

# 2016

10

Est. 2007

CHAMPIONSHIP



*Celebrating our 10<sup>th</sup> year of football excellence*

March 5, 2017

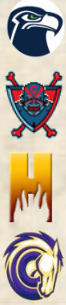
# 2016

10

Est. 2007

EDITION

EAST



NORTH



CENTRAL



ATLANTIC



WEST



SOUTH



# PERFECTION

# TRUMPHANT!



*Antonio Brown*

## Gale Sayers Game X



31

TRIUMPH



24

SWORDFISH

Triumph WR, **Antonio Brown** celebrates after scoring the game-winning TD in his team's final triumph of the season. Twin Cities recovered from a slow start while the Swordfish offence struggled under back-up **Jameis Winston** in a game that went down to the wire. *(Full story inside)*





31

GAME CENTER  
2016

24

Twin Cities

CHAMPIONSHIP

Sebastian

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Palmer	25	44	421	3
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Martin	18	57	3.2	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Brown	12	205	17.1	2

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Twin Cities	0	7	7	17	-	31
Sebastian	14	0	3	7	-	24

## Play of the Game

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter, 17-7, **Alex Smith** checked down to **Jerome Felton**. LB **Bobby Wagner** that was recovered to a TD.

## TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Winston	9	27	93	1
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Anderson	17	125	7.4	1
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Baldwin	5	65	13.0	1

## TWIN CITIES TRIUMPHS!

BROWN CATCHES GAME-WINNER IN FURIOUS 4<sup>TH</sup> QUARTER FINALE!

**CANTON (AP)** – On the coldest day in EFL Championship history, 27,500 fans packed the close confines of historical Fawcett Stadium in Canton to witness history in the making. The 10<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game was about to played; the climactic finale to a milestone 10<sup>th</sup> EFL season that some thought would never come. Raised like a phoenix from the ashes of the cataclysm that had consumed the old NFL, the EFL began its life in an existential struggle with three rival leagues. Its bold ambition to be the best was matched only by its dogged determination in the face of many obstacles. It had not been a smooth journey; and that made this day ultimately satisfying for the league and its diehard fans.

No doubt there would have been more fans in the stands to witness history had the game been played at a larger venue. But the EFL, faithful to its roots, had returned to the place of its origin for this ceremonious occasion. The ground upon which the Sebastian Swordfish and the Twin Cities Triumph were about to clash had been consecrated by the hopeful spirits of 636 professional football players selected in that now famous inaugural draft back in 2007 at the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Mere months after appearing to lose everything, their football careers had been reborn. This was the league's 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, of sorts, and the name to be inscribed on the 10<sup>th</sup> Championship "candle" would be known in only a few hours.

It was ironic that the teams contending for the 10<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Trophy at the league's birthplace had not been around on that momentous day. They had joined the league together as members of the Expansion Class of 2012 and had followed widely divergent paths to the ultimate stage. The Triumph had been relatively successful from the beginning, breaking into the playoffs for the first time in 2014 and building on that success until they had achieved near perfection. They had not lost a single game in 2016 and were the most dominant team to enter the Championship game since the Aurora Mustangs of 2014.

**QUOTES:** "It hurts, but we'll get over it. Because life goes on, long after the pain of losing is gone. Jameis and Odell – just two American kids doing the best they can. Sometimes a loss don't feel like it should, this one hurts so good!" – Sebastian coach, **Russ Lemmon**.

"We stuck to our game plan right until the end and it wasn't easy. Stopping Beckham was our no.1 priority – he is just an outstanding receiver. Dalton going down hurt them, but it did not change our approach. As we did all year, our team made big plays at key moments in the game," – Triumph coach **Guy Williams**.



HAPPY FAN



titter

ANGRY FAN



**Lars Odegard** @LarsValhalla  
Odin was watching over the Triumph today as He has been all year



**Jean Boisvert** @JB-SwamplandP  
'GSX' was a classic marred by all-too familiar sight of Dalton injury. That's football!



The Sebastian Swordfish had suffered four losing seasons in near total obscurity before bursting on the scene in 2016. Their first winning season had been as impressive a display of power as it had been a surprising one for their rivals. After finishing off the Gladiators and Mustangs in the post-season with unnerving ease, there were few who would dispute that "The Fish" were the cream of the Atlantic Conference – the team with the best chance to ruin Twin Cities' bid for perfection and seize a ring.

The Triumph were the slimmest of favourites heading into the game. Despite their perfect record, top-scoring offence and no.1-ranked defence, there remained skeptics who attributed an equal portion of their success to the deficiencies of their rivals as to the merits of the team. As for the Swordfish; while many were initially slow to accept Sebastian as a true powerhouse, by game day there was a widespread belief that they out-gunned the Triumph and that it was Andy Dalton's game to lose.

"We're in the historic city of Canton. The build-up has been incredible for Gale Sayers Ten," began ESPN play-by-play announcer **Phil Winterall**. "The two best teams in the league will battle it out in the birthplace of the EFL. How exciting! The Triumph come into this game unbeaten, Bill, but a lot of people think the Swordfish are the better team. What are your thoughts on that?"

"Well, Phil, I don't know how you can be better than 16-0," replied ESPN colour-analyst **Bill Badden**. "And then you add those two wins that got 'em here and you have....a....whole lot of wins without a loss. I don't know how you can beat that. But the Swordfish are a good team. They kind of snuck up on the league this year but there is no doubt they deserve to be here today."

"All week long we've talked about the weather and the condition of the field. It doesn't look that bad out there today, but it is a lot colder than other championship games. Do you expect the weather to be a factor today, Bill?" Winterall asked.

"I was watching the warm-ups, Phil, and the field looks pretty good," Badden answered. "The Triumph used to play in cold weather just a year ago and the Swordfish play in the North...which I don't understand one bit...but my point is they play in some cold places. I don't think it will matter to the players as long as they play with what got them here. If they start thinking about things like being cold they could get into a lot of trouble out there."

A gathering of dignitaries unlike any other in history of the EFL's big game crowded the center of the field as the head official, **Bill Vinovich**, handed a special EFL 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemorative coin to special guest **Gale Sayers**. The '*Kansas Comet*' had been introduced to rousing cheers from the crowd and was about to be honoured with the job of tossing the coin to start the game that bore his name. The Triumph, in their white jerseys with sky blue numbers and gold trim; and the Swordfish, in their ocean blue jerseys with white numbers and silver trim, stood opposite each other as Vinovich went over the rules of the coin flip.

Finally the time for the flip arrived. With a steady hand Sayers flipped the coin high in the air. Triumph defensive captain **Bobby Wagner** called "heads" and the coin landed heads to a burst of cheers from the Triumph supporters in the crowd. The Swordfish special teams captain, **LP Ladouceur** elected to defend the west end zone. The players assumed their respective sides before shaking hands in a ceremony that took much longer than usual due to the large number of pre-game participants. But just as the ritual was coming to an end there was a commotion near the center of the great oval 'EFL' logo. A league official approached and conferred with Vinovich, who suddenly signalled for the players to return to the circle. He activated his microphone and addressed the crowd solemnly:

"There's a mistake. Sebastian, you won the coin toss," Vinovich turned to Ladouceur. "This is not a joke. I'm afraid they read the wrong side." Vinovich showed the coin to the captains and turned it back and forth. He was explaining something.

Murmuring in the crowd turned to uproar – a mixture of hissing and booing Triumph fans, and clapping and cheering Swordfish fans. But general applause broke out when Ladouceur, the Swordfish rep, announced that his team would defer; Wagner declared his team would receive; and Ladouceur elected to defend the west end zone. All was back to the way it was. But confusion as to what had happened still reigned.

"Have you ever seen anything like that before, Bill?" asked **Phil Winterall**, clearly as perplexed as everyone else.

"I'm not sure what I just saw, Phil, so I'm not sure if I've seen it before or not," replied **Bill Badden**. "Aren't there just two sides to a coin? If one side is down and the other side is up and the guy reading it is standing over it, I don't know how he could read the other side...unless he already knew what was on that side and imagined it....sort of, in his mind as he was reading the other side and said what was in his mind instead of what he was looking at."

"There were problems with the coin toss last year. The call had to be reviewed," noted Winterall.

"Yeah, and it was the right call on review, Phil," Badden was quick to point out. "The league usually gets these things right in the end. You'd like them to get the coin toss right the first time but that's not always possible."

As the VIPs at center field gradually began to disperse and the team's confused head coaches retreated after having had their say, the head official obviously felt the crowd required an explanation. He turned his microphone back on and lectured the fans:

"A special coin was used on this occasion," Vinovich stated in his most official voice. "The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary Championship Coin bearing the likeness of Gale Sayers on the 'heads' side and the EFL logo on the 'tails' side is a transparent crystal coin. The coin was flipped properly and landed properly with the 'tails' side facing up. However, in the bright light the official could see, and did read, the other side of the coin in error. This was corrected soon after. Sebastian therefore won the toss and elected to defer."

[Type] "Okay.....now I know I've never seen anything like that before, Phil," Badden declared.





# THE GAME



**1<sup>st</sup> QUARTER (Sebastian 14, Twin Cities 0)** – The protracted coin flip ceremony pushed back the official kickoff time from 4:35 to 4:45 pm local time. ESPN had squeezed as many advertisements as possible into the pre-game time space. At \$3 million per minute – a new record for a Gale Sayers Game – that meant big bucks for the network and more elaborate ads by the sponsors. An extended three-minute ad from '69 Lumber,' depicting the harrowing journey of an illegal alien from Mars to Earth only to find that his landing is barred by a giant roof over America, had many people scratching their heads as they expressed their impatience about the long wait over social media.

Finally, the cameras returned to Fawcett Stadium, where the special teams units for the Triumph and the Swordfish were keeping warm through the delays by stretching and jogging around the field.

"Welcome back to Fawcett Stadium in Canton where it appears we are finally about to the get under way," announced, **Phil Winterall**. "How did you feel about long delays when you were a coach, Bill?"

"Well, we didn't like them, Phil," **Bill Badden** replied. "The coaches, the players, the trainers, the fans, nobody likes waiting. You get so focused that all you really want is to get out there on the field and hit somebody. Even the coaches feel that way. You just want to smash somebody, take their head off...you know....get the blood flowing. When you have to wait, it's hard to keep up that intensity so you start hitting your teammates to stay focused. This can get your players injured. As a coach you don't want that."

Sebastian kicker **Adam Vinatieri** bent over and placed the ball on the tee. The capacity crowd rose to its feet and began to cheer. As he walked back to prepare to kick the Triumph suddenly started making substitutions. Every tight end on the roster came charging onto the field.

"What's this?" a startled Winterall exclaimed. "It looks like the Triumph have put their hands team on the field! What do you make of this, Bill?"

"Well, Russ Lemmon has developed a reputation as an aggressive coach who is prepared to do the unexpected," Badden explained. "An onside kick here to start the game would be unexpected....and Triumph coach Guy Williams knows this. So he's expecting the unexpected here and sending in the big bodies with the soft hands up front in anticipation of an onside kick."

Vinatieri pushed off and launched himself toward the ball. But instead of an onside kick he drilled a low liner into the grass about 20 yards down field. The ball took a high bounce then rolled all the way to the 16 yard line where return man **Shane Vereen** picked it up. With little blocking up front for the Triumph, the Swordfish special teamers swarmed towards Vereen and brought him down after a short 8-yard return.

"What do you know! He crossed him up with a squib kick there!" declared Winterall. "Do you get the feeling this is going to be a real chess match between these two maverick coaches, Bill?"

"Well, I don't know about chess, Phil, but it's going to be a heck of a football game, that's for sure!" Badden blubbered in excitement. "Russ Lemmon did it again! He bamboozled his opponent by doing the unexpected. Everyone was expecting an onside kick there because that would have been unexpected, but instead he went with another kind of kick – a *squib* kick. Nobody expected that....especially considering the Triumph are known to be not all that great on kick returns."

"Vereen's longest kick return this year was 27 yards, Bill," Winterall noted.

"He's not a threat to take it back all the way, that's for sure!" Badden added. "But Russ Lemmon made sure of that by faking the onside kick then squibbing it. I can't wait to see what else these two coaches have up their sleeves this afternoon!"

The Triumph offence jogged onto the field and lined up at their 24 yard line in a two tight end set with **Doug Martin** the lone setback. The Swordfish met them with three down linemen and four linebackers, set at mid-depth behind the line of scrimmage, with the free safety shaded to the right to support corner **Delvin Breaux**, who had the task this day of trying to defend the virtually un-defensible **Antonio Brown**.

"What does Delvin Breaux have to do today to try and limit or stop Antonio Brown, Bill?" Winterall made conversation as the Triumph took their time setting up.

"Well, he's going to need help, Phil, pure and simple," Badden answered flatly. "The only corner to hold off Brown all year was David Amerson of the Knights. That was in the quarter finals and he did it because he had a lot of help from the safety over the top and the linebackers underneath. Brown is the best weapon the Triumph have, probably the best weapon in the league, and you're not going to stop him one-on-one."

**Carson Palmer** took up his spot behind center and barked out signals as he surveyed the Swordfish defence. With one second left on the play clock the ball was snapped and Palmer handed it off to Martin, who bounced off the right side and was taken down by **Jerry Attaochu** after a modest 2-yard gain. The crowd cheered. The opening drive of Gale Sayers X was officially underway.

"And they start with a run to Martin for about two yards. Are you at all surprised that they didn't go to Brown to start the game, Bill? Perhaps to send a message?" Winterall asked as the teams regrouped on the field for second down.

"Not at all surprised, Phil," Badden replied. "You could see the Swordfish had Brown double-covered on that play. A lot of people don't realize that Doug Martin won the rushing title this year. There wasn't much hullabaloo about it because everyone was talking about Brown. But Martin was a big part of Brown's success this year. Heck, he's what they call one of them dark sheep contenders for offensive MVP."

[Type] On the next play Palmer checked down incomplete to Martin. But Sebastian linebacker **Denzel Perryman** had arrived early to break up the pass, drawing an immediate flag from Vinovich for pass interference and an automatic first down. Swordfish fans booed lustily while Triumph

supporters applauded.

"And we have our first penalty of the game on just the second play of the game," announced Winterall.

"Ah, the rookie looked a little anxious on that play, Phil!" Badden added. "You wanna see that kind of aggression in your young players in a game like this, but you kinda hope the ref doesn't see it."

The Triumph had a first down at their 31 yard line but they would go no further. Martin was stoned on a nice play by **Carlos Dunlap**, Palmer threw incomplete to a double-covered **Rishard Matthews** and, on third down, **Sharif Floyd** got penetration up the middle and stripped Palmer of the ball. It took a Triumph bounce and Palmer was able to cover it up, but the net result was a 7-yard loss.

"It looked like Palmer didn't stand a chance on that play, Bill," Winterall observed as the Triumph punting unit came onto the field.

"No he didn't, Phil! Floyd just plows over the center Kraig Urbik," Badden enthused while watching the replay. "Look, he just gobberstomps him and bats the ball out before Carson Palmer even gets set. It's a good thing too, because the Swordfish were playing underneath and both Brown and Clay were open down field."

**Chris Jones** launched a high, arcing punt to a waiting **Danny Amendola**, who thought better of attempting a return with four Triumph players beading down on him. It was a nice kick that netted 54 yards, giving the Swordfish their first possession at their own 22 yard line.

"And here comes the 'Red Rifle' for his first shot at the Triumph defence this afternoon," Winterall announced as **Andy Dalton** led the Swordfish offence onto the field. "Dalton led all quarterbacks in passer rating this year but struggled to stay healthy."

"Yeah, he was held to just under 300 attempts, Phil," added Badden. "But, you know, that Jameis Winston kid looked pretty good in relief too. I guess that's what happens when you have the weapons the Swordfish have and you have Marshall Yanda on your offensive line. You just throw touchdowns when you're in a situation like that. Heck, I could probably throw a touchdown pass behind that offensive line!"

"Have you ever thrown a touchdown pass before, Bill?" Winterall chuckled.

"Once, in High School I was playing tight end," Badden giggled. "We had an option play to the tight end and I just heaved it up in the air. Our half back, a guy named Buster McVee, caught the ball. That was my only touchdown pass....well except in pick-up games. Can I count those too?"

"Dalton and Winston combined for 36 this year – still not as many as Carson Palmer," Winterall stated as the Swordfish lined up.

Dalton called an audible at the line, dropped back on the first snap and looked down field. **Odell Beckham Jr** was double-covered so he checked down to **CJ Anderson** for a 5-yard gain. On the next play he took a seven-step drop and fired a bullet down the sideline that was caught by **Dough Baldwin** for a 23-yard gain. The Swordfish fans in the crowd roared their approval.

"Dalton doesn't look like he's backing down from those Triumph corners, Bill," Winterall said as the referee placed the ball at the 50 yard line.

"Yeah, he's going right after them, Phil," Badden concurred. "But, you know....that's Russ Lemmon's style of coaching right there! When the Swordfish were struggling all those years everyone said that you couldn't get a handle on him as a coach because he didn't have anything to work with. Well, now he has something to work with and he's like...bam...boom...zap...going right after everyone out there!"

A handoff to **Justin Forsett** for a 5-yard gain offered a brief change of pace then the Swordfish went back to the air. But Triumph defensive lineman **William Gholston** knifed through the Swordfish line to dump Dalton on the next play for a 6-yard loss. Dalton had been looking toward Beckham, but **Jerrell Freeman** was guarding the passing lane underneath.

"And Dalton is dumped! William Gholston with the sack!" play-by-play announcer **Phil Winterall** called the play.

"Gholston plays the old middle guard position in that 5-2 set the Triumph like to use," colour commentator, **Bill Badden** pronounced authoritatively. "That would be like a nose tackle, but in the center of a five-man defensive line. It's an old formation that hasn't really been used much in professional football since the 1950's, but the Triumph use it as their base defence. The league still hasn't figured it out. Heck, I remember from my playing days when we moved away from the 5-2 by pulling back the middle guard to plug that gap in the middle of the field. The Triumph play it a little different. They spread out those big boys in the middle and play the two linebackers facing the guards. That can cross up the guards if they expect a blitz, as they did there. But the Triumph faked the blitz that time and the guard failed to pick up Gholston."

The sack knocked the Swordfish offence off their rhythm. Forsett made up the loss with a 6-yard gain on a screen pass, but that was not enough for the first down and it brought up 4<sup>th</sup> & 5 at the Triumph 45.

"And that will bring on the punting unit.....no! Wait a second! It looks like the Swordfish might be going to go for it here, Bill! Andy Dalton is still on the field," Winterall exclaimed. "If they are really going for it, it's a pretty gutsy move. Do you agree with a gamble here, Bill?"

"Well this is vintage Russ Lemmon here, Phil," Badden answered. "He's going to take these types of chances. He's been doing it all year. I think it's a little too early for this myself. If they make the first down they make the first down. If they don't, they don't and Carson Palmer gets the ball in great field position with that explosive offence. But, heck, it's football! It's the game we play here in America!"

The Swordfish lined up with a third wide receiver, Amendola, deployed in the slot. Without making the slightest attempt to deceive Dalton slung a short pass to him over the middle for an 8-yard gain and a first down at the 38.

"And Danny Amendola has the first down! He looked pretty open on that play, Bill," Winterall commented.

"That was the right call to go for it in that situation, Phil!" Badden quickly pointed out. "You have Danny Amendola, a veteran, on nickel corner Byron Maxwell, who's only playing his second snap of the game. He does a little jiggy move at the line, cuts underneath and Dalton gets the ball out quickly to him for an easy first down. Sometimes this game is really just that simple!"



The Swordfish had a new set of downs but soon faced another 4<sup>th</sup> down situation, this time at the Triumph 28, after Baldwin came up one yard short with an 11-yard gain on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 12.

"Well, they aren't even thinking about it here. They're going for it on 4<sup>th</sup> & 1. Do you agree with this decision, Bill?" Winterall asked.

"Heck, I agree with whatever works, Phil!" Badden chortled. "But you have Adam Vinatieri on your team, a veteran kicker who isn't going to be intimidated. He makes these types of kicks in his sleep. I think you take a shot at points here rather than risk it against a great defence."

But Coach **Russ Lemmon** saw an opportunity. The Triumph had had 6 defensive backs on the field for 3<sup>rd</sup> and long. Going without a huddle he hoped to catch his opponent in a non-optimal formation and he was successful. The Triumph hastily lined up and seconds later Forsett ploughed through the middle of the line for a 4-yard gain and another first down.

"Great call in that situation, Phil!" Badden gushed. "The Triumph got caught in their dime package and the Swordfish went smash mouth at 'em with Justin Forsett and...bongo...first down! It's a simple game really, when you think about it!"

The second fourth down conversion of the drive seemed to deflate the Triumph defence as a whole, but it appeared to anger **Ziggy Ansah**. On the next play he split the gap between **Ryan Schraeder** and **Justin Pugh** and zeroed in on Dalton. The Swordfish quarterback got the ball away to Anderson, but as he did the Triumph defensive end crashed into him. Dalton went down awkwardly and stayed down.

"Oh no, this looks bad, Bill. Dalton is down. The officials have called an injury timeout here," Winterall declared gravely.

"You just hate to see that," Badden filled in after a long pause as the replay ran in slow motion on the screen. "Dalton twists his right knee here as Ziggy Ansah falls on him. That's just really unfortunate there. It's a good football play by the defender and a good play by the quarterback. But sometimes two rights make a wrong, Phil. Looks like they're going to have to assist Dalton off the field."

"Jameis Winston is warming up on the sideline, Bill," Winterall commented as the camera turned to the Swordfish back-up QB. "He's used to this situation. He played in 11 games this year and saw considerable action in relief of Andy Dalton."

"Well, normally I'd be worried right now if I were the Swordfish, Phil," Badden said. "But Winston did a great job this year when he was in there. You never want to lose your starting quarterback, but if you *have* to lose your starting quarterback then having a player like Winston come into the game is as good as it gets as far as back-ups go."



Swordfish quarterback **Andy Dalton** is carted off the field holding his knee during first quarter action. Dalton was injured at the end of the game's opening drive and never returned. The early loss of Dalton meant **Jameis Winston** played most of the game.



Sebastian came right at the Triumph on the ground after that with **CJ Anderson** following **Morgan Moses** off right tackle for consecutive runs of 9 and 6 yards, the second for a touchdown to finish the drive. Swordfish fans rose to their feet in celebration but it was comparatively muted for an opening score. Their team had drawn first blood, but it had come at a price.

"I know it wasn't easy, but the Swordfish made it look pretty easy on that drive, Bill," Winterall commented as Vinatieri gauged the wind for the extra point.

"It wasn't easy at all, Phil," Badden replied. "It certainly wasn't easy for Odell Beckham. He didn't catch a ball on that drive and that's because the Triumph had him locked up the whole time. But that made room for playmakers like Doug Baldwin and CJ Anderson to do their thing. And that's the thing about the Swordfish – they have that big stinger on their nose and they can sting you in a lot of ways."

Vinatieri made the extra point to make the score officially 7-0. After a long commercial break the network returned to live action just in time for the ensuing kickoff. The Triumph once again deployed their hands team on the field and Vinatieri again booted a squib kick. This time the ball was tracked down by Vereen at the 27, but he was brought down almost immediately at the 30 yard line.

"The Triumph look really concerned about the onside kick, Bill. Do you think that concern is warranted?" Winterall asked as the Triumph offence trotted onto the field.

"Absolutely, Phil! You don't want your opponent to have a free shot at you," Badden answered with conviction. "Remember, Russ Lemmon can be tricky and a little crazy. You don't expect a team to risk an onside kick this early in the game, especially after they've scored and have all of the momentum – that would be crazy! And that's exactly why Guy Williams expected an onside kick there. It's just crazy enough that Russ Lemmon might do it. Heck, he probably would do it. But Lemmon crossed him up again. Knowing that trying an onside kick would be crazy, he banked on Guy Williams thinking he'd be crazy enough to try it, and again he did the one thing nobody expected or would think was a good idea – a second squib kick to Shane Vereen."

"Well, with the 3-yard return the Triumph take over in good field position at their 30 yard line looking to answer the Swordfish touchdown," Winterall continued with the play-by-play.

The second Triumph series got off to a good start: Palmer caught the Swordfish keying on Martin and hit a wide open Matthews for a 19-yard gain. Then Martin raced around the left end for 13 yards and a first down in Sebastian territory. But on the next play, Swordfish safety **Aaron Colvin** tipped a pass intended for Matthews and linebacker **Paul Posluszny** wrestled it away for an interception. A 15-yard return gave the Swordfish the ball at their 43 yard line. Swordfish supporters erupted in celebration.

**Jameis Winston** led the Swordfish offence onto the field for its second go at the Triumph defence. A check down to **Clive Walford** on first down hit the ground, but back-to-back 7-yard runs by Anderson brought them into Triumph territory. Then a deep throw to Beckham was tipped by **Da'Norris Searcy**, who was doubling him underneath. Winston looked for Beckham again, but again he was double-covered, forcing a dump off to Anderson for 13 yards. A holding penalty on Searcy against Beckham on the next play gave Sebastian an automatic first down at the Triumph 25. Two plays later, **Justin Forsett** followed a crushing block by the right tackle Moses and burst into the secondary. Nobody on the Triumph side laid a hand on him as he darted to a 25-yard touchdown run. The lusty cheers of delirious Swordfish fans provided the background music for Forsett as he spiked the ball and leaped into the arms of Moses in celebration.



**Justin Forsett** flashes his EFL Week 10 'Salute to Service' gloves after scoring Sebastian's second TD in the first quarter of GSX.

"Justin Forsett with the big run and the Swordfish have their second touchdown!" Winterall blared.

"It's bad enough for a defence to have to deal with CJ Anderson, but when he finally takes a play off then you have to deal with this guy!" Badden chortled as Forsett bounded back to the sideline. "Twin Cities is in danger of letting things get away from them here! They took Beckham out of the play again on that drive. So what did the Swordfish do? They ran it down their throats instead. Morgan Moses...you have to love the way he plays this game! He just smears Jerry Hughes on that play. Like...we're talking about a guy...a guy with 10 sacks who seldom misses a tackle just getting run over. You don't see that too often."

Triumph fans were sitting on their hands. Nothing had gone their way to this point in the game. **Guy Williams** looked composed, but grim on the sideline. His team had never trailed by more than 7 points at any point during the season or the post-season. Their grit was about to be tested as never before.

They took over at their 33 after another squib kick by the Swordfish, but managed to move the ball just 2 yards in the next three plays. As the whistle blew the longest opening quarter in EFL Championship history to a close, his team faced 4<sup>th</sup> & 8 at



its own 35 yard line and a certain punting situation. It looked like they were on the road to failing that test of grit miserably.

**2<sup>nd</sup> QUARTER (Sebastian 14, Twin Cities 7)** – There was no grand deception to start the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter. Jones dutifully punted the ball, not as far this time but equally as high, causing Amendola to signal for a fair catch at the 22 yard line – the exact spot where they had started their opening drive.

“And Winston comes onto the field for the Swordfish. His team has a chance to really put the Triumph on their heels if he can lead them to a score here,” Winterall said dryly. Nobody in the broadcast industry wanted a blowout in Gale Sayers 10 and Winterall’s deadpan delivery said it all.

“Well, the Triumph need to make a stop,” added Badden gravely. “If they give up a score here they’ll fall further behind.”

The Sebastian drive went nowhere. Winston tried to hit Beckham on a short hitch but the star wide-out was double-covered. Then **Kenny Clark** batted down an attempted screen to Forsett and Anderson was corralled by Hughes after a 4-yard gain on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 10. That brought up 4<sup>th</sup> & 6 and a punting situation – the first of the day for Sebastian.

“The Triumph got the stop they needed, Bill,” declared Winterall, sounding a little more upbeat.

“That wasn’t a good series for the Swordfish on offence,” observed Badden. “Winston is trying to get Beckham the ball but he was double-teamed again. They also attempted another screen to Forsett there but the Triumph were playing it straight up on defence as they have all game....then the pitch to Anderson was a bit of a long shot in that third and long situation. They seem to have backed off a bit, Phil.”

“And here comes the Swordfish punter, Jordan Berry,” said Winterall. “No punter has seen less action than Berry this year. That’s a testament to the Swordfish offence.”

“Well Russ Lemmon hates to punt, Phil,” Badden elaborated. “He spent most of his first four seasons in the league sending the punting unit onto the field and this year he is making up for it, going for it on 4<sup>th</sup> down and all. But he doesn’t want to throw away his team’s advantage here by giving the Triumph a short field. He’s going to send them backwards and trust his defence to make a stop.”

**Jordan Berry** launched a high but short punt. The always dangerous **Antonio Brown** attempted a return but **Arik Armstead** took him down by the ankle for a 2-yard loss. The Triumph took over at their 35, hoping to crack the goose egg on the scoreboard.

Palmer didn’t wait to take his shot. On the first play he caught the Swordfish in a run defence and found **Charles Clay** wide open down the sideline for a 32-yard gain. The Swordfish defence looked confused as they scrambled to make substitutions, forcing them to call a timeout. The breather allowed them to recover their composure. Perryman forced a Martin fumble on the next play but Clay recovered to maintain possession for the Triumph. Another handoff to Martin went nowhere when Posluszny stuffed him for a 1-yard loss then Attaochu came in untouched on a blitz to sack Palmer for a 5-yard loss. That brought up 4<sup>th</sup> & 12 at the Sebastian 35 and a tough decision for **Guy Williams**.

“Do you punt it here or go for the field goal, Bill?” asked Winterall as an official retrieved the ball from Palmer.

“Well...if you’re Guy Williams you don’t do either of those things, Phil. You go for it on 4<sup>th</sup> and 12!” Badden answered excitedly as Palmer called the offence to the huddle.

The Triumph were gambling on 4<sup>th</sup> and long. They lined up in their two-tight end set with Martin split wide while the Swordfish deployed seven defensive backs. Palmer dropped back five steps and lobbed a pass to Brown who was running a fly pattern near the sideline. The Triumph superstar ran under it and was immediately knocked out of bounds by the safety Colvin, but not before he touched both feet down inbounds for a 15-yard completion and a first down.

“What do you know! It’s complete to Antonio Brown for a first down!” Winterall exclaimed.

“That’s what MVPs do, Phil!” Badden interjected. “They make the big plays...and that was a humogenous play for the Triumph!”

The Triumph drive was alive but there were still 20 yards to go to reach the Swordfish end zone. Two plays later Posluszny got a hand on a pass intended for Clay and nearly had his second interception of the game. That would have ended the Triumph threat. But with another lease on life, Matthews caught a short slant from Palmer on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10 and squirted through the Sebastian linebackers for a 12-yard gain and a first down at the 8 yard line. Three plays later, Martin swept to the outside and cut back through the zone vacated by a blitzing Perryman for a 4-yard touchdown run. The Triumph were finally on the board.

“Touchdown, Doug Martin!” cried Winterall. “And we have a ball game here in the second quarter!”

“That drive was like the Coyote and the Roadrunner, Phill” Badden blubbered as the Triumph fans roared in the background and the replay rolled on the screen. “The Triumph were the roadrunner and the Swordfish were the Coyote. Every time it looked like the Coyote had the Roadrunner cornered....the Roadrunner got away. The Swordfish tried everything. They even brought out the ACME anvil there with Perryman and Clowney blitzing. But you know what happens when the Coyote brings out the anvil...it always falls on his head...and there you can see it falling on the Swordfish as Martin goes <beep beep!> and scoots through that gap to the end zone!”

Amendola chose not to run out a kick into the end zone and the Swordfish took over at their 20 yard line. They burst out of the gate with scrambles of 18 and 14 yards by Winston and runs of 9 and 14 yards by Anderson. But at the Triumph 26 the drive hit a wall; rying to get the ball to Beckham, Winston was nearly picked off by Searcy then Moses was flagged for a hold on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 10. Winston missed Amendola crossing over the middle on 3<sup>rd</sup> & long setting up a long field goal attempt for **Adam Vinatieri**. With the wind at his back the 54-yard attempt fell a half foot short of the cross bar, giving the ball back to Twin Cities in great field position at their 44.

“The Swordfish looked to have something going there, Bill. But they end up missing a long field goal and now the Triumph have a good shot at tying this game before the half,” Winterall said animatedly. The gas seemed to be escaping the Sebastian balloon and the



momentum appeared to be slowly shifting to the Triumph.

"Well, Jameis Winston is struggling with his secondary reads, Phil," Badden observed soberly. "He locks in on Beckham and the Triumph are letting him know that he's not going to get any free shots at Beckham. Winston is looking a little big-eyed right now, Phil. He's got those big saucer eyes that are easy to read. He's got to calm down and remember what he did during the regular season. He was a big reason the Swordfish finished at the top of their conference."

With 4:24 left in the half, time was not an issue. A 10-yard run by Martin and a 16-yard pass to Clay got the drive off to good start, but a vicious 5-yard sack by **Chandler Jones** checked the advance. A 6-yard run by Martin brought up 3<sup>rd</sup> & 9 and the two-minute warning. After the break an incomplete pass on third down was nearly picked off by Perryman bringing up a 4<sup>th</sup> & 9 at the Swordfish 29.

"Guy Williams took a bigger gamble on 4<sup>th</sup> & 12 the last time, Bill. Do you go for it here, or attempt the long field goal?" Winterall asked.

"Well, you have to come away with points here if you're the Triumph, Phil," Badden replied sagely. "They made Robert Aguayo their fourth round pick for this very reason. I think you have to give him a shot put his team into double digits."

But the Triumph had other ideas. Palmer stayed on the field for another 4<sup>th</sup> down gambit. There was no doubt in the stadium about who was about to get the ball. But Palmer threaded the needle to Brown anyway on a crisply executed slant. Breaux laid a devastating as the ball arrived but the superstar hung on for a 12-yard gain and a first down at the Sebastian 17 yard line.

"And Brown has the first down!" Winterall cried. "Another gamble by the Triumph pays off."

"Great call in that situation, Phil," Badden enthused. "You have a long shot at the field goal; the wind is swirling a bit here in Canton; might as well go to the guy who's been doing it all year for you. That's great concentration by Brown to hold onto the ball there. Look at Breaux coming at him. He's got help over the top so he knows he can go for the knockout. He times it perfectly and <BAM!> he lays the lumber on him. But Brown just kind of goes with it, hangs on, gets up, does that pointing thing they do when it's a first down and the Triumph are in good shape."

The Swordfish were forced to call timeout as the Triumph looked to catch them with 7 defensive backs on the field. Those backs had been brought in for a fourth down passing situation. But with a new set of downs and the Triumph fielding two tight ends, it would have been a mismatch with Martin in the backfield. The switch back to the 3-4 worked. A 3-yard scramble by Palmer was the only forward progress on the next set of downs, which brought up 4<sup>th</sup> & 7 at the Sebastian 14 yard line.

"Given what we've seen from these coaches, Bill, do you think Guy Williams should go for it here?" Winterall asked.

"I don't think so, Phil," Badden answered thoughtfully. "You basically have a chip shot field goal here and you'd think that the Swordfish have to make a stop on 4<sup>th</sup> down at some point and....ah...it looks like Aguayo is coming onto the field here. I think this is the right call."

The Triumph sent their field goal unit onto the field in a bid to make it 14-10. But the snap from **Kraig Urbik** was high and holder **Chris Jones** had to rush his placement. The ball got set but the split second delay knocked Aguayo off his rhythm. He booted it high but pushed it to the right – no good.

"And Aguayo misses wide right!" Winterall cried. "That's got to hurt, Bill."

"Well I have to question the decision to try the field goal here, Phil," Badden intoned solemnly. "You're two for two on fourth downs, both of those longer than this one and you have a shot at tying this game before half time. It's a strange time to lose your nerve when you're in a game of coaching chicken with another maniac coach on the other side. I think Guy Williams was the first to go <bawk! bawk!> here."

The Swordfish took over at their 22 yard line with 1:06 remaining and 1 timeout left. Coach Lemmon inserted back-up running back **Kenneth Dixon** into the game, giving the impression that he had been put in to do the dirty work of running out the clock. With the Triumph in a dime package and shadowing Beckham on every play, the Fish went into a hurry-up offence as Dixon ripped off 36 yards in 3 carries to the Triumph 42, where **Russ Lemmon** called his last timeout with 0:09 left.

"What do you do here, Bill? You're out of field goal range and out of timeouts," Winterall laid out the scenario.

"Well, I don't think Russ Lemmon expected Kenneth Dixon to rush for 30-plus yards there. Suddenly his team is in Twin Cities' territory with a chance to get into scoring position but now he has hardly any time left," Badden answered. "He could take a shot or go for a sideline pass and hope to get out of bounds before the clock runs out. Myself, I'd do both; look deep to your primary and if he's not open look for your secondary near the sidelines. But I don't know if Russ Lemmon has the confidence in his quarterback to execute a play like that."

The first half ended with Winston firing high in an attempt to hit Beckham, who was double-teamed as he ran a medium slant toward the center of the field. It would have been an all or nothing play – either Beckham would break free of the coverage and sprint into the end zone or he would be tackled with no time left on the clock. But he never got a chance as the throw was off target. For good measure, Triumph end **Ziggy Ansah** levelled Winston after the throw. The young quarterback jumped to his feet looking for a flag, but no flag flew. It was a big non-call. A roughing the passer penalty would have give the Swordfish the ball at the 27 yard line, well within field goal range, with a free play following the defensive foul.

"Looks like Ansah arrived late, Bill," Winterall commented as the replay flashed on the screen.

"He did, Phil," Badden concurred. "But when you have 275 pounds of muscle bursting to get loose and you have that quarterback in your sights it's really hard to stop yourself. Ziggy Ansah – love that name, "Ziggy" – he's been zigzagging around linemen to get to the quarterback all year. That's what he does – he sacks quarterbacks. Sometimes you have to let them play, Phil. That was a good non-call there!"

And with that the first half came to close. The Swordfish had come on strong early, but their offence had sputtered under back-up Winston, allowing the Triumph to claw their way back to within a touchdown thanks to a daring 4<sup>th</sup> down gamble. It was now anybody's game.



**3<sup>rd</sup> QUARTER (Sebastian 17, Twin Cities 14)** – After an exceptionally long half time show featuring a number of official ceremonies and a prolonged set by Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, the teams took to the field with the sun below the horizon and the temperature much colder as a result.

"We're back and ready for the second half of football here on a crisp, cold night in Canton," Winterall announced. "But the crowd is all warmed up and still buzzing after listening to Bruce Springsteen. How do you think the players are going to feel after such a long break, Bill?"

"The ones who can stay focused will be itching to get out there and hit somebody. But the ones who kind a take it easy, you know, fool around, you know, they're going to be slower getting back into it," Badden explained. "This is where the coach comes in, Phil. It's the coach's job to keep the players focused. And that's where I think both these coaches have excelled this year. It should be a great second half."

Aguayo's kickoff was high and short, landing at the 12 and taking a funny bounce to Amendola at the 7. The Swordfish returner fumbled, but the ball took a fortuitous bounce back into his arms and he charged up the field. The Triumph reacted to the fumble and momentarily lost containment, allowing a 29-yard return to the Sebastian 36. The bounce had gone their way and now the Swordfish had good field position.

Winston stood under center and surveyed the Triumph defence. Suddenly he started to gesticulate and bark out signals. He was calling an audible. He took a deep drop and unloaded in the direction of Baldwin, who was streaking down the right side between the sideline and the right hash. The ball had a lot of zip but not enough loft and Slay got his hand in the way for a deflection. Winston never saw it; he was blasted to the ground after the throw by Ansah.

"He goes deep, looking for Baldwin....and the ball is knocked away at the last second by Darius Slay!" Winterall exclaimed. "And Winston is down. It looks like he was hit after the throw...and it was Ansah again."

"Well, I'm not sure what Winston saw there but he changed the play at the line and took a shot downfield," Badden commented. "Nice play by Slay to stay with his man and get his hand up at the right time. Yeah, Ziggy Ansah barrels in there after being half blocked by Ryan Schraeder. You know, you go back to that non-call at the end of the first half and it sends a message to these players that they can go after the quarterback. As a ref, you need to deal with that right away or you're going to have quarterback stew on the field."

"The Swordfish don't have a third quarterback on the roster. Bill," noted Winterall. "What do you do when you run out of quarterbacks?"

"When you run out of quarterbacks you do a lot of running, Phil," Badden answered. "They have Danny Amendola for emergencies, but he has never played quarterback at any level in a regular season or playoff game. He horses around in practice with the third team."

It turned out that Winston was just a little shaken up on the play. Before the trainer could come onto the field he was up and back in the huddle. After a 2-yard gain on a trap by Anderson, Winston fired a short cross to Amendola, who was taken down by the facemask by **Johnthan Banks** one yard short of the first down. This drew an immediate flag from the officials and added 15 yards to the 7-yard gain.

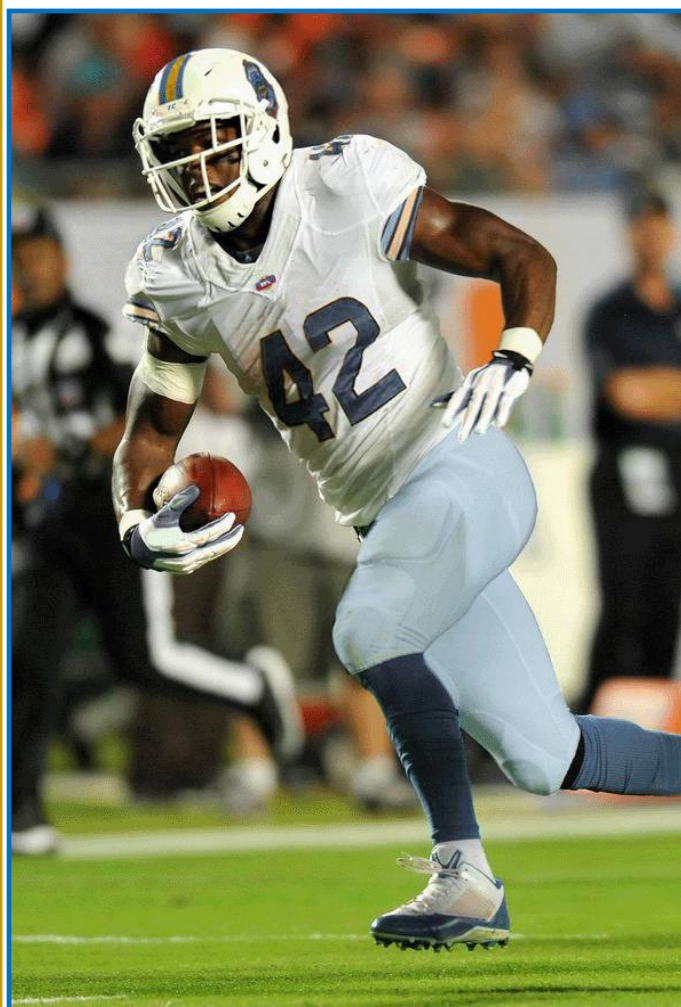
"And the personal foul will bring the ball into Twin Cities territory," announced Winterall. "You know, Bill, that was just Jameis Winston's second complete pass of the game. He's now 2 of 10 for 20 yards."

"Well, he hasn't been very accurate, that's for sure, Phil," Badden weighed in. "He's looking like he's throwing a little scared....like he's afraid to make a mistake. The Triumph corners are doing a good job staying with their man but there's been opportunities, he just hasn't seen them."

An encroachment penalty on Gholston and a 14-yard run off right tackle by Dixon brought the Swordfish into field goal range. But another attempt to connect with Beckham was foiled by a double team and a pass intended for Baldwin was broken up by the linebacker, Wagner. On 3<sup>rd</sup> & 10, Winston went short to tight end **Benjamin Watson**, who was tripped up by Banks 2 yards short of the first down. That brought up 4<sup>th</sup> & 2 at the Triumph 13 yard line and another decision for Coach **Russ Lemmon**.

"Well, I don't normally have to ask this question so often, but these are two coaches who don't always follow the rule book. Do you go for it on 4<sup>th</sup> down here if you're Russ Lemmon, Bill?" Winterall asked.

"If I'm Russ Lemmon, I go for it, Phil," Badden declared firmly. "If I am Russ Lemmon, I'd look at it like, if I can't get two yards when I



**Charles Clay** was one of the unsung heroes of GS 'X'. Here he is scoring his team's second TD on a 16-yard 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter TD pass. He finished with 7 catches and 119 yards.



need them, I don't deserve to win the game. So I go for it here, if I'm Russ Lemmon."

But this time the cautious side of the Swordfish coach won out. He sent the field goal unit on the field and the veteran kicker, **Adam Vinatieri** made no mistake, drilling the ball through the center of the goal posts to widen the Sebastian lead.

"And Vinatieri makes it easily. He delivers to make it 17-7 for the Swordfish," Winterall announced.

"Well, it's important to get that two-score lead in a game like this, Phil," Badden joined in. "You don't want to miss a shot at points when you're in your opponent's red zone. I like the call to kick it here, especially when your quarterback can't hit the broad side of a barn right now."

The Swordfish lined up for the kickoff and Vinatieri surveyed the Triumph special teams. The hands team was on the field once more, indicating Guy Williams' continuing concern that the Swordfish would attempt to catch them by surprise. But deployment of the hands team was no longer news to the broadcast crew and it was mentioned only in passing as Vinatieri kicked the ball deep to a waiting Vereen 2 yards in the end zone. With no blocking up front the Triumph return man took a knee and Twin Cities took over at their 20 yard line.

There were 12 minutes remaining in the third quarter – plenty of time for the Triumph to make up the 10-point difference. But the thought that the Swordfish offence, sputtering since the opening two drives, might soon get back in rhythm under **Jameis Winston** prompted Palmer to waste no time moving the ball up the field. Five consecutive passes, including a 17-yard pass to Brown on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 10 and a 27-yard lob downfield to Brown on the very next play gave Twin Cities a first down at the Swordfish 21 yard line.

"Antonio Brown makes the catch and is brought down right away by Breaux just shy of the 20!" Winterall cried. "Wow! Even when he's not wide open Brown makes plays, Bill."

"You're right, Phil!" Badden. "On the replay we can see that Delvin Breaux is with him step-for-step and is in position to knock the ball away or even intercept it if it is off target. But Palmer delivers a strike and Brown focuses like a pro and makes the catch. Breaux's doing a good job but he needs help. His nickname isn't Breaux Island, you know. I don't know what his nickname is, but I know it's *not* Breaux Island."

On the sixth play of the drive the Triumph changed pace with a handoff to Martin, who ran off left tackle for a 5-yard gain. But on the next play, with the Swordfish selling out to stop the run, Palmer slung a short slant to **Charles Clay**. The explosive tight end snared the pass high in the air and came down running for the end zone, reaching the left pylon before safety **Walter Thurmond** could head him off. Twin Cities fans leaped to their feet and let out a loud cheer.

"And Clay will find the end zone – touchdown Triumph!" Winterall cried. "Well, that didn't take very long, Bill."

"The Sebastian defence was really off balance on that drive, Phil," Badden remarked earnestly. "They didn't know what was coming next and they kept guessing wrong; and when they did guess right, on that 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10 back at their 35, you-know-who made a play anyway. Russ Lemmon has to find a way to shut down Antonio Brown or else this game will slip away from them."

The Triumph kicked off and Amendola elected to down it in the end zone for a touchback. The Swordfish lead was now down to a field goal. They needed to make something happen on offence. Things started well, with a short slant that Baldwin turned into a 15-yard gain then Anderson followed with an 18-yard run to cross into Triumph territory at the 47. But the promising drive would end right there after three consecutive incomplete passes brought up fourth down.

"Sebastian can't seem to get anything going through the air, Bill," Winterall noted dryly.

"They tried getting it to Beckham on the quick outside pass just hoping to get the ball in his hands but Winston threw it behind him as he was breaking and it sailed out of bounds," Badden commented. "You know, the Triumph have basically used the same defense all game. They aren't attempting to fool anybody, but it seems to be confusing the young Swordfish quarterback, Phil."

With his offence struggling, Coach Lemmon clearly thought better of daring fate with another daunting fourth down gamble. He sent out Berry, the punter, hoping to win back some field position. Berry booted a nice, lofty kick angled toward the sideline that rolled out of bounds at the Triumph 10 yard line.

Palmer stood behind center and surveyed the Swordfish defence. He decided to stick with the plan and handed the ball off on consecutive plays to Martin, who netted 15 yards on a pair of sweeps. Now with breathing room, they opened things up with a pass to Brown, who made a nice move in double-coverage to get open for a 13-yard gain. On the next play, Palmer threw outside to Matthews, who tight-roped along the sideline for a 20-yard pass play; then hooked up with Clay down the seam for a 27-yard gain. It had taken the Triumph one second shy of three minutes to move from their 10 to the Sebastian 15.

"Palmer is just carving them up, Bill," Winterall stated as the Triumph quarterback listened on his headset for the play from the sidelines. "He's spreading the ball around and getting time to throw."

"Well...one of the concerns the Triumph had coming into this game was how the offensive line would hold up against the Swordfish defensive ends, Carlos Dunlap and Chandler Jones," Badden added. "Those two haven't been pinning their ears back and going after Palmer like they did to Ryan in the Atlantic Conference Final. And that's because the Swordfish are concerned about Doug Martin. They don't want to lose containment on the outside and that's one of the reasons Palmer has time to throw."

They handed off to Martin on the next play but Perryman came in unblocked and stuffed him for a 1-yard loss. Then two consecutive incomplete passes brought the drive to a sudden halt and the field goal unit onto the field.

"I know it sounds crazy, but do you think it may have crossed Guy Williams' mind here to go for it on fourth down and 11, Bill?" Winterall made conversation as Aguayo tested the wind.

☐ "I don't think so, Phil," Badden guffawed. "You have a chance to tie the game here with a makeable field goal. This is the right call."

Urbik snapped the ball to Jones and the young kicker stepped into the kick. The ball went up and curled left, just outside the left post.





Sebastian coach **Russ Lemmon** tries to calm down **Odell Beckham Jr.** between series. The temperamental wide receiver was steadily frustrated by double teams.

"And he *missed* it!" exclaimed Winterall. "The 34-yard attempt by Aguayo is no good and the Swordfish hang on to their lead."

"He just flat out missed that one, Phil," Badden observed. "Last time the snap was high but this time it was on the money. You know....Aguayo hasn't attempted many field goals this year. Kickers like to get in the game and kicking is all they do, but the Triumph were too busy scoring touchdowns this year to go for field goals. You wonder if maybe...big game and all....he's pressing a little."

"Aguayo attempted just 10 field goals in the regular season, lowest in the league. He was two for two in the post-season coming into the game. His longest was 30 yards," Winterall consulted the stats.

"It makes you wonder if maybe Guy Williams should have gone for it on fourth down there, Phil," Badden opined. "You have a young kicker...a big moment in the game....maybe you take your chances with Antonio Brown there instead....just saying."

The Swordfish had dodged a bullet. The Triumph had raced 74 yards up the field but

had finished with nothing to show for it. Taking over at their own 24, the Fish had a chance to regain the momentum that had been slowly but steadily shifting away from them since their two-TD outburst in the opening quarter. But instead of building on the good fortune of the Aguayo miss, the Winston-led Swordfish continued to swim against the current. A first down pass to a double-covered Beckham was broken up at the last instant by Wagner then Anderson managed just 8 yards in two carries to bring up 4<sup>th</sup> and 2 at the Sebastian 32. With his demoralized offence exhibiting no confidence, Coach Lemmon did not hesitate to send in his punter for the third time that day. Barry kicked another high one toward the sideline, away from Brown, sending it out of bounds at the Triumph 30 yard line.

Palmer came onto the field for what would likely be the final play of the third quarter. He took his time setting up as he looked at the swordfish linebackers creeping in close behind the defensive line. But once he was behind center he called a quick snap. This disrupted the timing of the Swordfish blitz and the Triumph picked it up easily. Palmer stood tall in the pocket and surveyed the field. He fired a missile down the seam to Brown, who caught it on his back shoulder before being brought down by Breaux at the Sebastian 45. The play netted them 25 yards and brought Twin Cities fans to their feet. The roar of the crowd drowned out the whistle signalling the end of the third quarter.

"That's 7 catches for Brown, Bill," Winterall stated. "He's already over one hundred yards on the day and we still have one more quarter to play."

"The Triumph look like they know what they're doing, Phil," Badden observed. "They are going right after this Swordfish defence with all kinds of different plays. They'll keep throwing to Brown until Sebastian figures out how to stop him or slow him down."

"Well, that's the end of the third quarter," announced Winterall. "We're going to break for a commercial now, but stay tuned football fans, because you aren't going to want to miss one play of what is going to be an exciting finale, coming up!"

**4<sup>th</sup> QUARTER (Twin Cities 31, Sebastian 24)** – When the network returned to live action the Triumph were already lined up with two tight ends and Martin the lone setback. Palmer was in the middle of his cadence. The Swordfish were in playing a straight 3-4, with the linebackers evenly spaced and covering the gaps between the three down linemen, indicating they expected a run. Palmer dropped back, looked left then threw right to Clay, who was open near the sideline. The tight end hauled in the pass and darted 5 yards up field before being knocked out of bounds by Posluszny after a 14-yard gain.

"Clay has another first down. That's his 6<sup>th</sup> catch of the game and that puts him over 100 yards on the day. He's having a nice game, Bill," Winterall turned to his booth partner.

"He's getting chances to show what he can do and he can do a lot," Badden replied. "They made him a big part of the game plan for this game because they were expecting the Swordfish to take away Antonio Brown. But the Swordfish seem to be paying more attention to Doug Martin this afternoon. I don't know if it's one of them double-thinks; where...you know....you think the other guy thinks you're going to do something, so you don't do that thing and do the thing you think the other guy is going to do because he thinks you're going to do the other thing....or it could be that



you don't do that thing the other guy expects you to do to get him to do the thing you don't want him to do later when you're ready to do the thing he expected you to do at the beginning but didn't do and now thinks he can do it and get away with it. I guess we won't know if that's the case until later in the game, but for right now it's hurting the Swordfish and helping the Triumph get back in this game."

While Badden was trying to analyze Russ Lemmon's coaching strategy, Martin was stopped after a 2-yard gain then stuffed for a loss of 4 yards by Perryman on second down to bring up 3<sup>rd</sup> & 12. With the Swordfish in a nickel and double-covering the wide-outs, Palmer came back with a short slant to **Tyler Eifert**, who galloped for a 16-yard gain to Swordfish 17 yard line.

"Tyler Eifert has the first down inside the Sebastian red zone!" Winterall called. "Tyler Eifert – that's a name we haven't called very much today, Bill."

"What a time to go Eifert!" Badden burst. "He really hasn't done much all game and the Swordfish weren't paying any attention to him on that play. He just snuck into the middle flat and his momentum carried him through the grasp of Patrick Chung and on to the first down. I'm telling you, Palmer is getting everybody involved and it's giving the Swordfish fits."

On the next play the Swordfish appeared to think that it was now Martin's turn to get involved and they tightened up, expecting the run. But Palmer went back to the air, checking down to Clay for 10 yards then flaring a short out pass to Brown inside the goal line for a touchdown. Triumph fans erupted in jubilation – for the first time all game they had the lead.

"Touchdown, Antonio Brown!" intoned Winterall, emphasizing the rhyme of *down* with *Brown*. "It felt like it was just a matter of time, Bill!"

"Well, it was a matter of time, Phil!" Badden agreed. "It took him three quarters and...ah...a few more minutes in the fourth quarter for Antonio Brown to finally score. But, you know, he's been a big part of this Triumph offence all game. Now he gets a touchdown in the Championship game. Nobody can take that away from him, whatever happens now!"

Aguayo kicked the extra point to make it officially 21-17 for the Triumph and stayed on the field for the ensuing kickoff. He laid into it, and the kick landed in Amendola's arms near the back of the end zone. He wisely took a knee and the Swordfish took over at the 20.

"It will be interesting to see how the Swordfish respond to being behind for the first time in this game, Bill," Winterall made conversation as Winston led his offence on to the field.

"Maybe this is what they need, Phil," Badden replied sagely. "Jameis Winston hasn't been able to do much with the lead. We'll see what Russ Lemmon has up his sleeve here to get his quarterback into the game."

The solution to getting the Sebastian quarterback into the game was apparently to hand the ball off to **CJ Anderson**. The Swordfish running back opened the drive with runs of 10 and 14 yards straight off right tackle. Then Winston dropped back and threw a short cross on target to Beckham for an 8-yard gain.

"Complete to Beckham. He's brought down immediately by Roby across mid-field," Winterall called the action. "And that's Beckham's first catch of the game, Bill! Are you surprised he hasn't been more of a factor today?"

"Well, of course you expect a player like Beckham to make more of an impact, but I'm not that surprised, Phil," Badden answered. "The Triumph have been double-covering him all day and that's the first time Winston has laid a pass in there he could catch. What surprises me is the determination of Twin Cities' coach Guy Williams to take Beckham out of the game and how the Swordfish haven't been able to get much going with guys like Baldwin and Anderson out there."

The Triumph faked a blitz on the next play and Winston fell for it, bailing out of the pocket at first opportunity. But as luck would have it he found an opening and took off running, sliding down at the Triumph 35 after a 13-yard gain. Then gains of 5 and 14 yards off left tackle by Anderson and 6-yard check down gave the Swordfish a first down at the Triumph 10 yard line. On the next play, with the Triumph maintaining the same defensive posture as they had all game, Baldwin finally got separation from his nemesis, Slay, snaring a short cross from Winston and cutting back into the end the end zone for a touchdown. Sebastian fans, quiet and demoralized after seeing a two-touchdown lead slowly evaporate, jumped as one to their feet and roared.

"Touchdown, Sebastian!" Winterall exclaimed. "Doug Baldwin with a nice play there regains the lead for his team!"

"Darius Slay has been doing a great job on Baldwin all day, Phil," Badden remarked as the score replayed in slow motion on the screen. "But on this play he buys Baldwin's fake and takes a little step outside and that was enough to gain separation. Baldwin cuts back across the middle and, luckily, Winston sees him and gets the pass off on time. Once he has the ball he fakes out Jerrell Freeman and there is nobody who can catch him now. That's a play right there."

After the extra point it was now 24-21 for Sebastian with 7 minutes left in the fourth quarter. The atmosphere in Fawcett Stadium had completely changed with that score. It no longer looked as if the Swordfish were doomed to a slow death – the game was back on and the pressure now squarely on the Triumph.

The Triumph special teams set up for a return for only the second time. With a chance to perhaps catch the Triumph by surprise, Vinatieri instead hit a low liner that bounced to the Triumph 23, where Vereen picked it up on the run. He was wrapped up by **Isa Abdul-Quddus** at the 31 yard line after an 8-yard return. Twin Cities would have good field position to start what would be a critically important drive.

"Do you think Russ Lemmon might have flirted with the idea of an onside kick there, Bill?" Winterall asked.

"No way, Phil!" Badden chuckled. "Russ Lemmon might be crazy but he's not insane!"

Palmer went to work as if he was executing a two-minute drill. He completed back-to-back sideline passes of 14 yards to Matthews and 19 yards to Brown to quickly bring his team to the Sebastian side of the field at the 36. The Swordfish had been gunning for Martin on the completion to Brown and this drew the attention of **Bill Badden**.



"Brown has it....and Breaux trips him up for a 19-yard gain!" Winterall droned as he called the action. "It looked like Brown might get away there, Bill. Delvin Breaux made a nice play to save a touchdown."

"The Swordfish were gambling on Martin again, Phil," Badden remarked grimly. "I think at this point in the game you let Martin try to beat you. The Swordfish front seven has done a good job so far containing him on the outside. But Brown is just killing them. I think that's his 20<sup>th</sup> catch of the game, Phil!"

"It's actually his 9<sup>th</sup> catch, Bill," Winterall sniggered. "But who's counting."

"It feels like 20, Phil," Badden chortled.

The prolonged broadcast booth exchange was made possible by an injury timeout as the Triumph training staff looked at right guard, **Joel Bitonio**, who was on the ground. Eventually he was carted off the field to a round of polite applause, but the game was clearly over for him.

**Oday Aboushi** came on to take his place.

"This is a big loss for the Triumph," offered Badden, unprompted by his partner. "That line is doing a pretty good job so far and Bitonio's been one of the reasons for that. Okay Aboki comes in to replace him and he really is a bit of an unknown."

"Oday Aboushi," Winterall interjected, correcting the pronunciation, "He appeared in 7 regular season games with 2 starts. He had injury issues as well. We'll see how he does here."

The Triumph finally swept left with Martin as the Swordfish came with the blitz and dropped back into coverage. The play was developing well until **Carlos Dunlap** knifed like a bolt through a gap in the wall and blasted him out of bounds for a 4-yard loss. Then back-to-back incomplete passes appeared to put an end to the once promising Triumph drive as they suddenly faced 4<sup>th</sup> & 14 at the Sebastian 40.

"And this will bring the punting unit onto the field," Winterall began. "No! Guy Williams has sent his offence back onto the field! Can you believe this?"

"With these two coaches, I'm ready to believe anything, Phil!" Badden laughed. "Now, do I agree with it? 4<sup>th</sup> and 14 is a huge gamble when you still have 5 minutes left in the game. There's a big difference between 14 yards and say, 9 or 10 yards. A lot can go wrong trying to get 14 yards. I'd be trying to pin them back inside their 20."

The stadium rose to its feet in anticipation as Palmer strode up to the line. There was a sense that the game was on the line, even with five minutes still left to play. Swordfish fans strained to create as much noise as possible while Triumph fans kept quiet and waved their gold towels frantically.

Palmer barked out signals as he scanned the Swordfish defence. There was something different about it. Dunlap and rookie **Austin**



**Johnson** were the only down linemen. Meanwhile, the corners, Breaux and Colvin were playing just three yards off the line. This would likely have confused a young quarterback, but the veteran Palmer was unfazed. He knew who he had to get the ball to and the chances of succeeding had just improved. The ball was snapped and Palmer dropped back. As he did so, both corners came on the blitz. The Triumph line picked them up as Palmer looked down field. But before he could throw he was flushed from the pocket by Dunlap. He escaped, scrambled to his right and fired the ball to Brown, who had broken down the sideline. The pass was on the money and Brown caught it for an 18-yard gain and a first down at the Sebastian 22 yard line. The Triumph fans screamed and the Swordfish fans groaned.

"Brown has it at the 26! And he's brought down by Thurmond at the 22 yard line. First down Triumph!" Winterall yelled.

"Unbelievable!" Badden joined in. "I know I said I was ready to believe anything.....but this is unbelievable!" As the play replayed on the screen, Badden continued: "Great poise in the pocket by Palmer. Dunlap almost saves this play...he swirls around him like one of those Tazmanian Devils...but Palmer gets away and gets off an accurate throw on the run to... guess-who! But what's really unbelievable about this play is that the Swordfish

**Antonio Brown** indicates a first down after picking up 18 yards on 4<sup>th</sup> & 14 in 4<sup>th</sup> quarter action. Some pundits are calling it the turning point of GS 'X'.



send both corners on the blitz there! That's one heck of a surprise! I'd bet my motor home that nobody saw that one coming. I know I didn't! The last thing I would have expected was to have the guy covering Antonio Brown...on the biggest play of the game so far....ignore him completely and go after the quarterback. But...<heh!> <heh!>....I didn't expect Guy Williams to go for it on 4<sup>th</sup> down and 14 either. These two coaches are coaching at another level, Phil!"

The Triumph were now in field goal range. But the magic of that stunning fourth down completion wore off quickly. Palmer fired a bullet to Brown on the next play but Breaux was all over him and broke up the pass. Brown was incensed and looked at the official, but no flag was forthcoming.

"Well, that was payback for the last play," Badden observed. "Delvin Breaux wasn't going to let Brown catch that ball no matter what. And the referee agreed with him. Heck, that's football! That's the game we play here in America!"

On the next snap, a botched exchange



**Jameis Winston** vents his frustration after leading his team to a three-and-out with 2:18 remaining in a tie game. It was a tough outing for the young QB.

between Palmer and Urbik resulted in a scramble for the ball. But again, fortunately for Palmer, the ball bounced off a leg back at him and he fell on it to maintain possession. On 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11 Palmer's pass for Brown sailed a little high as he tried to place it past the corner Breaux and it fell incomplete to bring up 4<sup>th</sup> down and 11 at the 23.

"I have to ask you, Bill. Do you tempt fate and go for it here?" Winterall asked. Everything was now on the table as an option it seemed.

"Guy Williams has been daring the Devil all day, Phil," Badden replied. "I don't know why he would stop now. But seriously, he has to consider his options and decide. A field goal will tie the game, but his kicker is struggling. If he makes the first down his team is in the catbird seat with three minutes left. You know...it's crazy....but I think he should go for it here! It's just that kind of game."

But the Triumph coach did not like what he had seen from his offence on the last three plays. He decided to roll the dice that his young kicker had recovered from the yips and was ready to earn his paycheque. Aguayo sprinted onto the field to try and tie the game.

"Well it looks like Guy Williams is going to bet on his young kicker, Bill," Winterall declared.

"And that's the right call there, Phil," Badden eagerly concurred. "At some point you have to trust your fourth round draft pick to make a kick in a pressure situation."

Aguayo lined up the ball and looked skyward. Then he lowered his head and steadied himself. The snap from Urbik was a little high but Jones got it down quickly. With clockwork rhythm Aguayo stepped forward and drove his leg at the ball. It exploded off his toe, high and true, covering all 41 yards, and then some, through the center of the goal posts.

"And the kick is down the middle! We have a tie game," shouted Winterall as Triumph fans bellowed and waved their towels.

"This is the way it should be in a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary championship!" Badden gushed. "A tie game with 3 minutes left to play. It doesn't get much better than that. All it needs here is a bit more mud on the field to get those uniforms really dirty; and maybe a few more bloody noses and taped up body parts too! Then we'd know we're watching a real football game, the kind we play here in America!"

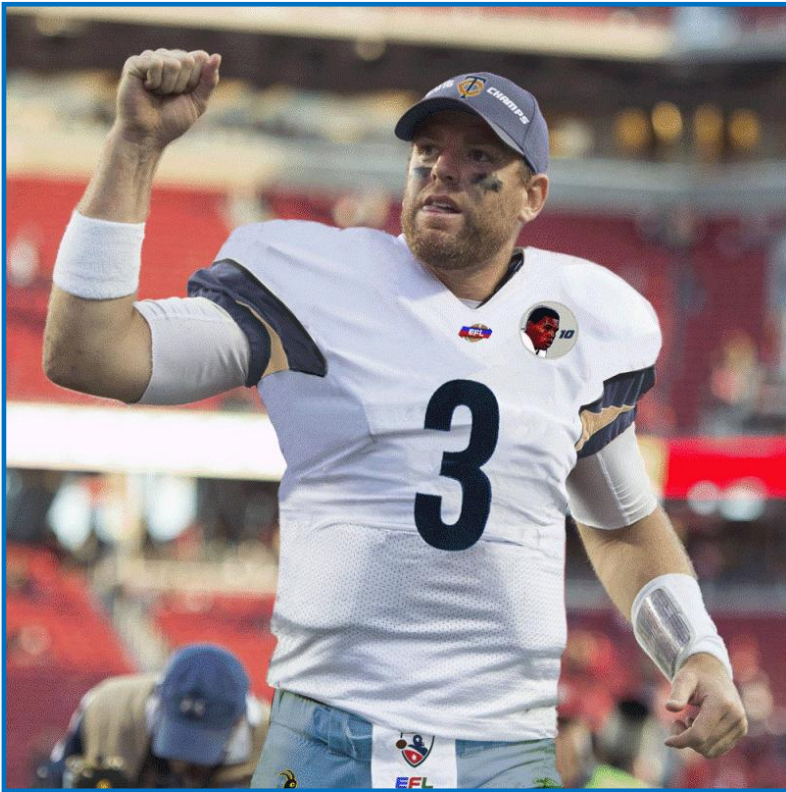
The kickoff from Aguayo was fielded 6 yards deep and was downed in the end zone by Amendola. The Swordfish would take over again at their 20 yard line, needing just a field goal to bring their franchise closer to immortality.

**Jameis Winston** stood behind center and stared at the Triumph defence. It was set up exactly as it had been on almost every play the Swordfish offence had run all day. But Winston took his time and continued to scan the field as if looking for something. The play clock wound down....3...2...1....<hut!> the ball was snapped at the last instant and Winston dropped back, his eyes staring forward. In less than 2 seconds he was blindsided by **Jurrell Casey** and brought down 6 yards behind the line of scrimmage.

"And Casey sacks him!" Winterall barked. "That's not how the Swordfish wanted to start the drive, Bill."

"Winston's lucky he didn't lose the ball on that play, Phil!" Badden added. "Casey comes in unblocked and <blamm-o!> he just levels him. That's a sack, Phil. That's a real sack by a real lineman! When they came up with that word, 'sack,' that is what they were talking about!" Hughes was flagged for offsidess on the next play, recouping 5 of those yards the Swordfish had lost on the sack. Sebastian deployed four wide receivers and the Triumph countered with a fifth defensive back, but hedged their bets by not committing fully to defending the pass. Winston handed off to Anderson, who was immediately met behind the line by Casey and downed for a 1-yard loss. On 3<sup>rd</sup> & 12, the Triumph added a sixth defensive back and it paid off. Winston dropped back and found his primary receiver double-covered and Ansah bearing down on him. He escaped the pocket and threw hard and wild in the direction of **Brandon Coleman** for an incomplete pass.





**Carson Palmer** gives what's left of the post-game Fawcett Stadium crowd one final fist pump as he walks toward the tunnel. Palmer was the steady hand behind the win, passing for 421 yards and 3 TDs.

"And the throw to Coleman is low – incomplete. That will bring up fourth down and, I think, no doubt that the Swordfish will punt it away here," Winterall opined.

"Well, it would be the craziest gamble of the year if Russ Lemmon kept his offence on the field here, Phil," Badden chortled. "And it looks like he's going to send out the punter, so Sebastian fans can put away that straight jacket, <heh!> <heh!>"

Berry lofted another high punt. Brown drifted under it. He tried to make a move but he was smothered by the Swordfish coverage after a 1-yard return. The kick had done the job of keeping the dangerous Brown in check, but it had only covered 35 yards. The Triumph would start with excellent field position at their 48 yard line with plenty of time, 2:08, left on the clock.

The Triumph started the drive with an attempted screen to Martin, but the Swordfish linebackers were practically on top of him as the pass came in and he wisely let it hit the ground. Martin was called for a false start on the next play to push them back 5 yards. But on 2<sup>nd</sup> & 15, Palmer dropped back and threw a dart to the wide receiver Matthews for a 16-yard gain and a first down at the Sebastian 41.

"Palmer throws a strike to Matthews – first down!" Winterall cried. "And that will bring up the two-minute warning."

"The Swordfish had Rishard Matthews double-covered on that play, Phil, but Palmer goes to him anyway," Badden observed. "That was a perfect pass and a great job of hanging onto the ball by Matthews after Aaron Colvin nearly takes his

head off. If Palmer keeps passing the ball like this and his line keeps holding up, it won't matter what the Swordfish do!"

The Triumph had the ball at the Sebastian 41 with 2:00 left and all of their timeouts. Fearing that the Triumph would try to take some time off the clock on first down, the Swordfish focused on Martin, but Palmer instead fired a short flare to Brown for an 11-yard gain and another first down at the 30. Martin did get the ball on the next play, with the Swordfish continuing to look for him, but the shifty runner followed his block and managed to gain 4 yards. With time ticking away, the Swordfish called a timeout.

"The Swordfish use their final timeout," Winterall announced. "Time is definitely a factor now, Bill, with 1:19 remaining."

"Well, this is one of those situations where, if you're Russ Lemmon, you need your defence to make a stop," Badden commented. "Or better yet, force a turnover; that would give them the ball. What you don't want is for the Triumph to score with no little or no time left."

Palmer bent down under center and barked signals. He looked left, he looked right, he looked straight ahead. The ball was snapped and he took three steps back and fired a tight spiral to **Antonio Brown** near the sideline. Brown faked inside and broke outside, nearly stepping out of bounds. Breaux bit on the inside fake and stumbled as he tried to recover. Brown took off down the sideline with nobody near him. **Walter Thurmond**, the closest Swordfish, overshot his angle trying to make up the distance and Brown cut back inside the 10 yard line to cross the goal line untouched for the touchdown. Triumph fans erupted in jubilation. Swordfish fans lowered their heads.

"And Brown will score! Touchdown, Triumph!" Winterall yelled. "Antonio Brown with his twelfth catch of the game, his second touchdown of the game, and it gives his team the lead in the final minute of the fourth quarter!"

"There are just no more words for this guy!" Badden remarked as the camera focused on Brown dancing back to the Triumph sideline, holding the football high. "You're going to have to invent a word for him. I mean, he has done it *all* for this team this year and here he is doing it for his team in the biggest game of the year. I know he's got my vote for MVP!"

The extra point by Aguayo was on the money, brining another wave of cheers from Triumph supporters. The score was now 31-24 for Twin Cities. With 1:12 remaining however, the Swordfish were not dead yet. This was pointed out by **Bill Badden** when the networks returned to live action after the commercial break.

"The only good thing about the Triumph scoring like that if you're the Swordfish is that you still have time to come back," Badden stated soberly. "Odell Beckham has been frustrated all day by the Triumph corners but he can still strike from any area of the field. He needs Jameis Winston to get him the ball."

The kickoff from Aguayo was high and was fielded by Amendola at the 2 yard line. With little room to run he did a good job to gain 17 yards on the return, putting the Swordfish at their 19 yard line with the game now on the line. Winston jogged on to the field. It was do-or-die time.

The Swordfish deployed three wide receivers and the Triumph countered with their dime package. Winston hollered the signals then took the snap. He looked over at Beckham but he was double-covered. He looked around the field and saw Baldwin circling back with a step on Slay. He fired the pass low but the Baldwin caught it as he went to the ground for a 6-yard gain. Sebastian was in a hurry-up now. The offence hustled to the



line and **Mike Pouncey** snapped the ball. Winston dropped back and looked from left to right. His receivers were blanketed so he checked down to Watson. The throw was high this time and sailed out of bounds. It was now third down & 4 with only 0:37 left on the clock.

"You get the feeling that it is going to take a miracle for the Swordfish to pull this one off, Bill," Winterall noted grimly.

"They keep looking down the middle of the field, Phil, expecting the Triumph to shade their coverage to the outside," said Badden. "But the Triumph are playing it straight up as they have all game. Sebastian needs to get a chunk here and run get of bounds to set up a shot or two at the end zone."

The play was in and Winston stood in the shotgun. Pouncey hiked the ball and Winston took three steps back. He scoured the field, but before he could unload, **Jerry Hughes** came barreling in from the front and wrapped him up for 11-yard sack. Fawcett Stadium exploded with the rejoicing of ecstatic Triumph fans; they sensed victory was nigh.

With the seconds ticking away **Marshall Yanda** extended a hand to Winston and pulled him to his feet. The rest of the Swordfish scrambled frantically to get set, with Beckham running all the way back from the 50 yard line and lining up in the nick of time. The ball shot backwards to a waiting Winston who dropped back further for good measure. With muscle born of desperation he fired a laser downfield, trying to lead Beckham streaking across the middle, with some room to run. But the pass was a little too far ahead, forcing Beckham to dive to haul it in. He did, but before he could get back on his feet the middle corner **Bradley Roby** landed on him to touch him down with no time left on the clock.

"And that will do it here! The Twin Cities Triumph have finished off a perfect season



Triumph coach **Guy Williams** gets what he deserves: a victory bath of Gatorade at the sound of the final gun of GS 'X.'

and are the **10th Champions of the EFL!**" Winterall announced in his most resonant baritone voice. "Just listen to those Triumph fans celebrating!"

"Well....they deserve it! This whole organization deserves it, Phil," Badden gushed. "They started from Day One with only one goal in mind; and that was to win a championship! And here they are....in only their fifth year of existence, finishing off a perfect season and making EFL history."

The moon shone brightly as the camera from the *Brylcreem Blimp* caught the view of Fawcett Stadium from above. The players, coaches, media and several hundred friends and family poured onto the field to offer congratulations to the Triumph and, a few, to show condolences for the Swordfish. Fireworks burst over the stadium. The historic 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Season was finally in the books.

### POST GAME

The 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Championship will be remembered as one of the longest and most dramatic final games in EFL history. It will also be noted as the final triumph in a perfectly triumphant season for Twin Cities, a franchise just five years old – half the age of the league it conquered in 2016. In beating the Swordfish they became the second EFL team to finish off a perfect season; a feat that was once considered next to impossible in the salary cap era. They did not lack for equal challengers in their race for the ultimate prize. The Triumph of 2016 were not a dominant team by the standards of the 2014 Aurora Mustangs, but they played dominant football. They played without fear and for keeps, unabashedly attacking with their best weapons while ruthlessly depriving the enemy of their own. The 10<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers Game was a case in point: **Antonio Brown** flourished while **Odell Beckham** wallowed; suffocated by constant double-coverage. It is fitting then that their opponent in the final would be a mirror image of themselves. The five-year old Sebastian franchise had never had a winning season until this year. But the first Swordfish team to achieve renown was able to so, in part, because they too played without fear. They were also immensely talented; so much so that many believed them to be superior. If so, the playing field was at least leveled when **Andy Dalton** went down to injury in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter. Everyone can agree that the **Jameis Winston** who came on in relief of Dalton was not the same confident quarterback who had helped the Swordfish reach the top of the Atlantic Conference in the regular season. Whether that was due to the Triumph defence, Winston's shortcomings, or a combination of both will be debated for years to come. But Swordfish fans will likely forever wonder what might have been had their starting quarterback, the top rated passer in the league, played the entire game. The Swordfish acquitted themselves well anyway. They tested the daring of the league's top team like no other. It took bold gambles by **Guy Williams** and great plays by a great player to beat them in the end. And that player, **Antonio Brown**, will be remembered as the MVP of MVPs – the player who did the most to put his team in a position to win and then won it for them – with a little help from old vet, **Carson Palmer** and the young buck, **Doug Martin**. All together they were the deadly Triumphant Trio that terrorized opposing defences all year and brought a perfect ending to a perfect 10<sup>th</sup> EFL season.



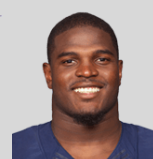
Who was slick in the Championship?

"BRYLCREEM" THE EFL'S FIRST SPONSOR



**Antonio Brown**  
WR  
Twin Cities Triumph

12 catches, 205 yards, 2 TDs. Made big plays in the big moments.



**Denzel Perryman**  
OLB  
Sebastian Swordfish

12 Tackles, 3 Stuffs, 2 FF. Played winning defence in a losing effort.





# Twin Cities 31 Sebastian 24



	1	2	3	4	F
Twin Cities	0	7	7	17	31
Sebastian	14	0	3	7	24

\* Championship \* 03-04-2017 Neutral Park Temp:25 Wind:0-10 None No Line MVP:Palmer

1	5:46	Sebastian	TD	Anderson 6 run (Vinatieri) (13-78-6:42)	0-7
1	1:02	Sebastian	TD	Forsett 25 run (Vinatieri) (8-57-2:51)	0-14
2	8:39	Twin Cities	TD	Martin 4 run (Aguayo) (11-65-5:11)	7-14
3	12:01	Sebastian	FG	Vinatieri 31 (10-51-2:46)	7-17
3	8:39	Twin Cities	TD	Palmer 16 pass to Clay (Aguayo) (7-80-3:22)	14-17
4	11:49	Twin Cities	TD	Palmer 7 pass to Brown (Aguayo) (7-70-3:47)	21-17
4	7:10	Sebastian	TD	Winston 10 pass to Baldwin (Vinatieri) (8-80-4:39)	21-24
4	3:41	Twin Cities	FG	Aguayo 41 (10-46-3:18)	24-24
4	1:12	Twin Cities	TD	Palmer 26 pass to Brown (Aguayo) (5-52-1:06)	31-24

## Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Palmer	44	25	421	5	1	3	3	102.6
	44	25	421	5	1	3	3	102.6

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Winston	27	9	93	0	0	1	2	56.6
Dalton	7	6	62	0	0	0	1	103.6
	34	15	155	0	0	1	3	67.6

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Martin,D	18	57	3.2	4	3	13	1
Palmer	2	2	1.0	0	0	3	0
	20	59	3.0	4	3	13	1

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Anderson	17	125	7.4	8	5	18	1
Dixon,K	4	50	12.5	3	2	19	0
Winston	3	45	15.0	3	3	18	0
Forsett	4	32	8.0	2	1	25	1
	28	252	9.0	16	11	25	2

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Brown	12	0	17	205	17.1	12	3	27	2
Clay	7	0	11	119	17.0	6	2	32	1
Matthews	5	0	9	81	16.2	5	0	20	0
Elfert	1	1	4	16	16.0	1	0	16	0
Vereen	0	0	2	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Martin,D	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	25	1	44	421	16.8	24	5	32	3

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Baldwin	5	0	7	65	13.0	3	0	23	1
Anderson	4	0	4	33	8.3	1	0	13	0
Beckham Jr.	2	0	9	28	14.0	1	0	20	0
Amendola	2	0	3	15	7.5	1	0	8	0
Forsett	1	0	3	6	6.0	0	0	6	0
Watson	1	0	4	8	8.0	0	0	8	0
Dixon,K	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Walford	0	0	2	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
Coleman	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	15	0	34	155	10.3	6	0	23	1

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Palmer	2	2	0
Martin,D	1	0	0
Clay	0	1	0
	3	3	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
	0	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Vereen	4	28	7.0	9	0
	4	28	7.0	9	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Amendola	2	46	23.0	29	0
	2	46	23.0	29	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Brown	2	0	-1	-0.5	1	0
	2	0	-1	-0.5	1	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Amendola	0	2	0	0.0	0	0
	0	2	0	0.0	0	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Aguayo	1-3	41	4-4	7

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Vinatieri	1-2	31	3-3	6

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Jones	2	97	48.5	0	0	0	54

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Berry	4	147	36.8	0	1	0	38

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Str	Hur	FF	Int
Freeman	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Roby	6	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Slay	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Hughes	4	1	0	0	4	0	0-0
Casey	4	1	0	2	1	0	0-0
Harris Jr.	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Searcy	3	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Wagner	3	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Gholston	2	1	0	1	0	0	0-0
Ansah	2	0	0	0	2	0	0-0
Maxwell	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Banks	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Cooper	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Melton	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Holmes	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Lucas	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Clark	0	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
	47	3	7	3	7	0	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Str	Hur	FF	Int
Perryman	12	0	0	3	0	2	0-0
Colvin	9	0	3	0	0	0	0-0
Posluszny	8	0	0	1	0	0	1-15
Breaux	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Attaochu	4	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Floyd	2	1	0	0	0	1	0-0
Thurmond	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Clowney	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Dunlap	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Jones	1	1	0	0	1	0	0-0
Chung	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Armstead	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Abdul-Quddu	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Doss	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	52	3	6	5	1	3	1-15



3 big 4<sup>th</sup> down conversions, 205 yards receiving, Game-winning TD catch.

	Twin Cities	Sebastian
First Downs	29	25
Rushes	20-59	28-252
Passes	44-25-421	34-15-155
Sacked	3-17	3-23
Fumble	3	0
Penalties	5-35	2-15
Turnovers	1	0
Missed Tackles	7	2
Dropped Passes	1	0
Bad Passes	2	2
Passes 25+	5	0
Runs 10+	3	11
Blitzes	0	33
Time	30:18	29:42
Third Down	4-12	1-11
Fourth Down	3-3	3-3
Red Att/Td/Fg	5/3/0	2/2/0
Net Offense	463	384





# AT THE



# CHAMPIONSHIP

*With Spats McChad*

CANTON – My editor, **Mr. Finchley** made it bloody clear to me that this year my report from the EFL Championship would be subject to a word limit. He would not tolerate *“long novels full of bullsh\*t about people trying to kill you”* – those were his exact words. I tell you this to explain why my article is shorter this year and to let you know that I work for a jerk. But I have to comply; **Mr. Finchley** gets me published. Without him I’d probably be blogging and forced to beg for donations to keep me in rent money. Or worse, I might be forced to apply for a job at the *New York Times*.

Times are tough in the sports media industry these days. The Internet and Social Media have created a myriad of avenues for people to exchange views and opinions outside of the mainstream, professional media outlets. For true freelancers, it has never been easier to get published, but it has never been harder to make a living at it. As a member of the syndicate I am guaranteed to get published....somewhere. And because I’m good, well-connected and reasonably well-known at this stage of my career, they will occasionally pay my expenses to attend major events like the EFL Championship. The year of the historic 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Championship in Canton was no exception – but my budget had been cut in half. This caused me some problems, as you will see when you read on.

## THE ROAD TO CANTON

The birthplace of two professional leagues has become a shrine. As Mecca is to Islam, Canton, Ohio is to Football; every true football fan should travel there at least once in his or her lifetime to take in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. For me, once – back in 2007 for the inaugural EFL draft – was enough. While the Hall of Fame itself is worth the price of admission, the surrounding “attractions” are of the run-of-the-mill sort one could find most anywhere in America. Travel packages (yes, the Visitor’s Bureau offer these) are rightfully centered around the Football Hall of Fame and dressed up with trips to the Canton Classic Car Museum and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland 60 miles away. If you forgo the side trip to Cleveland you can substitute with a visit to the McKinley Presidential Library and Museum or a round of golf at the Glenmoor Country Club (in-season). And that’s about it for unique Canton tourist destinations. All the nonsense about vibrant arts, music culture, great museums, historic sites and “unique shops” creates the impression that Canton is some kind of hipster cultural center, which it is decidedly not. Bear in mind that things that can be loosely described as above do exist in Canton; they just are not impressive enough to warrant going out of your way to see them, especially when you live in New York City.

But as far struggling rustbelt communities trying to survive in the era of global capital go, Canton is doing pretty well. At least there is *something* interesting to see when you’re there. My problem with Canton is its selection as the setting for the 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Championship. It was bad when media across the continent descended on this place in 2007 after the cataclysmic collapse of the NFL. The lesson should have been learned then not to attempt to host another national event of such magnitude. But *no*, the memory of that debacle had apparently faded and been replaced with a vision of millions of dollars floating into the local economy. Fair enough, but when a community has two years to prepare I expect to see a lot more organization and a lot more infrastructure upgrades. I don’t expect another Ferraroland, but a modest ‘Football World’ would have been nice.

Canton does not lack for hotels on any given weekend. The city is the site of the annual Pro Football Hall of Fame Enshrinement Weekend, which brings in the largest chunk of the Hall’s estimated 200,000 visitors annually. But Gale Sayers Week was expected to attract at least twice that number to the Canton-Cleveland area; and that was a conservative estimate based on an unlikely scenario involving Cowtown making it to the final. With Twin Cities and Sebastian making it, estimates became much higher, even accounting for the lack of a detectable Swordfish fan base outside of the Florida East Coast.

Due to budget cuts I had been booked into the Knights Inn, the cheapest hotel within 5 miles of the stadium. But it was cheap in quality only. The rate of \$159.00 a night was about triple its normal rate for a single bed and that included the “corporate discount.” The EFL Championship had raised hotel rates across the entire region and there were no vacancies anywhere within 40 miles of Canton. So I was stuck with it unless I wanted to grab a room in Cleveland or Wooster and pay for it myself.

The quality of my hotel room was the least of my concerns, however. At least it was relatively close to the action. My flight was a torturous marathon of connecting flights – four in all – on a *Gusair* Saab 340 twin-engine turboprop relic from the 1990s. If



you're on a tight budget and you don't care if you live or die, '*Gusair Quality Discount Flights*' is the airline for you. The owner of the airline, **Gus "Crash Puppy" Kuiper**, was an ex Marine Corps pilot who had flown missions during the Vietnam War and had recently retired from *Phillipine Airlines*, where he had worked as a trainer and consultant. The airline had sold him the outdated Saab 340 for \$1.00 in honour of his long service. Gus advertised "*personal attention to your safety*" – a valid claim as he was the one and only pilot for *Gusair*. His company's website was packed with old photos and memorabilia from his Vietnam days. In the 'About Us' section of his site there was a boast that his co-pilot, son Gus Jr, has "*at the age of 40, just received his commercial pilot's licence, proof that you can do anything if you put your mind to it. I'm proud of my boy!*" But most disconcerting was the throwaway comment at the end of his company auto-bio that read: "*Glad to be finally back in the cockpit after all these years!*"

Had I known any of the above *before* I got on the plane I would have rented a car at my own expense; and I might have arrived in Canton earlier if I had. My flight on *Gusair* took me, and two dozen other unwitting saps, from Teterboro Airport in the Meadowlands to Allentown, PA for a one-hour layover before re-boarding for Harrisburg, PA. In Harrisburg we refueled and ate a boxed lunch on Gus that consisted of a bottle of water, a cheese sandwich, and a twin-pack of Oreo cookies (he boasted that he was the only airline to still offer a free meal and a smoking section on the plane). The "cheese" sandwich was actually *Cheez Whiz* between two slices of stale white bread. From there we flew to Morgantown, WV, where we dropped off a family of five heading to Little Falls for a family reunion. We cried as we parted ways – they, tears of joy for having safely arrived; and us for having to endure one more leg of the journey. Finally we arrived in Akron, about 25 miles from Canton, exactly 5 hours and 23 minutes after we had taken off from Teterboro. The only thing right about this whole experience was the price: \$89.00 round trip, approximately \$500 less than the going cheap rate on a major carrier. Gus was likely making his money by not offering refunds and banking on his customers declining the "round" part of trip.

While the flight on *Gusair* was more dangerous than normally tolerable for a domestic flight, I had had more harrowing experiences on the extreme adventure holidays I used to go on when I was younger. *Gusair* had made me more uncomfortable than fearful. What really got under my skin was that the syndicate had made me travel to Canton on Thursday, Day 4 of Gale Sayers Week to save on hotel costs, depriving me of Opening Night and Media Day – two long standing traditions for me going back to the first EFL Championship. If they were going to make me risk my life and comfort to get to Canton, they could at least make it worth my while when I got here.

My *Blackberry* (yes, I still use one of those!) had been pinging with messages from all of my sports writer buddies wondering where I was on Tuesday when Twin Cities Coach, **Guy Williams** was telling **Thomas Jenifer**, of the *Maryland Independent*, to stick his pen "where the sun don't shine." The Chargers beat reporter had asked Williams how he was preparing his players to face "a team that can fight back," a clear dig in reference to the controversial Week Two pummeling the Triumph had administered to the expansion St. Charles Chargers at the grand opening of Wilhalla Stadium. The exchange and the resulting trash talk between Triumph and Chargers fans had dominated the headlines and overshadowed the, in retrospect, even more controversial statement by Triumph end, **Ezekiel "Ziggy" Ansah** that "Andy Dalton won't survive the first quarter."

Being late turned out to be a theme of the 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Championship for Yours Truly. The paucity of cabs in Canton had brought cab drivers from across the State of Ohio to Canton to serve the hundreds of thousands of visitors who had descended all at once onto the city of 75,000. That included cab drivers from Akron. So I had to wait over one hour for a cab at the airport and then deal with unusual congestion on Highway I-77. I finally arrived at my hotel at 4:30 pm, four hours late for my lunch date with **Gabriele Laurent-Vainluven (Gabby)**, Knights' correspondent for the *LA Daily News*.

Gabby had made reservations at the Basil Asian Bistro on Market Avenue N. It was the only restaurant she considered 'chic' in the backwater of Canton. It was to be our first meeting since I had spent a week on the West Coast with her after the drama in Ferraroland at last year's championship. That had been a nice time but, for reasons that are none of your business, we had decided to keep our relationship professional going forward.

So, in the professional capacity of two sports writers meeting to exchange notes about an important imminent sporting event I expected that she would have understood that my lateness was the result of my travel plans not panning out as planned and not due to some personal ambivalence or deliberate slight on my part. But apparently that was not the case.

'I am at the brewing company with the others dont try to talk to me,' she typed at the end of a long text exchange in which I had made the mistake of updating my progress with overly optimistic projections of when I would arrive.

I was not personally familiar with the Knights Inn brand and I was surprised to discover that they could be found across the country. Judging from the outside and the lobby there was certainly nothing fancy about the Knights Inn Canton. I dropped my bags and surveyed my room. It was plain but not untidy. There were nicks in the wall and the odd burn mark on the carpet, which was odd since I had requested a no smoking room. The bed looked neat at first glance. I turned up the covers to inspect the sheets and I was pleased to see that there were no visible dried stains on the pillow cases or sheets. There had evidently been a recent repair to the door and a spot on the wall near the bathroom. I unpacked my shaving kit and went into the bathroom. The toilet and sink were rust-stained and there was an unknown substance on the floor next to the bathtub. The towels looked dry and smelled clean, masking, not completely, the faint smell of mold. I brushed my teeth stiffly, half expecting a police raid to break out any second. *Oh well*, I thought. *I can live with it as long as I'm very drunk when I go to bed.*

I changed my shirt and called a cab. "Canton Brewing Company," I answered when asked where I was going.



## CANTON

In June 2016, Canton became the first Ohio municipality to allow the open consumption of alcoholic beverages in a “designated outdoor refreshment area” pursuant to State law enacted in 2015. Then it proceeded to designate the 25 square miles of Canton as a “designated outdoor refreshment area.” This was to attract more football fans to the city for the Championship Game. With the “refurbished” Fawcett Stadium temporarily able to house approximately 27,000 fans, it was thought that turning the entire city into an “outdoor refreshment area” and installing huge digital TV screens carrying the broadcast in all city squares and parks would attract the many fans unable to secure actual tickets for the game. The problem, of course, was the cold weather. Football tailgaters are generally willing to endure freezing temperatures for 2 or 3 hours before game time, but not many are hardy or drunk enough to spend upwards of 6 hours standing in the cold to watch a football game.

The true test would come on game day, with temperatures forecast to be between 35 and 19 degrees Fahrenheit. But on Thursday night, with temperatures hovering around freezing, there did not appear to be anybody taking advantage of the open consumption by-law.

I waited 50 minutes for a cab. When I finally arrived at the Canton Brewing Company I found it to be jam packed. A pair of beefy security guards stood at the entrance with a couple of policemen standing idly off to the side keeping an eye on the crowds around the building. Although there were many people outside near the entrance, there was no discernible line that I could see. So I walked right up to the door and braced myself to be denied entry. But the security guards barely noticed me as I opened the door and walked inside.

I stepped into a restaurant that, surprisingly, was only moderately busy. I stood and scanned the room for a familiar face, but found none. A waitress approached me and asked how many were in my party. I replied that I wasn’t sure, but they were supposed to be in a place called “the Speakeasy.” She smiled and pointed to a staircase adorned with a sign showing a prohibition era policeman winking and pointing downward. The Speakeasy was in the basement – as a speakeasy should be, I guess.

I could hear the din coming from below as I neared the top of the staircase. *So that is where everybody is*, I thought as I descended into a modestly lit bar packed with patrons, most of them wearing football paraphernalia of some kind. The place looked like I could well imagine a real speakeasy would have looked like back in the 20s, when professional football was officially born; except for the multiple large screen TV screens all over the place. I started to look around for my friends and found myself smelling the beer. Yes, the atmosphere was laden with the sweet smell of barley malt. Immediately, I knew that I was going to like this place.

I had been texting **Jean Boisvert**, Swordfish correspondent for the *Swampland Proof*, updating him on my location. He was at the cornhole boards; ‘you cant miss them’ he had texted. Before I actually found the “can’t miss them” cornhole boards, I heard my name called from opposite locations simultaneously.

“Spats!” >> “Spats!” >> “It’s about time, you donkey!” >> “I knew it was too good to be true!” came the over-lapping voices. I looked around.

To my front was **Quentin San Pedro** of the *Chino Champion*, holding a blue cornhole bag. Slightly to my rear and off to the side was **Charlie Wood** of the *Charleswood Banner*. I froze for a moment, unsure in which to direction to go first. I didn’t have to choose; they both came toward me.

“Come and join us, Spats, you cornholer!” Quentin cracked. “You know you want to!”

“Hey, you big jerk,” Wood smiled. “Come over and buy us a drink so we can stand your presence!”

As they got closer, I could see that Quentin and Charlie were avoiding each other while engaging me in banter.

“Where’s Jean?” I asked, feeling a little awkward.

“He’s over with us,” Quentin replied immediately. “Come on, I’ll take you to him.”

“Trust me, Spats,” Charlie leaned forward in an attempt to speak confidentially but failing miserably. “You don’t want to hang out with those wingnuts! Plus, I have to introduce you to the new guys.”

“Spats, I know you really don’t want to be with those libtards,” Quentin hissed under his breath. “Come on, I’ll buy you a beer!”

Quentin grabbed my left arm and Charlie grabbed my right and attempted to lead me in opposite directions.

“Hey, hey, guys!” I protested. “The night is young, I’ll make the rounds. More importantly – where can I get a beer?”

They both looked a little miffed at first then switched to fake smiles. “Jennifer!” >> “Leanne!” came the simultaneous replies, referring to their respective waitresses.

I settled the dispute by informing them that I had some pressing business with **Jean Boisvert**, which wasn’t exactly true, but which wasn’t exactly a lie; Boisvert had been making notes for me on all that had been going on in Canton in my absence.

I followed **Quentin San Pedro** to the cornhole boards. I was greeted there jovially by **Jean Boisvert** and several others – a little *too* jovially. What the hell was going on?

I soon discovered the reason. It turned out that over the course of Gale Sayers Week the divisive subject of politics and the US election had come up more than once. Discussions had turned into heated exchanges, with the result that my fellow journalists had separated into camps – one supporting Trump and the other supporting Clinton. These camps had quickly become so uncompromisingly partisan that they could not stand to be with each other. Friendships forged over the years were suddenly in



jeopardy. And the only reason I had been welcomed by both sides was due to my publicly avowed neutral position. I soon discovered that I would not be allowed to remain neutral for long. Not being a member of the “other side” was not enough – the camps were hardening into a “with-us-or-against-us” attitude. “Converting” me was the unstated but certain goal of both the Trump and Clinton camps; a trophy for their respective causes.

The Trump side had staked out the area near the cornhole boards as its unofficial headquarters at the Canton Brewing Company. The Clinton side was across the room around the Giant Jenga game. Judging from the numbers present that night, the Trump camp was much smaller. But clearly not everybody was here; or if they were, they were hiding somewhere else, unwilling to get involved in the politics.

I was greeted convivially by the Trump group. **Randy the Desert Rat** of the *Mohave Torch*, never unfriendly but never overjoyed to see me either, dropped his red cornhole bags and sprinted over to shake my hand.

“Spats, buddy! Great to see you finally got here!” he exclaimed with a huge and obviously forced grin. “A lot’s been happening here in Canton.” And then he leaned forward, lowering his voice slightly. “I just knew you voted for Trump! I can read between the lines, buddy and I saw right through that neutral Switzerland shit you wrote in your column!”

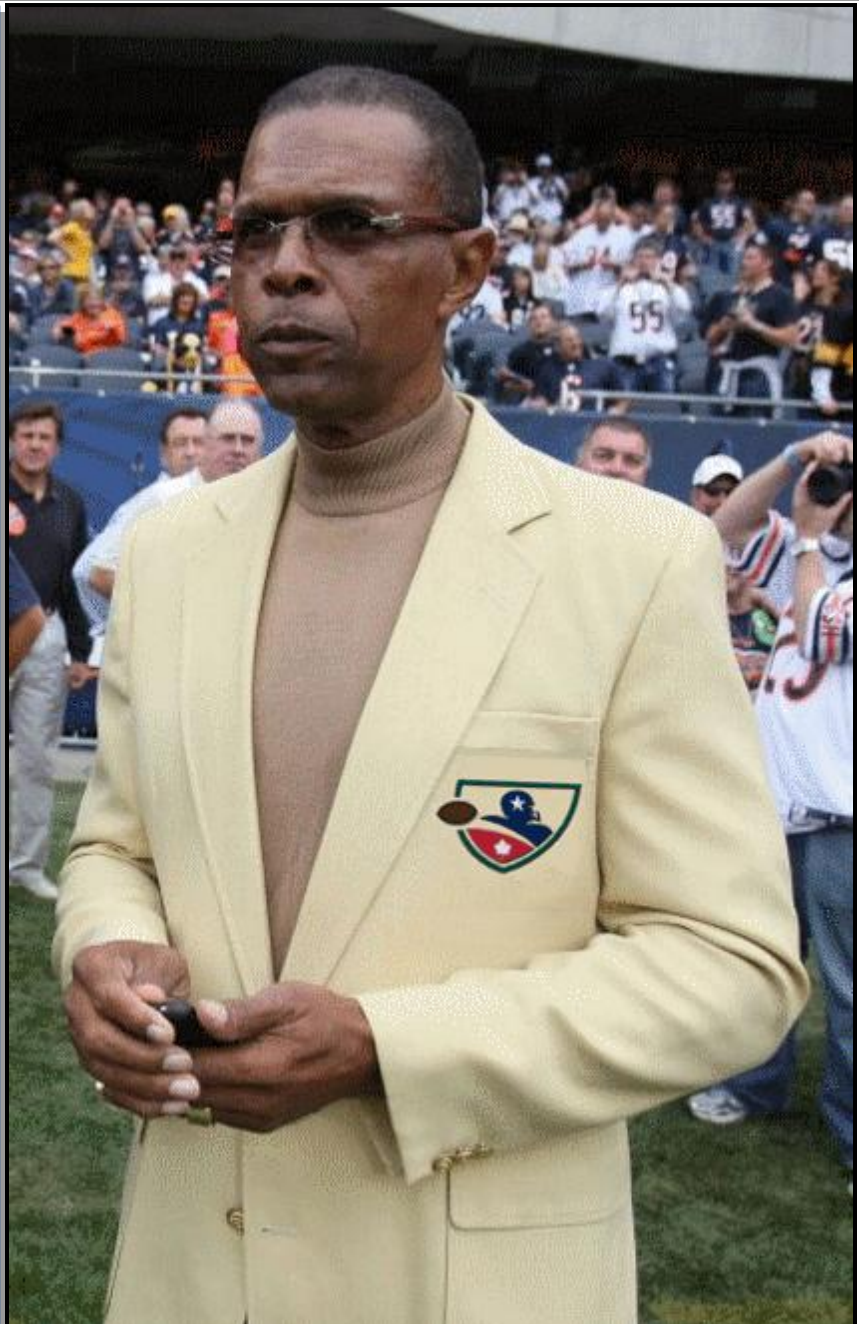
“I don’t remember mentioning Switzerland,” I quipped.

Randy burst out laughing as if I had made a great joke, which I hadn’t. “You’re too funny, Spats! You know what I meant – you’re trying to keep your readership intact by not pissing off the other side, I get it.”

Also at the cornhole boards, and therefore implicitly aligned with Trump, was **Lars Odegard** of the *Wilhalla Press*; **Sir Reginald Malcolm Clapham** of the *Durham Diggat & Pick*; **Sparky McGillicuddy** of the *Iowa Press Citizen* and, of course, **Jean Boisvert** and **Quentin San Pedro**. Each greeted me in turn as if I was some long lost brother. While we had all grown familiar over the years from attending the Championships together, I wouldn’t have classified any of them, except maybe Jean, as remotely “brother-like.”

It became apparent before the night was done that Randy was the loud ring-leader of the Trump group and Lars was the guy who would step in if the argument actually turned to the issues and away from personal insults. Randy seemed to embody the rage of Middle America that had swept Trump to an overwhelming victory in the Electoral College and across the counties of almost every State. The main population centers had mostly gone to Clinton, but the physical geography of the Trump landslide was undeniable. Randy, who lived near the border with Mexico, was clearly in favour of the Wall and replacing the Mexican Hellfire fans with born and bred Americans. Lars was more intellectual in his approach – he felt the Democratic Party had lost touch with its labour base and had betrayed the core principles of liberalism and the American people. He saw an America on the road to economic ruin under the Democrats and, while he remained skeptical that Trump could deliver on all of his economic promises, he believed strongly that something had to be done “to keep America from failing.”

**Sparky McGillicuddy** was not a big Trump fan, but he was a staunch Republican and



**Gale Sayers** stands on the field at Fawcett Stadium prior to opening ceremonies at the 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Championship Game. It was the first time he had participated in the opening coin toss for the game that bears his name.



had voted for his party. The constant media attacks on Trump, a few warranted but most not, had put him in a reflexive defensive posture and had turned him, despite his previous low opinion of Trump, into an increasingly vociferous defender “out of common fairness and decency.”

**Sir Reginald Malcolm Clapham** simply yearned for “the Halcyon Days of Yore” and felt that Trump was “a regular brick of a fellow” in spite of his penchant for “gum and tantrums;” while **Quentin San Pedro** liked that Trump was “a fighter,” a person who, like him or not, would “fight for America” and “scare the shit out of the Chinese!”

To my eyes, the most unlikely Trump supporter of the group was **Jean Boisvert**, who I considered a grounded person capable of seeing through the idiocy of modern politics and not getting overly worked up about which of the establishment parties was in power. It turns out that Boisvert, a natural Democrat in his sympathies, detested his party’s candidate so much – “the anti-thesis of a true Democrat,” he called Hillary – that he was willing to vote for “that ignorant blowhard Trump” because “he just might be able to bring jobs back to the United States” and “avoid a war with Russia.” He thought it was “worth a shot.”

I tried to steer the conversation back to football to catch up on what had been going on in Canton this week. But the sport we were all being paid decently to watch and write about was clearly second on the agenda for discussion, and a distant second at that. I did manage to find out from Quentin that there a lot of “unhappy Swordfish fans in Canton” who had made the trek at the last moment but found out when they got here that tickets to the game were not just sold out, but hardly available at all on the resale market. The few being offered were out of the price range of the average slob. In spite of Sebastian’s 14-1-1 regular season record and a couple of easy playoff wins, the team’s fans, beaten down by years of losing, could hardly believe the Swordfish were in the final game. Few had bothered to plan in advance, with the result that the many late bandwagon jumpers were now late for the party.

Triumph fans, on the other hand, had long anticipated that their team would make it to the Championship and were confident that they would win it all. There were thousands of them in Canton and many of them had tickets. The average Triumph fan truly believed that 2016 would be “our year.” They had watched too many comebacks, seen too many lucky bounces and firmly believed that **Antonio Brown** was some kind of God. They hadn’t lost a game. So why start now?

I ordered a beer from Jennifer – a *Red Spear Red Ale*, brewed right here at the Canton Brewing Company. Too late, I realized my gaffe. My choice of the colour red merely confirmed what **Randy the Desert Rat** had suspected: that I had secretly voted for Donald Trump.

“Good choice, Spats!” Randy laughed and winked. “I’ll stick to the *Amstel Light*, but I get your point you sly dog!”

At some point about 30 minutes into my visit to the Trump Camp, I became aware of burning eyes watching me from a distance. I could not see who it was, but I had the unmistakable feeling that I was being watched and judged. I looked down at my *Blackberry*. There were more than a dozen texts. The last one, from Gabby, read ‘you have no shame spats.’

“Sorry guys, got to head over and see Gabby,” I interrupted Sir Reginald, who was confessing to the others that he was feeling deep seated guilt about having killed an elephant in Kenya many years ago on a safari.

“You want back-up, Spats?” Randy asked. “They’re a bunch of idiots over there and your girl, Gabby is leading the pack!”

“I’ll be okay, Randy. Thanks,” I replied and walked away, looking around for the giant Jenga game that marked Clinton territory. I did not have to look for very long. Within seconds of crossing the floor I saw Gabby leaning against a railing near the bar. She was wearing a light blue cotton dress, a feathered scarf and a blue ball cap with some design on the front the reminded me of a spirograph drawing. I was about to make a wisecrack then I saw her withering glare and held my tongue.

“I’m still not talking to you,” she said, speaking to me. “I’m just saving your reputation. People are talking.”

“Who’s talking?” I asked.

“I told you I’m not talking to you.” Her words were clipped and she walked with exaggerated force toward the Giant Jenga game. When we got close she suddenly flashed a smile and announced to the others: “I rescued the naughty boy from the Ku Klux Klan rally!”

There was general laughter and I heard **Charlie Wood** yell: “Behind every moronic man there is a smart woman like Gabby keeping him from walking into the side of a bus!”

I paused. “What does that *mean*?” I asked Charlie, genuinely puzzled until I realized that he was gob-smacked drunk and it didn’t really matter.

The Clinton Camp welcomed me, but not as warmly as the Trump Team had. This was because I had gone *over there* first, raising suspicion and resentment about my motives for doing so. Charlie was first to come over. He got a little too close to me – the way that drunks tend to do when they are really drunk and drawn to whatever they are looking at. He whispered in a loud voice: “Don’t worry, Spats! I defended you! I know you voted for Clinton,” he slurred. “I read your columns and I can read through the lines. Smart idea to throw those Tumpsters a bone by not shooting down their hero – you don’t want to lose too many readers.”

Also playing Giant Jenga, and therefore supporting Clinton (or at least *not* supporting Trump) was Monarchs’ correspondent, **Michael S. Hickenbottom** of the *Orange County Register*; **Johnny Rebb** of *The State*; **Mike Myers** of *The Scarberian*; **Molly Qerim**, spokesperson for the Triumph; **Kokopali Crimpton** of the *Carthage Carving*; **Marcus Aurelius** of the *Gwinnett Tribune*; **Aristedes Kalogiannis** of the *Pickering Post*; and three others who I had not met before, although I could have sworn I knew the older gentleman sitting next to **Johnny Rebb**, cradling a glass of soda. I tried to place him but couldn’t.

Gabby, always attuned to social cues, sprung into action. “Oh Spats, you haven’t met Fergie!” she squealed. She grabbed my arm and led me over to the table. “Fergie, this is Spats McChad. He writes for the syndicate,” then she turned to me. “Spats, this is Fergie and his friend Archibald. They cover the Cadillac for the *Chatham Daily News*.”

Now I knew where I had seen him before! “Ferguson Jenkins!” I cried. “You’re Ferguson Jenkins!”

He smiled and nodded. “Ferguson Jenkins the First,” he declared. “And this is my co-writer, Archibald Davies.”

“Ferguson Jenkins the First?” I asked, not sure if that meant I had the wrong guy. He sure looked like **Ferguson Jenkins**.

“Ferguson Jenkins the First is my, as the French say, *non de plume*,” he replied, affecting a poor French accent. He chuckled. “Isn’t that what they say, Archie? But, of course, sports fans know me as Fergie Jenkins.”

**Ferguson Jenkins** had been a major league pitcher, playing 19 seasons for four different teams. Born in Chatham, Ontario, he was the first Canadian to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Although he had never pitched for any New York team, he was one of my favourite baseball players of all time. I used to have his baseball card at the top of my deck – even above Tom Seaver. Don’t ask me why I liked **Ferguson Jenkins** – it started as one of those kid things where I simply liked his baseball card.

Fergie, I would find out, was enjoying his retirement and was trying out various things, including sports writing. In this he was assisted by a less famous, but distinguished young writer: **Archibald Davies**, grand nephew of Canadian novelist **Roberston Davies**. Fergie would express his thoughts about a sporting event freely and Archibald would diligently make notes. Following the event they would together “map out” an article and Archibald would write it. The byline would read: “*by Chatham’s own Ferguson Jenkins I.*” I expressed my surprise that the young Archibald would not be credited for his work.

“Oh, everybody knows Archie writes the words,” Fergie laughed. Archie giggled. “That’s not a secret in Chatham-Kent.”

It turned out that Davies was an antiquarian and wrote extensively about the rural antique market in southern Ontario. He had earned a solid reputation in that area and did not want to mar his professional image with the “taint” of sports writing, which he described as a “light and frivolous diversion” that he did for fun. That characterization of our collective profession did not go over very well with those of us at the table who took our sports writing very seriously. But Davies was vehemently anti-Trump and that redeemed him in the eyes of most.

The two others I did not know were **Thomas Jenifer**, Chargers correspondent for the *Maryland Independent*; and **Dave Hodge** of TSN (the Canadian ESPN) and a guest writer for the *Asbury Park Press*, covering the Wrecking Balls. Jenifer carried himself with an air of superiority that did not quite equate to his somewhat shabby deportment. I would later find out that he was a direct descendent of **Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer**, a former colonial governor of Maryland and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. This fact was always brought up as punctuation to any point Thomas (and he insisted people call him ‘Thomas’) made that he sensed was failing to carry the argument. He too, was stridently anti-Trump, due to his certainty that “the Founding Fathers would be appalled at Trump!” **Dave Hodge** was much more laid back and very diplomatic. He did not look comfortable talking politics but his leanings were clearly in the “anti-wall” camp.

To my great surprise Gabby, the social butterfly who always strived to make everyone comfortable, was the main agitator for the Clinton camp. Watching her in action had rendered me speechless. This was not the Gabby I knew. There was something detached about her amateur attempt at rhetoric. She threw around phrases like: “Trump wants to silence women;” “we have chosen Fear and Hate over Love and Compassion;” “America was built by Immigrants and now he wants to throw them all out;” “we must resist Bigotry and Violence;” and “he’s not MY president” as if reading from a script. Perhaps it was not so surprising; she was a product of Hollywood after all. To all this, the others nodded mechanically in agreement and offered thoughts of their own:

“Don’t forget he’s Putin’s bum buddy!” the young, **Michael S. Hickenbottom** blustered, his voice cracking on *Put*.

“I started to cry when he mocked that disabled person,” **Molly Qerim** proclaimed, her head shaking slowly from side-to-side and her lower lip quivering.

“He reminds me of Nero,” remarked **Marcus Aurelius**.

“He wants to put native Samoans in Death Camps!” bellowed **Kokopali Crimpton**.

Everyone stopped and turned to Crimpton. **Johnny Rebb** broke the silence: “Really?”

Kokopali looked around. All eyes were upon him. **Molly Qerim** looked ready to burst into tears. “Well....he hasn’t said so....yet!” Kokopali replied feebly. “But we all know he’s thinking about it!” he added with more assurance.

Everyone nodded sagely and grunted forms of agreement.

“Look people, it’s really simple! He’s just nuts and should be impeached,” a drunken **Charlie Wood** declared, taking advantage of the lull to wrest control of the narrative and establish himself as the top anti-Trump guy.

The table roared its approval and Charlie called for a round of drinks. Leanne arrived and took our orders. I ordered a *Blue Moon*. Immediately, I realized my blunder but it was too late to change it; **Charlie Wood** had heard me. He leaned into me and said:

“Nice pick, Spats! Most people won’t catch the message of the blue bottle, but I do.” He winked.

Not everybody entered the (for lack of a better word) “discussion.” **Mike Myers** just smiled at everyone and everything and drank his beer. **Aristedes Kalogiannis** left the table shortly after I arrived; not concealing the fact that he was doing so to avoid me. **Johnny Rebb** seemed engaged, but resisted offering words for the “two minutes of hate” that, this being Thursday night, had turned into “four days of hate” directed at Trump.



Later in the evening, at the 11:00 pm turning point when the hard core partiers began to separate from the lightweights, I learned more about what had motivated **Johnny Rebb** to vote for Clinton:

“Trump is a con man, in my opinion,” Rebb stated flatly, without the vehemence I had detected in the others. “He is taking us all for a ride – some willingly, some unwillingly. He is the worst of hypocrites because he gives the average American real hope that he will reverse the inevitable decline of America. But he can’t ‘make America great again.’ America will never be the same as it used to be. The world is changing and Trump wants to bring us back to a time that cannot exist in the present. Hillary would have kept the status quo, which has its flaws, but would give us a gentler landing. Trump is going to lead us off a cliff, but not in the way many of these people,” he gestured to the half empty table where only a few of the Clinton partiers remained, “think he will.”

At that moment I realized something that felt to me, at the time, to be quite profound. Judging from what I had heard, nobody in the Clinton Camp had voted *for* Hillary; they had all voted *against* Trump. **Johnny Rebb** was the only one who had even hinted at an understanding of what Clinton had stood for. I knew this meant something....I just wasn’t sure exactly what.

The Canton Brewing Company had extended its hours of operation for Gale Sayers Week. The Speakeasy was still busy at 2:30 am, but only a few of my journalist friends remained. Gabby and Molly, their political rant burnt out, had gone up to the restaurant to commiserate about how horrible men could be and, at some point, they had left. **Charlie Wood** had become incoherent and was stuffed in a cab just after midnight by **Aristedes Kalogiannis**, who was staying at the same hotel.

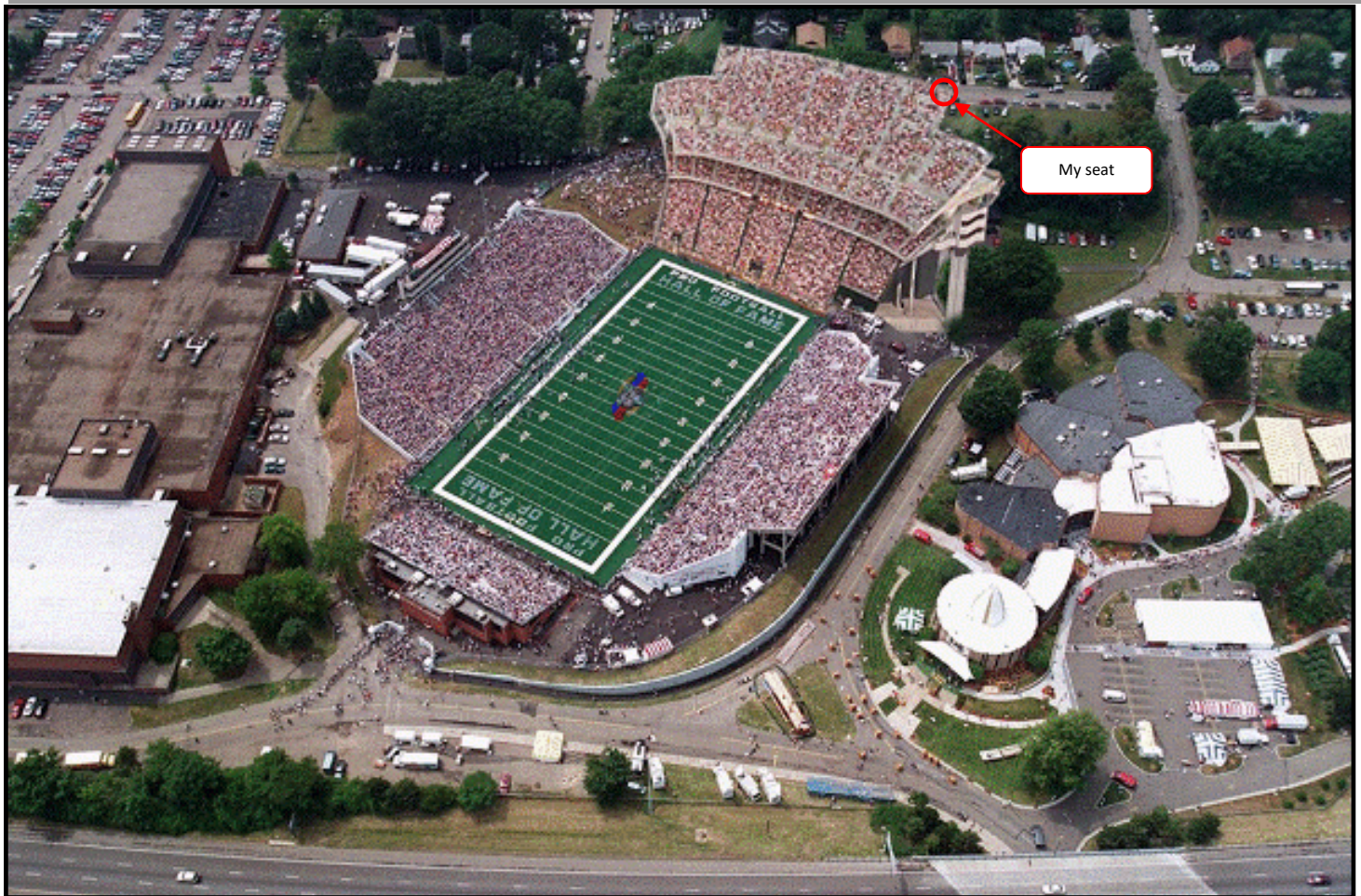
**Lanny McDonald** of the *Markham Economist & Sun* wandered into the picture some time before midnight. “Sptz...soyoufnllymadeit....lknewoodbeinabarzumwhere,” he said when he saw me. Nobody knew where he had been all night but he hung around, two-fisting it with the diehards, until closing time.

By 3:00 am I was feeling the effects of the beer. When combined with the long and uncomfortable day of travel it threatened to put me completely out of my head. I paid both my tabs. I had run tabs with both the “Trump Waitress,” Jennifer; and the “Clinton Waitress,” Leanne (although neither of them knew that’s how we thought of them). Jennifer thanked me, smiled and handed me a big blue, silver and gold ticket with the letters ‘CBS GSX’ emblazoned on the front.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It gets you into the Speakeasy on Sunday to watch the game on the big screen,” she replied. “And it also gets you a free nachos with your drink order.”

“But I have a ticket to the game,” I answered.



Fawcett Stadium in Canton on Gale Sayers X as viewed by *Brylcreem Blimp*. The location of my seat is circled in red above.

“Really?” she looked surprised. “Well, keep it anyway in case you change your mind. We’re sold out Sunday and you won’t be able to get in without it. It’s going to be cold outside.”

I was too drunk to put up a fight – especially with a cute waitress, who was inviting me to a bar. I liked this place anyway. *Best to keep my options open*, I thought in that foggy moment. *But, why me?*

“We get a few of these every night to give out to our best tippers,” she giggled. “Plus you look like a nice guy.”

*Me, a best tipper?* I thought. I looked down at my credit card receipt and my eyes popped out of my head. I had accidentally entered 100% on the keypad instead of 10% for Jennifer’s tip. Leanne, on the other hand, had received my standard 10% for drinks-only service and was no longer anywhere near me.

“See you Sunday,” Jennifer said in a sing-songy voice.

### **RED LIGHT RUN**

By 3:30 am, staff at the Canton Brewing Company were pushing us out the door. All that was left of my journalistic entourage were the Trump crowd (minus **Sir Reginald**, and **Sparky McGillicuddy** who had gone back to their hotels) and **Johnny Rebb**.

“Okay Spats! Let’s find out if you were right about the \$10 hookers in Canton!” **Quentin San Pedro** shouted as we milled around outside waiting for a cab.

Quentin’s challenge had come totally out of left field. I had completely forgotten that I had written, off-the-cuff in one of my “rougher” columns, that Canton was the “*home of the \$10 blowjob*.” I had apologized to Canton the following week and I had thought it was done. But Quentin remembered; and he seemed genuinely anxious to find out....through me.

“But...but...I don’t have any cash on me,” I protested – as if that was the only thing stopping me.

Quentin smiled, his gold teeth flashing in the streetlights. “Here you go, my friend,” he said. He held out a \$10 bill.

“And I’ll pay for the cab,” **Randy the Desert Rat** volunteered.

“This should be good,” **Johnny Rebb** said with a smile. **Lars Odegard** and **Jean Boisvert** rolled their eyes.

The six of us crammed into one of those cab vans. “Take us to the red light district!” cried Randy boldly. Caution had been officially thrown out the window.

I won’t go into the details because I can’t – they are simply too embarrassing for the people involved. And yes, I was involved, but I never got to sample the \$10 service I was eventually able to track down. Somebody else did, however, and that person will remain nameless. But we have pictures. And if that person ever, ever steps out of line and breaches our constantly changing journalistic code of ethics, those pictures might very well find their own way onto YouBoob.

I got back to my hotel some time before dawn to find a couple of police cars parked out front. One of them still had its emergency lights flashing. I stumbled past an officer sitting in the passenger side writing on a clipboard.

“Everything okay, officer?” I slurred.

He looked at me with that peeved look cops get when they don’t want to talk to you but are obliged to say something to make you go away. “Everything’s fine now, sir,” he replied in an affected professional tone. “A party got a little out of control and a person was shot, but he’ll survive.”

I stood there dumbly for a moment. “Do shootings happen often in this hotel?” I asked. “I’m from out of town, you know.”

“Really?” he answered sarcastically. “Not often, only every second weekend usually.”

I went to my room, engaged the safety lock and crashed on the bed. I would not wake up again until 1:00 pm the next day.

### **PRE-GAME**

My plans for Friday were blown up before they started. I missed the Football Writers of America Breakfast at the Fairfield Inn & Suites in South Canton. **Gale Sayers** was scheduled to be the guest speaker. Then I missed my “make-up” lunch date with Gabby at Thatsa Wrapp on 6<sup>th</sup> Street. My *Blackberry* was pinging like sonar and I was afraid to read the messages. Between two missed lunch dates and my perceived questionable loyalty to the cause of Hillary Clinton, my relationship with Gabby was tumbling down a steep hill this week.

A group of us were to meet at the McKinley Presidential Library and Museum for 3:00 pm for a tour before the Press Dinner and Awards Night at the Canton Club Event Centre. I showered and shaved and called a cab. As I waited, I screwed up the courage to check my messages.

‘you are a jerk!!!!’ was the latest one from Gabby. I didn’t bother to read the rest.

I arrived at the museum to find that many of our group had bailed on the tour. I checked the rest of my messages. In addition to about a dozen angry ones from Gabby, there were cancellation messages from everyone who had been with me on the red light run through Canton, as well as several of the others. They all offered various excuses designed to conceal that they were, in all probability, still hung over from last night’s beer festival. What did it say about me that I had been through all that and was still able to find my way to one of Canton’s signature attractions?

**Marcus Aurelius** of the *Gwinnett Triubune* was there. You couldn’t miss him in his thick, winterized toga and white plaster mask. He was eager to see what had been preserved from the McKinley era, to see “if it is as I remember it.” *Huh?* He was known to make odd statements like that. Most brushed Marcus off as a high-functioning madman like **Merlin the Magician** of the *York Round Table Chronicle*, but more capable of carrying on a real conversation.





This picture of me was taken by Quentin San Pedro through the front window of our cab in Canton's red light district. I am pointing to some loose change that had fallen on the sidewalk.

While we were waiting for the tour to start, Marcus let it slip that the Gladiators were about to move to Lake Oconee in Green County, Georgia. It was known that the team's lease on the Coliseum had expired and that owner **Dave Birdsall** was looking to relocate the team. But there were several places in the running and no official move had been announced. My source inside the Gladiators organization had been unable to give me the inside scoop, apart from informing me that it was Birdsall's decision and he hadn't made up his mind. But Marcus clearly had other sources who knew better.

By the time the tour got underway – it was a special guided “press” tour to promote the museum to the maximum – only me, Marcus, **Marquis de Sade** of the *Viriden Eviscerator*, and one of the new beat reporters, the **Birdman of Brooklin**, who covered the Hawks for the *Brooklin Town Crier*, were in attendance.

The **Birdman** was wearing a bird costume and introduced himself to us as “Birdman.” No, “*hey my name's Jack Smith but I go by the pseudonym Birdman*” – simply: “Birdman;” surname: “Of Brooklin.” I was embarrassed to be seen with this group. Other people visiting the attraction assumed my colleagues were some kind of living display from the museum. A group of High School students gathered around the **Birdman of Brooklin** and tried to touch his

feathers. I caught the **Marquis de Sade** leering at the young girls.

**Marquis de Sade**, dressed as a French aristocrat from the 18<sup>th</sup> century was mistaken by the historically-challenged as a American Revolutionary War hero of some kind or President McKinley himself. When he replied to the question “who are you?” with his real name, people look confused and walked away.

I came away from the tour thinking that if I had been hoping to learn more about President McKinley I would have been very disappointed in the library and museum dedicated to his memory. This was more of a 6<sup>th</sup> grade natural science and discovery tour than a serious shrine to the history of a man and his era. McKinley's tomb was very impressive however.

I went back to my hotel and changed into my suit for the Friday night gala.

Everybody who was anybody in the world of EFL journalism was at the Press Dinner and Awards Night at the Canton Club. The EFL and the Associated Press were co-hosting the event. Cocktails began at 6:00 pm and dinner started at 7:00 pm. The reception area was packed and buzzing with the hum of professional gossip mongers trying to outdo each other with witticisms and scoops on the upcoming game.

**Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** of ‘Deathspun’ hinted that he was developing a story about a Triumph spy scandal that would blow ‘Headset-gate’ out of the water. The Triumph were practising at the North Canton Memorial Stadium while the Swordfish were working out at the Paul Brown Tiger Stadium in neighbouring Massillon. Neither of those were professional facilities and they afforded no secrecy whatsoever. **Guy Williams** had lobbied to have the teams share old Cleveland Browns Stadium, which was currently being used to host college bowl games, but the EFL Committee had blocked the move without giving a reason. Smith-Abdullah assured us that both teams were spying on each other and suggested that the Triumph were winning the spy war by using drones to get a bird's eye view of the plays and had hidden cameras and microphones in the locker rooms to spy on the meetings.

A rumour that **Odell Beckham Jr** was secretly injured was based on the fact that he had not been observed running full speed drills in practice. But a flip side of that rumour was that Beckham had taken himself out of full speed drills to avoid injury to his hamstring, which had bothered him all season.

But the main hot topic of discussion was the small size of the stadium and the resulting lack of tickets to the game. The exorbitant prices being charged by re-sale firms bordered on larceny. To make matters worse, the press boxes had only been expanded enough to accommodate the additional international broadcasts. The vast majority of small outlet journalists and freelancers had been stuck in the auxiliary seating that had been installed in the west end zone as part of the “refurbishing” of Fawcett Stadium. **James Duthie** of TSN and *The Auroran* had the ‘Seat-Seeker’ app on his I-phone. One-by-one angry journalists fired off expletives after checking the app and seeing the field view from their seats. I was angered to find mine at the very top of the auxiliary seating. The one big selling point about Fawcett Stadium – that it put one close to the action – was something I was not going to experience. It would be like being at the very top of the *Big House* in Chino and – believe it or not – less comfortable.

The dinner itself, in terms of the food, was pretty good. There was nothing extravagant about the menu: green salad, dinner rolls, choice of roast beef or chicken or pasta as a vegetarian option, ice cream or cake for dessert, coffee or tea. But it was really well done – as if a frustrated gourmet chef had been forced to keep it simple but was determined to make it memorable anyway. The

wine and beer flowed pretty freely as well.

As expected, the mainstream media dominated the awards. **Peter Prince** of *North America Today*, head suck-up to the league, won the prestigious Committee and President's Awards for his "insightful, balanced, articulate" reporting that "set the standard" for others. **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** of '*Deathspun*' received the Investigative Journalism Award from the Associated Press. This was a bit of a surprise since '*Deathspun*' had prided itself on being uncompromising as a source of the most scandalous football news that others were too timid to publish. Many saw this as a coordinated attempt by the mainstream press and the league to co-opt '*Deathspun*' into being a more cooperative partner down the road. **Harry Schultz** of [FootballOutriders.Org](http://FootballOutriders.Org) received the Excellence in Analysis Award; while the tired duo of **Phil Winterall** and **Bill Badden** won the 'Broadcast Award' for their "iconic play-by-play and analysis." Local media and freelancers were almost totally excluded from the podium. However, the room gave a hearty round of applause when **Orville Smucker** of the *Cowtown Plain Dealer* received the Legacy Award for being the first accredited journalist in any forum to publish an article on the EFL. It had appeared in Orville's column, 'The Smucker Scoop,' and it had miraculously scooped everybody, including ESPN. A framed copy of the article was included with his plaque.

I was a little miffed that I had not been recognized. I am the most widely published EFL writer with the syndicate – nobody else even comes close. Politics certainly played a role in this. While I am generally supportive of the league, my occasional scathing criticism gets under their skin, I am told. And I had been instructed recently by Mr. Finchley to "tone down" my criticism of the journalistic standards, or lack thereof, of some of my professional colleagues in the mainstream media.

As the dinner wound down, guests moved from their pre-assigned seats to other tables to accommodate the profound split that had developed along political lines even here at the Awards Dinner. I was tired of it all. Not even the beer was protecting me from the headache I was developing from having to listen to the increasingly strident debates between Trump and Clinton supporters breaking out around me and the efforts of the participants to bring me in.

In desperation I struck up a conversation with a certified weirdo, **Sperl Sponefritter** of *Sperl's World of Sports*. He was known in the industry as an "alternative sports journalist" who applied a New Age approach to traditional sports coverage. He had voted for **Jill Stein** of the Green Party. Sperl, being largely detached from reality, was not easily flustered by the invective coming from both sides. But he agreed with me that it was frustrating for "us Greens" to have to listen to arguments that completely miss the main point: that Mother Earth is dying and humans are hastening its demise. I listened politely to his views then gently corrected him about the "us Greens" part; I wanted him to know that I was politically neutral here.

He looked at me disapprovingly. "You want Mother Earth to die, Spats?" he asked, in all seriousness.

"Well, no I don't, Sperl. Not any more than I want to die," I replied.

"There is no neutrality when it comes to Mother Earth, Spats. We are all in this together," he declared.

Sperl was right. Not that I agreed that we were destroying the Earth together, but we all certainly share it as home. Just like we all share America as our home. We *are* all in this together and the sooner we find common ground to build on, the better it will be for us all.

### **TRIBUTE TO MARDUK**

I had been told by one of my sources with the league that "something" was planned for Saturday night that was not listed on the official calendar of Gale Sayers X events, but which would involve all 13 members of the murky EFL Committee and an invitation-only group of guests simply known as "friends." There was no program to distribute and no official guest list available, but the event seemed "very, very important," my source informed me.

I spent Saturday contacting my other sources around the league trying to find out what my source inside the EFL was talking about, but the responses I got provided no viable leads. I did find out, however, that a group of Hall of Fame Alumni along with several EFL team owners and select members of their staffs had reportedly booked the *Diamond Royale*, a local "gentleman's club," for a private all-night party on Saturday night.

I also learned that Mission Viejo owner, **Chris Ferraro** was not in Canton this week for the Owner's Tribute Breakfast on Sunday morning because he was at home dealing with a "cash flow crisis" stemming from massive debt accrued by the construction of Ferraroland. The opulent theme park had fulfilled its role impressively as the venue for Gale Sayers IX, but public interest and demand for a theme park and convention centre based on medieval Lisbon had turned out to be low. His properties were losing money. I was pointed to an article in the *Orange County Register* that reported that Ferraro had received an official letter from the Government of Portugal formally refuting his claim to the Portuguese Throne. This had had repercussions in the Portuguese Community of Mission Viejo. Tradesmen and artisans who had worked for little or for free on the construction of Ferraroland were now invoicing His Ex-Highness. It was thought that Ferraro would have to sell his team if he did not find a financial solution.

I also found out, sadly, that **Gale Sayers** himself was beginning to exhibit early signs of dementia, thought to have been caused by his pro football career. He apparently kept asking his hosts why his name was posted all over the city. On this issue, the EFL Players Association is reportedly in the early stages of leading an effort to have the EFL reimburse former players for concussion-related injuries suffered while playing professional football. A recent study by UCLA based on autopsies of former NFL players' brains showed that 65 of 68 had tested positive for chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). The EFL will be fighting the lawsuit, claiming that what happened in the NFL is an NFL problem. They add the fact that no similar findings have been made for



former EFL players. This is a disingenuous position as very few former EFL players have died and none are willing to have their brains autopsied while alive for the sake of the players' lawsuit.

I heard dozens of other rumours and absorbed some salacious second hand gossip; none of it printable due to lack of corroborating sources and the likelihood of much of it being exaggerated or false. But the "something" that had been planned for Saturday suddenly became fair game to mention here when photos emerged Sunday morning of what appears to be a bizarre ceremony in a glade on the shore of Lake Meyers.

The photos appeared in my in-box in the early morning hours of Gale Sayers Sunday accompanied by captions that read: "EFL Committee of 13 pays tribute to Marduk;" "Midnight Invocation of Babylonian God near Canton;" and "Snake Cult Lives." The unsigned e-mail from [peekaboo443@gmail.com](mailto:peekaboo443@gmail.com) read: "Blood Ceremony to Marduk ensures EFL survives another 10 years. Lake Meyers, OH, 2017. Vow of 2007 fulfilled. The **real reason** why the 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Championship as played in Canton, Spats" (emphasis in the original).

Okay then – that was as clear as Lake Meyers mud! If anyone can shed any more light on this I am open to further e-mails. In the mean time, I have added the Tribute to Marduk to my list of investigative assignments that, along with the mysterious Cowled Figure, might never be completely solved.

### ***FAWCETT STADIUM***

Overnight I had had a brilliant idea: I had decided to sell my ticket! Despite the idea popping into my head as a 'Eureka moment' while I laid awake in my no frills hotel room, I did not make the decision lightly. It would mean that, for the first time ever, I would not be sitting in the stands for an EFL Championship. For that to happen at all, let alone at the historic 10<sup>th</sup>, was a significant loss. But the 'Canton Experience' had, for me, not been a particularly satisfying one to that point. After looking at my seat on 'Seat-Seeker,' the thought of spending the late afternoon and early evening on game day freezing my butt off at the very highest point in the stadium, with who-knows-who else beside me, was extremely unappealing. The Canton Brewing Company, on the other hand, was just my kind of place and I had a ticket for game day there tucked away in my luggage. After somberly pondering my choice for five minutes, I got up, showered, put on my Wrecking Balls jersey, and took a cab to Fawcett Stadium.

I did not see it as scalping. Selling tickets at inflated prices wasn't my profession. I looked at it as charity. I was about to give some poor suffering, ticketless Swordfish fan or Triumph fan a chance to watch history. If they had to pay a little more for it, that would be a moral lesson to them to plan better in the future. In every way I would be helping them out. I got to the stadium



This photo taken on the eve of the 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Championship purportedly shows members of the EFL Committee engaged in a mysterious fire and blood ceremony around a statue of the Babylonian God, **Marduk**. The source of this photo is unknown, but news accounts of a giant bonfire and chanting near Lake Meyers on Saturday night corroborate that something weird happened.

around 10:30 am. The game was still 6 hours away but there were already crowds of fans milling around. The scalpers were not hard to find. They swarmed all of the cabs as they pulled up, asking if the occupants had tickets to sell. The police looked on impassively, seemingly indifferent to it.

Something told me I should not immediately volunteer that I had a ticket to sell. I shook my head at a meaty, balding fellow in a dirty cloth jacket who was the first to stake out my cab as it pulled up to the curb. I got out and brushed off a sharp-tongued, thin man with a pale and drawn complexion who got a little too close. I moved through the swarm as if I had pressing business to attend to. As I pulled away, somebody made a wisecrack about my Wrecking Balls jersey.

I found a spot away from all the traffic and surveyed the scene. There was a knot of Triumph fans decked out in horned helmets in the parking lot across from McKinley High School who were chanting “*Tri-Umph! Tri-Umph! Tri-Umph!*”, between swigs of liquor. Small groups of Swordfish fans, a few wearing giant plastic bills on their noses, milled around, most likely looking for tickets. The official Championship tailgating site was on the other side of Highway 77 in the Canton Garden Centre but that had not deterred fans from wandering all over the place and taking over the roads, parking lots and sidewalks around the stadium.

Trucks carrying equipment for the **Bruce Springsteen** concert at half time rolled in as I looked in vain for a respectable-looking scalper to buy my ticket. The thought occurred to me that I should sell it directly to a fan, but I only had one ticket and just about everybody appeared to be in a group or in pairs. Then I heard somebody calling my name. “Spats! Spats!”

I looked around and saw a guy in a Patriots’ jersey walking in my direction. It was **Charlie Wood**. Behind him was **Johnny Rebb** in his Regulators’ cap and grey Confederate winter coat. It turned out that they had had the same idea.

We compared tickets. Charlie’s was 6 rows down from mine and Johnny’s was in the same back row as mine, but 12 seats away. They each had a face value of \$350.00 – the cheapest seats in the house. “I wonder how many of the others have seats in the same area,” I asked.

Then I heard my name again. “Spats! Spats!” I looked around and saw a guy wearing a black Convicts jersey jogging in our direction. It was **Quentin San Pedro**. Behind him, wearing a pair of horns on his head and a burgundy Hellfire jersey was **Randy the Desert Rat**. It turned out that they had had the same idea and were looking to sell their tickets.

“What is going on?” I asked. “Is everybody selling their tickets?”

I don’t know about everybody, but I got this ticket to the Canton Brewing Company Gale Sayers X Party that I want to use,” answered Quentin.

It turned out that all five of us had received Canton Brewing Company tickets from our waitresses this past Thursday night. **Charlie Wood** had been so drunk that he had typed in 150% instead of 15% when prompted by the card reader. Leanne had stuffed the ticket into his pocket as Aristedes had led him out of the bar. I laughed and told him I had punched in 100% instead of 10%.

“10%?!” **Randy the Desert Rat** barked. “You’re one cheap bastard, Spats!”

Randy had deliberately tipped Jennifer 50% on a \$180.00 tab, putting \$90 in her pocket. He had an open-ended expense account for the championship game. The *Mohave Torch* was not bothering to cut budgetary corners, believing that wall-building in their area was about to boom very soon and would be good for business.

I noted that the animosity between the two pairs of journalists, being on opposite sides of the US Election had, for the moment, disappeared. They had found common cause in getting rid of their tickets in a socially-responsible manner. Well, everybody except Randy, who wanted to dump them on the scalpers for “whatever we can squeeze from the bastards.” It was pointed out to Randy that whatever we squeezed from the scalpers would, in turn, be squeezed from the public.

“Who cares?” he replied. “They’re going to squeeze ‘em anyway.”

Randy was overruled by the group and thought better of striking out to sell his ticket on his own. The scalpers were swarming the area like piranhas and it was unsafe for any of us to meet them alone. We agreed that whatever we would do, we would agree to it, and do it, *together*. After scouting the area as a group for about 30 minutes we finally spotted what appeared to be a group of five fans standing near the stadium ticket windows. Three of them were wearing white ‘DALTON’ jerseys, one a teal ‘BECKHAM’ jersey, and an older man a bright blue and orange Dragons jersey with ‘HOUSHMANDZADEH’ crammed on the back in white block letters. They looked grim.

I approached the older man and commented on his Dragons’ jersey. He looked at me skeptically. I introduced myself as “not a scalper, just an old Dragons fan.” He relaxed a bit and introduced himself as Rob. He was from Orlando and had once had season tickets to the Florida Dragons. He was with his son-in-law, daughter and teenage grandson and granddaughter. Their decision to travel to Canton had been a last minute one and he admitted that it had been a “big mistake.” Even the scalpers were starving for tickets and they were demanding “insane” prices for the few they had. When I had arrived the family had just been discussing whether or not to go back to their hotel in Cleveland and watch the game there.

I looked at the others. Randy shook his head ‘no,’ but the others stood still. I asked Rob to wait there a minute while I took the journalists aside to talk strategy. “Well, what do you guys think?” I asked. “They seem nice enough.”

Spats, give me a break! They aren’t going to be able to afford these tickets!” Randy spat. “They may be nice enough but they’re also stupid to come here with no friggin’ plan. I say we make them pay our price or they’re sh’t out of luck!”

“Hey, Randy, a lot of people here don’t have a plan,” **Johnny Rebb** countered. “How many people know that Fawcett



Stadium only has 27,000 seats? I bet you half of them didn't realize."

"Who the f&^k flies to f%#king Canton and doesn't do their research?" Randy barked back. "Alright, alright!" he lowered his voice. "Ask them for \$2000 each – an even 10 grand if they can pay it. I can live with that."

I felt a pit forming in my stomach. "Are you serious?" I asked Randy.

"Of course, I'm serious!" Randy hissed back. "Have you seen what standing room is going for on Stub Tub? \$1,500 each!"

I did not have the heart to make that kind of demand, especially after telling Rob I wasn't a scalper. He had clearly already encountered one or more of those – thus his knowledge that he could not afford the going rate. I appealed to the others.

Johnny felt we should sell the tickets for face value, which provoked Randy to immediately call him a "f^\*king idiot!" Charlie suggested that maybe we should sell them to the scalpers because it looked like we weren't "cut out for this kind of dirty work" but that we would be "fools" to not take advantage of the market. To that, Randy agreed. Surprisingly, the rough and ready **Quentin San Pedro** agreed with Johnny that we should sell them for face value. This brought a snort of derision from Randy and a snide remark that Quentin had "lost his mind too!"

"The way I see it is none of us actually paid for these tickets in the first place," Quentin explained. "Selling them at face value is more than fair and the proceeds can pay for our drinks at the Brewery."

"I didn't say it wasn't *fair*," Randy protested. "I'm just saying its stupid not to take advantage. We can pay for a lot more than beer with ten grand!"

The four of them turned to me. There was a tie and they looked to me to break it.

"Look, I'm tempted to make the most of this opportunity, but I can't do it," I said. "I'm going to offer them the tickets for face value."

Randy moaned. Charlie groaned. Quentin and Johnny didn't exactly smile but they looked a little more relaxed than they had. But I could see the second thoughts creeping onto their faces. Doing the right thing wasn't always easy, even for nice guys.

I turned back to Rob and his family. They had started to shuffle off toward the cab stands, perhaps thinking I had forgotten about them. "Rob, hold on!" I called out.

The family of five stopped. I jogged over to them. When I got close I held out the tickets for them to see. I could see Rob's eyes counting them. Then he looked at me suspiciously and said, "I thought you said you weren't a scalper."

"I'm not," I replied. "Look, my friends and I have changed our plans. You can have these for face value. There's five of them: two are together, two are in the same row but apart, and the best one is in the second level of the end zone. Four at \$350 and one at \$400, that's....ah....," I paused to do the math. "That's \$1,800."

Rob's eyes widened. He scrutinized the tickets from a distance. I told him that they were real and tilted them back and forth so that he could see the holographic Swordfish and Triumph logos alternately appearing in the light. His daughter had come over for a closer look. She studied them. I could see the tears welling in her eyes. She started to reach inside her purse.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "They're real, I swear to you!"

"Oh, I believe you," she choked. "I'm just happy! I lost hope we would find tickets. This might be the last game Daddy is able to see."

At that Rob turned sharply to his daughter, "Karen! That's enough of that!"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

The daughter, Karen, started crying. "Daddy has to undergo chemo and radiation next week for some tumours. We found out last week. That's why we flew to Canton. He loves the EFL. We hoped to get tickets when we got here. My prayers have been answered. I'll gladly pay your price," she said as she fumbled with an envelope. She began to count. While I am no bank teller, I saw the denominations, gauged the thickness of the wad, and sensed she was going to be short to the tune of a few hundred dollars.

"You know what!" I said abruptly. I looked around and saw that people were gathering. "Just take the tickets!" I thrust them at her and stuffed them in her purse. "*Now run!*" I yelled.

The exposure of genuine game tickets to the air had put the scent of profit in the wind. Like natural predators, the scalpers had immediately sensed a transaction was occurring and, like a swarm of hornets, bore down on us. Rob and his family started to run toward the cab, but Karen hesitated, turned and stared at me. "But....but... what's your name?"

"There's no time for that!" I yelled. "Just go! They're almost here!" And with that I pushed her toward her waiting cab.

She managed to get into the taxi just as the first scalper, a tall scarecrow of a man with a tattoo of a panther on top of his shining bald head, arrived. He jerked the door handle but it had been locked a split second before by the panicked driver. He pounded on the window and kicked the door as the taxi sped off. Two scalpers took off on foot after the car, apparently hoping to catch it at a red light, but they gave up after a 100-yard sprint. Rob and his family had safely escaped.

I felt somebody suddenly grab my arm. It was Randy.

"Jesus, Spats! Come on! We gotta get out of here!" he yelled.

I looked around and saw the scalpers had regrouped. A tall, chubby one with a big head and bushy eyebrows was pointing at me. There were at least a dozen of them all together and they looked furious. Three of the younger ones charged toward us.

The five of us ran pell-mell toward the next waiting taxi and jumped in. The driver had seen what was happening and looked terrified.

"Take us to the Canton Brewing Company! *Now!*" ordered Randy, his military background coming to the fore. The authority in his voice spurred the taxi driver to wrench the car into gear and put his foot to the floor. The tires squealed as the cab took off. There was a thud and a scream of rage as one of the scalpers leaped onto the hood and slid off. I looked over my shoulder. A short red-headed scalper with a giant nose ring was running after us and was somehow gaining on the cab.

"Faster!" Randy barked.

The taxi sped up but the light ahead was turning amber. We wouldn't make it. A long, lanky scalper wearing a black trench coat and a long stocking cap joined the other one chasing us. His stride was long and his pace was quick. He was bound to catch us.

"Blow the light!" Randy ordered.

The taxi driver didn't think twice. He drove right through the red light. Cars slammed on their brakes. Pedestrians jumped back onto the sidewalk. The cab driver dodged a cyclist crossing our path. The sound of horns and the yelling of pedestrians filled the air. I looked back. The two scalpers had stopped and were standing on the sidewalk shaking their fists in our direction. Then we turned a corner and they were out of view. We were safe...for now.

### **THE GAME**

What was normally a 10-minute cab ride from Fawcett Stadium to the Canton Brewing Company took us 30 minutes in the Gale Sayers Game traffic. Had the scalpers known our destination they would certainly have caught up to us by 25<sup>th</sup> Street.

The cab driver obviously thought we were crazy. He said he would take us there free of charge if we didn't hurt him.

"Look brother," Quentin said. He called him 'brother' because the cab driver looked part Hispanic. "Nobody's going to hurt you. Do we look like the kind of people who would hurt you?"

The cab driver, Fernando, had thought we had robbed the scalpers. And he was scared to death of Randy. But after we had explained the whole story to him he actually laughed.

"You tried to sell tickets under the nose of the scalpers?" he hooted. "Boy, you guys have balls!"

"We just didn't try to sell them – we sold them!" Randy bragged. He turned to me. "Let me see the envelope, Spats!"

I gulped. Randy had seen Karen counting money from an envelope but had not seen the final moments of the exchange; an exchange that had not been completed.

"I don't have it," I said meekly. "I gave them the tickets."

The cab went totally silent. Even Fernando held his breath. A blank look came over Randy's face. He stared at me like a wax statue. It occurred to me at that moment that Randy had been in special ops and had once bragged that he could kill a man with the straw from a juice box. I wondered if this was the look Randy gave people he was about to kill with the straw from a juice box.

In a voice barely audible, his lips hardly moving, Randy asked: "Why..did...you... give... her... the... tickets, Spats?"

My voice cracking from sudden onset dryness, I explained to everybody what had happened at the scene of the deal. When I had finished there was another uncomfortably long period of silence. It was broken by **Charlie Wood**.

"Oh....my...God!" Charlie said in a quiet voice. He started to say something else but was interrupted.

"That was nice of you, Spats!" Quentin broke in. "You didn't ask us if it was okay, therefore breaking our agreement, but it was still nice of you."

**Johnny Rebb** started to say something but was cut short by a sudden outburst from **Randy the Desert Rat**: "No, it was *not* nice! It was stupid! S-T-U-P-D....*stupid!*" Randy yelled. He looked at me. The death stare was gone and had been replaced with a wide-eyed, raised brow look of outraged bafflement. "You actually fell for the 'my-daddy-is-dying-of-cancer-and-this-is-his-last-game trick!' F%^k! I never took you for a complete fool, even though you wore that f&\*king fool suit last year!"

For the rest of the cab ride we argued. **Johnny Rebb** came to my defence, asserting that the family's story was probably true and that "Spats made a judgement call under pressure" with the scalpers moving in to break it up. Quentin agreed with Johnny's assessment, but as a reformed convict he had become highly sensitive to matters of honour and felt that I had to do something to make up for breaking my vow to follow the group's wishes. Charlie just shook his head back-and-forth. It was hard to tell what he thought – maybe he didn't know what he thought. But in the end he agreed that I owed them all a beer "at least."

Poor Randy went through all five stages of grief. He kept referring to the figure \$10,000 as he alternately cried, cursed feigned indifference and threatened to kill me. I knew that if he was just threatening me, I was safe. (If Randy intended to kill you he was unlikely to give you any warning). I had to keep reminding him that we hadn't agreed to sell the tickets for \$10,000, but he had become fixated on the figure, as that was the amount he *knew* we could have gotten for them.

By the time we reached the Canton Brewing Company it was agreed that I would pay for the drinks and the cab ride. Everyone was responsible for their own food. Randy could hardly look at me but agreed to drop the matter for the remainder of the day. After all, we each had a football game to write about

The Speakeasy was packed. Regular tickets, long since sold out, cost \$100 – a steep price to watch a game on TV, but it included a free buffet and door prizes. A couple of fresh-faced, well-endowed hostesses greeted us at the door, handing out Canton Brewing Company GSX hats and selling tickets for the 50-50 draw. I bought one just to spend a little more time enjoying the view.

Seating was first come-first served. The only thing that had gone totally right for us so far that day was the fact that we were among the first in the door and were able to grab seats near the cornhole boards and in front of one of the giant screens. The pre-game show was already underway. ESPN was in the middle of reviewing the highlights of the previous nine Gale Sayers



Games. Currently they were reviewing GSVI. I watched as **Jordy Nelson** caught a strike over the middle from **Eli Manning** and zig-zagged through the Undertakers' secondary for a 31-yard touchdown. I remembered the play well. The Undertakers had been gunning for **DeAngelo Williams** on the play. Left alone, their secondary, suspect all season, was unable to handle the speedy Nelson in space. The North Stars had come out of nowhere that year and had ruined **Drew Brees'** record-setting season by containing him in the Championship. Many traced the current Durham quarterback's gradual decline back to this game.

My waitress, Jennifer appeared within a minute and walked straight over to me. "Helloooo," she sang. "I knew I'd see you today. What would you like to drink?"

I ordered a pint of *Tuscora* and told her that I was covering the tabs for all five of us. She brightened up even more at this news as she envisioned a large bill and another 100% tip at the end of the night.

We soon settled in as the bar quickly filled up with football fans of all stripes. Despite the talk of small market Sebastian not being well-represented in Canton, a "jersey poll" revealed that there were close to as many Swordfish fans in the bar as there were Triumph fans. They were not nearly as loud, however. Winning was a new concept for them and they were still learning to be obnoxious. I scanned the room for any other familiar faces. It looked like it was just the five of us so far. It felt strange. I was accustomed to having the whole gang around. I would miss Gabby's inane commentary and Jean's insightful asides in particular.

The good news was that talk of politics had ended and we were making new acquaintances. A group of accountants from St. Paul were on one side of us and a sports fisherman and his wife, a maritime lawyer, from Vero Beach were on the other. These people were probably normal, perhaps even dull, for 364 days of the year. But today they were all decked out in classic "super-fan" garb and carrying on like lunatics. Aileen, the lawyer, was wearing a giant blue swordfish bill over her nose that kept hitting me when she turned her head around. Her husband, Ben, was dressed up as Aquaman, with the addition of a large foam Swordfish helmet. The accountants were from Redpath and Company – a reputable firm. The six of them were dressed like a Viking raiding party, but they were painted blue with gold 'Ts' on their chests. There was more of the same scattered around the bar, along with fans of other teams who were just in town for the party. I made the rounds and talked to strangers. The consensus was that the Canton Brewing Company was *the* place to be if you weren't at the stadium itself.

Time flew by. I drank and ate and drank some more. The more I drank the better I got at cornhole. After a while I didn't care that Randy was ordering drinks for the other people at our table and putting it on my tab. Jennifer kept the booze flowing – it was the best service I had ever had, but I knew I was going to have to pay for it in the end.

When the network finally switched from the record long 6-hour pre-game show to the broadcast booth at Fawcett Stadium, manned by the "iconic" **Phil Winterall** and **Bill Badden**, people stopped milling around the bar and returned to their tables. The tension was building in the room as the music was turned down and the TV volume turned up.

None of the five of us had "skin in the game" here, but each of us had put our reps on the line with a published prediction for the final. As you know, I had been unequivocal in my prediction of a Triumph victory. I was all but certain of it. The only thing that made me pause was the possibility of the Swordfish limiting **Antonio Brown**. If somehow they managed to do that, I felt that **Carlos Dunlap** and **Chandler Jones** would be able to get to **Carson Palmer** and wreak havoc. I thought this scenario was unlikely on the balance of probabilities, but it was not a *remote* possibility.

**Quentin San Pedro** had also predicted a Triumph victory, for different reasons. He expected the Swordfish to shut down Brown and **Doug Martin** to take over the game for the Triumph. He also expected **Andy Dalton** to shy away from the elite Triumph corners and try to throw the ball short to his running backs and tight end, which would slow his offence down. Although he thought the Triumph would win, he was cheering for the Swordfish for the simple reason that, "I don't like the Triumph," he said.

**Charlie Wood** had gone on record predicting a Sebastian win. He had seen the Triumph twice this year and had not been overly impressed. "I still don't know how they went 16-0," he said as we looked at a graphic on the screen showing the Triumph's rising win total. Charlie thought that the Swordfish offence would overpower the Triumph defence; a thought shared by many. He was also rooting for the Swordfish because he did not want the Triumph to post a perfect season before his beloved Patriots.

**Randy the Desert Rat** had predicted an easy Swordfish victory. The Hellfire had traveled to Sebastian during the regular season and he had witnessed firsthand a pretty sound beating of his team by the new kids on the block in the North Division. He had only seen Triumph highlights and therefore believed that "all they have is Antonio Brown." He expected the Swordfish to shut down Brown (as if it was as easy as shutting the bathroom door) and that would be it. But Randy was rooting for the Triumph because, even though they were now 18-0, he saw them as the underdog.

**Johnny Rebb** had also predicted a Sebastian win but he had not explained, on the record, why. He didn't participate very much in our pre-game debate. When pressed, he merely said that the Swordfish had manhandled the Regulators with their back-up quarterback and he felt they were the stronger team. He didn't really care who won, he just wanted to see a "good game."

The National Anthem was performed by Canton native, **Jeff Timmons** of the pop band *98 Degrees*. This was not a national anthem performance that patrons at the Brewing Company were allowed to talk over. The staff halted everything to watch the performance and 'shushed' the drunks who carried on their conversations while Timmons, dressed in a white turtleneck sweater with a black vest and sunglasses, sang what can best be characterized as a "casual" version of the 'Star Spangled Banner.' I have watched the anthem butchered in the name of "art," but I have never seen it defiled in quite this way before. Timmons would point



**Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band** perform '*Born in the USA*' at Fawcett Stadium in Canton during the 10<sup>th</sup> EFL Championship Game, also known as Gale Sayers X. Springsteen's set, consisting of seven full length songs, turned into the longest half time show in EFL history. **Jeff Cohen**, co-owner of the New Jersey Wrecking Balls, can be seen off stage in the background .

his microphone toward the crowd every second line and yell, "Let me hear you, Canton!" It was brutal, but the locals loved it. Jeff was one of their own and he was, at that moment, being viewed by millions across the globe.

Everyone stood up in the bar and applauded when **Gale Sayers** came onto the field for the coin flip. It always amazes me when people watching television or at a movie act as if they are at a live event. To be fair, the digital screens at the Canton Brewing Company were of highest quality and the camera work was the best I had ever seen for a sporting event. This gave the broadcast a "live feel." But come on, people!

Gale did a good job flipping the coin but the official coin flip caller, one of the field judges, apparently called it wrong. This created a delay and lots of confusion. It wasn't clear exactly what was going on but in the end the Triumph ended up receiving.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Charlie. "How do they manage to screw up the coin flip every championship game?"

"Because they're idiots like Spats!" Randy blurted. "Oops, sorry! Didn't mean to mention that!" he added.

Right off the bat I knew this game was going to be a bit of a circus. Two of the boldest/most aggressive coaches in the league were going at each other with loaded teams. **Guy Williams** put his hands team on the field to receive the opening kickoff. **Russ Lemmon's** response was to squib kick the ball. Nothing about these opening moves made much sense unless you understood that they were both popping blood vessels trying to outguess each other. An onside kick to open the game was not beyond **Russ Lemmon** – he had never done one, but his reputation was such that you could never be sure he wouldn't. The downside was that it gave up the return. But Lemmon's squib kick, designed to prevent a big runback, gave the Triumph 16 yards off the bat, with **Shane Vereen** picking up another 8 to give them respectable field position at the 24 yard line. A lot of posturing, it seemed, for 24 yards net.

The opening drive betrayed big game jitters for both teams. The Triumph looked gun-shy and the Swordfish looked amped up. Although the Fish appeared out of position on every snap they still managed to get to the ball and make plays, adrenaline flowing through their veins at dangerous levels. A roar of excitement accompanied a sack and fumble of **Carson Palmer** by **Sharif Floyd** on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 10. It subsided when it was revealed that Palmer had recovered the ball. Disaster had been averted but the Triumph were punting – not exactly the start they had in mind when they chose to receive the ball.

"I think it's harder for an offence to open a big game than it is for the defence," remarked **Johnny Rebb**. "It's harder to execute when you're pumped up and nervous. Reacting is easier." We all nodded and watched the newest Coke commercial.



The pressure off, the Swordfish offence came out loose with guns blazing. **Andy Dalton** threw long on the second play, hitting **Doug Baldwin** for a 23-yard gain. With the thought of the deep ball now in the back of their heads, the Triumph defence were content to give up small gainers underneath, biding time until the offence made a mistake; which they did. A sack of Dalton by an unblocked **William Gholston** looked like it would shut down Sebastian's opening drive. But Lemmon kept his offence on the field on 4<sup>th</sup> & 5 at the Triumph 45. Gambles like these, although defensible in theory, had the potential to backfire more severely when the stakes were high. A stop by the Triumph defence would certainly galvanize their offence – an offence that the season had shown did not require a lot of galvanizing. But the Swordfish gamble worked; Dalton hit **Danny Amendola** on a simple crossing pattern for an 8-yard gain.

Aileen shrieked and jumped out of her chair: "YEEEESSS!"

"Lemmon is leaving it all on the field," **Quentin San Pedro** remarked. "The Triumph haven't had to deal with a coach like this before."

But the Triumph defence did not break. They stopped Baldwin one yard short of the first down, bringing up 4<sup>th</sup> & 1 at the 28 yard line. I knew that if 4<sup>th</sup> & 5 near mid-field was considered fair game for the Fish, 4<sup>th</sup> & 1 at uncertain field goal range would be a no-brainer. Sure enough they went for it and got it, with **Justin Forsett** charging through the line for a 4-yard gain. Frustration was beginning to show on the Triumph side of the ball.

And then it happened: the play of the game. **Ezekiel "Ziggy" Ansah**, the Triumph defensive MVP, split the gap between two linemen and stormed toward Dalton, colliding with him a split second after he released the ball. Ansah "finished his tackle" driving Dalton's upper body into the turf faster than his plant leg could adjust. Dalton's knee bent awkwardly as he went down. He stayed down.

Ben banged his head on the table, his foam Swordfish helmet absorbing most, but not all, of the blow. Groans issued forth from Swordfish fans throughout the bar. A few of the drunker Triumph fans cheered until they realized, for certain, that Dalton was really hurt. They too paused and watched as trainers worked on the clearly agonized Swordfish quarterback. They collectively tiptoed the moral fine line between wanting Dalton out of the game and hoping that he wasn't seriously hurt.

Dalton was hurt badly enough to require transportation off the field. The full severity of the damage would not be known until tests were run, but it was obvious he would not be returning to the game.

"Oh...no!" whined Charlie Wood. "The Swordfish are done!"

"I don't know about that," cautioned **Johnny Rebb**. "Winston is a great back-up. He could probably start for half the teams in the league."

**Jameis Winston** had had a fine year as back-up to the oft-injured Dalton. A small minority of Swordfish fans, judging from everything I'd read and heard, actually preferred him to Dalton as the starter. There was no reason yet to throw in the towel if you were pulling for Sebastian. But it had also been clear from Dalton's demeanour on the opening drive that he was not afraid of the excellent Triumph corners. He had been composed in the pocket and very accurate with his throws. In admittedly limited action he had looked "on." Would Winston be similarly locked in?

It was a question that would have to wait until the next Swordfish possession to be answered. Winston handed off twice to **CJ Anderson** for runs behind right tackle **Morgan Moses**, finishing off the drive with a 6-yard TD run. Fans of the Fish cheered, their quarterback worries temporarily forgotten.

"That Swordfish offensive line is pushing back the Triumph line," **Randy the Desert Rat** observed. "I bet you they run the ball down their throats the rest of the way."

"They might have no choice," lamented **Charlie Wood**. In addition to not wanting the Triumph to post a perfect campaign before the Patriots had, Charlie had placed a large bet on the Swordfish by phone through a friend in Vegas after imbibing a pint of Canton's own DIPA (Double IPA) beer; a 10.5% ABV monster that usually ended people's nights. But with Charlie it had merely made him irrationally tipsy.

Palmer was intercepted by linebacker **Paul Posluszny** to bring the Triumph's second possession to an abrupt end at the Swordfish 43 yard line. Swordfish fans exploded with joy at the turnover. With Dalton out, this was the kind of break they would need to keep the initiative.

"Palmer sucks!" **Randy the Desert Rat** hissed.

"Come on, Randy!" **Quentin San Pedro** chuckled. "He only threw 52 touchdown passes this year. He's not *that* bad!"

Palmer had finished first in TD passes and second in QB rating, behind Dalton, to build a strong case for Offensive MVP. While **Antonio Brown** got most of the accolades, many Triumph experts claimed that Twin Cities would not be in the final without Palmer. The point was hard to argue, considering nobody could picture a **Jay Cutler**-led Triumph making it past the first round of the playoffs.

The Swordfish made short work of the Triumph defence on the ensuing drive. This was due to the punishing work of their offensive line and the running of Anderson and Forsett; who finished it off with a 25-yard touchdown run off right tackle. Swordfish boosters hooted with glee. Forsett, hardly touched on the run, had made it look easy. The first quarter ended with Sebastian in front 14-0 and their fans giddy with excitement. I couldn't help but to have noticed, however, that Winston had not completed a pass

downfield on the drive. He looked a little tentative in the pocket. Perhaps he would settle in, but the early signs were concerning.

The Triumph responded to the Swordfish with a punt to start the second quarter. One had the feeling that if Winston could lead his team to another score on this possession, the Triumph would start to panic and the Swordfish defensive ends, quiet until that point, would be unleashed. But a three-and-out in which Winston missed two easy throws gave Twin Cities a temporary reprieve.

“Winston looks nervous,” observed **Johnny Rebb**. “He certainly doesn’t look like he did when we played them,” he added, in reference to the 24-0 whitewash of the Regulators in Week 14.

“Winston sucks!” declared **Randy the Desert Rat**. “I hope he f%king chokes.”

The Triumph offence finally made its presence known with a 65-yard touchdown drive. **Doug Martin** administered the *coup de grace* with a 4-yard touchdown run. But the play of the drive was a 4<sup>th</sup> & 12 completion to Brown for a 15-yard gain to the Sebastian 20 yard line. **Guy Williams** had outdone **Russ Lemmon’s** 4<sup>th</sup> & 5 with a 4<sup>th</sup> & 12 that nobody had seen coming. The Swordfish had flooded the field with 7 defensive backs, but Brown easily found the hole in the zone and Palmer was perfectly on target with his throw. The accountants to our right, who had been very behaving very accountant-like while the Triumph had been struggling, went berserk. “TRI-LIMPH. TRI-LIMPH. TRI-LIMPH!” they chanted as they stood and waved plastic swords and axes.

The Swordfish mounted a push in response to the Triumph score, but after some success running the ball, the drive fizzled with three straight incomplete passes and a holding penalty on Moses. **Adam Vinatieri** came on and missed the 54-yard field goal attempt. The momentum was gradually shifting away from the Swordfish, but it re-set in their favour when Triumph kicker **Robert Aguayo**, a fourth round pick in the rookie draft, missed an easy 32-yarder with time running down in the first half.

“Aguayo sucks!” yelled **Randy the Desert Rat**. “Seriously! Why the f&\*k did the Triumph waste a fourth rounder on this guy?”

Randy was getting drunk and it was not improving his earlier bad mood. As the first half ended he stormed off to the washroom, stopping briefly to say something to our waitress, Jennifer. Within minutes another round of drinks arrived for the entire table. I stopped Jennifer and asked who had ordered these.

“Your friend,” she replied sweetly. “He said he was ordering them for you.” She saw the look on my face and her smile vanished. “You mean you didn’t order them?”

## CHAMPIONSHIP MVPS

### I – 2007

**LaDainian Tomlinson**  
Chino Convicts

### II-2008

**Will Witherspoon**  
Florida Dragons

### III-2009

**DeAngelo Williams**  
Florida Dragons

### IV – 2010

**Chris Johnson**  
Pickering Spartans

### V – 2011

**Josh Freeman**  
Los Angeles Knights

### VI – 2012

**Eli Manning**  
Markham North Stars

### VII – 2013

**Jacoby Jones**  
Charleswood Patriots

### VIII – 2014

**Brandon Boykin**  
Aurora Mustangs

### IX – 2015

**Lamar Miller**  
Charleswood Patriots

### X – 2016

**Antonio Brown**  
Twin Cities Triumph

The Honour Roll of EFL Champion MVPs.  
**Antonio Brown** takes a deserved place at #10.

I decided to go easy on her. Lord knows, I had screwed up enough this week. “That’s okay. Just give me a sign next time he does that and I’ll give you the thumbs up or the thumbs down. Okay?”

The half time show featuring **Bruce Springsteen** and the **E Street Band** was very long. This was due to Springsteen’s lengthy set, which included mega-hits such as *Born to Run*, *Glory Days*, *I’m On Fire* and *Dancing in the Dark*. But he also played the lesser known *Wrecking Ball* as a tribute to his new team and a classic from his first album, *Blinded by the Light*. He finished with *Born in the USA*, which he drew out for what seemed like an eternity. I counted 47 “born in the usa’s” at the end; and that was not all of them, just the ones I counted. Logistical challenges in moving the stage off the field added further delays. Half time had lasted more than one hour – which was good for the bar, but not necessarily the patrons and certainly not for the 27,500 freezing fans at Fawcett Stadium. As my mind melted a little more over another pint of *Topaz American IPA* I felt that giving away my tickets had been the right decision.

Then I suddenly remembered that I was to have met Gabby at the Fawcett Club in the stadium at half time! She had somehow finagled a ticket to the interior press box, meaning that we would not be watching the game together. I had felt bad for



missing lunch twice, so I had absent-mindedly agreed to the meeting via text on Saturday while I was trying to track down sources for the Tribute to Marduk story. I noticed that my *Blackberry* was flashing red. With dread, I unlocked it. There were over 40 unread messages. I winced as I saw the top one, from Gabby, that read: ‘i hate you!’

*Oh well, there’s nothing I can do about it now*, I thought. Reflexively, I called over Jennifer and ordered another beer. She saw that I looked distressed and asked if everything was alright.

“Do you think I have a drinking problem, Jen?” I asked, surprising myself with both the question and the familiarity with which I addressed her.

She looked taken aback at the question. But she recovered quickly; she had obviously been asked this before by people with drinking problems. “Not at all!” she assured me. “You’re just having a good time. You’re allowed, you know.”

The second half of the game was not exactly a blur, but my recollection of the action is somewhat dreamlike. It was as if I was observing the action from a higher plane of existence. The specific play results mattered less than how the players looked playing the game. It was as if I was tuned into the spirit of the sport, a deeper part of the action that was not obvious to everyone else. The subtle, subconscious cues that create “gut reactions” in a sober person were immediately articulable for me. When people speak of liquor as “spirits,” this is what they mean.

The Swordfish opened the third quarter with a field goal drive that put them ahead 17-7. On the surface this looked good for them, but the way they had moved the ball did nothing to make me confident that they could put points on the board if they really needed to. A good kick return, 20 yards in penalties against the Triumph, and a long run by **Kenneth Dixon** put them in field goal position, but the passing attack remained in neutral. Winston’s body language was not good. *He’s scared sh^&tless*, I thought.

The Triumph sensed that their “long night of darkness” was coming to an end. They looked more like the team that had torn up opposing defences all season on their first possession of the second half. Brown caught three easy passes and **Charles Clay** turned a short slant into a 16-yard touchdown play. The Sebastian lead had shrunk to 17-14.

I heard **Charlie Wood** whining: “What are the Swordfish doing?” he cried. “Brown is wide open; Palmer has all day to throw. I thought they had a good defence!”

The Swordfish defensive strategy was unclear until you realized – as I did in my altered state – that **Russ Lemmon** was trying to be unpredictable, hoping to catch the Triumph off guard and make a big play. He had eschewed the common strategy of doggedly double-teaming **Antonio Brown** and had opted to rotate double teams and gamble on stopping the run at moments where he “felt” it was time for a run. But the problem was that he was guessing wrong half the time. His defence was making up for some of these off balance play calls, but the odds of them continuing to stop the Triumph while they were out of position were slim. The run keys especially had held back his two killer defensive ends, **Carlos Dunlap** and **Chandler Jones**. In summary, the Swordfish were all over the map defensively.

On the Triumph side of the ball, things were exactly the opposite. **Guy Williams** had stuck with the same defensive formation throughout, tenaciously double-teaming **Odell Beckham Jr** on every single play. This approach had the potential to be suicidal against a well-balanced offence like the Swordfish. But the Swordfish offence under Winston was no longer a well-balanced offence. The running game had been effective but the passing game was hamstrung. Still, the Swordfish persisted in trying to establish a presence through the air and kept getting shot down.

The Triumph missed a chance to tie the game toward the end of the third quarter when Aguayo missed another easy field goal. I sensed the kid was, like Winston, terrified. He was tense from head to toe. But his reaction to his second miss was interesting – he did not hang his head or throw his helmet. He walked off the field with a steely, straightforward glare. He was angry.

The missed field goal was quickly forgotten. The Triumph burned through the Sebastian defence on the opening drive of the fourth quarter and took a 21-17 lead on a 7-yard TD pass to Brown. The Swordfish had been in a run posture and Brown had easily shaken Swordfish corner **Delvin Breaux** loose to get wide open for the easy toss from Palmer

“Breaux sure sucks!” **Randy the Desert Rat** snorted. “How many catches is that for Brown?”

Nobody in my group knew for sure. Fred, one of the accountants from St. Paul – the one with the spear – had been tracking Brown – that was his job for this game. Each of them had numbers to keep track of during the game. They would pool them afterwards to see if they matched the official score sheet. That was what football fans who were accountants considered fun. “Antonio has 8 catches for, let’s see, 131 yards!” Fred announced proudly.

Thanks, bud,” Randy said. “You see! Breaux really does suck!”

Actually, Breaux had been holding his own against the top receiver in the league. With few exceptions, he had been close to Brown all game. As much as Brown was getting open, Palmer was also throwing him open. Few corners had been able to cover Brown all year. It was universally acknowledged that even the best of them needed safety help on passing downs. Breaux was getting that help sporadically, but generally he had been left alone to contend with Brown. Impressively, he hadn’t given up.

The Swordfish had their backs to the wall. Winston’s “little hero within” needed to make an appearance, and fast, or the day would be lost. The Swordfish counter-drive gained early traction with a couple of 10+ yard runs by **CJ Anderson** then Winston gained a touch of confidence with an 8-yard completion to a double-covered Beckham.

"I don't need an accountant to tell me that's Odell's first catch of the game," **Quentin San Pedro** quipped.

He looked to go to Beckham again on the next play, but when he saw the lane underneath covered he took off running and gained 13 yards and a first down. For the first time since the opening drive of the first quarter the Triumph defence looked to be back on its heels while, for the first time all game, Winston had a touch of swagger in his step. *This drive will end well*, I thought.

I was right (of course!). Anderson ripped off another nice run and Winston finished it off with a short pass over the middle to a wide open Baldwin for a 10-yard touchdown pass. Swordfish fans in the bar who had been pouting in their beer suddenly rose up and roared their approval. In addition to regaining the lead, tactically the TD pass was a big win for Winston and the Swordfish. The perfect pass to Baldwin had exposed the weakness in the Triumph defence. It was just a matter of making the play; and if Winston had really overcome his nerves, he would make that play again.

The Triumph surged back with a couple of passes to **Rishard Matthews** and another one to Brown, but they hit a snag at the Swordfish 36 yard line, where Martin was stuffed for a 4-yard loss by Dunlap and the next two passes fell incomplete. It looked like they would have to punt but, incredibly, **Guy Williams** kept his offence on the field for 4<sup>th</sup>



Swordfish coach **Russ Lemmon** (left) and Triumph coach **Guy Williams** (right) greet each other at mid-field after the Triumph win in GSX.



Jennifer, my waitress at the Canton Brewing Company, poses for a photo.

& 14 at the Swordfish 40.

"What the f&^k are they doing?" **Randy the Desert Rat** was incredulous. He had visions of a Swordfish stop and, with a little more than five minutes remaining in the game, the running out of the clock.

"They're taking charge of the game," I answered, without even thinking. My sixth sense was working overtime.

With everyone in the bar knowing where the ball was going, **Russ Lemmon** did the unthinkable and sent Breaux on a corner blitz. He did it *because* it was unthinkable and therefore likely to catch the Triumph by surprise. But the little Breaux was immediately picked up by the tight end **Tyler Eifert**, nullifying him. The subsequent coverage mismatch of safety **Walter Thurmond** on the best receiver in the league resulted in an 18-yard completion to Brown and a first down. The Triumph fans bellowed in satisfaction. Swordfish fans expressed disgust.

"What – are – they – *DOING?*" **Charlie Wood** screeched, on the verge of tears. "How can they not cover Brown there?"

"The Swordfish are gambling big time," **Johnny Rebb** observed. "So far they've come up snake eyes every time."

The incredible fourth down conversion almost came for not when Palmer fumbled the snap two plays later. But the ball was bouncing the Triumph's way now and the pigskin came back up into Palmer's arms. One incomplete pass later and it was 4<sup>th</sup> & 11 at the Swordfish 23 yard



line and decision time for **Guy Williams**. It was a gamble either way: Aguayo had been shaky all afternoon; while going for it again might have been pressing his luck too far. He decided to go with his kicker.

It turned out to be the right decision. The fiercely competitive Aguayo had overcome his case of the yips by sheer force of will. He drilled the kick down the center for a 41-yard field goal to tie the game 24-24 with 3:41 remaining.

I was overcome with the feeling, fueled by my second pint of *DIPA* (the 10.5% IPA), that the game would be decided on the upcoming Sebastian possession. I had no confidence that the Swordfish could stop the Triumph offence and had no expectation that the Triumph offence was about to stop itself if they got the ball back with time remaining. It was going to come down to **Jameis Winston** and whether or not he could make a play to put his team in the history books. I had my doubts that he would be able to do this. But Aguayo had overcome his demons when the chips were down for his team. Maybe Winston would do the same.

The Swordfish response to Aguayo's game-tying field goal was less than stellar. It bordered on disaster. Winston was blindsided by **Jurrell Casey** on the first play from scrimmage and was lucky to have held on to the ball. Then the Swordfish line picked the wrong time to suddenly miss a block, allowing Anderson to be dumped in the backfield by Casey again. On 3<sup>rd</sup> & 12 Winston missed a check down to **Brandon Coleman** and it was punting time. **Jordan Berry** kicked it high, but not very far. Brown was contained to a 1-yard return but the Fish had netted just 34 yards, giving the Triumph great field position at their 48.

The only thing the Triumph did wrong on their ensuing series was score too early. With Sebastian out of timeouts and 1:19 remaining in the game, Brown made the "mistake" of taking a short out pass 26 yards to the house for the go-ahead score. The bar erupted in a frenzy of roaring, screeching and cursing. The accountants jumped up and down, chanting "TRI-LUMPH! TRI-LUMPH! TRI-LUMPH!". Aileen and Ben slumped in their seats. Aileen had taken off her Swordfish bill after the Casey sack so that she could shake her head without knocking over her drink. She turned to me: "It's over. Jameis doesn't have it today," she said.

There was time left for a Swordfish miracle. But, like Aileen, I too felt that it would have literally taken a miracle for them to tie the game. A few diehard Swordfish fans refused to read the digital tea leaves and began to whoop it up as the camera focused on Winston walking onto the field and into the huddle. He looked unfit to lead in that moment. The end was an ugly one. **Jerry Hughes** sacked Winston for an 11-yard loss on 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4, bringing up a do-or-die 4<sup>th</sup> & 15 with 0:29 left. On what turned out to be the final play of the game, Winston threw long to Beckham. The throw was too far in front and Beckham had to dive to catch it. He did but was touched down almost immediately. The Swordfish scrambled to spike the ball but time ran out. The game was over. The Triumph had triumphed, as I knew they would...but it had been close.

### **THE LAST WORD**

Gale Sayers X lived up to the hype leading up to the league's historic 10<sup>th</sup> championship game. It was a closely contested match with enough highlight reel plays to qualify it as one of the more exciting final games we have witnessed. But I could not shake the disquieting sense that in the end the game had arrived at the "right" result in the wrong way.

While I had been confident of a Triumph victory beforehand, the game itself had seriously shaken that confidence, even as **Guy Williams'** squad finished off a perfect season in classic 2016 Triumph style: with a thrilling touchdown pass to **Antonio Brown**. The Triumph star finished off an MVP Season in MVP form, deservedly winning 'Player of the Game' to join a select group of 10 players forever engraved in the annals of the league. For Brown's achievement, **Carson Palmer** deserves an assist. He was steady under pressure and a calming presence in the panicky early moments of the game.

But Brown and his quarterback notwithstanding, the Triumph nearly had their doors blown off early. The Swordfish started fiercely and the fury of their assault might very well have carried further than the first quarter had **Andy Dalton** not been knocked out of the game. The hit on Dalton by "**Ziggy**" **Ansah** was the *real* play of the game because it irrevocably changed the character and nature of the contest and, I suspect, the Swordfish game plan. Would **Russ Lemmon** have rolled the dice so freely on defence had he been in better control of his offence? Only Russ Lemmon knows, but he isn't talking.

Post game, speaking in distinctive '*Mellencampian*' phrases, Coach Lemmon focused on the positive and did not attempt to lay blame at anybody's feet. He had been quick to cross the field and shake the hand of his opponent, **Guy Williams** when the gun sounded to end the game and he opened up his post-game press conference with a hearty offer of congratulations to the Triumph franchise and the "city of Twin Cities," as he put it.

**Guy Williams** was equally gracious in victory, but did show some defensiveness when asked if the injury to Dalton had helped his team recover from the early beating. "The injury to Dalton did not change our game plan one bit," he replied.

While that might be true, it is likely equally true that his defensive game plan, a steady diet of 5-2 and constant double coverage on **Odell Beckham Jr.**, was better suited to stopping **Jameis Winston** on a bad day than it was **Andy Dalton** on a good day. There is no question in my mind that Dalton would have found **Doug Baldwin** more often than Winston did, had he been on the field. I think Williams knew, as I did, that his team had survived a close call and might not have prevailed had he not personally wrested control of the initiative with daring, almost outrageous 4<sup>th</sup> down gambles. To the degree that teams reflect the personalities of their coach's ancestors, the Triumph battled like **William "Wee Willie" Williams** behind enemy lines and escaped alive.

As for Canton, it was not a total disaster. I won the 50-50 draw at the Canton Brewing Company and pocketed \$10,235! The size of the jackpot blew me away until Jennifer explained to me that they had been selling 50-50 tickets all season in the lead-up to the final. I was able to cover the \$1,217 tab **Randy the Desert Rat** had helped me ring up and give Jennifer the 100% tip she

had worked her little butt off for. I couldn't resist pointing out that my windfall was very close to the figure of \$10,000 that Randy felt we could have gotten for our tickets on the scalpers market. In my drunken celebratory mood I shared my jackpot with my friends by reimbursing them for the face value of their GSX tickets that they hadn't paid for. Despite my feeling that I had done nothing morally wrong by giving away our tickets to Rob and his family; to the extent that my friends did, we were now even.

Poor **Charlie Wood** was inconsolable after the game. He wouldn't reveal what he had lost betting at the last minute on Swordfish, but it had clearly been a substantial sum. **Randy the Desert Rat**, in an irretrievably bad mood still from not raking in a fortune for his ticket, directed his anger at the officials. He felt that they had missed calling roughing the passer on Ansah for the hit on Dalton. He complained bitterly that the league should take a look at Ansah's hit on Dalton and "fine the bastard \$10,000!" he had said.

I got a flurry of texts from other beat reporters who had been at the stadium and had been looking for me.

'where are you? Guy in a Dragons jersey in your seat,' wrote **Jean Boisvert**, who once covered the Dragons for the *Swampland Proof*. Another text came in from Jean 30 minutes later: 'can't believe it! I know the Dragons guy old season ticket holder. Great guy but real sick. Good call spats!'

I almost showed the text to Randy but decided not to. I felt good after reading it and wanted to hold on to the feeling.

I booked out of my hotel room at the Knights Inn just as the Canton Police Drug Squad was executing a raid down the hall at the opposite end from my room. The clerk at the front desk carried on with my checkout as if nothing was going on.

I held on to my return ticket to New York on *Gusair* Flight 2 as a souvenir and bought, at my own expense, a much more expensive one from *WestJet* just to make sure I got home alive. I met Gabby at the airport and we had breakfast before her flight back to LA. One thing about Gabby, she valued appearances and she did not want everyone else to know we were fighting. Breakfast was her idea but she let me know in no uncertain terms that she had not forgiven me yet for standing her up three times in Canton and hanging out with "those Trump people." But by the time the bill arrived things were back to normal, sort of. I'm not sure what "normal" is with Gabby.

The election debate between the journalists never really ended, it had been just suspended for the length of the big game. I suppose it will never end; the divide appears to be just too great. Hopefully, for the sake of the nation, Democrats and Republicans can find some common ground to build on over the coming years and restore some health to our democracy.

As I sat at the gate waiting for my flight, I got a news flash on my Blackberry. **Chris Ferraro** had just announced the sale of the Mission Viejo Monarchs to a Seattle coffee consortium – details to follow. So my old nemesis was leaving! Even though he had spent most of his time as an owner trying to have me locked up and assassinated, we had finally made our peace last year. I was surprised to find that I was a little choked up at the news. Life can be very strange.

Well, that wraps it up for this year. The Twin Cities Triumph are officially EFL Champions as well as the second team to post a perfect season. The 10<sup>th</sup> EFL season, the league's biggest, is now part of history. I am now banking on the EFL's blood ritual to Marduk to keep the league going, and thus keeping me employed, for another 10 years.

Good night folks! See you in the Fall of 2017!

## BUG THE BOOKIE!

### JIMMY THE GEEK WRAPS UP ANOTHER SEASON OF SUCCESS

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## JIMMY'S SEASON WRAP UP

**TWIN CITIES @ SEBASTIAN (line – TRIUMPH by 1)**

**INJURIES:** Twin Cities – None; Sebastian – None.

**MY PICK:** Sebastian

Okay, so I got the final game wrong! But give me a break; Andy Dalton was injured in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter. I tell you it would have been a different game if he had stayed healthy. Unlike the Triumph, I wasn't perfect this year. I wasn't even on my usual pace. But with the league expanding and greater parity making nothing a sure bet, you could have done worse than follow my advice. In fact, if you went with another bookie I know you did. At 58% winning percentage I am still the best there is!



# EFL ANNOUNCES MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS



## OFFENSIVE M.V.P.



**ANTONIO BROWN**  
**TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH**

There was not a whole lot of debate about who made the biggest offensive impact on his team in 2016. Brown set all-time league records in TD catches (31) and 1<sup>st</sup> Down receptions (105) in addition to leading the league in catches (120), all despite being double-teamed more than any other receiver in the league. Add two punt return TDs and you have a real superstar!



## DEFENSIVE M.V.P.



**KHALIL MACK**  
**MISSION VIEJO MONARCHS**

In a year when not very much went right for the Monarchs, Mack was a force to be feared by opponents around the league. He finished with 15 sacks, 11 run stuffs, 5 forced fumbles and 84 tackles and was the main reason why the Monarchs, for all their flaws, had a respectable defence overall and the best run defence in the league. Imagine if he'd played on a contender!



## ANCIENT HISTORY CHANNEL PRESENTS

*This Week in EFL History*  
*With Professor*  
*Sterling Smitherman*

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – With the widely anticipated Can-Am Conference Final of 2010 now history, the 4<sup>th</sup> Gale Sayers game felt like an anti-climax. The Pickering Spartans had routed a dynasty when they brushed aside the Florida Dragons; and because of that very few people believed that the Charleswood Patriots were a match for them – including the Patriots!

But the game had to be played anyway, and with the playing of any game there always remained the possibility that something could go wrong or, in the case of

Charleswood, go right. The Pats did have **Peyton Manning**, and it was raining at Jurassic Park, so anything could happen.

To their credit, the Pats pulled out all the stops in an effort to defeat nature. In a move that, in 2010, was every bit as shocking as the Triumph going for it on 4<sup>th</sup> & 14 in 2016, the Pats went for a 4<sup>th</sup> & 1 at their own 20 yard line, trailing 7-0 in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter. **Adrian Peterson** was stoned for no gain and the Spartans offence scored on the very next play to take a 14-0 lead.

The Pats were undeterred, however. They continued to gamble wildly and to a degree it paid off. They kept the vaunted Spartans offence off the field and managed to find the end zone to go into half time trailing just 17-7.

The Pats recovered an onside kick to start the 2<sup>nd</sup> half and earned a FG. Then **Ryan Pickett** returned a fumble for a TD to tie the game at 17 going into the final quarter. But the power of the Spartans could not be contained forever. With the Pats gambling to stop a 3<sup>rd</sup> & inches with 6 down linemen, **Brett Favre** found **Percy Harvin** wide open for a 23-yard TD pass to open the floodgates. The Spartans stopped the Pats on 4<sup>th</sup> down on consecutive series, adding 10 more points, including a 6-yard TD run by **Chris Jonson**, to cap off a 34-17 Gale Sayers IV victory!