

GALE

SAYERS

2012 **EFL** 2012

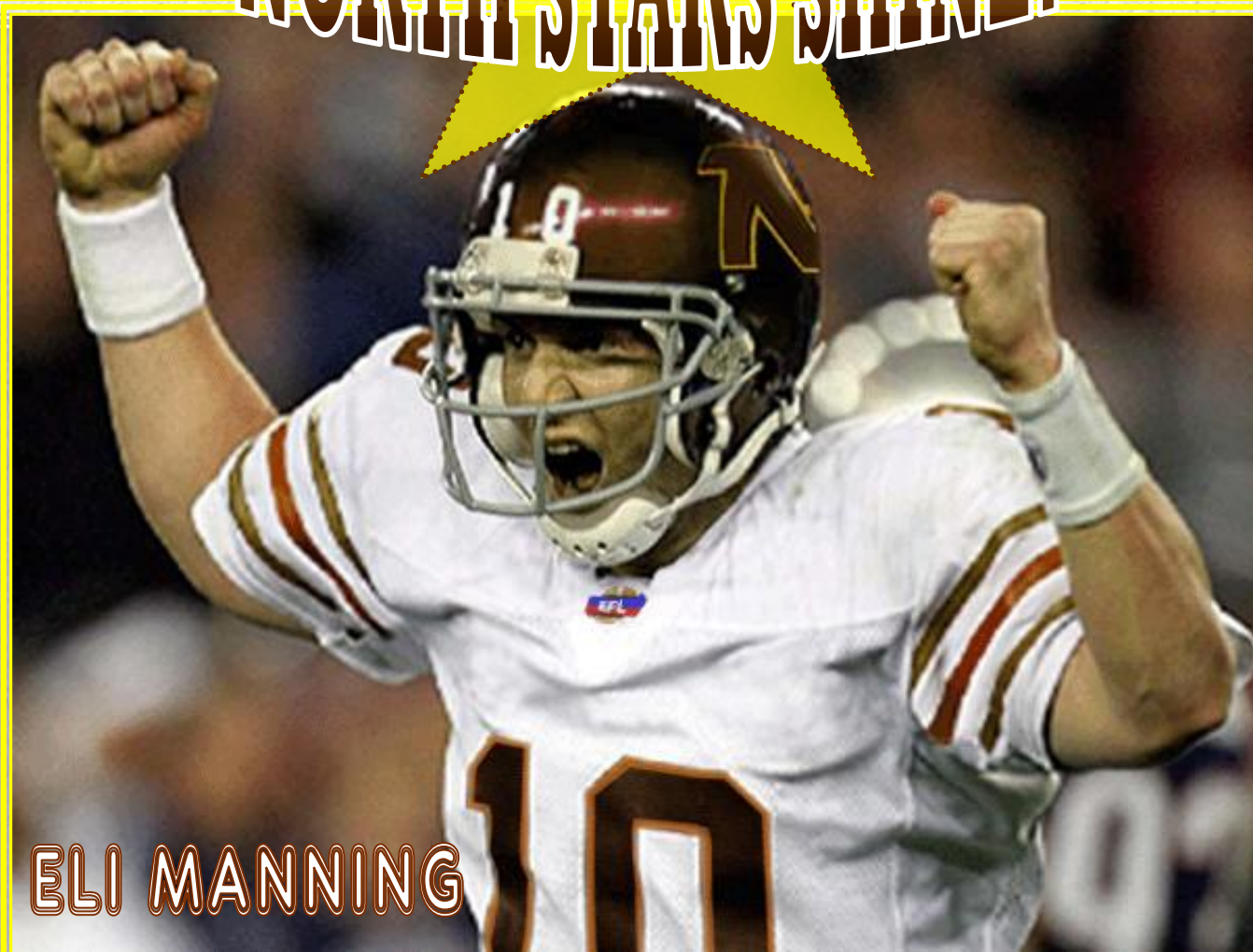
February 24, 2013



EAST

SOUTH

NORTH STARS SHINE!



ELI MANNING



31

'TAKERS



34

STARS

Markham North Stars quarterback *Eli Manning* (above) raises his arms in celebration after hooking up with *Jordy Nelson* for a 19-yard TD pass during 3rd quarter action at the EFL Championship. Nelson and Manning finished off a spectacular post-season to lift their team over the favoured Undertakers and win their first title.



17-2-0

31

EFL

CHAMPIONSHIP

GALE SAYERS



14-4-1

34

STARS TRIUMPH!

TILLMAN INTERCEPTION POWERS 3RD
QUARTER MARKHAM SURGE!

UNDERTAKER OF THE GAME

Drew Brees

32 of 47, 405 yards, 4 TDs, 2 INTs

| Team | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | OT | Total |
|--------------|----|---|----|---|----|-------|
| Death Valley | 10 | 7 | 7 | 7 | - | 31 |
| Markham | 10 | 7 | 14 | 3 | - | 34 |

NORTH STAR OF THE GAME

Eli Manning

17 of 23, 275 yards, 2 TDs

GARLAND (AP) – It was a Championship match-up that few had anticipated at the start of the season – a hastily rebuilt team that had never posted a winning season in its history versus the league's most enigmatic franchise led by an eccentric coach. Certainly, some had predicted one or the other might make the final, but almost nobody expected to see both of these teams in Garland. The reason was simply that neither Markham nor Death Valley appeared to be the best teams in their respective Conferences at the beginning of the season. Contenders certainly, but not quite as good as rivals Durham, Scarborough, York or Los Angeles. The chances of both surviving the post-season run to the Gale Sayers Game would have seemed remote then – to the few even considering the possibility – but by the time the dust settled on 16 weeks of regular season play and two playoff rounds, it was apparent to everyone exactly how both of these Conference Champs had earned the right to play for the EFL's top prize.

The North Stars overcame early season hurdles; adjusting to new personnel, purging a losing culture in Markham, and developing a game plan that best suited their maddeningly inconsistent quarterback, **Eli Manning**, to lock up the first wild card spot in the Can-Am Conference with an 11-4-1 record. The Undertakers simply burned up the track in 5th gear from the start, spinning out once in York before blazing to the finish line on the power of a turbo-charged performance by their quarterback, **Drew Brees**, to easily win the top seed in the Pacific-Atlantic Conference with a 15-1 record. Having not faced each other during the regular season, there was much uncertainty about how they would perform against each other on the league's biggest stage in the final. But while few outside of their respective home towns felt strongly about the strength of one over the other, the overall sense across the football world was that the Gale Sayers Trophy was Death Valley's to lose. This was almost entirely due to the common view of the quarterbacks: the interception-prone Manning was expected to falter against the touchdown-prone Brees; this despite the fact that Manning had out-performed all quarterbacks to that point in the post-season with a 151 passer rating after two games.

"Eli is getting the job done in the post-season, Bill. He leads all passers with a 68% pass completion rate and he's thrown 5 touchdowns without a pick," network play-by-play announcer **Phil**

QUOTES OF THE GAME

"I don't know what to say. This is an overwhelming feeling I have right now. I want to hug *everybody*. Is that a normal feeling? I haven't won something so big before." – *North Stars' coach, Darrin Jones.*

"The game came down to a pair of interceptions and a missed field goal. We choked today and they didn't. I expected more from our MVP. I don't know what else to tell you." – *Undertakers' coach, Chris Worthley.*

"I felt good today. I guess some of you felt pretty good about me too! – *Markham QB, Eli Manning, on being named Gale Sayers Game MVP.*

"We've been making those types of all plays all year. I'm glad you all didn't notice it 'till now. We expect to take the ball away every game. It ain't no fluke! – *Markham cornerback, Charles Tillman, commenting on his 3rd quarter interception and 62-yard return.*



FAN RATING



FANS' THUMB UP

Flawless Eli!



FANS' THUMB DOWN

Unfamiliar Undertaker miscues!



titter

Lanny McDonald @economistsunlm

We won the game in the third period. I don't know why it went to overtime.

GRETA @fatladyrow54

We ate Brees for dinner and now #Markham is a winner!

Winterall commented to booth partner and colour analyst, **Bill Badden** before the start of the game.

"When a quarterback throws touchdowns instead of interceptions he's doing his job well, Phil," Badden observed, "but you have to like the way his offensive line has played. They haven't allowed a sack and fullback Vonta Leach is making some great blocks for those two running backs of theirs."

"DeAngelo Williams and Jonathan Stewart, yes," Winterall interjected.

"Yes, those two running backs. You have to be able to run the ball if you're going to have a ground game in this league," Badden continued. "Markham has a ground game – they run the ball at you in rain, snow or sleet. They're like the postman, Phil."

"It's a pleasant day here in Garland, Bill. It doesn't look like weather will be a factor in this game," Winterall commented.

"The weather is always a factor, Phil. Good or bad, it's still weather and it's always there....unless you're in a dome or something," Badden sputtered. "Then there's no weather. Weather or no weather, you can bet that before the end of this game there is going to be lots of dirt and a bit of blood on those white Markham jerseys."

"How is the Markham defence going to stop Drew Brees, Bill?" Winterall asked.

"They're going to have to sack him and intercept him, Phil," Badden pronounced without hesitation. "And their corners and safeties are going to have to cover his receivers and break up passes. I don't see any other way. This is a guy who threw a gazillion touchdown passes this year – he had to pass the ball to get all those!"

The Team Captains strode onto the field for the coin toss. As the visitors, Death Valley got to make the call. This year's Offensive MVP received the honours. "Heads," called out **Drew Brees** as the special gold coin, emblazoned with the EFL logo on one side and the inscription 'GSVI' (for the 6th Gale Sayers Game) on the other, turned in the air. As it landed, referee **Jerome Boger** bent over and hovered above the coin as the camera zoomed in on 'GSVI'. There was a pregnant pause.

"Ahhh...." Boger could be heard saying through his field microphone. He suddenly turned to lineman **Gerhard Pifflesinger** and hissed "which side is heads?" The sellout crowd of 56,457 reacted with a mixture of laughter and booing that drowned out Pifflesinger's response; but seconds later Boger indicated that Death Valley had won the toss and would receive. The captains retreated to their sidelines and soon the Undertakers, dressed in their black jerseys with white numerals and red trim and black pants; and the North Stars, dressed in their white jerseys with brown numerals and orange trim and white pants, lined up opposite each other to decide destiny.



THE GAME



1st QUARTER (Death Valley 10, Markham 10) – The Undertakers' offence started at their 16 yard line after **Randall Cobb** elected to try his luck with a return from 5 yards deep. Their opening drive was a balanced one that started with a pair of runs by **Ryan Mathews** and a short pass completion to earn two quick first downs out to their 37 yard line. But a 2nd down sack by defensive tackle **Jonathan Babineaux** brought up 3rd and 17 and an early challenge for **Drew Brees**. He responded with a perfectly thrown spiral to **Rob Gronkowski** that his favourite target carried to the Markham 44 yard line for a 26-yard pass play. The drive might have ended as soon as the next play when Brees fired a deep ball to **Andre Johnson** that corner **Nate Clements** thwarted by draping himself over the Undertakers' star. It certainly appeared that a flag might have been warranted but the officials let them play on. As it turned out, it took Death Valley four more plays to find the Markham end zone. Back-to-back 9-yard carries by Mathews brought the North Stars' defenders into the box, setting up an easy 15-yard TD pass from Brees to Johnson on a crossing pattern to open the scoring. The Undertakers led 7-0 and had made it look easy.

The North Stars' offence got the ball for the first time at their 33 yard line after an angled kick-off and a 23-yard kick return by ace returner **Joe McKnight**. Not surprisingly, their first play was a hand-off to running back **DeAngelo Williams** that the Undertakers appeared to be waiting for; but a great block by All Pro guard **Evan Mathis** opened up room for an 11-yard gain to the 44 yard line. On their next play, with the Undertakers' defence still set up to stop the run, **Jonathan Stewart** was stuffed for a 1-yard loss by **Charles Johnson**. Having tested the Death Valley line with their two running backs, Markham suddenly went to the air – with devastating results. **Eli Manning** stepped up and drilled a pass to **Steve Breaston** for 26 yards on a slant route then, with Death Valley looking for Williams in the backfield; Manning rolled out and tossed a medium fly to **Jordy Nelson** for a 31-yard TD pass. In the space of less than 3 minutes the North Stars had tied the game at 7 and had made it look even easier.

With the stage set for a shootout at the Corral, Brees went straight to the air on Death Valley's second possession; but was immediately picked off by veteran safety **Ed Reed**, who returned the ball 11 yards to the Undertakers' 35 yard line.

"It looks like he tried to force that ball into double coverage, Bill," observed **Phil Winterall**.

"He was looking for Gronkowski on that play, Phil," Badden replied. "But he found Ed Reed instead. It's one thing to be double-

covered and it's another thing to be double-covered by Ed Reed. Brees would love to have that one back."

The Undertakers' defence responded well to the game's first turnover by holding Markham to just 3 yards on 3 plays; but the league's leading kicker from 40 yards or more didn't need any extra and **David Akers** gave the Stars a 3-point lead with a 50-yard field goal to make it 10-7.

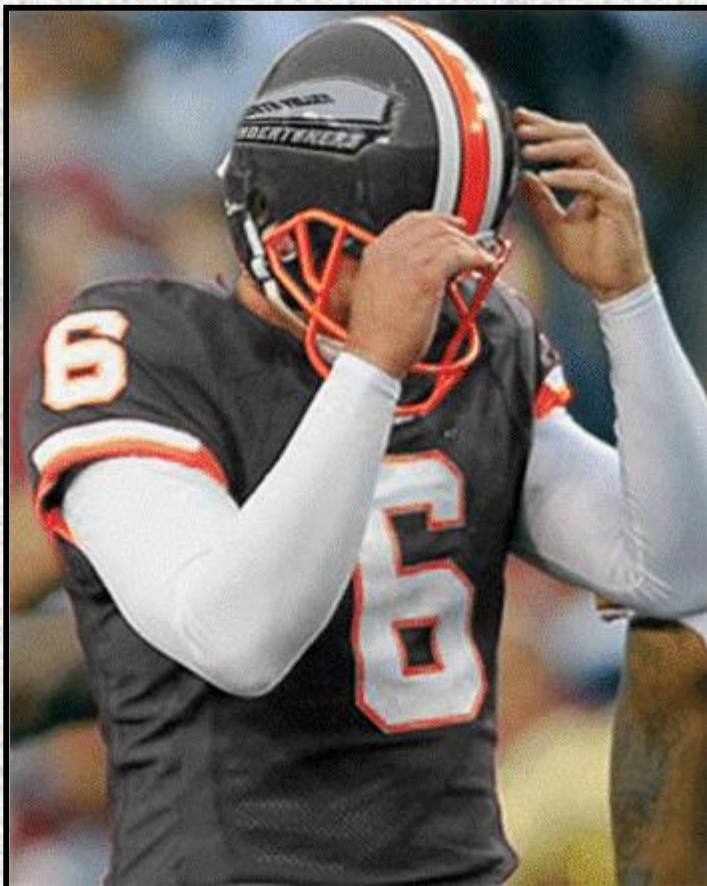
Another angled kick-off by Akers coupled with an 8-yard return by **Ryan Broyles** gave the Undertakers the ball at their 15 yard line; but they were soon threatening again after a pair of completions to their tight ends for 35 yards, a 14-yard pass to **Marques Colston**, and a 15-yard personal foul on defensive tackle **Fred Robbins** put them inside the Markham red zone. The North Stars stemmed the Death Valley push with a big play from linebacker **Pat Angerer**, who stuffed Mathews for a 2-yard loss, followed by perfect coverage by the secondary on an attempted crossing pattern to Johnson that resulted in an incomplete pass. After a check down to Mathews on 3rd down brought up 4th and 5, **Graham Gano** came on the field to tie the game 10-10 with a 29-yard field goal.

2nd QUARTER (Death Valley 17, Markham 17) – Death Valley's penchant for surprise onside kicks was obviously foremost in the thoughts of the Markham coaching staff because they lined up for the ensuing kickoff with their "hands team" on the field. The Undertakers weren't gambling, however, and surprised the Stars by kicking deep. McKnight managed just a 12-yard return to give Markham their worst field position to that point in the game at the 14 yard line. Manning was undaunted. He connected with **Wes Welker** for a 21-yard hitch then handed the ball off to Williams 3 straight times for a total of 34 yards, including a 25-yard burst off right tackle, to bring his team into field goal range at the Death Valley 31 yard line. On 3rd and 9 he cleverly fed the ball on a short slant to Nelson for a 24-gain with the Undertakers playing 7 defensive backs in a deep zone then hustled to the line to have Williams rush the ball for a 5-yard gain. Death Valley called timeout to switch personnel but it did not matter as Williams busted into the end zone from 2 yards out on the next play to give Markham a 17-10 lead.

"That drive was all Eli and his running back and his receivers and his offensive line," **Bill Badden** extolled. "Without them that touchdown doesn't happen."

"Markham has had the ball for just 6:42 minutes, Bill, and they've score 17 points already," commented Winterall.

"It's not how long you hold on to the ball that matters, Phil, it's how many points you score," replied Badden. "If Markham keeps



Death Valley kicker **Graham Gano** cringes after missing a 33-yard field goal attempt at the end of the 1st half. The score remained tied 17-17 at half time and the Undertakers wound up losing by 3 points.

outscore Death Valley in this game they're going to win."

The Undertakers came right back on their next possession. Beginning at their 21 yard line, Hernandez shook off a hit from **Rob Ninkovich** to turn a short slant into a 19-yard gain then Mathews broke a tackle on a draw for a 14-yard gain. Two plays later, **John Abraham** was flagged for pulling Mathews down by the facemask then Brees found Colston for 10 yards to put the ball at the Stars' 4 yard line. After being stopped at the line for no gain, Mathews found the end zone through the air as the check down target of Brees' second touchdown pass of the game. With 7:37 left in the first half the score was 17-17.

The game had the feeling of a barn-burner and the North Stars were not going to try and slow it down. They marched back up the field from their own 32 and eventually managed to reach the Undertaker 33 yard line where they faced 4th down and 1. With the aggressiveness of their opponent in mind they decided to forgo the field goal try and go for the first down by sending Williams right behind tackle **Tyson Clabo**; but the Death Valley defence was waiting for him and **Jerod Mayo** stopped Williams in his tracks to turn the ball over on downs.

"Do you think Darrin Jones might want to have that one back, Bill?" asked **Phil Winterall**.

"No doubt he does, Phil, because he didn't make the first down," replied Badden. "If he makes that first down he's happy and he hopes his team scores a touchdown."

The Undertakers took over and converted two 3rd downs in driving 52 yards in 12 plays to the Markham 15 yard

line. There they faced 4th down and 2 with 20 seconds left in the 1st half and no timeouts. It was the kind of situation that might have prompted a 4th down gamble for Death Valley during the regular season; but with no timeouts, the Championship on the line, and a near chip-shot scenario for Gano, **Chris Worthley** instead sent the field goal unit onto the field to try and grab a lead heading into the locker room. Despite everything going well on the execution, Gano inexplicably missed the kick. He drove it inches past the right crossbar.

"Wow! He missed it!" exclaimed Winterall, calling the play.

"That's going to come back to haunt them," said a surprisingly lucid Badden in response.

The first half came to a close with the teams locked in a 17-17 tie on the scoreboard but with the North Stars feeling they carried the momentum into the second half. They had held the ball for just a little over 10 minutes but had equalled the Undertakers in points while slowing down their powerful attack. Not only that – but they got the ball to start the 2nd half.

3rd QUARTER (Markham 31, Death Valley 24) – The onside kick that the North Stars expected finally came to start the second half. They were ready for it and **Vonta Leach** covered the ball up at the Markham 47. With great field position the Stars led with their strength. The Undertakers crowded the line and keyed on Williams, but he still managed to plough forward 10 yards on 2 carries to set up a sneak by Manning for an initial first down. Manning changed the pace with a medium fly to Welker that netted 25 yards but almost ended in disaster when Mayo popped the ball out and fell on it at the 16 yard line. However, Jones threw the challenge flag and Welker was ruled down-n-by-contact. The drive continued on the ground, assisted by a facemask penalty against **Adrian Clayborn**, and Williams finished it off with a dive through the line from 3 yards out to give Markham a 24-17 lead.

The Undertakers turned to Mathews on their next possession and their half-back delivered with runs of 25 and 10 yards, and a catch in the flat that he turned into 19 yards, to key a promising drive to the Markham 24; but it ended suddenly when safety **Jairus Byrd** tipped a pass from Brees intended for Johnson and **Charles Tillman** picked it off at the 19. The corner returned the ball 62 yards, from one 19 yard line to the other, setting up a 19-yard TD pass to Nelson on the next play that caught the Undertakers in a run defence. Suddenly the North Stars were ahead by two touchdowns and less than 8 minutes had transpired in the 2nd half.

"The players on both sidelines got whiplash watching that change of direction, Phil," Badden remarked.

"The Undertakers have lots of time left, Bill, but they likely have to score on this drive to stay in the game," said Winterall.

And score they did, on an impressive 79-yard touchdown drive highlighted by consecutive runs of 14 yards by Mathews and a pair of long completions to Gronkowski, the last covering 28 yards for the major against double-coverage. It was 31-24 for Markham and there were still 2 minutes remaining in the 3rd quarter. There was lots of time left, but the Stars continued to expect the unexpected and lined up to watch the onside kick. Gano kicked off on an angle and **Steve Slaton** returned it 20 yards to his own 26. As time ticked away in the 3rd, the North Stars turned short passes into substantial gains to reach their 48 by the time the gun sounded.

4th QUARTER (Markham 34, Death Valley 31) – The break in the action gave the struggling Undertakers' defence a much-

needed breather. **Sheldon Brown** broke up a long pass intended for Welker that could have been pass interference but wasn't called.

"In the regular season that's a penalty," observed **Bill Badden**. "But in the biggest game of the year that's just good football!"

Defensive end **Chris Long** took Manning down by the ankle for an 8-yard loss on the next play due to a fine individual effort. It was the first time Manning had been dumped for a loss all post-season, and it came at the right time for the Undertakers, as it was the key play that would force a first appearance by Markham punter **Adam Podlesh**. A 40-yard punt



Markham corner **Charles Tillman** (#33) celebrates with teammates after a spectacular 62-yard interception return in the 3rd quarter. The play was the turning point of a hard fought championship.



Death Valley QB and MVP, **Drew Brees** stares bitterly at the clock as time runs out on his first shot at an EFL Championship. He threw 2 picks and was sacked 5 times in a 34-31 loss.

to the sideline forced Death Valley back to their 11 yard line. From there they sustained a modest drive to past mid-field but were shut down on 3rd and 9 when Babineaux swallowed up Brees for a 9-yard loss on his second sack of the day. That prompted the first appearance of 'takers punter **Zoltan Mesko**, who boomed a 56-yarder into the Markham end zone for a touchback.

There was 9:34 left in the game and the Undertakers expected the Stars to try and run some time off the clock. Facing primarily run defences, the Stars mixed in a few passes, completing 4 for 58 yards, to move the chains on a 73-yard drive to the Death Valley 7 yard line. After a 3rd down pass to Nelson in the end zone was nearly intercepted by safety **George Wilson**, Markham settled for a 25-yard Akers field goal to make it a two-score game with 3:33 left.

"The Undertakers haven't completed a pass for over 30 yards yet, Bill," observed **Phil Winterall**. "They need one of their signature long passes right around now."

Three times Brees looked to go deep on the ensuing drive, but each time the Stars were ready for him. Eventually Brees found the end zone, scoring on an 18-yard TD pass to Colston, but the effort had consumed 2:25 minutes of precious time. With no timeouts and just 1:03 remaining, the only hope left was the onside kick, and this time the Stars knew for certain it was coming. With the season on the line, Gano bounced a beauty just past mid-field but the sure hands of **DeAngelo Williams** snared it. He fell forward one yard, as the Undertakers piled on, and held on tight for the Gale Sayers trophy – his personal third, but the first for his Markham North Stars.

POST GAME

When EFL historians look back on this game, years from today, they will probably question whether the result of the 6th EFL Championship Game truly represented the second upset in the history of the final. Certainly the raw numbers suggest that it was. Never had a quarterback performed at such an elite level as **Drew Brees** had over the course of the regular season and continuing through the first two rounds of the playoffs. Never had a team scored so many points. Finally, the Undertakers had lost just one game all season, and it had been a close one, to the team many had expected would represent the PAC instead of Death Valley in this game. Nobody expected the North Stars to be pushovers, but they had observable flaws. They had been out-gained in each post-season win, they had entered the playoffs as a wild card, and they were led by an interception-prone quarterback who many expected would implode trying to keep pace with the Undertakers' scoring machine. What apparently got lost in the pre-game analysis were the intangibles such as guts, determination, and a well-conceived and executed game plan. **Eli Manning** was not the same quarterback in the post-season that he had been during the year. For that he can offer some thanks to his coach and his supporting cast; but it is also thanks to a quality that nobody but he could have known about before this game – Eli is a *Big Game QB*. Hindsight will see this more with the passing of time, even as Death Valley and Coach **Chris Worthley** continue to mourn their lost shot at glory. In the biggest game of his career, Brees played close to the level of an MVP, but two costly interceptions brought him down. The first one, thrown defiantly into double-coverage, was arrogance. The second, however, was just a great play by a Markham secondary that made many in 2012 but rarely got much credit. It was fitting that that play by the defence would mark the game's turning point. Markham's gritty season, and their ultimate triumph, was a total team effort, from Coach **Darrin Jones** on down.



Who was slick in the Championship?

"BRYLCREEM" THE EFL'S FIRST SPONSOR



Eli Manning
QB
Markham
North Stars

17 of 23, 275 yards yards, 2 TDs,
QB rating 142.5 to grab the MVP.



Charles Tillman
CB
Markham North
Stars

7 Tackles, 1 PD, and 1 very big
interception and 62-yard return.

| | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Tot |
|-------------------|-------|--|----|---|----|---|-----|
| 2011 Markham | (3-0) | | 10 | 7 | 14 | 3 | 34 |
| 2011 Death Valley | (2-1) | | 10 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 31 |

| | | | | |
|---|-------|--------------|---|-------|
| 1 | 9:06 | Death Valley | TD Brees 15 pass to Johnson (Gano) (11-84-5:47) | 0-7 |
| 1 | 6:35 | Markham | TD Manning 31 pass to Nelson (Akers) (4-67-2:26) | 7-7 |
| 1 | 4:52 | Markham | FG Akers 50 (4-3-1:21) | 10-7 |
| 1 | 0:14 | Death Valley | FG Gano 29 (10-74-4:28) | 10-10 |
| 2 | 12:11 | Markham | TD Williams 2 run (Akers) (8-86-2:55) | 17-10 |
| 2 | 7:37 | Death Valley | TD Brees 4 pass to Mathews (Gano) (9-79-4:27) | 17-17 |
| 3 | 10:31 | Markham | TD Williams 3 run (Akers) (8-53-4:22) | 24-17 |
| 3 | 6:12 | Markham | TD Manning 19 pass to Nelson (Akers) (1-19-0:12) | 31-17 |
| 3 | 2:00 | Death Valley | TD Brees 28 pass to Gronkowski (Gano) (8-79-4:04) | 31-24 |
| 4 | 3:33 | Markham | FG Akers 25 (13-73-6:02) | 34-24 |
| 4 | 1:03 | Death Valley | TD Brees 18 pass to Colston (Gano) (12-80-2:25) | 34-31 |

| Markham | | | | | | | | | | Death Valley | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|-----|----|------|----|------|----|------|-------|---|---------------------|-----|-----|------|-----|------|----|-----|-------|---|
| Passing | | | | | | | | | | Passing | | | | | | | | | |
| Manning | 23 | 17 | 275 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 142.5 | | Brees | 47 | 32 | 405 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 105.4 | |
| Rushing | | | | | | | | | | Rushing | | | | | | | | | |
| Williams,D | 16 | 75 | 4.7 | 5 | 3 | 25 | 2 | | | Mathews | 20 | 135 | 6.8 | 9 | 7 | 23 | 0 | | |
| Stewart | 7 | 18 | 2.6 | 1 | 1 | 14 | 0 | | | Hernandez | 1 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | | |
| Leach | 1 | 2 | 2.0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Manning | 6 | 1 | 0.2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Receiving | | | | | | | | | | Receiving | | | | | | | | | |
| Welker | 6 | 1 | 9 | 89 | 14.8 | 5 | 1 | 25 | 0 | Hernandez | 9 | 0 | 9 | 105 | 11.7 | 6 | 0 | 20 | 0 |
| Nelson | 5 | 0 | 7 | 91 | 18.2 | 3 | 1 | 31 | 2 | Gronkowski | 8 | 1 | 14 | 135 | 16.9 | 6 | 2 | 28 | 1 |
| Stewart | 3 | 0 | 4 | 33 | 11.0 | 1 | 0 | 15 | 0 | Colston | 6 | 0 | 10 | 71 | 11.8 | 3 | 0 | 19 | 1 |
| Breaston | 2 | 0 | 2 | 43 | 21.5 | 2 | 1 | 26 | 0 | Mathews | 5 | 0 | 6 | 41 | 8.2 | 2 | 0 | 19 | 1 |
| Cook | 1 | 0 | 1 | 19 | 19.0 | 1 | 0 | 19 | 0 | Johnson,A | 4 | 0 | 8 | 53 | 13.3 | 4 | 0 | 16 | 1 |
| Fumbles | | | | | | | | | | Fumbles | | | | | | | | | |
| No Rec TD | | | | | | | | | | No Rec TD | | | | | | | | | |
| Kick Returns | | | | | | | | | | Kick Returns | | | | | | | | | |
| McKnight | 3 | 57 | 19.0 | 23 | 0 | | | | | Cobb | 3 | 61 | 20.3 | 21 | 0 | | | | |
| Slaton | 1 | 20 | 20.0 | 20 | 0 | | | | | Broyles | 4 | 56 | 14.0 | 18 | 0 | | | | |
| Leach | 1 | 2 | 2.0 | 2 | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Williams,D | 1 | 1 | 1.0 | 1 | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Punt Returns | | | | | | | | | | Punt Returns | | | | | | | | | |
| No Fc Yds Ave Lg TD | | | | | | | | | | No Fc Yds Ave Lg TD | | | | | | | | | |
| Kicking | | | | | | | | | | Kicking | | | | | | | | | |
| Akers | 2-2 | 50 | 4-4 | 10 | | | | | | Gano | 1-2 | 29 | 4-4 | 7 | | | | | |
| Punting | | | | | | | | | | Punting | | | | | | | | | |
| Podlesh | 1 | 40 | 40.0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 40 | | | Mesko | 1 | 56 | 56.0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 56 | | |
| Defense | | | | | | | | | | Defense | | | | | | | | | |
| Byrd | 10 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Mayo | 13 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Reed | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1-11 | | | Keisel | 9 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Tillman | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1-62 | | | Ryans | 7 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Lee | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Grimes | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Clements | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Long,C | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Ninkovich | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Moore,W | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Abraham | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Wilson | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Babineaux | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Brown,S | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Canty | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Smith | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Williams,D | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Mathews | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Fujita | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Clayborn | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Biermann | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Foster | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Branch | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Allen,J | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Brown | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Huff | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Angerer | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Worthy | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| Robbins | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | | Brown,S | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | Jenkins | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | Johnson,C | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0-0 | | |



17 of 23 for 275 yards, 2 TDs and no picks earns top individual honour.

| | MAR | DVU |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| First Downs | 21 | 32 |
| Rushes | 30-96 | 21-135 |
| Passes | 23-17-275 | 47-32-405 |
| Sacked | 1-8 | 5-34 |
| Fumble | 0 | 0 |
| Penalties | 4-39 | 2-3 |
| Turnovers | 0 | 2 |
| Missed Tackles | 8 | 5 |
| Dropped Passes | 1 | 1 |
| Bad Passes | 2 | 5 |
| Passes 25+ | 3 | 2 |
| Runs 10+ | 4 | 7 |
| Blitzes | 13 | 14 |
| Time | 26:11 | 33:49 |
| Third Down | 4-9 | 7-13 |
| Fourth Down | 0-1 | 1-1 |
| Red Att/Td/Fg | 4/3/1 | 5/3/1 |
| Net Offense | 363 | 506 |



AT THE EFL CHAMPIONSHIP *With Spats McChad*

GARLAND, TX – In 2008 the Non-Stop News Network (NSNN) ranked Garland No. 67 in the Top 100 Places to live in the USA. Based on my experience here during EFL Championship Week it strikes me as one of those places you might want to live in; but wouldn't want to visit. I suggest that if you *do* get the inclination to visit the place, you save your money and watch 'King of the Hill' instead. Not that it's a bad city – it's clean and there are jobs to be found – but the tallest building is the Chase Bank Building at a towering five stories, and there is nothing to do unless you like \$6 theatre and family restaurants. As part of my 'Welcome Football Fans' visitor's package at the Garland Holiday Inn I received a two-for-one pass for the 20th Annual Trout Lily Tour and a coupon for a "Free Side Dish" with a standard entree at Golden Corral; along with a tourist map of Garland and about a dozen pamphlets advertising various attractions. *Steady, Spats, steady...one thing at a time...you don't want to burn out on the first day.*

It's not a real city, it's just called one. It is really just another bedroom community in the Dallas Metroplex. There isn't even a real rodeo in Garland, just a football stadium called the Corral where the only horse inside is a mustang named "Matt" that Garland team mascot *Mustang Sally* rides around the field whenever the Mustangs score a touchdown. Let's just say that "Matt" didn't get a lot of exercise in the final part of the 2012 season and looked a little out of shape on the day of the Championship. But I am getting ahead of myself.

This was not my first trip to Garland – I travelled here last year to interview coach **Doug Shirley** – but this was the first time I had spent more than 36 hours in the place. Of course, the avalanche of sports media and fans descending on the city charged up the atmosphere in the community, making it less sedate than it normally would have been on an average game week in Garland. But complaints about the lack of entertainment near the stadium were only multiplied by the number of visitors once it dawned on them that they would have to travel to Dallas to whoop it up in style. The Garland Chamber of Commerce had set up a 'Hospitality Tent' and 'Information Centre' in the parking lot of the Corral; but the featured attractions at the tent – funfair-style contests such as "Hit-the-Bell," the horseshoe toss, the "Bucking Bronco," and everybody's favourite water-pistol target shoot (to name just a few) – drew mostly locals and visitors from Cowtown and Iowa City. The 'Information Centre' ran out of information by mid-week and actually had to start asking visiting media questions to find out what was going on around the game. Not that there was much to talk about – it was a quiet week before the Big Game.

MEDIA WEEK

Judging from the media coverage in the week leading up to the 6th Gale Sayers Game, a Death Valley-Markham match-up was probably not at the top of the EFL's wish list for the final pairing. This would be due to the fact that neither Markham, Ontario nor Hell, Michigan are major media centres. The spectacular achievements of **Drew Brees** and the controversy surrounding them, while leading the Undertakers to a 17-1 record through the regular and post-seasons, drew national attention of course. But that attention did not transform so lucratively into sponsorship dollars, probably due to the depressed economy in Hell, as well as coach **Chris Worthley's** known association with the Devil and rumours of Undead on the Undertakers' payroll.

As for Markham, most dismissed it as a football backwater if they considered it at all. Prior to this season, that dismissal had been entirely justifiable. Perennial losers on the football field with a rough and unsophisticated fan base, the North Stars had achieved national notoriety only once before, and that was because of a scandalous incident at the Dawg Pound involving morbidly obese **Greta Clapper**, the infamous *Fat Lady in Row 54* and Markham's so-called *biggest fan*. The Stars' ascendancy in 2012 had caught the average fan by surprise and even some veteran journalists.

"Who are these Stars in the final, Spats?" asked **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven**, West Coast fashion expert and Knights' columnist for the LA Daily News. "I've never heard of them."

I ran into Gabby (as she liked to be called) at the hospitality suite sponsored by the LA Knights at The Joule Hotel in Dallas. She was wearing a blue charity wrist band in support of the 'Save Charles Woodson Fund' and a baby blue evening dress with stiletto heels and something on her head that looked like a shower cap. Before I could answer her question she clasped my hand and gasped, "I just love Dallas! I had no idea it was so glamorous! Why haven't I been here before Spats?"

I had come to Dallas on Thursday after a stagnating three days in Garland looking for a story – any story – to write about. Nothing was going on there because both teams had decided to practice in secret at their own training facilities and fly into Garland on Friday night. This had not been done in any previous game and everyone was caught off guard. It meant that most local and national media who had booked their trips to Garland months in advance were forced to conduct their “Live in Garland” interviews over the phone or via Skype. That is, if they could even get interviews at all. Undertaker coach **Chris Worthley** had muzzled all of his players, literally, and stood in their places for the few interviews he granted. “*If Clay Matthews were available he would say....*” or “*If Drew Brees were here he would likely say....*” and so on and so on he went. The North Stars, by contrast, granted player interviews, but only between 4:30 and 5:00 pm, without video.

Fortunately, I had encountered most of my Affiliated Press colleagues at the Information Centre earlier in the week before it had run out of information. Many were staying in Dallas, due to over-booked hotels in Garland proper, and one of those was my old buddy **Jean Boisvert** of Florida’s Swampland Proof, a former Dragons’ correspondent.

“I’m covering the Swordfish now, even though it’s not really my beat,” he explained over Coronas at a place called *El Chico* in Garland, where we went after attending a two-hour “media orientation” session at the Information Centre. “It’s not the same as covering the Dragons, but somebody has to do it. There’s not much coverage of the team in Sebastian.”

We had agreed at the time to meet up again in Dallas for Gabby’s hospitality suite – usually the best one happening during Championship Week. This year it was a little more subdued, with the Knights out of the final, but it was still a lot more fun than tickets to the Garland Opry for a night of Texas Country music. It also yielded the only shred of insider information I got all week when **Grim Reaper** of the *Death Valley Obituary*, got drunk after too many shots of Red Death and, leaning unsteadily against his scythe, revealed, “*IF BREES AND WORTHLEY MAKE-UP BEFORE THE GAME THE NORTH STARS DON’T HAVE A HOPE IN HELL....*” but before anyone could ask what he meant by that, **Grim Reaper’s** shoulders suddenly slumped and he passed out in a bowl of chocolate mousse.

THE CORRAL

As I discovered during my last trip to Garland, Mustangs’ coach **Doug Shirley** carries a lot of influence in the community. His image in the form of pictures, busts, or statues can be found in most public places, but in particular at the Corral where his team plays. He is a strangely iconic figure for somebody who has had no notable success as a professional football coach. His most noteworthy achievement, as far as I can tell, is returning professional football to the Dallas area and, (most importantly for Garlanders), keeping it out of Dallas.

“It is with great pride that I welcome you all to Garland. I trust you have enjoyed our humble city and all it has to offer,” Shirley said to the journalists gathered in the stadium press gallery on game day. “To be honest, I wish I wasn’t here addressing you right now.” He paused for effect. “I would much rather be down in the dressing room getting my Mustangs ready to play for the Championship,” he added with a smile, at which the group of writers chuckled. “Drinks and food here in the gallery come to you courtesy of the Mustangs organization. All I ask is that you put your sharp minds to work and try to write something good about my

coaching,” he added with a broad smile.

“You’re going to have to bring in a lot more booze then, Doug!” quipped **Charlie Wood** of the *Charleswood Banner*, to a roar of laughter from the group.

Shirley is all class, even if his team isn’t quite in the same class as this year’s contenders for the Gale Sayers Trophy. I’m sure he’ll bring a winner to Garland eventually. I just hope that, when he does, we don’t have to come back here to witness history.

The Corral certainly lives up to its name. It looks like one and it smells like one. The only thing missing are the horses, but there is plenty of evidence that here are a lot of horses in the



North Stars’ quarterback, **Eli Manning** addresses the media after his North Stars defeated Death Valley 34-31 in the sixth EFL Championship Game. Manning was the named MVP after passing for 275 yards, 2 touchdowns and no interceptions – a performance few expected.

area.

"You get used to the smell, Spats," **Granny Gee**, the wizened old Mustangs beat writer of the *Garland Gazette* told me when she caught me holding my nose. "That's why the grass on the field is so green. Chemicals can't compete with good old Mother Nature!"

Horse dung from across several Texas counties goes into a homegrown fertilizer mix that produces the greenest golf course quality turf in the State and, arguably, the nation. '*Garland Grass is the Greenest*' runs the motto beneath the label on bags of manure from Garland's own Crappy Fertilizer Company. The fact that the field smells like crap is a source of pride for both the company and the locals. "If it don't smell bad, it ain't working!" says the buck-toothed groundskeeper in the concluding line of a local TV commercial for Crappy Fertilizer.

Although there was no escaping the odour of the place, the Mustangs had obviously spent some cash sprucing up the stadium's appearance for the big day. "Those seats at the 50 yard line are all new," pointed out **Johnny Rebb** of South Carolina's *The State* newspaper; a yearly visitor to Garland when the Regulators come to town. "They used to be long benches like those in the end zones. And this press box was never here before. We used to have to cover the game from the seats and recharge our laptop batteries in a room we called the cloak room because the employees at the concessions used to keep their coats there."

While regular visitors to the Corral seemed to be impressed by the renovations, high-maintenance types like Gabby and Twin Cities spokesperson **Molly Qerim** found the atmosphere intolerable. "Everything here tastes and smells like sh\$t!" spat Molly as soon as Shirley had left the gallery. "I'm sorry, but the Triumph don't pay me enough to put up with this! I'm going back to the hotel, Gab!"

"I'm with you sister," Gabby agreed as she packed up her hand bag. She turned to me and gave me a quick peck on the cheek. "Sorry, Spats my dear. Text me later and maybe we can meet for cocktails."

"I see it took you just a couple of minutes to scare away the only good-looking women in the room, Spats!" **Charlie Wood** sneered after Gabby and Molly had left. "Now I guess we'll have to focus on football. Who do you like?"

"I don't like either of them, but I think the Undertakers are going to win," I replied; knowing Charlie would be looking for any bit of information that might allow him to make a safe bet on the side. Before he could ask me why, I added, "but then again they might not – Markham's hot right now. I don't know, Charlie, it's up for grabs." I like to tease Charlie because he is, at his core, a jerk. The kind of jerk you can have a good time with, but a jerk nevertheless, and I've told him so to his face.

Journalists being opinionated by profession, there was no shortage of opinions in the room about the eventual outcome of the 6th Gale Sayers Game. The more confident and cocky the writer, the more likely the opinion would be voiced loudly and in advance; just so the author could rub it in faces later. Bold and brassy **Michael S. Hickenbottom**, who covers the Monarchs for the *Orange County Register* made sure us veterans knew there was a new kid on the block and that he knew more than any of us.

"It's not even going to be close!" he bawled. "The Undertakers led the league in points scored and Brees threw like 10 touchdowns a game! There's no way Markham can keep up with them. Plus their defence has been lucky all year. They can't cover Johnson or Gronkowsi and they won't get to Brees. My article's already written, boys. I'm just waiting on the final numbers!"

At the other extreme, the usually stoic **Marcus Aurelius** of the *Gwinnett Tribune* set down his chisel as Hickenbottom spoke and rose to challenge the young man's view. "You see only the surface of things, young man!" Aurelius charged. "I have witnessed this Markham team of which you speak so loosely and disparagingly. As well, I have observed the manner of Death Valley's mastery. Of the two, I believe Markham is the stronger and by far. They have battled the great titans of the North and emerged scarred but victorious. What has Death Valley thrashed soundly that was not rabble to begin with?"

Not all of the remaining journalists in the room shared their opinions so vociferously, but those who did tended to favour moderate versions of the two opinions expressed above, with a slight majority favouring the Undertakers. All except of course **Lanny McDonald** of the *Markham Economist and Sun*, **Grim Reaper** of the *Death Valley Obituary*, and **Death** of the *Death Valley Epitaph*, who each took a staunchly partisan line while being careful not to offend the other's team.

"I juz sink it'l be a gud game," Lanny slurred as his head bobbed slightly and his eyes tried to focus in on the black shadow of Death's face. Lanny was making the most of Doug Shirley's hospitality and the game hadn't started yet.

"I AM SIMPLY PLEASED THAT TWO TEAMS OF GREAT STATURE ARE PLAYING. REST IN PEACE, DEAR FRIEND. DEATH COMES SOON TO MARKHAM," **Death** uttered.

"YES. DEATH TO MARKHAM!" **Grim Reaper** added.

At first I was not able to get fully comfortable with two black-clad supernatural beings charged with the power of severing souls from the Earthly Plane sitting nearby, skeletal fingers rapping dryly on the keys of their MacBook Pros. But after an hour of listening to the two of them celebrate and agonize over Death Valley's fortunes, I realized that **Death** and **Grim Reaper** were just a couple of regular guys who happened to have unusual jobs. And wow, could they pack away the beer!

THE GAME

Anyone who thought this contest would be easy for either team was sorely mistaken; this was clear after both teams had possessed the ball once. The Undertakers scored on the game's opening drive. They caught the North Stars in a run defence and found the end



A svelte **Greta Clapper** aka “The Fat Lady,” cheats on her diet to celebrate her beloved North Stars’ Championship victory over Death Valley. Clapper has lost 515 lbs since Markham started contending.

zone on a 15-yard pass from **Drew Brees** to **Andre Johnson** to finish off an 84-yard, 11-play drive. They set up the score with a balanced attack that experts had predicted they would need to move the ball against the Markham defence capable of thwarting any one-dimensional approach.

The North Stars also scored on their first possession. They tested the Death Valley line with two probing runs, one by each running back, before quickly moving to the air. **Eli Manning** connected on passes of 26 yards to **Steve Breaston** and 31 yards for a TD to **Jordy Nelson** to send a message to the Death Valley defence that they would put the game in the hands of their quarterback early and often.

Both teams had executed their offensive game plans perfectly to start; but which team would be able to sustain its success over the long haul remained a question that the defences had to answer.

The Markham defence was the first to raise its hand. Their scouting paid off on the first play of the Undertakers’ next series when Brees tried to force the ball to a double-covered **Rob Gronkowski** and **Ed Reed** picked off the ball, returning it to the Death Valley 35 yard line. The Markham offence was stymied in turn, but the subsequent 50-yard field goal by **David Akers** shifted the serve and the lead into Markham’s court.

“Brees, you *idiot*!” Hickenbottom had yelled after the interception. “Reed was right there! How could you not even see him?”

“HE SAW HIM,” intoned **Grim Reaper** in the only way he knew – solemnly. “HE IS MAKING A POINT.”

The comment, or the hollow dead voice, or both, caused Hickenbottom to cut short his reply. He looked at the hooded black figure with the ethereal floating skulls, ever so faintly visible, hovering around his head. He then glanced at the shining steel scythe at his side and backed away slowly, leaving his beer at the table.

Grim Reaper reached out with his emaciated hand, took the beer then turned to Death and said: “THAT MAKES FIVE FOR ME!”

“NO, THAT’S FOUR! GABRIELLE’S DOESN’T COUNT – YOU DIDN’T SCARE HER AND SHE WAS LEAVING ANYWAY,” Death replied dryly.

The comment by **Grim Reaper** about Brees making a point when he threw the interception intrigued me, but I had not yet become emboldened enough by alcohol to approach him and try to learn more. Mortal fear of being accidentally dispatched to the afterlife by an inebriated demon made me keep my distance even though my curiosity was killing me – figuratively speaking.

The first half went by quickly. Both offences appeared to be in control as they piled up 17 points each, but appearances were deceiving. The North Stars, under the guidance of **Eli Manning**, had struck quickly and from a distance when required. The 31-yard pass to Nelson was the main highlight reel play of the first half followed by the Reed interception. On the other side the league’s most dangerous quick-strike attack had been forced to work hard for their scores, almost too hard. The big bombs and long slants to Johnson were noticeable by their absence. **Ryan Mathews** was suddenly a real factor in the offence. Something just wasn’t right on the Undertakers’ sideline. To add to that vague sense of unease, **Graham Gano** missed an easy 33-yard field goal attempt in the final seconds that would have given Death Valley a small, but morally significant lead heading into half time. The team that had frequently turned up its nose at field goals during the regular season would later rue that critical miss.

The Half Time Extravaganza, ‘Salute to Texas’ drew little attention in the Press Gallery, where heated football discussions were taking place; but it drew the ire of a national television audience confused at the sight of the Randy Rogers Band sharing a stage with Kelly Rowland, rapper Trip Lee, and LA heavy metal band Megadeth. Under the principle that the Lone Star State is both inclusive and welcoming, this musical hodge-podge managed to anger the artists’ own fans as the performers took turns covering each other’s music. The best that could be said about Megadeth’s cover of Kelly Rowland’s song “Ice” was that it was the

strangest musical performance in EFL Championship or Super Bowl Half Time history.

In the gallery, the media was pre-occupied with the topic of who had “won” the 17-17 draw in the first half. Chino’s **Quentin San Pedro** reflected the majority view that Markham had been at the top of its game early but would not be able to sustain the pace in the second half: “They took away the long ball, picked off Brees, Manning made a couple of great throws, and they’re still tied. They’ve got to be perfect in the second half to stand a chance and I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

Others felt differently, but they were in the minority. The venerable **Sparky McGillicuddy** of Iowa City made perhaps the best point for this group when he said: “The Undertakers haven’t faced a team like the North Stars yet. So many PAC teams gave up against Brees figuring resistance was futile. Markham teams don’t give up, they play to the whistle. I think it’ll be Brees who needs to be perfect in the second half and he’s going to have to make a big throw to get the Stars’ corners to back off. Otherwise I think Death Valley is dead in the water....pardon the pun.”

“NOBODY WILL DIE UNTIL GRIM AND I SAY SO AND WE ARE WATCHING THE GAME AT THE MOMENT,” interrupted Death; who was obviously annoyed about something. When Death gets annoyed, people around him become uneasy. A white-faced **Patrick Henry** of the *Colonial Times* of Commonwealth promptly raised himself out of his chair and sprinted to the other side of the room, leaving behind a bottle of Budweiser. Death pointed a bony finger at it and the bottle rose up and floated into his hand. “THAT’S SEVEN FOR ME, GRIM! I’M COMING BACK.”

“NINE FOR ME,” countered **Grim Reaper** as he snatched a bottle of Old Milwaukee from beneath the nose of a dozing **Orville Smucker**, from the Cowtown Plain Dealer.

“THAT’S CHEATING!” protested **Death**, “PUT IT BACK!”

“I WON’T COUNT IT THEN, BUT I’M NOT PUTTING IT BACK,” **Grim Reaper** answered before taking a big swig. “IT’S 8-7 FOR ME.”

The second half started with a familiar twist for followers of the Undertakers. I do understand the irony of using the word “familiar” as an adjective for “twist.” A twist is supposed to be something *unexpected* – a *surprise*. When the Undertakers started to add surprise onside kicks to their regular season repertoire they usually worked because they came as surprises. The play worked so well, in fact, that it became a regular part of the Death Valley game plan and was still able to surprise an opponent as late in the season as Week 10 vs South Carolina; but it had not worked since despite many attempts. However, after two weeks of studying Death Valley game film, the North Stars had become quite familiar with fielding the onside kick and made it a daily part of their practice drill. The practice paid off. **Chris Worthley** ordered an onside kick to begin the 3rd quarter and it was easily recovered by the North Stars at their 47 yard line, giving Manning and his offence great field position.

Markham kept it on the ground for three plays then went to the air. Manning connected with **Wes Welker**, who eluded the coverage and sprinted across the field. But as he cut back he was decked by line-backer **Jerod Mayo** and fell hard. The ball popped loose and Death Valley recovered, prompting a loud, excited moan from the section of black-clad zombies at the stadium’s south end zone. But the replay appeared to show that Welker’s knee was down before the ball came loose and Darrin Jones threw the red flag. The fumble was over-turned on review and Markham carried on with its drive. It was the first of two critical turning points in the early second half that would knock the Undertakers off course and feed their opponent momentum.

“That would have been a fumble in the old days,” grumbled **Orville Smucker**, who had been startled from his nap by the sound of **Lanny McDonald** going “ARRHHHHRRRAARRRHHGH!” when Welker lost the ball. “No cameras to split the seconds,” he continued. “Welker had no business carrying the ball like that and that’s the problem with the modern game!”

Smucker is an old curmudgeon but I agree with his point. Players trying to make the ESPN highlight reel have stopped protecting the ball and modern defenders are hitting to strip it from them, not to tackle. Keep buying stocks in Yards-After-Catch and Turnover Funds, stats investors – they will continue to rise.

The ball was placed at the Death Valley 16 yard line and 4 plays later **DeAngelo Williams** was bowling through the Undertakers’ line on his way to pay dirt. The defence had been set up specifically to stop Williams on the play but a determined effort by the runner and a great block by center **Brad Meester** paved the way to the end zone. It was 24-17 for Markham after 4:29 had elapsed in the second half.

The Undertakers got the ball and moved up the field behind the running of Mathews, who turned two carries and a catch in the flat into a total of 52 yards to account for most of the offence; but for everyone else, the going was tough. In frustration, Brees tried to get Johnson into the game with a quick slant, but the velocity on the pass kept the ball too low and safety **Jairus Byrd** deflected it into the arms of **Charles Tillman**, who picked it off and dodged and weaved 62 yards on the return all the way back to the Death Valley 19 yard line. It was a huge play and a near carbon copy of his interception in the Conference Championship game against Durham that was pivotal to the outcome. In fact, the recent memory of that play must have charged up the Markham sideline with a sense that destiny was calling in their favour. It took the offence just one play to make the Undertakers pay for that mistake. Eli found Nelson wide open, as the Death Valley defence converged to stop the run, for a 19-yard TD pass, his second of the day. In short order the North Stars had knocked the Undertakers back on their heels and with it a growing sense in the gallery and stadium that an upset was in the making.

“Holy Cow! Look at that!” cried Scarberian columnist **Mike Myers** as he pointed down at the field. “What *is* that?”

The journalists who had heard him pressed forward and looked to where Myers was pointing – toward the Markham sideline. ‘Holy Cow’ was certainly an appropriate term, for there she was: **Greta Clapper**, the infamous ‘Fat Lady in Row 54’ dancing ‘*Gangnam Style*’ at field level in a custom-made *Markham Starlettes* costume. The once immovable Clapper had been dieting in a desperate attempt to attract the attention of Markham coach, **Darrin Jones**, and had lost a ton of weight (literally). At 480 lbs, she was svelte enough, barely, to shake her massive booty unaided. The horrendous sight of her will be forever imprinted on my memory and, unfortunately, everyone else’s as well, now that the obscene video has since gone viral on *You-Tube*.

The Death Valley sideline looked more grim than usual. That was because **Grim Reaper** had used his powers to materialize next to **Chris Worthley** and **Drew Brees**. The coach and QB stood transfixed, pale as sheets, staring at Reaper as he waved his scythe with one hand and pointed at each of them in turn with the other. Suddenly the Reaper vanished and reappeared in the gallery.

“WHAT DID YOU SAY TO THEM?” asked **Death**.

“I TOLD THEM TO STOP FIGHTING AND GET THEIR HEADS BACK IN THE GAME AND IF THEY DIDN’T I WAS GOING TO PERSONALLY BRING THEM INTO THE AFTERLIFE AHEAD OF SCHEDULE.”

“YOU KNOW YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO DO THAT!!” **Death** admonished him.

“I KNOW. BUT THEY DON’T KNOW THAT. MAYBE WE’LL SEE SOME DEATH VALLEY FOOTBALL NOW!” **Grim Reaper** proclaimed as he took another swig of beer.

That strange scene caused a few more souls to lose their nerve. **Granny Gee** screamed, hiked her petticoat, and ran out of the room. Her tea cup rattled as she bumped the table. **Jean Boisvert**, who I had taken to be a little stouter of heart, turned to me and said, “This is too weird Spats. I thought he was just a fruit loop but now I think that guy might actually be the *Grim Reaper*!” He got up and left, leaving a bottle of Lone Star behind.

Reaper’s hand lashed out and snatched it just as the bottle began to levitate. “THAT’S ELEVEN FOR ME! AM I EVER KILLING YOU TODAY!” Reaper cackled as **Death** cursed him.

There was a sense of urgency to the ensuing drive by the Undertakers. Mathews ripped off back-to-back 14-yard runs while Brees turned to **Rob Gronkowski** to finish off a 79-yard drive with a 28-yard touchdown pass completed into double coverage.

“What a friggin’ pass!” *Mohave Torch* columnist **Randy the Desert Rat** shouted. “Brees is back, boys!”

The flurry of scoring by the North Stars and the determined counter-drive by the Undertakers had taken an emotional toll on both teams. As if by unspoken agreement, there was something like a truce between them as the 3rd quarter passed into the 4th quarter and they exchanged punts for the first time all game. But after **Zoltan Mesko** had answered **Adam Podlesh** with a punt into the Markham end zone for a touchback, it was back to business for both squads with less than 10 minutes remaining in the game.

“I know it’s obvious, Mr. McChad, but I do believe that, for the sake of form, somebody has to say it: the Undertakers have to stop Markham here to have a sporting chance,” said **Sir Reginald Malcolm** Clapham of the *Durham Diggat and Pick* as he sidled up to me, brandy snifter in one hand and a pipe with no tobacco in the other. “Fancy a wager?”

“I’ve bet against Markham twice already,” I replied. “Most recently against your disappointing Thunder Lizards. I’m not betting against them again – I don’t see the Undertakers stopping them.”

“I agree – how disappointing! I took you for an Undertakers type of chap, Spats,” he said with a touch of irony. “I guess I’ll have to find somebody else to pay for my drinks. Where did that young Hickenbottom chap go off to?”

Darrin Jones’ team was in a strategic grey area as they took possession at their 20 yard line. They had the clear advantage with a 7-point lead, but with 9:39 still remaining there was more than enough time for an explosive team such as the Undertakers to turn things around. The North Stars needed to burn some time off the clock, but they also needed to move the ball and, if possible, score. Playing it overly conservative or turning boldly aggressive carried risks. Jones decided to make his team walk the tightrope.

Using the pass to set up the run, Markham managed to walk the line with near perfection – gaining chunks of yardage while burning time with an intuitively balanced mixture of pass and run. The Undertakers continued to be fixated on Williams, and managed to stone him a few times; but pass completions of 19 yards to **Jared Cook**, 17 yards to **Steve Breaston**, and 13 yards to Welker moved the chains while Williams moved the clock. The Markham drive kept lurching forward until finally, in the red zone, facing 8-men in the box, they hit a wall and had to settle for a 25-yard chip-shot by **David Akers** for a two-score lead with just 3:33 remaining in the game.

Death looked up at the scoreboard and saw the 3:33 glowing as the sky turned dusk overhead. “333 IS A BAD OMEN,” he said, and tossed a beer back.

It was now crunch time for **Drew Brees**; and the EFL’s regular season MVP rose to the occasion....somewhat. The Undertakers remained in their standard two-tight end formation for what would be their final drive. The North Stars answered with a nickel package and a four-man front to bring pressure. Brees’ first three passes were incomplete as the Markham corners appeared to mug the Death Valley receivers; but no flags littered the green Garland grass.

“The fix is in!” a disgusted **Aristedes Kalogiannis**, the barely literate *Pickering Post* reporter and man-servant of Spartans’ owner **Gus Konstantakos**, howled. No friend of Yours Truly, Kalogiannis had avoided me all afternoon and had perched himself

on the edge of the first row of seats on the far side of gallery next to York beat writer, **Merlin the Magician** of the *Round Table Chronicle*. “Clements was all over Colston on that play – all over him!”

Quentin San Pedro, the rehabilitated bookie turned Chino beat reporter, who knows a bit about fixing games, chuckled when he heard Kalogiannis. “The fix was in a *long* time ago! *That* was just bad refereeing!”

The Undertakers stayed alive with a 16-yard pass to Johnson on 4th down, but an attempt to tie the game quickly with a bomb on the next play ended with ***John Abraham*** landing on Brees in the backfield for a 10-yard loss. That brought up 2nd and 20 as well as the two-minute warning. The pause in the action did Brees good. He settled down and completed his next five passes, finishing with an 18-yard touchdown pass to ***Marques Colston*** to bring his team to within a field



Grim Reaper, columnist for the *Death Valley Obituary*, heads to the Corral to watch the EFL Championship Game. Reaper loves his football team but otherwise despises human beings and purposely frightens them in order to steal their beer.

goal, trailing 34-31 with 1:03 left.

Gano and the Undertakers lined up for what was certainly their most important inside kick attempt of the year. Oddly enough, the sports editor of the *Virdeu Eviscerator*, the **Marquis de Sade**, who had placed a live beetle on its back an hour ago and had been quietly torturing it with salt and soda water ever since, chose that moment to speak to me.

“It’s poetic isn’t it Spats?” he said; the slightest curve upward at the right corner of his mouth indicating that he was probably smiling. “The team that attempted onside kicks for sport all season is now kicking for its very life.”

“COME ON COME ON COME ON COME ON PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE...” pleaded **Grim Reaper**, sitting forward and clutching his scythe with both hands as Gano ran toward the ball and hooped a bouncer directly at the Markham coverage team. There was a huge pile-up and when the referees finally uncovered the pile, it was Markham’s *DeAngelo Williams* who emerged with the pigskin.

"NNN00000000000000000!!!!!!!" screamed **Grim Reaper**. It was a bone-chilling and horrifying sound, possessing an inherent malignancy that caused the gallery empty almost to a man. When the pandemonium finally ended, only **Death, Grim Reaper**, me of course, and a passed-out **Lanny McDonald** remained in the room.

"WHY DID YOU HAVE TO GO AND DO THAT?" an exasperated **Death** asked. "YOU REALLY SCARED THE MORTALS. IF ANY OF THEM DIE FROM THAT WE'LL LOSE OUR JOBS!"

"I'M SORRY," answered **Grim Reaper**. "WE WERE JUST SO CLOSE THAT..." He suddenly stopped talking when he saw me sitting there.

"WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING HERE? ARE YOU NOT AFRAID OF US?"

"I am," I replied, "But my curiosity is killing me and I have to ask. What did you mean when you said that Drew Brees meant to throw that interception?"

"OH, THAT!" he said with what might have been demonic chuckle (it's hard to tell). "TYPICAL MORTAL BEHAVIOUR ACTUALLY!"

For the next 15 minutes or so, before the Police came to investigate reports of a monster in the Corral press gallery, **Grim Reaper** and **Death** proceeded to explain it *all* to me, with examples from history, known and unknown. It seems that when partnerships become extremely successful, egos become inflated and the partnership suffers (this happens all of the time with famous rock bands, by the way). In the case of the Undertakers, **Drew Brees** had become convinced that he (and he alone) was responsible for his team's incredible run to the Championship. His coach, **Chris Worthley**, felt that he had *made* Brees and that without him Brees would be nothing. It was a classic collision of over-sized egos and apparently it happens *all the time*. The mistake Brees and Worthley made was voicing their feelings to each other during the lead-up to the Championship. Worthley wanted to put the game in the hands of **Ryan Mathews** and through that set up advantageous passing situations for his quarterback in a similar way to what was happening in Markham with **Eli Manning**. Brees was insulted by this plan and said he didn't need the help. He wanted to throw the ball 50 times and win Gale Sayers Game MVP. They argued and hurtful things were said. **Grim Reaper** continued.....

"BREES THREW INTO DOUBLE COVERAGE TO PROVE THAT HE COULD DO IT. HIS MESSAGE TO HIS COACH WAS 'NOTHING CAN STOP ME SO JUST GIVE ME THE

BALL!' BUT WHEN IT WAS INTERCEPTED HE BECAME HUMILIATED AND WORTHLEY BECAME ANGRY. THEY FELL INTO THE TRAP OF TRYING TO SHOW UP EACH OTHER."

THE LAST WORD

When two 'Teams of Destiny' meet, only one is permitted to fulfil that destiny. The contestants in the Sixth EFL Championship Game both appeared, at times, destined to be immortalized through victory in the 'Hall of Champions' in Canton. For Death Valley their sign of destiny was a regular season of dominance so awesome that the possibility of defeat never entered the mind. For Markham, their sign of destiny was a post-season of perfection that saw their quarterback miraculously transform from Clark Kent into Superman. Both teams, in their own right, deserved to win it all; but in the end it was the team with the biggest heart that did.

The North Stars were determined from the before the season began to transform themselves from what they had been – permanent losers – to what they desired to become – league champions. Their will to change served them well when devising game plans to meet the challenges of the playoffs – nothing was impossible in the Markham playbook if it was what was required to win the game. The Undertakers were willing to change as well, but their identity had coalesced around one player – **Drew Brees**. His prohibitive success had trapped them into a predictable course of action. In the week leading up to the final, Undertakers' coach **Chris Worthley** told the press, "we do what we do and we do it better than anybody else. We're going to do it again in the final."

The Undertakers tried to do what they had been doing all year but Markham was ready for them; and while they didn't stop them completely, they slowed them down just enough. The Undertakers moved the ball, but not once more than 28 yards in a single play. Their defence tried to strip the ball, but forced no turnovers. By the time Death Valley met Markham in the final the North Stars knew the strengths and weaknesses of their own offence better than anybody and, more importantly, had learned to play within them: Eli was a deadly weapon to opponents but could explode in your hands and maim you, so handle him with care.

The Markham North Stars are now Champions of the EFL. Although I cannot claim that I called it exactly in advance, it nevertheless sounds right to me. Had it been the other way, it would have sounded right as well. Sounding right, regardless of the outcome, is what happens when two teams of destiny meet.

EFL ANNOUNCES MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS



OFFENSIVE M.V.P.



DREW BREES

**DEATH VALLEY
UNDERTAKERS**

Drew Brees set over 7 new EFL passing records, including highest passer rating at 137.3; passing yards in a season with 5,622; and TD passes in a season with 73. He completed 73% of his 586 pass attempts and led his team to a 15-1 record in the regular season and a berth in the Championship Game.



DEFENSIVE M.V.P.



DEMARCUS WARE

VIRDEN VIOLATORS

After spending the first 4 games of 2012 on Death Valley, where he was utilized sparingly, Ware was traded to the Violators where he became the league's premier pass rusher. His 21 sacks in 2012 stands as the new EFL single-season record. He also forced 3 fumbles, deflected 6 passes, and stuffed 3 runners.