

CONFERENCE

FINALS

2012 **EFL** 2012

February 17, 2013



EAST



WEST



NORTH



SOUTH



YORK EXCALIBURS

23



DEATH VALLEY

35



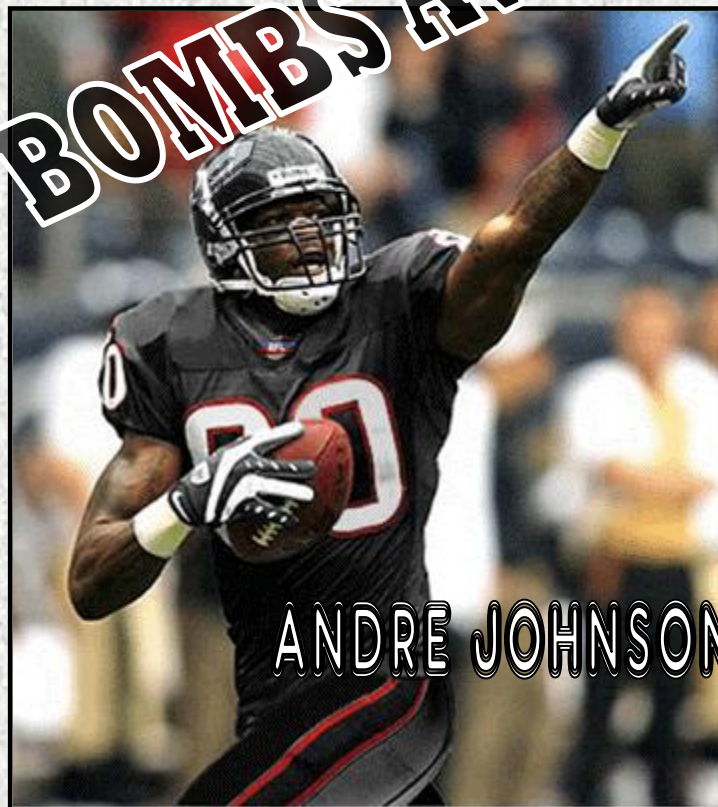
MARKHAM NORTH STARS

45



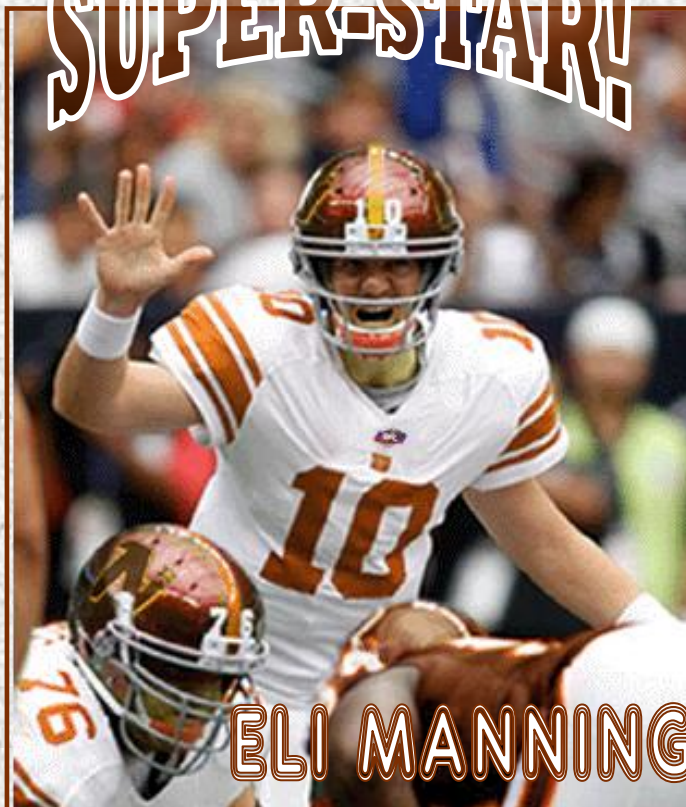
DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

24



ANDRE JOHNSON

Death Valley wide receiver *Andre Johnson* (left) points in the direction his team is going — UP! Markham QB *Eli Manning* (right) audibles ‘V’ for victory. These teams will meet in Garland.



ELI MANNING



Who was slick in the Conference Finals?

“BRYLCREEM” THE EFL’S FIRST SPONSOR

N
CONFERENCE



Eli Manning
QB
Markham
North Stars

13 of 19, 256 yards yards, 3 TDs, QB rating 150.8 Shut-up his critics.

N
CONFERENCE



Charles Tillman
CB
Markham North
Stars

7 Tackles and 1 very big interception and 47-yard return.



14-4-0

23

EFL

PACIFIC-ATLANTIC

FINAL



17-1-0

35

BREES BLOWS OVER YORK!

3 TD PASSES BY UNDERTAKERS' QB IN 2ND
HALF SHATTERS SWORDS!

EXCALIBUR OF THE GAME

Jason Babin

3 Tackles, 2 Sacks, 1 PD, 2 Hurries

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
York	6	3	7	7	-	23
Death Valley	0	14	7	14	-	35

UNDERTAKER OF THE GAME

Drew Brees

22 of 36, 352 yards, 3 TDs, 2 INTs

GAME SUMMARY: Gusting 30-40 mph winds at the Graveyard did not seem to bother **Drew Brees**. The league's leading MVP candidate threw TD passes of 41-yards to **Andre Johnson** and 38-yards to **Marques Colston** against the wind in the 4th quarter to boost his team to victory and earn a trip to Garland for the EFL Championship Game. The late surge wiped out a precarious 23-21 Excalibur lead, built on a York comeback of its own, in a game of ups and downs for both teams. York came out of the gate stronger with the stiff wind at its back but, while the powerful Death Valley offence stalled twice in the opening period, the Excaliburs could not take full advantage, settling for 3 **Blair Walsh** field goals on their first three possessions for a 9-0 lead. Much more quickly than they had fallen behind the Undertakers regained the lead on back-to-back touchdowns by half-back **Ryan Mathews**, who dived across the goal line from 1-yard away at the 6:51 mark to pull within 2 points; then broke through the York line into the space vacated by all 3 blitzing York linebackers and raced 30 yards to pay dirt to give the Undertakers a 14-9 lead at the 1:01 mark. The story at half time was how Brees had been held off the scoreboard, but he soon put to rest any thought of a potential shutout through the air on the very first play from scrimmage of the 3rd quarter – a beautifully thrown bomb down the right sideline that Johnson glided under in stride for a 60-yard TD. Trailing 21-9 the Excaliburs badly needed a touchdown to keep the game from getting away. Return specialist **Marc Mariani** gave his team a boost with a 51-yard kickoff return and **Tom Brady** finished off a 46-yard drive by threading the needle to **Michael Crabtree** in the end zone for a 9-yard TD pass. The score gave York a badly needed lift and when **Asante Samuel** intercepted Brees on Death Valley's next possession, one could feel the momentum swaying back to York. A pair of slants to Victor Cruz, one for 25 and the other for 22 yards, keyed an 86-yard drive that ended with Brady dumping the ball off to **Brandon Jacobs** in the end zone from 4 yards out. It was early in the 4th quarter and the Excaliburs were feeling agood about a 32-31 lead. It looked like it might be over for Death Valley when Brees was picked off again, this time by safety **Danieal Manning**, who returned it 22 yards to the DV 46 yard line. But 4 plays later, a failed attempt to convert 4th and inches at the 36 gave the ball back to the Undertakers with plenty of time left on the clock. With a second chance, Brees made no mistake, lofting a perfect spiral down the sideline into the teeth of the wind to Johnson for a 41-yard TD – the same play as the one that started the 2nd half. Desperately, York charged up the field but, facing 4th and 7 at the 19 with 3:18 remaining, opted to go for the 1st down instead of kicking a field goal. Brady's pass to **Anquan Boldin** was off target, setting up the final game-clinching score on Brees' third TD pass of the game.

QUOTES OF THE GAME

"I knew our game plan would work but of course I wasn't sure what the players were going to do on the field – ours and theirs. I thought Drew had his worst game of the year to be honest, but fortunately he made those two throws to Andre and our defence came up big in the 4th quarter when York had the wind. I knew we were going to win, but it took longer to clinch it than I thought it would." – *Undertakers' coach, Chris Worthley.*

"Damn, damn, damn! We had them and then we didn't have them then we had them and then we didn't! – *York coach, Jay Hammond.*

"The wind caught that ball when their safety picked it off. Probably shouldn't have thrown that ball into a zone like they were in. Andre ran the perfect route on those two touchdowns – all I did was put it in the air. We have one more to go then we can celebrate! – *Undertaker QB, Drew Brees.*



FAN RATING



FANS' THUMB UP

Brees Bombs to AJ



FANS' THUMB DOWN

Weather-beaten Brady!



titter

Dolf Lundgren @Undertaker666

Love hearing these whiny babies making excuses for Brady. #Brees blew him away!

Death @Afterlife

Great weather, great win! It's never felt so good to be undead! #

	1	2	3	4	Tot
2011 York (1-1)	6	3	7	7	23
2011 Death Valley (2-0)	0	14	7	14	35

1	10:30	York	FG Walsh 34 (9-33-4:21)	3-0
1	2:43	York	FG Walsh 53 (8-31-3:42)	6-0
2	10:35	York	FG Walsh 27 (10-47-4:47)	9-0
2	6:51	Death Valley	TD Mathews 1 run (Gano) (11-61-3:40)	9-7
2	1:01	Death Valley	TD Mathews 30 run (Gano) (6-65-1:35)	9-14
3	14:39	Death Valley	TD Brees 60 pass to Johnson (Gano) (1-60-0:16)	9-21
3	9:27	York	TD Brady 9 pass to Crabtree (Walsh) (9-54-5:07)	16-21
4	13:42	York	TD Brady 4 pass to Jacobs (Walsh) (11-86-5:59)	23-21
4	6:27	Death Valley	TD Brees 41 pass to Johnson (Gano) (5-64-2:20)	23-28
4	1:34	Death Valley	TD Brees 38 pass to Colston (Gano) (5-81-1:38)	23-35

York	Death Valley
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Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate	Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Brady	35	19	208	1	3	2	1	55.4	Brees	36	22	352	4	2	3	3	98.4

Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD	Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD
Jacobs	16	80	5.0	4	2	19	0	Mathews	10	72	7.2	5	3	30	2
Brady	6	30	5.0	3	1	10	0	McGahee	5	31	6.2	1	1	21	0
Turner	10	28	2.8	1	0	8	0	Cobb	1	27	27.0	1	1	27	0
Kerley	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	Brees	1	-1	-1.0	0	0	0	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD	Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Winslow	5	1	7	54	10.8	3	0	15	0	Gronkowski	6	0	7	86	14.3	6	1	26	0
Cruz	4	0	5	70	17.5	3	1	25	0	Johnson,A	6	0	9	128	21.3	3	2	60	2
Crabtree	3	0	8	35	11.7	3	0	19	1	Colston	4	0	5	67	16.8	4	1	38	1
Boldin	3	0	6	32	10.7	1	0	14	0	Mathews	4	0	9	43	10.8	2	0	15	0
Jacobs	2	0	2	6	3.0	1	0	4	1	Hernandez	2	0	6	28	14.0	1	0	20	0
Jones	1	0	2	7	7.0	0	0	7	0										
Kleinsasser	1	0	1	4	4.0	0	0	4	0										
Walker	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0										
Criner	0	0	2	0	0.0	0	0	0	0										
Turner	0	1	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0										

Fumbles	No	Rec	TD	Fumbles	No	Rec	TD
Goodwin	1	1	0	Wilson	1	1	0
Turner	1	0	0				
Brady	1	0	0				
Waters	0	1	0				
Winslow	0	1	0				

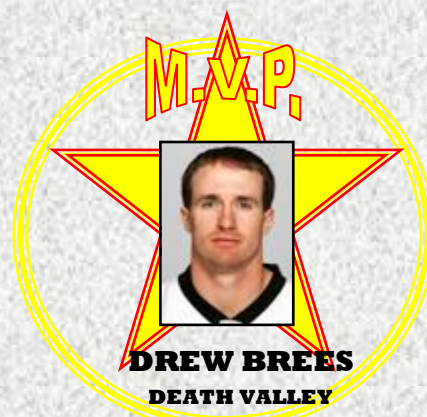
Kick Returns	No	Yds	Ave	Lg	TD	Kick Returns	No	Yds	Ave	Lg	TD
Mariani	2	70	35.0	51	0	Cobb	3	69	23.0	35	0
Herrera	1	0	0.0	0	0	Broyles	2	48	24.0	33	0
Brown	1	0	0.0	0	0						

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Ave	Lg	TD	Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Ave	Lg	TD
Mariani	1	0	9	9.0	9	0							

Kicking	Fg	Lg	Xp	Pts	Kicking	Fg	Lg	Xp	Pts
Walsh	3-3	53	2-2	11	Gano	0-0	0	5-5	5

Punting	No	Yds	Ave	Tb	20	Bk	Lg	Punting	No	Yds	Ave	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
								Mesko	1	40	40.0	0	0	0	40

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	INT	Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	INT
Clark	7	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Mayo	9	0	0	1	0	0	1-0
Urlacher	5	0	0	2	0	0	0-0	Moore,W	8	0	1	0	0	0	1-0
Gay	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Ryans	7	0	0	0	1	1	0-0
Babin	3	2	1	0	2	0	0-0	Wilson	6	0	1	0	0	0	0-9
Atkins	3	1	1	0	0	0	0-0	Long,C	4	0	0	1	1	0	0-0
Samuel	3	0	1	0	0	0	1-0	Johnson,C	3	0	0	1	2	0	0-0
Timmons	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0	Clayborn	3	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Miller	3	0	0	1	0	0	0-0	Brown,S	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Mathis	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	McCoy	2	1	0	1	0	1	0-0
Manning	2	0	1	0	0	0	1-22	Keisel	2	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Bolden	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Jenkins	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Jenkins	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Grimes	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Farrior	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Huff	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Patterson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Allen,J	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
								Smith	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
								Matthews	0	0	0	0	3	0	1-0



352 yards passing, 3 clutch TD passes to pull the game out of his hat.

	YOR	DVU
First Downs	22	25
Rushes	33-138	17-129
Passes	35-19-208	36-22-352
Sacked	1-12	3-20
Fumble	3	1
Penalties	6-45	5-54
Turnovers	4	2
Missed Tackles	8	5
Dropped Passes	2	0
Bad Passes	2	5
Passes 25+	1	4
Runs 10+	3	5
Blitzes	16	17
Time	34:53	25:07
Third Down	5-14	6-7
Fourth Down	0-2	0-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	5/2/2	2/1/0
Net Offense	334	461



13-4-1

45

EFL
CAN-AM

FINAL



15-3-0

24

STARS STUN DINOS!

TILLMAN INTERCEPTION ALIGNS STARS
WITH VICTORY!

NORTH STAR OF THE GAME

Eli Manning

13 of 19, 256 yards, 3 TDs

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Markham	3	14	21	7	-	45
Durham	7	10	7	0	-	24

LIZARD OF THE GAME

Reggie Bush

18 Carries, 88 yards, 1 TD

GAME SUMMARY: The North Stars blew open a first half deadlock with a 21-point outburst in the 3rd quarter that ended up propelling them all the way to the title game. Like it had all season long, Markham's good fortune started with a turnover. On the second play of the 2nd half, Markham line-backer **Sean Lee** got a hand up as Durham QB **Matt Schaub** tried to check down to **Calvin Johnson** and tipped the pass into the arms of corner **Charles Tillman**, who returned the ball 47 yards to the Durham 20 yard line. Three plays later **DeAngelo Williams** crossed the goal line from 3 yards out to give Markham a 24-17 lead. The break appeared to rattle the Thunder Lizards as they turned immediately to the ground game and may have sent the wrong play to the huddle in a rushed attempt to convert 4th down and 1 at their own 42 yard line. **Chris Canty** stuffed **Reggie Bush** for a 1-yard loss, setting up a 25-yard TD pass from **Eli Manning** to **Wes Welker** three plays later to make it 31-17. On their next possession the Lizards threw the dice again, sending **Reggie Bush** into the middle of the line on 4th and 1 from their own 29. This time **Jonathan Babineaux** stood him up at the line of scrimmage, giving the ball back to the Markham offence. Williams broke through the Durham line for an 11-yard gain then two plays later Manning hit Welker for a 14-yard pass to set up a 1-yard dive into the end zone by Williams. In the space of a little less than 9 minutes, the game had gone from a 17-17 tie to a 21-point Markham lead. With 4:22 left in the 3rd quarter, all was not lost for Durham, but they had to get a touchdown right away to have a chance. They got it courtesy of **Reggie Bush**, who carried the ball three straight times to cover the final 29 yards of an 85-yard drive and score on a 4-yard pitch as time expired in the 3rd frame. Moving into the final quarter trailing by 2 touchdowns, Durham needed a stop from their defence but the league's top rushing unit had other plans. After a couple of passes for 1st downs the North Stars handed the ball to Williams and **Jonathan Stewart**, who combined for 39 yards on 6 carries to break into the Durham end zone on Stewart's 13-yard run to break the will of the home team and their fans. Just an hour earlier, these two teams had been neck-and-neck in a battle of wills, with Durham forcing Markham to the air and the North Stars forcing Durham to the ground and both managing to put the ball into the end zone. **Jordy Nelson** continued his hot playoff run with 2 more TD receptions while Schaub scored with his feet on a 16-yard scramble and **Michael Bush** punched through the middle of the line for a 2-yard score. But the league's top turnover-generating defence during the regular season got a big one on a big stage and it tipped the balance. Markham goes on to Garland while Durham goes home.

QUOTES OF THE GAME

"This was a shock to me as much as anyone. Hey, I like my team, but after that first half I thought it would go down to the end. But we can be that kind of team – the kind of team that takes over a game like a pack of hungry dogs!" – *Markham coach, Darrin Jones.*

"What can I tell you? I f%\$#ed up. It's on me, okay. I take responsibility for those calls." – *Durham coach, George Kaldis.*

"I didn't see him there." – Durham QB, **Matt Schaub**, when asked why he threw the pass that Sean Lee tipped for an interception. "Everything is clicking for us right now. We're doing the little things right and we're getting the breaks. Correct that, we're making the breaks. There's a difference." – *Markham linebacker, Rob Ninkovich.*

"I've never been afraid of the grass here. A lot of people don't like it. I like it – I get traction here." – **DeAngelo Williams**, on playing at Jurassic Park.

FAN RATING



1/2

FANS' THUMB UP

Opportunistic Manning

FANS' THUMB DOWN

Durham's 2nd half meltdown

titter

KINGLIZARD7 @kinglizard7

I can't believe I actually wanted to see Philip Rivers in the game. #Lizards

Lanny McDonald @economistsunlm

Those two empty-net goals in the 3rd period were the difference in the game.

	1	2	3	4	Tot
2011 Markham (2-0)	3	14	21	7	45
2011 Durham (1-1)	7	10	7	0	24

1	10:08	Markham	FG Akers 22 (11-66-4:43)	3-0
1	4:31	Durham	TD Bush 2 run (Crosby) (14-84-5:32)	3-7
2	12:38	Markham	TD Manning 15 pass to Nelson (Akers) (9-61-3:19)	10-7
2	5:38	Durham	FG Crosby 36 (12-57-6:55)	10-10
2	4:29	Durham	TD Schaub 16 run (Crosby) (4-32-1:04)	10-17
2	1:41	Markham	TD Manning 69 pass to Nelson (Akers) (6-81-2:39)	17-17
3	13:14	Markham	TD Williams 3 run (Akers) (3-20-1:29)	24-17
3	8:15	Markham	TD Manning 25 pass to Welker (Akers) (4-41-2:15)	31-17
3	4:27	Markham	TD Williams 1 run (Akers) (5-29-2:12)	38-17
3	0:00	Durham	TD Bush 4 run (Crosby) (10-85-4:28)	38-24
4	9:53	Markham	TD Stewart 13 run (Akers) (9-64-4:59)	45-24

Markham									Durham								
Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate	Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Manning	19	13	256	3	0	3	0	150.8	Schaub	31	18	196	0	1	0	3	63.4
									Rivers	11	6	81	1	0	0	0	78.2
Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD		Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD	
Williams,D	21	97	4.6	7	3	13	2		Bush,R	18	88	4.9	6	2	23	1	
Stewart	10	22	2.2	2	1	13	1		Schaub	2	18	9.0	1	1	16	1	
Starks	2	8	4.0	0	0	5	0		Bush,M	3	7	2.3	2	0	5	1	
Leach	1	2	2.0	0	0	2	0										
Manning	2	-2	-1.0	0	0	0	0										

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD	Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Welker	6	0	9	92	15.3	6	1	25	1	Johnson	8	0	15	106	13.3	4	1	28	0
Nelson	3	0	3	95	31.7	3	1	69	2	Gates	6	1	7	73	12.2	4	0	22	0
Stewart	2	0	2	32	16.0	1	1	26	0	Bowe	3	0	6	32	10.7	1	0	14	0
Cook	1	0	2	20	20.0	1	0	20	0	Davis,V	3	0	7	30	10.0	1	0	19	0
Breaston	1	0	1	17	17.0	1	0	17	0	Gerhart	1	0	1	6	6.0	0	0	6	0
Spaeth	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	Bush,M	1	0	1	8	8.0	0	0	8	0
Leach	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0	Bush,R	1	0	4	15	15.0	1	0	15	0
										Bess	1	0	1	7	7.0	0	0	7	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	TD	Fumbles	No	Rec	TD
Nix	1	0	0	Rogers	0	1	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Ave	Lg	TD	Kick Returns	No	Yds	Ave	Lg	TD
McKnight	3	52	17.3	28	0	Hester	3	52	17.3	20	0
Nix	1	6	6.0	6	0						

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Ave	Lg	TD	Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Ave	Lg	TD
Welker	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	Decker	1	0	14	14.0	14	0

Kicking	Fg	Lg	Xp	Pts	Kicking	Fg	Lg	Xp	Pts
Akers	1-1	22	6-6	9	Crosby	1-1	36	3-3	6

Punting	No	Yds	Ave	Tb	20	Bk	Lg	Punting	No	Yds	Ave	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Podlesh	2	95	47.5	0	1	0	50	Ryan	3	150	50.0	0	1	0	52

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	INT	Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	INT
Lee	10	0	1	0	0	0	0-0	Wilson	16	0	0	3	0	1	0-0
Byrd	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Allen,J	6	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Tillman	7	0	0	0	0	0	1-47	Rogers	6	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ninkovich	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0	Lofton	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Clements	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Soliai	3	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
Cole	3	1	0	0	1	0	0-0	McCourtly	2	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Babineaux	3	1	0	0	0	0	0-0	Chancellor	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Abraham	2	1	0	0	1	0	0-0	Haggans	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Canty	2	0	0	1	2	0	0-0	Allen,R	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Reed	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0	Wootton	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Brown	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Manning	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hayden	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Lewis	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams,D	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Davis,D	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Robbins	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Dumervil	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ellis	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Sherman	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hagg	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Rodgers-Cro	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mays	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0	Smith	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Angerer	0	0	1	0	1	0	0-0								



256 yards in 13 completions and 3 TDs in 19 attempts defines efficiency.

	MAR	DTL
First Downs	22	24
Rushes	36-127	23-113
Passes	19-13-256	42-24-277
Sacked	0-0	3-21
Fumble	1	0
Penalties	8-70	6-33
Turnovers	1	1
Missed Tackles	3	6
Dropped Passes	0	1
Bad Passes	1	3
Passes 25+	3	1
Runs 10+	4	3
Blitzes	14	14
Time	28:34	31:26
Third Down	9-13	4-13
Fourth Down	0-0	1-3
Red Att/Td/Fg	5/4/1	3/3/0
Net Offense	383	369



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – I love Starbucks coffee and I find the servers a touch more refined than the ones, for instance, in Dunkin Donuts or McDonalds. Did I just call them *servers*? Sorry, I meant *Baristas*. See what I mean about refined? Anyway, lately Starbucks seems to be cozying up to me more. First it started with the *Barista* asking me for my name to put on my cup whenever I order an over-priced latté. I never tell them my real name, of course, because it's embarrassing – I usually just say, "Number four." When they pause and look at me with a puzzled expression, I explain that I was the fourth child of an accountant. Very rarely do any of these poor souls get the joke; so to relieve their growing consternation and the growing line-up behind me I usually say at that point, "Bob," which prompts a relieved smile and a helpful reminder that my drink will be ready at the bar. So last Monday I noticed that the Baristas were wearing name tags – with names like Samantha, Matthew, Ashley and Kiara. I guess that's fair – if they want my name they should tell me theirs. But why the sudden change?

"It builds better relationships with our customers," Samantha informed me.

"Really? What kind of relationships?" I asked her.

That question seemed to stump her for a moment. After a pause, she smiled and said, "That's funny, Bob. Customer service relationships, of course."

"Of course," I answered with a smile, and thanked her for the coffee.

The company thinks that we will want to buy their coffee more frequently if we feel close to the people working at the store and of course they are right. But I hate it because it is now far too common to see people, usually in front of me, chatting with the *Barista* about personal matters, theirs, that have nothing to do with buying a coffee. *Who cares if you're renovating your apartment and can't decide whether to purchase ceramic or porcelain tiles – I need my Grande Bold!* This friendly corner store thing has got to go! Starbucks should be for serious coffee drinkers and serious coffee drinkers are almost always in a hurry, whether they have something to do or not.

JURASSIC PUKE

I didn't see this one coming! I am sure that few others, apart from Jimmy the Geek, did either. Everything we thought we knew about Markham and Durham got blown away in a blowout upset that saw the North Division Champion Thunder Lizards melt down in a 45-24 Conference Final loss to the North Stars. You know it is an auspicious day for coach **Darrin Jones** when his QB, **Eli Manning** throws 3 TD passes, doesn't throw an interception against the team that led the league in that category, and his defence holds **Calvin Johnson** and **Dwayne Bowe** to zero touchdowns. All those things actually happened, and more!

From the very start, this game was different. The Thunder Lizards, determined to stop the Markham running game that trampled them in Week 15, routinely brought a safety into the box throughout the first half. This curtailed the Markham ground game but it opened up space in the secondary that Manning exploited with precision, connecting on TD passes of 15 and 69 yards to receiver **Jordy Nelson**. On the other side, while Markham focused primarily on the Durham passing attack, **Michael Bush** dived through the line for a 2-yard TD run and **Matt Schaub** scrambled 16 yards for another to account for the Dinosaurs two major scores. So, after two quarters, both defences had taken away the other's strength but had given up points to their weakness, resulting in a 17-17 tie.

The game looked like it might be a classic in the making but it took a sharp turn in another direction beginning with a tipped pass. On Durham's second play from scrimmage to start the 3rd quarter, Schaub checked down early from his primary receiver and looked for **Calvin Johnson**. Markham linebacker **Sean Lee** leaped as Schaub released the pass and got a piece of the ball, enough to divert it into the hands of corner **Charles Tillman**, who picked it off and ran it back 47 yards to the Durham red zone. Three plays later **DeAngelo Williams** was in the end zone for the go-ahead touchdown.

The reaction of Durham coach, **George Kaldis** to the Schaub interception bore a distinct resemblance to that of another oft-thwarted Greek coach. Kaldis threw his clipboard on the ground, ripped his headphones off his ears and charged over to Schaub, who was walking with his head bowed to the bench. There was a brief exchange then Schaub walked away. Kaldis followed, hitting him on the head with a playbook the whole time and finally disengaging from him with a roundhouse kick of a field microphone that sounded to a national television audience like a softball hitting a wall of egg cartons.

From that point onward the Durham game plan entered the twilight zone. Kaldis suddenly stopped calling plays and simply waved his approval whenever the assistant offensive coordinator made a suggestion. At one moment a microphone captures him barking to his assistant: “tell him to do what the f&^k he wants because he’s going to do it anyway!”

On their ensuing drive, Durham faced 4th and 1 at its own 42. As is standard practice in any short yardage situation, the coordinator looked to the coach for direction. With Kaldis still in “auto-wave” mode, the assistant mistook it for an order for the offensive unit to stay on the field. They did and **Reggie Bush** was stuffed for a loss by tackle **Chris Canty**. That set up a 25-yard TD pass to **Wes Welker** and a 31-17 Markham lead.

When Kaldis realized what had happened he snapped. On the next series, facing 4th and 1 at his own 29 he suddenly began to cackle uproariously and physically restrained punter **Jon Ryan**, preventing him from going onto the field. “Go look for the ‘h’ in your name, Jon, football’s being played here!” he barked. “Go for it, boys! They can’t stop us a second time!”

But they did stop the Thunder Lizards a second time, with **Jonathan Babineaux** standing up **Reggie Bush** for no gain. Two minutes later the North Stars took a 21-point lead on a 1-yard dive by Williams, forcing the Durham coach to re-think his position. The dawning of the realization that in the space of just 9 minutes his team had thrown away a trip to the Championship Game caused coach Kaldis to puke immediately, right there on the sideline.

When the retching was finally over, Kaldis collected himself long enough to direct a final touchdown drive, but it was not nearly enough. The Markham Machine went into full throttle putting the finishing touches on another huge upset.

“Oh, I’ve been there,” Jones said to the Press afterwards when asked if he had anything to say to the Thunder Lizards. “I’ve been on the losing end of things, that’s for sure. It’s not a good feeling, so I can sympathize with George.”



Undertakers’ coach, **Chris Worthley** is dressed for the weather at the Graveyard and for play-calling security. Worthley took no chances with his game plan after an accident by his rival coach tipped the balance in the Undertakers’ favour.

Strictly speaking, Jones is not correct. Certainly he has lost many times before.....many, many times before; but he has never lost a playoff game before, nor experienced the pain of being good, but not good enough. Prior to 2012, the North Stars have always lost as a bad team, not as a good team. As a good team in the playoffs they are 2-0. Two weeks from now in Garland, they may get the chance to actually experience losing as a good team, or maintain their perfect playoff record and achieve the ultimate success.

THE COLD, COLD HAND OF DEATH

If the chance of Death Valley ever getting awarded an EFL Championship Game is equivalent to a snowball’s chance in Hell, then the chances are very good indeed, if “Hell” means Hell, Michigan, home of the Undertakers that is. The Excaliburs can be forgiven for thinking that the Graveyard, where the Undertakers play their games, is the coldest place on Earth. Although empirically speaking it is not, it may have felt that way when 30-40 mph winds turned a -6 degree day into the equivalent of a -35 degree day during Conference Championship weekend. Why anybody would place a stadium in the middle of a supernatural vortex straddling the worlds of the living and the dead is nobody’s guess – because nobody knows the answer. It is simply there, serving purposes unfathomable to the human mind in addition to hosting EFL football games.

The weather at the Graveyard was balmy this week when compared with last week’s low of -56 degrees, but it was still too cold for the opposition and the Network camera crews. **Chris Worthley**, architect of this mess, was well-prepared for it, dressed head-to-toe in mountain climbing snow gear with his face covered. Sleep-deprived coach of the opposition Excliburs, **Jay Hammond** was not. But then, by game time, Hammond was not in his right mind and likely didn’t notice the biting cold wind blistering his manic features. How he got to that state requires stepping back in time a week....

Flush with the success of his team’s victory over Virden, as well as a few celebratory drinks, Hammond revealed that he would continue his after-hours work in the film room, but even more than before. Excalibur beat writer **Merlin the Magician**, writing for The

Round Table Chronicle, reports that in the week leading up to the Conference Final against Death Valley, Hammond rarely left the York training facility and slept at his desk on a mountain of binders stuffed with play designs. Following a strict diet of coffee, donuts, pizza and Pendragon Pale Ale, while working 18 hours a day, Hammond started to have visions even more elaborate than his now infamous "snow dream" prior to the Quarter Finals. His progressively more incoherent press conferences throughout the week revealed that a bold, but now familiar, game plan was in store for the Conference Final.

"We are swords and we attack the enemy like a slashing blade!" He shouted at a gathering of reporters on Friday afternoon. He made motions with his hands as he spoke: "We slash them (diagonal slicing motion) and we cut them (horizontal cutting motion) and we don't stop until they're DEAD!"

An astute reporter from Crystal Ball TV (CBTV) in Avalon asked Hammond if, by demonstrating those particular motions, he was suggesting that the Excaliburs would be throwing more of their trademark slants and crossing patterns against the Undertakers. Hammond looked surprised, then angry.

"Security!" he barked. "Arrest and search that reporter! He has our playbook!"

Hammond's mental state deteriorated further by the weekend. He absent-mindedly left a 6-inch binder with the title 'SECRET PLAYS' in a washroom stall at the Graveyard on Saturday. It was returned to him on Sunday morning by an employee of the Undertakers who apologized for the delay, explaining that, "we had to look through it first to see who it belonged to."

Hammond called an emergency meeting of his Staff of the Round Table and asked them what he should do about the security breach. To a man they suggested scrapping the game plan, in particular the new plays drawn up by Hammond himself – the 'Quintuple Slant,' the 'Quintuple Cross,' the 'Double Slant-Cross Read Option' and the intricate 'Hook and Slant' and its cousin, the 'Hook and Cross.' "They won't be expecting us to go basic," offered Offensive Coordinator, **Sir Galahad**, reflecting the consensus.

Hammond appeared to listen attentively at first, but lost his focus, looked up at the ceiling, and suddenly threw up his hands and yelled, "No more! They will be expecting us to change the plan! The last thing the Undertakers will expect is for us to use the very plays that we know they know. If I were Chris Worthley, I would suspect a trap. A binder with secret plays falls into my lap the night before the big game? Sure, that happens all the time – NOT! If my visions are correct, Worthley is, at this very moment, planning to stop the outside pass. We've got him where we want him, *Bwahaha!*"

By game time, Hammond appeared to be in a state of delirium. He took the field wearing slippers, tracks pants, and an over-sized fur coat, waving a wooden sword. He had developed play signals using the sword: slash meant slant; cut meant cross; stab meant run. The direction of any of those motions would indicate the direction of the play. On defence he had but one motion – parry – which meant STOP. It was simple and easy, but unfortunately not very discreet.

Indeed, for most of the game the Undertakers defence played like they knew what plays York was going to run; and for most of the game York stuck with the same game plan they always had. The talent of **Victor Cruz** and the experience of **Tom Brady** kept the offensive plan, such as it was, from being a disaster; but even they could not rescue it entirely. On the defensive side, the universal STOP sign seemed to work well. Middle linebacker **Brian Urlacher** looked at the personnel on the field and called the defence in the huddle. Notably, it was effective enough to keep **Drew Brees** off the scoreboard in the first half but not effective enough to keep running back **Ryan Matthews** from finding the end zone twice to give the Undertakers a 14-9 lead at half time.

Even with the lead, Death Valley looked like a team that could be beaten on this day. **Chris Worthley**, bundled up in his Mount Everest finest, was inscrutable on the sideline, but his lack of interaction with Brees suggested he was not happy with the way the game was developing. The 60-yard bomb down the sideline to **Andre Johnson** on the first play from scrimmage in the 2nd half seemed to improve the general mood as Worthley exchanged a "low five" with Brees as he passed him on the way to the bench. "That's more like it! Bombs away, Baby!" he is heard saying. But the celebration did not last long. York finally got its act together offensively, thanks to a handful of well-executed plays by **Brandon Jacobs** and **Michael Crabtree**, and a pick-off of Brees by **Asante Samuel** that set the stage. The Undertakers' lead was wiped out by York in the 3rd quarter and they found they were trailing 23-21 by the start of the 4th and about to head into a 35mph wind. Brees was picked off again, this time by safety **Danieal Manning**, on a long pass over the middle blown off course by a fatefully timed gust.

It looked, despite the advantages of home field and a pre-game peek at the Excaliburs' game plan, like Death Valley's destiny would be as black as their jerseys. But in a decision that will be brutally second-guessed by York fans for at least the next year, the Excaliburs forewent the field goal from 53 yards with the wind at their backs and attempted to convert 4th and inches at the Undertakers' 36. If it had been just the decision to try and convert 4th down I might have offered a defence for it. But the decision to walk away from points coupled with the choice of play puts me on the side of the Monday Morning Quarterbacks.

Making frantic, short slashing motions with his wooden sword, Hammond called for a short slant, the 15th one of the day, hoping to catch the Undertakers' in a run defence. But while the defence hedged their bets and lined up with 9 men in the box, the coverage was tight, as it had been most of the day, just in case. Brady's pass, hurried by a blitzing **DeMeco Ryans** and pushed by the wind, went too far and York surrendered possession on downs. With the adrenaline of a narrow escape coursing through his veins, Brees uncorked what might arguably be greatest pass of all time in a playoff game. Throwing directly into the wind he hurled the pigskin high and 50 yards down field, hitting **Andre Johnson** in the end zone for a 41-yard TD pass. The hybrid moaning-chanting-screaming sound that passes for cheering at the Graveyard hit decibel levels never heard before, multiplying the creepiness factor to

a degree that caused family dogs to stand up and their fur to bristle in living rooms across America. Poor corner **Rahsean Mathis** looked flabbergasted after the catch; he had played underneath, not expecting a fly down the sideline into the teeth of the wind.

The game was not over, but it was over; that play, brazenly defiant under the conditions, may have been its defining moment. It was the kind of play that **Tom Brady** knew deep in his heart he wouldn't match on this day. The spirit suddenly left the Excaltors sideline; in a supernatural dimension like the Graveyard normal eyes can see such things and everyone saw the shimmering sword put on its scabbard and evaporate while their temporarily insane coach loped up and down the length of the bench crying, "Rally, rally, rally, men! Rally, rally!" but to no avail.

In the aftermath of this crazy game I was left with the indelible impression that this is **Drew Brees** and Death Valley's year.

MVP SEARCH

Once again it is time for members of the Affiliated Press (AP) to put on their thinking caps and ponder the question about who contributed the most to his team's success in 2012 on offence and on defence. On offence, it doesn't look like much of a competition. Nevertheless, some will try really hard to justify, in their own minds, *not* voting for **Drew Brees** as Most Valuable Player. Let me go on the record and serve notice that if anyone other than Brees finishes at the top of the Offensive MVP voting I will refer to that player forever as the Most Voted Player, and save the word "valuable" for the Undertakers' signal-caller.

Why would anyone *not* vote for Brees? – Because he and his coach are not fondly thought of in cities where big chunks of his TD pass record were made. In South Carolina, for instance, where AP writer **Johnny Rebb** has devoted much space in his column to denouncing Brees' record, calling it "*as much a blemish as a badge*." In Commonwealth as well, where **Patrick Henry's** old-fashioned sense of honour caused him to castigate Brees, in archaic terms not readily comprehensible to the average sports fan, when he wrote: "*He is a talented rogue whose 'scoundrelly ways mimic and nourish the narcissism of his blackguard overlord, Count Worthley.*" And in Mission Viejo, where the highly spirited **Michael S. Hickenbottom** of the Orange County Register recently wrote: "*Without a doubt, Brees gets my vote for Biggest Asshole of the Year, but I'm not sure he was more valuable to his team than Matt Stafford of Virden was.*"

Running up the score in advantageous situations against weak opponents will continue to be an accusation that Brees, Worthley, and their defenders will have difficulty deflecting for as long as his records remain on the books; and that will be a very, very long time. But, as **Arpin Plunderflunder** of FootballOutriders.Org pointed out in his post-season analysis of Brees in his feature article entitled, 'One for the Record Books: "*An objective situational analysis of the 73 TD passes thrown by Drew Brees reveals that only 9 were indisputably thrown unnecessarily in so-called 'garbage time' – that leaves 64 that were thrown in situations where the outcome of the game, theoretically, was still in doubt. Granted, an argument can be made that against certain opponents, the game was in fact out of reach much earlier; but even taking those opponents into account, that adds just 3 more for a total of 12 superfluous touchdown passes. 73-12 = 61. That adjusted number of 61 not only shatters the previous EFL record of 36, it demolishes the old NFL record of 49. I think it's time for some people to take emotion out of the equation and acknowledge that we have just witnessed the best single-season quarterback performance of all time.*"

There really is no valid argument to be made against Brees as Offensive MVP, especially with the Undertakers marching nearly unopposed into the title game. But as my old debating team coach, Professor Willowby liked to say: "*Argument is the lifeblood of the rational mind and criticism its heartbeat.*"

Running with the theme that nobody should win anything unopposed, I present this year's candidates for Offensive MVP and offer my comments about why each one of them is worthy of the league's top individual honour.

Drew Brees (DVU) – If setting 7 new EFL passing records, including the most prestigious TD pass records (season and single game) and passing yardage records (season and single game), isn't enough to impress; then consider that his team finished with the best record in the league (15-1) and scored an astonishing 625 points. The Death Valley offence netted 477 yards per game and Brees was responsible, on average, for 342 of those, or 72% of his team's total net offence. He spread the ball all over the field while completing more passes than any other QB in the history of the league – reflected poignantly in the fact that three of his receivers had more than 70 receptions and five of them caught over 10 TD passes. In a game that starts with the guy behind center, Brees finished off all comers in true MVP-style.

Matt Stafford (VV) – The first year starter transformed a perennially weak Virden team into a surprise contender much earlier than most expected. His 5015 yards passing and 45 TD passes would have been new EFL records if not for the supernatural output of his Western nemesis, Brees. The beneficiary of a deep, if unspectacular, receiving corps and a just-good-enough-for-primetime running game, Stafford had some tools to work with but also made everyone around him better, including the defence. If you believe the Violators were bad to begin with, then perhaps Stafford really was this year's MVP.

Tom Brady (YOR) – The savvy vet rebounded from a disappointing 2011 campaign and led York to its first playoff berth. He set a personal best in passing yards, breaking the 4,000-yard barrier with 4068 yards, and threw 33 TD passes, just 3 fewer than his old league record of 36. At the same time, he had a lot of help, operating behind the league's top offensive line and throwing to talented wide receivers. He did a lot to help his 13-3 team, but perhaps could have done more.

Aaron Rodgers (SBE) – Rodgers had a quiet year by elite quarterback standards but that is partly because he was not asked to carry the team on his shoulders. When he was called to duty, he posted impressive numbers, throwing for 4169 yards and 27 TD passes

while rushing for 6 more in leading Scarborough to a 14-2 record and the South Division title. An indisputable talent, the overflow of talent around him may have overshadowed his contribution.

Ray Rice (SBE) – One of the reasons Aaron Rodgers tends to get overlooked in the MVP discussion is because of the Blue Eagles' tailback, who led the league with 2065 total yards from scrimmage. His 13 TDs (12 rushing, 1 receiving) often came in red zone situations where the going is tougher and touchdowns make the difference between an average team and a great team.

Cam Newton (CHI) – His passing numbers were pedestrian, with a mere 2784 yards through the air, 19 TD passes to 12 interceptions, and an unimpressive 84.3 QB rating. But Newton also ran for 837 yard and 17 touchdowns to lead his team in both rushing and scoring. Considering his supporting cast, or complete lack thereof, keeping his team in the playoff race until the final week was a phenomenal achievement.

Larry Fitzgerald (COW) – There were receivers with more catches, more yards, and more TDs, but there were none who carried a team and its quarterback for 16 games like Fitzgerald did. Facing double-coverage on a routine basis, he still caught 87 passes for a 15.7 yard average and scored 14 touchdowns. He made an erratic Joe Flacco look good and put the Corn Kings in the playoffs.

Evan Mathis (MAR) – Markham's league-leading running game had a secret weapon in their left guard, who graded out as one of the top run-blockers in Benny Clamp's 'Road-Grader Grades' episode of his weekly TV sports journal, *Crush*. Nick-named 'the Plough' by his teammates, Mathis rarely missed a block and also graded near the top of the league in pass blocking.

Alex Smith (LAK) – Hardly noticed in the tempest of controversy swirling around the Knights' defensive misfortunes was the steady play of their quarterback. With 3738 yards passing and 31 TD passes to just 5 interceptions, Smith was the quiet leader of the team and would have gained wider acclaim if not for an undisclosed injury late in the season that limited him in the final 3 weeks.

BEST OF THE REST: A few notables stood out in bad situations, or were over-shadowed by teammates. Mohave tight end **Jimmy Graham** set a league record for receptions with a bug-eyed 117 for 1193 yards and 6 TDs, but would have had to catch three times that many to make his team respectable. League rushing title winner, Cowtown running back **Maurice Jones-Drew** cracked the 2,000 total yard mark with 1640 yards on the ground and 363 through the air while drawing a lot of attention from opposing defences, but only managed to score 6 touchdowns. Durham wide receiver **Calvin Johnson** earned the nickname 'Megatron' for his superhuman plays, posting 85 receptions for an 18.2 yard average and 14 TDs; but working alongside **Dwayne Bowe** can have that effect. Finally, Death Valley tight end **Rob Gronkowski** played the leading support role in Drew Brees' epic passing achievements this year and deserves, at least, the Best Supporting Player Award.

DEFENSIVE MVP

As usual, there is no clear-cut top defender in this year's class unless you are the type who looks at sacks as the number one sign of defensive impact. If that is the case, the new EFL sack leader, Virden's **DeMarcus Ware**, is the logical choice. Certainly, he is one of the good ones, but there are many to choose from and here are the best:

DeMarcus Ware (VV) – After a slow start to his season in Death Valley, Ware exploded after being traded to Virden, notching 21 sacks in 12 games with the Violators to set a season record. He also forced 3 fumbles and caused 12 hurried throws. As a pass rusher he was elite, but his one-dimensionality and inconsistency might make him less valuable than his sack numbers suggest.

Terrell Suggs (SBE) – Whether at defensive end or outside line-backer, Suggs dominated. With 74 tackles, 13 sacks, 18 hurried throws, 7 run stuffs and an unprecedented (for a lineman) 11 deflections, he did it all on one of the league's top overall defences.

Darrelle Revis (SBE) – Not a standout in any single category, his effectiveness as a shutdown corner lies more in what was not done against him than anything else. He represented addition by subtraction. Playing nearly every single down, opposing quarterbacks attempted just 50 passes in his direction, completing only 29 of those. He also picked off 4 passes, returning one for a TD.

Jared Allen (DTL) – Finishing with 16 sacks, 19 hurried throws and 77 tackles, Allen made his mark as a pass rusher but also did the other things expected of a top lineman and did it cleanly – getting penalized just once for 5 yards all season. He forced 5 fumbles, stuffed 4 runs and picked off 2 passes, and his dominant presence on the line allowed the linebackers to drop back into pass coverage.

Cam Chancellor (DTL) – This unheralded star was put to the test frequently but rose to the occasion with a stingy 55.4% completion percentage against him, 5 deflections, 70 tackles and a league-leading 6 interceptions. He seemed to make the big plays when the defence needed it. Critics say he got some help from the pressure brought to bear on the QB by the Durham front four.

Troy Polamalu (GWG) – The mainstay of the Gladiators' defence had another fine year made more impressive by the lack of help around him. With so many easy targets elsewhere, opponents did not test him often but he still finished tied for third in deflected passes with 11, intercepted 3 balls, and made 72 tackles while taking off just 26 plays all season.

Derrick Johnson (COW) – The leader of the league's most efficient defence during the regular season was a huge presence at the line of scrimmage with a league-leading 23 stuffs and stuff yardage, knocking back running backs a total of 42 yards. He rounded out an All Pro season with 132 tackles, 10 pass deflections, 1 sack, 1 interception and 3 forced fumbles.

Jason Pierre-Paul (ICC) – If the Cubs had won even a handful of games instead of just one we would all be talking about this stud defensive end who posted line-backer type numbers with 129 tackles and 14 stuffs, while also challenging for the sack title through 13 weeks, finishing with 14 after being shutout in the final 3 games. He added 6 forced fumbles, tying for second in the league.

Haloti Ngata (CHI) – Whether swallowing up running backs or knocking down quarterbacks, Ngata dominated the middle of the line of scrimmage all year, regardless of the opponent. His 68 tackles are high for an interior lineman but impress even more because of double-teams and the tendency to run away from him. 4 sacks, 15 hurries, 9 stuffs and 2 forced fumbles round off a nice season.

Jason Babin (YOR) – A consistent pass-rushing force throughout the year, Babin came on strong in the final four games and looked poised to win the sack title before Ware's outrageous 11-sack storm in the final 3 weeks. Not as strong against the run, his fury in the backfield and 18 sacks, 18 hurries and 5 forced fumbles made up for it and helped put York's defence in the top five.

BEST OF THE REST: York's **Geno Atkins** posted 9 sacks to lead all interior linemen but was not otherwise as impressive as his high profile counterpart, Ngata. Chino's **James Harrison** was probably an injury away from MVP – his 10 sacks and 9 forced fumbles in just 10 games bears mentioning, even if does not bear a vote. His teammate **Julius Peppers** led the league in hurried passes with 33 but most of his 12 sacks came against lower tier teams. Cowtown's shutdown corner **Brandon Flowers** toiled in the shadow of "Revis Island" all year. Less respected than his star rival he was tested often by the league's best receivers but allowed just 51.8% of passes to be completed against him, while deflecting 10 passes and intercepting 4. Garland safety **Eric Weddle** received a lot of press attention for his improved play and leadership, posting 4 interceptions and deflecting 11 passes; but like the rest of the Mustangs he seemed to get winded down the stretch. Finally, I need to point out that second year defensive tackle **Phil Taylor** of the woeful Patriots quietly posted 89 tackles, 4 sacks, 18 hurried passes, 8 stuffs and 1 pass deflection. I say "quietly" because nobody tends to notice anybody on a defence that surrenders an average of 34 points a game; but he is somebody to look out for, along with rookie safety **Mark Barron**, down the road when the Pats return from purgatory.

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JIMMY'S CHAMPIONSHIP PICKS

At 'The Corral' in Garland

DEATH VALLEY versus MARKHAM (line – UNDERTAKERS by 2)

BACKGROUND: These teams did not face each other in 2012. Under current management, Death Valley has the historical edge with a 31-3 victory over the North Stars in 2011. Markham sported a 1-2 record against them from 2008 to 2010 when the Undertakers were the Ringgold Crimson Hawks.

WHEN DEATH VALLEY HAS THE BALL: The Undertakers have not come out of their standard 2-tight end set even once in the post-season. Why would they? They have two of the best pass-catching tight ends in football and one of them can block too. Traditionally a running formation, the 2-TE set is home base for the dreaded Death Valley passing attack. But with two dangerous safeties in the Markham secondary covering "the Twins", don't expect Chris Worthley to lean as heavily on the pass as he has thus far in the post-season. The Undertakers will not shy away from the run despite a deep Markham line that has held its own at the line of scrimmage. In fact, you can bank on seeing a much more balanced play selection in an attempt to put Markham off guard.

WHEN MARKHAM HAS THE BALL: Despite 5 TD passes, no picks, and a red hot 151 passer rating for Eli Manning in the playoffs, the Stars have been running the ball more than ever this post-season. This seems to be working well for Manning, if not as much for the running game itself, so you can expect more of the same – especially against a Death Valley defensive line more suited to rushing the passer than stopping the rush. Stay-at-home lineman Brett Keisel will see more action than usual in an effort to contain DeAngelo Williams and Jonathan Stewart. Expect the North Stars to take their sweet time when they have the ball.

HOW I SEE IT: This game is going to be much closer than many people think. The prevailing wisdom that Drew Brees will finish off the best season of all time for a quarterback with a slam dunk victory over the talented but flawed North Stars and their "shucks-I'm-just-happy-to-be-here" coach warrants some reconsideration. Those who have fallen into the trap of underestimating Markham are now at home or are a little lighter in the wallet. The root of Markham's deception lies in their defence, which does not overawe anybody at first glance, but which gives a full effort and attacks the ball on every play. If Eli had been less generous in giving the ball away, it's possible that Markham's 38 regular season takeaways would have been enough to win them the North Division title outright while giving their post-season opponents greater warning of what was in store. Having said that, Brees has made many great defences look ordinary or incompetent this season, so it is not a safe bet to assume that the North Stars will steal the ball from him. I think the players on both sides will likely perform within expectations and that the difference will boil down to game plans and in-game adjustments. In a proverbial chess match with some very powerful pieces on the board, Drew Brees gets my edge for being the best passer in a passer's game. **PICK: DEATH VALLEY**