the Coyotes they moved east, because I’d call them to win the West too!”

“Come on, Will!” **Skope Boylezz** jumped in as **Russ Flont** chortled and coughed in disbelief. “They traded **Lamar Jackson!**”

“Yes, they did!” Simons replied, clearly ready for the question. “That was a surprise. But the bigger surprise will be that they are better for it!” As the guffawing picked up volume, Simons continued: “They got a bundle of draft picks and a still elite wide receiver in **Julio Jones**. One of those picks was involved in a trade to bring in interior stud, **Geno Atkins** and promising young safety, **Chuck Clark**. Then GM, **Eron Osman** played a bit of a shell game to maximize his pick value and proceeded to have a decent draft where he picked up a bag of promising young players, including tackle, **Tristan Wirfs** and edge rusher, **K’Lavon Chiasson.**”

As the chortling died down, **Russ Flont** weighed in, “But what about quarterback, Will? Who’s going to direct all this great talent to the top of the East? **Ryan Tannehill?**” he asked rhetorically.

“Yes, **Ryan Tannehill!**” **Will Simons** replied without hesitation. “He is in a good situation, well protected, with weapons. We will see the best of Tannehill this year, I’m calling it here!”

Cobb County, a team that won 4 games in 2019 as the Knights, appears at first to be an off-the-wall call. But it is not out of the question according to **Harry Schultz** of Football.Outriders.Org: “*All the divisions of the Pacific Conference*



The Cubs will once again rely on their top asset, **Russell Wilson** to keep them competitive in 2020. The good news: He has more weapons than ever.

*could be walkaways for one dominant team, or tightly contested by many teams. While that does not seem to make sense, it is what we are seeing repeatedly in the modelling. The Coyotes offence will perform better than expected under **Ryan Tannehill**, but the Bombers’ defence could turn things around for **Jared Goff**, who brings one less dimension to the quarterback position than **Marcus Mariota** did in is prime. Then there is New Jersey, another team that will rely on its defence to keep quarterback **Matt Stafford** on point. The Wrecking Balls seem built to be boom or bust, as usual. A lot will depend on whether new head coach, **Sean McDermott** can modernize the game plan on both sides of the ball.”*

The off-season story of the Wrecking Balls is another long one. Whether it will have an impact deep into the season, when the snow starts to fall, is up for debate.

“Whatever you think of the Wrecking Balls as a football team, you have to give, **Jeff Cohen** credit!” a smugly-smiling **Cowan Bullherd** crowed on his syndicated talk show, *Morning Bull*. “He sells *Hope* to his fans better than any team executive in the league. I don’t know if it’s because he’s got that Springsteen ‘*Hungry Heart*’ vibe going on when he talks. He got rid of some bad contracts, some bad players, and brought in a big name at quarterback to paper over the dealing away of **Jared Goff** for a two-bit running back. The details of these deals quickly fade because there are so many deals! But because there is so much happening, the fans think they are moving forward. They think they are going to the final. It helps that Cohen believes it himself; and he’s talked himself and the Jersey fanbase into thinking the Balls have a shot, when they don’t!”

Tony ‘the Coach’ Carlucci-Colangelo, of *EFL Network* and a native New Jerseyan, who makes no secret of his Wrecking Balls partisanship, contributed his opinion during his monologue at the beginning of his show, ‘*Gabagoods.*’ “Yeah, **DJ Chark** and **Terry McLaurin** are reasons to like the Balls’ offence. But come on, Ballers; those two ain’t **DeAndre Hopkins** and **Tyreek Hill!** Can **Matt Stafford** even get ‘em the ball? I’m not sure – Stafford looked done on Erieau and he has no run game here. If you’re looking at the offence to be the force on this team, you’re lookin’ in the wrong direction. Now, the defence – that’s another story! It’s got a bit of everything and it’s got **Jamal Adams!** Yeah, the Balls have a chance! But it’ll be that defence that gives ‘em that chance!”

On the lesser viewed, but cult-like weekly TV Magazine ‘*Crush,*’ offensive line guru, **Benny Clamp** looks at the East Division battle from a completely different angle – the offensive line. “Crushers know what really creates opportunities for an offence, so we have an edge in breaking down the teams if we get the technical analysis right. I have examined the

Bombers' line and it is a good one. Only two starters returning from last year, **Frank Ragnow** and **Garett Bolles**. **Justin Pugh** was promoted during camp. They acquired pro bowl guard, **Joel Bitonio** in a trade with Twin Cities and **Morgan Moses** from Sebastian. They moved Ragnow from guard to center and flipped Bolles from right to left tackle. This kind of turnover and position switching is usually a problem sandwich for the line coach. But the Bombers have one of the best offensive line coaches in the game in **Dante Scarnecchia**. Look what he's done..."

Benny Clamp then launches into a technical analysis, complete with frame-by-frame video, showing footwork, pulling technique, various examples of back-straight-knees-bent pass block techniques, and other techniques and terminology incomprehensible to most people and fans. That's why 'Crush' is a cult show airing at 10:00 pm on a Wednesday. But the essential message is clear. The Bombers have an unsung but highly effective offensive line that will sustain their offence and keep **Jared Goff** upright. Who is going to argue?

As for more the more conventional view of the Bombers? **Kris Hortenson** of ESPN's *Sports Central*, a bit of a Bombers' watcher, sees the quarterback change as the most significant factor in Bruxelles' fortunes this year: "The Bombers' defence is usually underrated and the offence overrated heading into the season and this year is no exception," he begins. "But this year, the offence warrants a closer look. It has promise but cannot be taken for granted. **Jared Goff**, a straight pocket passer with limited mobility, brings a completely different style to the Bomber attack. He is the opposite of **Marcus Mariota** in his prime. Goff has lots of weapons in the passing game, including an embarrassment of luxuries at tight end with **Travis Kelce** and **Darren Waller**. But the knock on Goff is that he pulls off his first read too quickly and becomes indecisive. **Leonard Fournette** is the X-factor in this offence. Can he force defences to turn their attention to him and open up the play-action pass for Goff?"

With a tight three-way race potentially developing in the Pacific East Division, where do the Derailers, proud new owners of the most sensational and intriguing quarterback prospect since **RGIII**, fit in the mix? **Harry Schultz** of [Football Outriders.Org](http://Football.Outriders.Org) covers the situation in Buffalo in his *2020 Football Almanac*:

*"The Derailers opened the trading season with the blockbuster trade of the off-season, acquiring **Lamar Jackson** from the new management of the Knights for a bundle of draft picks and ageing but still elite wide receiver, **Julio Jones**,"*



Chino QB, **Dak Prescott** is one reason the Cubs cannot relax in their quest for the west. The Convicts will look to Dak to tire out opposing secondaries in 2020.

*Schultz opens. "Then everything stopped, but only after they tied the albatross of **Jonathan Joseph**'s contract around their necks. That ensured there was no money in the bank to put real weapons around their big trade prize. The run game will be led by Jackson and the pass game will succeed or fail with **Robert Woods**. With almost nothing else around him except a Pro Bowl left tackle in **Mitchell Schwartz**, Jackson will be on an island this year, relying on his immense talent to turn bad plays good. In our models, this will work to some degree against the middling to weak teams. But the good teams will wear the Derailers down."*

Switching again to the Central, where in most prognoses the Violators will dominate, there is an intriguing black horse that appears to be gaining ground behind them as we approach the eve of Week One:

"Okay, it's my turn again," **Skope Boylezz** said after exhaling forcefully. The tiring panel on ESPN's *'Call It!* looked on in silence, its feistiness momentarily abated. "With most of you anointing the Violators as the heirs to the Championship Throne, I am going to hit you with something now so that it doesn't totally blindside you once the games go live. Pay attention to Peg City, folks. They could totally upset the apple cart in not only the Central, but in the conference."

This prompted wheezing hysterics from **Russ Flont**, who crumpled, momentarily incapacitated. **Will Simons** did not laugh, but merely raised an eyebrow.

"The Crusaders' **Stephen Katopodis** was active under the radar in the off-season – how he fell under the radar I don't know. He built a more balanced team, one that is vastly

improved in many areas from the 2019 edition,” Boylezz continued. “Gone is **Luke Kuechly**, the face of the defence for many years going back to South Carolina. But in the deal with Bruxelles he secured a young, impactful defensive line stud in **Chris Jones** who, at 25 years old, has not reached his full development potential. Kuechly, as great as he is, may be retired next year. This was a win deal. Then he somehow pried the expensive but vital **Von Miller** away from York for the now surplus **Everson Griffen** and **Corey Davis**, who had lost his no.2 status at wide receiver to **Courtland Sutton**. He turned an excess of running back talent into draft capital by dealing **Chris Carson** to Scarborough, then nailed it early in the draft with the acquisition of Ohio state corner, **Jeff Okudah** and Arizona State wide receiver, **Brandon Aiyuk**. With the development of **Marlon Humphrey**, the Crusaders now have two of the better one-two corner-combos in the league, something they have never had going back to South Carolina. To top it all off, he snatched up **Saquon Barkley** at a bargain basement price from the rebuilding, possibly tanking, East Elmhurst. This is a very different team in 2020!”

“But...but what about quarterback, Skope?” **Russ Flont** spat out between wheezes. “Are you saying that **Kirk Cousins** <ahem!> is going to compete with **Patrick Mahomes**?”

“I’m not saying he’s going to be *better* than **Patrick Mahomes**. But can he compete? Absolutely! *I’m calling it!* **Kirk Cousins** is going to be better than everyone expects and he is going to keep the Crusaders in the race until the end!”

Rounding out the potential playoff teams in the Pacific Conference is the new-look Chino Convicts. Switching from a set of shackles on their helmet to a pirate-like skull-and-crossbones was one of the bigger changes **Rob Nazar** made in the off-season, as the offence remains largely untouched from the 2019 edition. That is not necessarily a bad thing if **Greg Olsen** and **Hayden Hurst** are able to achieve their full potentials at tight end and **Mark Ingram II** stays healthy as a hard-running complement to **Christian McCaffrey**. Dak Prescott remains the engine of the attack. Where Nazar was more active was in shoring up the teetering Chino defence. **Lazor Ponk** of *Scouts Ltd*, explains what happened and why it is important.

“The Convicts did not rebuild their defence so much as they addressed aspects of the defence that had been lacking in 2019, when **Grady Jarrett** was the beginning and the end of the discussion when talking about impact players,” Ponk explains. “**Rob Nazar** felt he could part with **John Brown** in order to add another pass rush threat in the center of the defensive line in **Gerald McCoy**. He nurtured the development of **Za’Darius Smith**, who we can expect to have a breakout year in 2020. He drafted Clemson corner, **A.J. Terrell**, who may turn out to be a steal in the second round. He acquired **Gareon Conley** to stabilize the other corner position – Conley is young with upside. Overall, they improved their run defence and their pass rush. The one area of concern lies at safety, where veteran **Antoine Bethea** is showing his age in camp and

there is nobody else around him ready to take up the mantle of leadership. But the key factor for Chino is that this 2020 defence, while not dominant, is more balanced and perhaps slightly more talented than the Cubs’ defence. That is all that really matters if you’re a Convict fan hoping to wrest the West from Iowa.”

On the fringe of contention is Twin Cities, despite the insistence of coach and GM **Guy Williams** that his team is taking a back seat in order to assimilate younger talent.

“*Mr. Possum, you don’t fool me,*” writes **Jack Maximillian Ginsberg**, sports satirist and contributor to ‘Football Unplugged.’ “*You are never really dead. You replace your experience with youth as an involuntary reaction to a deep-seated fear of impending old age and irrelevance. But youth is the breath of life. A sack of gold for a tackle entering his prime. A stable of magnificent rookies – the best young running back available and seedlings already bearing young fruit. And then there is Jameis, he of the heart of a warrior and the head of a child. He can be made to believe! No, Mr. Possum, you are not dead. A*



The Twin Cities Triumph made Driftwood Bullies tackle, **Trent Brown**, the highest paid free agent in this year’s UFA class. The Triumph doled out \$13 million to Brown, \$10 million of that in guaranteed bonuses.

smart dog would rip your entrails out while you lie still, before it is too late!”

In an attempt to kick-start their rebuild, the Triumph invested the most of any team in free agency. They doled out a profligate **\$31,250,000** in signing bonuses and \$12,663,000 in first year base salaries for 7 free agents from the SFL, CFL and the Tex-Mex Football League. This included the largest bonus of the free agent season, \$10,000,000 given to former Driftwood Bullies tackle, **Trent Brown**. They also retained the contract of 12 rookies selected in the annual draft. Don't be surprised if at least half of these turn out to be regular contributors to a contender in the near future.

Peter Prince of *North America Today* thinks it is a long shot, but he does not count the Triumph out in 2020: *“We all know what **Guy Williams** gave up in the off-season and there were some big names: **Joel Bitonio, Darius Slay, Jurrell Casey, Chris Harris**, the list goes on. But he did not give up **DJ Moore, Kenny Golladay, Danielle Hunter, Bobby Wagner** and **Jaire Alexander**. Add in dynamic rookie **Clyde Edwards-Helaire** and you have a team that cannot be dismissed by anybody on any given Sunday. If enough teams take them lightly, the Triumph could very well sneak into the post-season.”*

Further out on the edge is Las Vegas, Seattle and far behind those two is Charleswood.

*“**Anthony Holguin** inherited a former championship team from St. Charles, but that team was never considered an abundantly talented team, despite the **Gale Sayers Trophy**,” **Mumbar Thakar** of ‘Pro Football Focal-Point’ writes in his Pre-Season Power Rankings section of the ‘EFL Kickoff Edition’ of PFFP. **Carson Wentz** graded no. 5 overall and **Michael Thomas** no.3 in our rankings last year, but the team only managed to finish the season at 8-8. The 2019 defence did not grade out much worse than the 2018 Championship Edition of the team, but its red zone ranking fell and it gave up 149 more points. As far as we can tell, based on limited data, the 2020 Assassins will improve on defence thanks to the maturing of homegrown talent such as **Marcus Williams, Shaquill Griffin** and **Shaquil Barrett**; and tactical trade acquisitions like **Tramon Williams** and **Rayshawn Jenkins**. The defence, as a whole, grades out at 78.6, which puts it up there in the top five. The offence is a curious story – looking much better on paper as individuals than it does as a whole. We project **Michael Thomas** to be the no.1 wide receiver in football and **Jerry Jeudy** to be the no.1 rookie at the position. We also expect **Dalvin Cook** to perform at an above-average level in yards-after-contact. Where we will start seeing problems is at offensive line, where the run grades are not high, and the pass grades not significantly better. There is also no legitimate no.2 back behind Cook. **Dion Lewis** and **Wendell Smallwood** grade slightly above practice squad level. This is a team that will have to be extremely well-coached to be successful.”*

Nobody on ESPN's *‘Call It!’* round table is calling the Pilots to do anything extraordinary, but Seattle is an interesting team capable of posting 6 or 7 wins and ruining somebody's day late in the season. **Kareem Hunt**'s injury issues forced **Mitch Gangwish** to deal for **Marlon Mack**, giving up interior pass-rusher, **Jordan Phillips** in the process. That move wrong-footed Seattle to start the off-season, but they made up some ground by flipping their no.3 pick with Peg City's no.4 pick and in the process acquiring a second 1st round pick for a 2nd round pick. They used the draft capital to bring in two promising wide receivers, **CeeDee Lamb** of Oklahoma and **Denzel Mims** of Baylor to bring youth and skill to the receiving corps for young **Sam Darnold**. The trenches on both sides of the ball will cause some headaches for the coaching staff but the back-seven of the starting defence is more than respectable. If Seattle tumbles down too far, it will be because the teams around them are that much better.

The Patriots were touched on in part earlier, but **Spats McChad**, freelance sports columnist, sums up the situation in Charleswood perhaps more succinctly and accurately than most: *“The Pats will be one of the worst teams in the league. If they do anything noteworthy or impressive at all, it will be because of **DeShaun Watson** and **Alvin Kamara**. The defence will get raked over the coals by the high-powered offences in the Pacific Conference. It will be a long season reminiscent of 2014. Have fun fitting the bags under your masks, Pats fans!”*

So, what does all of this mean? Are we any clearer on where this *Season of the Pandemic* is going? The football analysis, at this stage, is more guesswork than cogent analysis. How already will that foggy picture be altered by the virus itself? How will testing for COVID-19 work? What if a team suffers an outbreak in the middle of the week? What does the league have planned in case games have to be postponed or cancelled?

Yorrgo Kaldis and **Cogswell Cogs II**, co-chairs of the mysterious EFL Committee of 13, held a press conference on Wednesday before the Week One opening kickoff in which they assured Media, fans and players, that the league had all of these matters well in hand.

“The Committee has called this press conference to share with you the league's plans to contain and eradicate the virus in order to permit the 2020 season to be played to completion, with minimal disruption,” **Cogswell Cogs II** began, his voice a deadpan. The inscrutable **Yorrgo Kaldis**, seated next to him, stared forward, still as a statue. “Please hold your questions until the end – any interruptions will result in immediate expulsion from the room and revocation of your Media passes for eternity.”

To punctuate his point, he cast a cursory nod in the direction of two men-in-black at the door. They were wearing opaque sunglasses and looked as if their consciences would not be bothered by having to take a wayward journalist to a



EFL Committee of 13 co-Chairs, **Yorrigo Kaldis** and **Cogswell Cogs II** host an inspirational Press Conference in Canton. They announced new protocols and proclaimed victory over COVID-19. “The 2020 EFL season will not be defeated by the virus...no matter what,” Cogs II said.

back room and pumping a .22 calibre round into his temple.

“We are please to announce that we have reached an agreement with the Player’s Association on social protocols and mandatory restrictions that all players, coaches and team staff will be subject to for the duration of the season,” Cogs continued. “These restrictions will be viewed by some as serious infringements of civil liberties, but everyone in the league understands – *now* – that they are a necessary first step.”

A tiny man wearing a tweed Gatsby cap, later identified as Irish beat writer **Seamus McFly**, started to raise his hand but it was quickly swatted down by veteran beat writer, **Charlie Wood** of the *Charleswood Banner*.

“In addition to the restrictions – a complete list of which can be found at our website and in the handout you will be receiving – we have spared no expense to bring in the most advanced testing methods available in the world to ensure our tests are the most accurate and that false positives are minimized. We will not cancel games or close facilities in the event of a single positive test result. Contact tracing will be conducted followed by appropriate and reasonable, I repeat, *reasonable* measures. Only in the event of an outbreak, which we define as 15 or more players, coaches or staff testing positive, will the league consider postponing games,” Cogs paused, as if daring the muffled surprised reactions in the room to break out into a full-blown clamour, which would have given him an excuse to kick everybody out.

“What many do not know is that The Committee has been preparing for this moment since the league’s inception,” he paused for effect. “A worldwide pandemic was forecast for this year long ago by our predictive analytics team. Our commissioned medical experts include not only luminaries of modern medicine, but practitioners of the primeval arts whose original masters you would not have heard of, but whose work we are familiar with.”

The room went dead silent. The collected media were unsure whether to laugh or back slowly out of the room.

“Therefore, we have ordered certain dietary restrictions and prescribed certain herbal and incense remedies for warding off the virus, including the use of Apotropaic measures to promote immunity to COVID-19.” At this, he pulled out an amulet from beneath his robe that appeared to some kind of winged bug. “All shall wear these, at all times to ensure victory over COVID-19. The 2020 EFL season will not be defeated by the virus...*no matter what!*”



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. One of the finalists in 2020 will be Durham. For the Pacific Conference finalist, access the red 'A' 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



13-3

COBB COUNTY COYOTES
COACH: **Eron Osman**
OFFENCE: **A** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **B+**

Ryan Tannehill and **Teddy Bridgewater** are in position to show their best stuff. **Julio Jones**, a dynamic run game and two Pro Bowl linemen on the left side makes the offence a Class-A outfit. The secondary, led by **Tre'Davious White** is one of the best, but the D-line could be a soft spot in close games. KR game is a mess but you can't have everything!



10-6

BRUXELLES BOMBERS
COACH: **Ken Main**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **A**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B+**

The pass rush and run D sets this defence apart from others in the Conference. Veterans **Harrison Smith** and **Earl Thomas** will keep things in line at the safety position. An abundance of talent at TE along with **Chris Godwin** at WR equals danger, but the offence will go only as far as **Jared Goff** can carry it. Solid, not spectacular, kickers and returners.



9-7

NEW JERSEY WRECKING BALLS
COACH: **Jeff Cohen**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **A**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **B**

Matt Stafford has the arm but can he get the ball to **DJ Chark** with no run game to slow down the pass rush? **Jamal Adams** is the heartbeat of the defence and the unsung LB corps, led by **Matt Judon**, are the limbs and muscle. CB, **Chidobe Awuzie** is a pleasant surprise. Returners are decent and kicker, **Chris Boswell** could win a game or two.



6-10

BUFFALO DERAILERS
COACH: **Daryl Brothers**
OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B-**

Lamar Jackson is a stud put out to pasture by a thin supporting cast on offence, where **Robert Woods** is the only other playmaker. The defence has dropped down a peg from last year but remains dangerous with All Pro **Aaron Donald** and ballhawk **Quinton Dunbar**. ST coverage is on the light side, but P, **Andy Lee** and K, **Jake Elliott** are stable.

CENTRAL DIVISION



14-2

VIRDEN VIOLATORS
COACH: **Lance Barrate**
OFFENCE: **A-** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B+**

Pat Mahomes is the real deal and he has **Amari Cooper** and **John Brown** as primary targets and **Ezekiel Elliott** to take the heat off. The defence boasts playmakers in **Marcus Peters** and **Jamie Collins** but could be prone to staying on the field for long stretches. KR is in good hands with **Cordarell Patterson** but team is still looking for a punt returner.



9-7

PEG CITY CRUSADERS
COACH: **Stephen Katopodis**
OFFENCE: **A-** DEFENCE: **B-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B**

The diversity and number of offensive weapons at RB and WR will vault this offence into the top five as long as **Kirk Cousins** brings his 'A'-game. The secondary is improved at CB with **Marlon Humphrey** and **Jeff Okudah** but it will be the pass rush, led by **Von Miller**, that will tell how effective this unit will be. Special teams are serviceable in all areas.



7-9

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH
COACH: **Guy Williams**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **C+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **D** TOT: **B-**

A questionable offensive line will tilt a boom-or-bust offence under **Jameis Winston** toward bust unless **Clyde Edwards-Helaire** can call off the dogs. **Danielle Hunter** and **Bobby Wagner** are the only warriors remaining on a once top-notch D. No gunners, no legitimate punt returner and an iffy kicker make this unit a very *un-special* special teams.



4-12

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS
COACH: **Jason Findlay**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **C-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **D+** TOT: **C-**

A good pass-blocking line will give **DeShaun Watson** to find his only good WR, **DK Metcalf** and **Alvin Kamara** has some tricks up his sleeve to find the end zone. It will not matter because the defence is in shambles with **DeMarcus Lawrence** now their best player. An unreliable kicker, inept returners and a so-so punter round out the misery.

WEST DIVISION



11-5

IOWA CITY CUBS

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

A brawny offensive line led by **Quenton Nelson** will give **Joe Mixon** room to run and **Russell Wilson** time to throw. A lack of pass-catching TE holds back the grade. The 'D' is suspect and will rely on **Cameron Heyward** and the interior of the defensive line to make plays. ST coverage is elite, as is the kicker, **Justin Tucker**, but return game is a touch light.



8-8

CHINO CONVICTS

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

Chino's offensive fortunes will rely on **Dak Prescott** and **Christian McCaffery** and, to a lesser extent, **Michael Gallup**. The 'D' will give ground up until a point then expect **Za'Darius Smith** or **Grady Jarrett** to make a play to keep the red zone TD % down. **Jakeem Grant** is a HR-hitter at KR, but the kicker, **Chase McLaughlin** will cause grey hairs.



7-9

LAS VEGAS ASSASSINS

COACH: **Anthony Holguin**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **A-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B-**

Production will be hampered by a shaky O-line that will keep **Carson Wentz** dancing, but **Michael Thomas** and **Dalvin Cook** will make up ground. The strength of the team is on 'D', with an elite LB corps led by **Demario Davis** and **Shaquil Barrett** leading the way. **Mecole Hardman** nails down the returns, but **Ka'imi Fairbairn** makes X-points exciting.



2-14

SEATTLE PILOTS

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

This offence must be able to run the ball well with **Marlon Mack** if **Sam Darnold** is to succeed at all. One of the worst PB outfits in the league will help him spend time on his back otherwise. The defence, led by **Khalil Mack** and **Marshon Lattimore** is good, but will suffer due to the offence. **Jake Bailey** is a good punter, which will be important.

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



14-2

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

COACH: **George Kaldis**
OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **A+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **A**

Nick Chubb will deliver in the run game but **Josh Allen** will decide how far this offence will go as a scoring force. The defence has everything, including a shutdown CB in **Richard Sherman** two elite safeties and the top pass rushing prospect in the draft, **Chase Young**. While quibble about K, **Eddy Piniero** when he won't be needed to win games?



9-7

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

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

Once again, the team will rely on **Drew Brees** and **Odell Beckham** to spearhead the attack, but the addition of RB, **Jonathan Taylor** will help. **Chandler Jones** leads a talented defence that is built to stop the run and rush the passer but leaves its scant coverage resources on an island. **Dan Bailey** is money on FGs, not so hot on X-points.



7-9

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

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

The offence could go either way with rookie, **Joe Burrow** at QB, but a stout offensive line led by **Zack Martin** and RB, **Chris Carson** give him a chance. The defence, always respectable, remains so with **Nick Bosa** and **Dante Fowler** bring heat and **Deion Jones** staying at home. ST coverage could be better but overall solid special teams crew.



6-10

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

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

A dilapidated offensive line and a deteriorating **Todd Gurley** will give **Jimmy Garoppolo** all he can handle trying to find a double-teamed **Mike Evans**. The defence is riddled with holes but still holds promise with All Pro **TJ Watt** steering a top-notch pass rush. **Deonte Harris** is a returner's return man, **Johnny Hekker** a fine punter and K, **Joey Slye** is alright.

COASTAL DIVISION



12-4

BUDAPEST NORTH STARS
 COACH: **Darrin Jones**
 OFFENCE: **B+** DEFENCE: **A**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **A-**

Aaron Rodgers brings promise to an offence that boasts the best O-line in the league but has no real running threat to accompany it. The defence is tough, with three All Pros, **Calais Campbell**, **Cameron Jordan** and **Minkah Fitzpatrick**, bringing big-play ability. The un-explosive **Pharoh Cooper** and a weak-kneed kicker are tiny warts on a shiny veneer.



9-7

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

The offence will rise and fall with **Derek Carr** and **De'Andre Hopkins** and the stout pass-blocking O-line anchored by **Rodney Hudson** gives "rise" an edge over "fall." The defence could ruin everything in the end. Respectable vs the run, they are helpless against vs the pass and have no pass rush to redeem it. **Kenjon Barner** is a "burner" in the RET game.



6-10

YORK EXCALIBURS
 COACH: **Jay Hammond**
 OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **C+**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-** TOT: **C**

Apart from **Derrick Henry** and the fading **Tom Brady**, there is little to put a defence on edge other than **Zach Ertz**. The defence is built to slow down a late 70's offence but ill-equipped to handle a modern air attack, unless one counts the occasional pick by **Kevin Byard**. **Tyler Matakevich** is an excellent gunner but the PK and returners are anemic.



4-12

PICKERING SPARTANS
 COACH: **Gus Konstantakos**
 OFFENCE: **C** DEFENCE: **C-**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C-TOT: C-**

The O-line is a bad as they come in 2020 and this will affect all aspects of the offence. **Gardner Minshew** does not bring the TO baggage of **Philip Rivers**, but he doesn't bring the big plays either. The already bad defence will be burned out before Week 8 by being on the field all day. The barely functional special teams will not make any of this better.

SOUTH DIVISION



10-6

AURORA MUSTANGS
 COACH: **Rich Liotta**
 OFFENCE: **A-** DEFENCE: **C+**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **B+**

Jason Kelce anchors an offensive line that will elevate the play of Matt Ryan and his star supporting cast, **Kenyan Drake** and **Davante Adams** – as if they needed elevation. Where the Mustangs may come up lame is on the defensive side, where **Eric Kendricks** replaces **JJ Watt** as the Alpha Dog. **Wil Lutz** makes up for a frail group of kick returners.



7-9

ERIEAU CADILLAC
 COACH: **Jamie Rilett**
 OFFENCE: **D+** DEFENCE: **B-**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **C+**

Kyler Murray will oversee the same lousy Erieau offence, but he will be more exciting to watch. An excellent pass rush headed by **Joey Bosa** and good secondary captained by shutdown CB **Stephon Gilmore** will allow the average defence to punch above its weight with big plays. A pair of explosive punt returners will add surprises to thee scoresheet.



5-11

EAST ELMHURST
 COACH: **Chris Ferraro**
 OFFENCE: **C** DEFENCE: **C-**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C** TOT: **C-**

If it is any consolation, the Irish QB – whoever he may be – will enjoy decent pass protection from **Ben Jones** and **Jason Peters**. **Tyreek Hill** will shock opponents occasionally. The defence is, apart from **Jalen Ramsey**, defenceless against the pass. The butter-fingered return teams will cause fits. At least the ST coverage is pretty good.



3-13

GEORGIA GLADIATORS
 COACH: **Dave Birdsall**
 OFFENCE: **C-** DEFENCE: **D+**
 SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **C-**

Last and least, the Gladiators have little to offer on both sides of the ball except a measure of pass protection for **Tua** and an excellent RB in **Josh Jacobs**. The defence, with **Tremaine Edmunds** as a 'Captain,' has the potential to reach the bottom of every defensive stat category. **Richie James Jr** is a solid returner; but who is **Tyler Bass**?

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Jimmy's WEEK ONE PICKS

VIRDEN @ CHARLESWOOD (line – VIOLATORS by 7)

Patrick Mahomes could not have dialed up a better opponent from within the Division to start his campaign for glory than the 2020 edition of the Patriots. The only hitch is that the game is in Charleswood, but with no fans in attendance, Patriot Place will become a giant echo chamber for Mahomes' nasty hard count. Not that the Patriots' pass rush is the kind to fire on a hair trigger. Cameron Heyward is now on the opposite sideline and Demarcus Lawrence will be left to fight off double teams. Montez Sweat has some moves, but not of the calibre likely to bring down the dexterous and speedy Mahomes, who can throw as well on the run as inside the pocket. If the suspect secondary of the Patriots performs as feared, this could be a coming out party for the Violators that will send a challenging message to Conference rivals that will bury them in the film room. Now, it is not as if the Pats have no weapons to fire back. DeShaun Watson can keep a game alive and Alvin Kamara is an 'X' factor. But while this might keep things close for a while, expect Virden to dominate down the stretch and cover comfortably to start the season. **PICK: VIRDEN**

LAS VEGAS @ CHINO (line – CONVICTS by 5)

The season begins with a cage match between the two self-proclaimed 'bad boys' of the Conference. The new look on the Convicts' helmets says, "we're going to kill you," while the Assassins' name speaks for itself. Whether the players themselves are capable of living up to the thug hype remains to be seen. But it is clear that the Convicts' offence is one to be feared, even by a defence like that of Vegas, with real talent on the back end. The Assassins' secondary is strong and the linebacking corps elite, but the lack of stoutness up front will open up opportunities in the run game for the one-two punch of Christian McCaffery and Mark Ingram II. This, of course, will open up play action for Dak Prescott and then things can get ugly quickly. However, Carson Wentz has shown he is a gamer – he won a Gale Sayer Trophy – and he has the elite Michael Thomas as his primary target to complement the explosive running of Dalvin Cook. The Convicts will call on rookie corner AJ Terrell to cover Thomas, so a double-team is almost mandatory. Do not expect the 'Lockdown Crew' to lock down the Assassins. The question will be can Chino dominate a shootout? I think they can. **PICK: CHINO**

NEW JERSEY @ COBB COUNTY (line – COYOTES by 4)

The most overrated team in the division visits the most underrated team to decide if they are deserving of the tags that have been slapped on them by the so-called experts. The Wrecking Balls scrapped a scheduled rebuilding year and sought out the legendary Matt Stafford to lead a respectable, but by powerhouse standards, slim band of talent to take a run at glory. Stafford has delivered eye-popping numbers in the past (2012 comes to mind) but he did nothing to make the Cadillac better the past three years and it would be a stretch to think that he is going to elevate the play of those around him here. Expect DJ Chark Jr and Terry McLaurin to do their thing on their own. On the other side, the former Knights will start retreat Ryan Tannehill at QB after jettisoning Lamar Jackson, Jeff Dohrn's pick to lead the franchise, for no apparent reason. The crazy thing is that Tannehill has been reportedly tearing it up in camp, no doubt thanks to the presence of Julio Jones and the ageless Adrian Peterson. His protection is excellent on the blindside and if Tannehill gets protection, he can eat a defence alive. This game will be an eye-opener for many. **PICK: COBB COUNTY**

BUFFALO @ BRUXELLES (line – DERAILERS by 2)

The Derailers mortgaged the farm to bring in Lamar Jackson and now they have no choice but to pin their franchise's hopes on the dynamic but still raw talent. This is a move that will need to be judged in the long term because in the short term the Derailers simply do not have the juice left this year to build a team around him. A sub-par draft brought no impact rookies to bear, so it will be Lamar's legs and Robert Woods who will carry the banner for the offence. In a dramatic off-season move, the Bombers parted ways with long time starter Marcus Mariota and handed the reins to the controversial Jared Goff. Goff has the support he needs in two top tier tight ends and an elite playmaker in Chris Godwin. But he will be facing a top-notch Buffalo defence featuring the disruptive Aaron Donald.

The talent edge goes to Buffalo, but a veteran coach like Ken Main has a way of getting the most out of his players. Expect the long trip and European quarantine to take its toll on the Buffalonians, who will be one step behind all day. **PICK: BRUXELLES**

TWIN CITIES @ PEG CITY (line – CRUSADERS by 4)

With Guy Williams unable to decide after camp who his starting quarterback will be, odds-makers, fans and opponents are left to guess as to whether Mitch Trubisky or Jameis Winston still start under center for the Triumph. While this might appear like an edge, the fact that he cannot decide between those two mediocrities does not bode well for the Triumph's fortunes in 2020. After years of relative dominance in the Central Division and the Conference, the Triumph may be finally in decline. However, the remnants of a powerhouse remain, and new blood in the form of Clyde Edwards-Helaire could very well breathe second life into this ailing body. The Crusaders, on the other hand, appear to be on the rise. They like Kirk Cousins and Cousins likes what he has around him in Keenan Allen, Courtland Sutton and the high-powered Saquon Barkley. The defence is vastly improved, especially in the secondary, and it is hard to picture them falling flat in their home opener. Witness the changing of the guard. **PICK: PEG CITY**

SEATTLE @ IOWA CITY (line – CUBS by 9)

This will be the fourth straight season that the Cubs have opened at home against Seattle and every time it has been a tough slog for the favourites. In fact, the Pilots opened 2018 with huge upset over the Cubbies in a season where they eventually finished 7 games apart and the Cubs won the division. The point I am making is that you can throw out the line when the Pilots come to Joe Ferguson Stadium in Week One, regardless of who is behind center for Seattle. This time it happens to be Sam Darnold, a third-year up-and-comer who will be taking on confirmed starting duties for the first time. He will be attacking a Cubs' defence that has lost some lustre from past seasons, but is still capable of standing up to a first-time starter. On the other side, The Cubs have their ace-in-hole, Russell Wilson, as a sort of insurance policy against disaster. He will look for Tyler Lockett if he has to perform some magic. Will the Cubs have to make a claim on that policy? If history is a reliable indicator, yes. **PICK: SEATTLE**

SCARBOROUGH @ COWTOWN (line – CORN KINGS by 4)

More attention will be paid to this game than is warranted by the overall quality of the competition. The Football World's eyes will be on Joe Burrow, the no.1 overall pick and long pined-for Saviour of the Scarborough franchise. How will he fare against a Cowtown defence that has not changed noticeably from the squad that finished ranked 8th overall in efficiency in 2019? It depends on whether the Cowtown pass rush can gain penetration to disrupt his timing and rattle his cage. The Corn Kings will need a good game from TJ Watt to put that dynamic in motion. If protected, a Burrow living up to his reputation will be able to do some damage against a so-so Cowtown secondary. On the other side, Jimmy Garoppolo is looking forward to starting and hopefully finishing his first season as the undisputed starter. He will need his quick release to keep the Joey Bosa-led Scarborough pass rush at bay and will pray that Todd Gurley's rickety knees don't give out. It could be long season for Garoppolo otherwise. But for this week anyway, expect Cowtown to rally at home and show the New Kid on the Block who's Boss. **PICK: COWTOWN**

DURHAM @ SEBASTIAN (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 1)

While most of the football intelligentsia are picking Durham to represent the Atlantic Conference in the Championship, a few of us who know a tiny bit more recognize a potential "trap game" when we see one. Not that Durham is undeserving of the slim 1-point favourite status on the road, but the Swordfish have the tools and skills to penetrate the Maginot line of the Thunder Lizards' defence and hit them unexpectedly from the rear. Of course, offence will not be enough to pull off an upset. The Sebastian defence will have to contain Josh Allen in the pocket and force him to throw downfield, where his accuracy is not the greatest. A couple of forced errors could easily tip the balance for the home team. Enter Nick Chubb. The budding star will emerge from the shadow of Derrick Henry and let Jay Hammond know in no uncertain terms who he should have kept and who he should have dealt. **PICK: DURHAM**

BUDAPEST @ PICKERING (line – NORTH STARS by 10)

The North Stars are the consensus "other" pick to represent the Atlantic Conference in the Championship and the chances that they will very much look the part after Week One are good. The Spartans, tired of pretending to compete every season, threw in the towel during the off-season and stripped the shelves of most of their stars. They will rely on young prospects to carry the Spartan Shield in 2020. While the foundation is laid for a brighter future, today they will experience the growing pains. Do not expect the Stars to try and prove a point, or "send a message" to their competitors by thrashing the Spartans to start the season. If thrashing occurs, it will be a by-product of their opponent's ineptness. Expect Budapest to go out and take care of business decisively with the professional decorum worthy of a champion and a sportsman. **PICK: BUDAPEST**

YORK @ BROOKLIN (line – EXCALIBURS by 1)

The first round of the battle to decide which team will finish closest to the playoffs without making it begins in Brooklin as the mediocre Excaliburs take on the slightly less mediocre Hawks. I've looked at the numbers and Tom Brady is the only explanation I can think of for why York enters this game as 1-point favourites on the road. Sure, Derrick Henry is a tank and Zach Ertz is a pest down the seam, but DeAndre Hopkins is a fighter jet, Derek Carr fires short range missiles with supreme accuracy and Carlos Hyde still has fight left in him. Give the Hawks the decided edge on the offensive side of the ball. If York wins this game, it will be because the defence steps up and overperforms as it sometimes does in close games. But that always happened with Von Miller on the field. DeForest Buckner may be a stud and Kevin Byard a ballhawk, but even together they are no Miller. **PICK: BROOKLIN**

GEORGIA @ ERIEAU (line – CADILLAC by 6)

The Gladiators elected to go without fans at Georgia Stadium and this game will provide the first hint at why that is a good move on top of preventing the spread of the Coronavirus. The Gladiators are spent defensively, with little to no pass rush, precious little on the front line and only token coverage skills in the secondary. On offence, they have Josh Jacobs and a talented Jarvis Landry who will see his talent go to waste with a rookie quarterback at the helm. On the other hand – dare I say it – the Cadillac are positioned to be a truly dark horse playoff candidate, made even more dangerous by the fact that nobody will see them coming. Kyler Murray still needs work, but he has legitimate young talent around him and a defence that could emerge as a potent equalizer with enough rest between series. The Erieau threat may be phantom in the long run, but not in Week One. **PICK: ERIEAU**

AURORA @ EAST ELMHURST (line – MUSTANGS by 2)

I realize Week One lines in a pandemic are not easy to make, but this one baffles me because there is no reason, short of an accurate crystal ball, to believe Aurora will suffer any hardship apart from the sore hooves that come after administering a severe trampling. These young and depleted Irish are not the Wolverines they replaced. They ceased to have any hope for this season after they traded Saquon Barkley and Aaron Rodgers. Now some might argue that they never stood a chance anyway. Perhaps. But now we now for sure. Of course, there is a scenario where the Irish could make me look bad. It revolves around Tyreek Hill and a lot of Irish luck centered around a certain mythical gnome named Fitzmagick. But in the real world of objective analysis, the Mustangs retain the edge in every meaningful and less meaningful category, except kick returns. Matt Ryan still has Davante Adams and Julian Edeleman and Kenyan Drake is still capable of obscene gains when a defence lets down its guard. The question is not whether the Mustangs will win, but how much will they win by. It will be by more than two. **PICK: AURORA**



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