

2010



2010

CONFERENCE FINALS EDITION

February 13th, 2011



REDEEMED!

Running back, Chris Johnson holds his arms up to a silent crowd at Dragonmount after scoring his second TD early in the 2nd quarter to give Pickering a 14-0 lead. Johnson gained 200 yards rushing and scored 3 TDs to power the Spartans' offence in a 28-9 drubbing of the previously unbeaten Florida Dragons. The Spartans have won 14 in a row after losing to Florida in Week Four. They will face Charleswood in their first ever trip to the EFL Championship Game.



Who was slick in the Conference Finals?

"BRYLCREEM" THE EFL'S OLDEST SPONSOR



Chris Johnson
RB
Pickering Spartans

200 yds rushing, 12 yds rec, 3 TDs to lead his team to Championship.



Jason Taylor
OLB
Pickering Spartans

7 tackles, 2 sacks, 2 stuffs, 2 def to lead 'D' at crucial moments.



CAN-AM CONFERENCE



SPECTACULAR SPARTANS SLAY DRAGONS!

200 YARDS, 3 TDs FOR C.J. / RODGERS SACKED 5 TIMES



PICKERING

28



FLORIDA

9

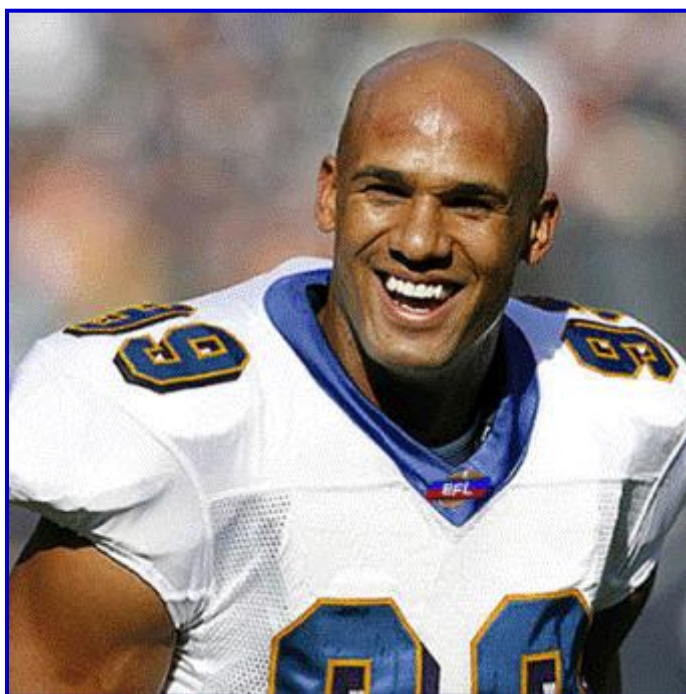
**M
V
P**

Chris Johnson – Pickering

"We knew we could beat them. We believe in ourselves. We believe in God. The Lord was in my shoes today – no way some fire-breathing cat gonna catch me!"



Jason Taylor (RIGHT) has reason to smile. Plucked from struggling Markham to bolster a weak line-backing corps, the Pickering Defensive MVP bagged Aaron Rodgers twice, batted down a pair of passes, and stuffed Jonathan Stewart on 4th down at the 1 yard line.



FLORIDA – The doubting is over. The Pickering Spartans certified their claim to elite status at football's highest level with a stunning triumph over the EFL's gold standard – the previously unbeaten Florida Dragons. They did not simply win the game, they dominated the game; leaving no doubt at the end of 60 minutes which team deserved to advance to the EFL Championship Game two weeks from now in Durham.

For Florida, the loss was a devastating letdown after 17 weeks of perfection. During that period, the Dragons built a myth of invincibility upon the foundation of two consecutive Gale Sayers Trophy wins in the previous two years. They had only to immolate the upstart Spartans in the Can-Am Conference Final to get into position for their third. They had beaten Pickering once already, in overtime, on the road in the regular season. This time they were at home, with history on their side – the Dragons had never lost a home playoff game.

It did not take long for the Dragons to realize they would be in for the fight of their lives. Pickering elected to receive after winning the toss and proceeded to fire-walk 71 yards on 9 plays straight through the top-ranked Florida defence to get on the scoreboard with a 3-yard screen pass from **Brett Favre** to **Chris Johnson** for a TD. It was the first time all year a team had scored a TD on the opening drive against the Dragons and it had a ready and noticeable effect on the atmosphere at Dragonmount.

Florida did not have an immediate answer, going three-and-out on their first possession. Pickering took over again and moved the ball from their 27 yard line to the Florida 38, where they elected to pooch punt on 4th down. The Dragons took over at their own 10 yard line and moved the ball tentatively to their 37 before disaster struck. **Aaron Rodgers** fired a ball across the middle that got tipped by **David Harris** and intercepted by safety, **Morgan Burnett**, who returned it 39 yards to the Florida 6 yard line. One play later, Johnson was in the end zone for a TD after bursting through a hole created by **Kris Dielman** and **Jeff Saturday**. Early in the 2nd quarter, the score was 14-0 Pickering and the crowd at Dragonmount – so unaccustomed to being down at all, let alone down by 14 points – went eerily quiet.

Florida responded by moving the ball into Pickering territory on the strength of a 20-yard pass to Jackson and a 15-yard pass to **Jerricho Cotchery**. But on 3rd down and short at the 28, **Jason Taylor** sacked Rodgers for a 5-yard loss to set up a field goal attempt that **Ryan Longwell** missed from 50 yards away. Taking over at their 40 yard line, the Spartans unleashed Johnson for a 31-yard sweep to the right. Three more Johnson runs and a personal foul penalty against **Dwight Freeney** put the ball on the Florida 9 yard line, where Favre connected with **Percy Harvin** on a short pass in the flat for a 9-yard catch-and-run TD to make the score 21-0 for the visitors. To say that Rodgers looked confused at this point would be an understatement. On his next possession, sacks by **Aubrayo Franklin** and **Jason Taylor** drowned out any hope of a Florida score before half time and the teams went into their respective locker rooms with Pickering leading 21-0.

The second half began with Florida finally getting on the score board after Jackson turned a short hitch route into a 30-yard pass play into Pickering territory. Five plays later, Longwell booted it through the uprights for 3 points from 29 yards to make it 21-3 for Pickering. Looking to catch the Spartans off guard, Florida tried a surprise onside kick, but an alert **Jake Long** recovered the ball for Pickering at the Florida 42. The Spartans were held to a rare three-and-out on their next series setting up the best opportunity for the Dragons to turn the tide back in their favour. Starting with their backs up against the wall at their own 4 yard line, Rodgers moved his team out from the shadow of their own goal line then connected with Jackson for a 48 yard pass play that carried his team into Pickering territory. **Jonathan Stewart** broke a 17-yard run and **Ray Rice** converted a 3rd down and inches to set up a 1st and goal at the Pickering 7 yard line. A dump off to Cotchery on 2nd down nearly paid off with a TD, but the Florida receiver was shoved out of bounds before he could extend the ball to the pylon. On 3rd & goal at the 1, Rodgers overthrew Jackson in the back of the end zone, setting up the ESPN Turning Point of the game. Facing 4th & goal, the Dragons elected to gamble for the big score. They sent Stewart into the middle of the line but Jason Taylor got penetration and stuffed him for a 1-yard loss. The Dragons had driven 94 yards in 13 plays and had nothing to show for it.

The Spartans took over and put the ball in the hands of their main man, **Chris Johnson**. He carried the ball 7 times, covering the entire 98 yards to the Florida end zone and scoring on a 32-yard run off right tackle to inflict the mortal wound. Trailing 28-3 in the 4th quarter, Florida was in unfamiliar territory. From that point on, the Dragons' offence possessed a desperate quality rarely, if ever, seen since their first year in the league. They scrambled and scratched their way up the field with the scrappiness of a street fighter, scoring on an 8-yard pass to Jackson with 8:14 remaining in the game. They missed the 2-point convert, but came right back with an onside kick, which Pickering recovered at the Florida 42.

The Spartans sent Johnson into the teeth of the "Firewall" and he responded with a 12-yard run for a first down, then 3 more carries for 6 yards to bring the field goal unit on the field. **John Kasay** missed from 41 yards out, turning the ball over at the Florida 31 yard line with 4:35 left in the game. Down by 19 points with time running out, Rodgers was forced to take the kind of risks that good defences want their opponents to take. **Asante Samuel** picked off Rodgers at the Florida 40 and returned it 4 yards to the 36. From there, Pickering wasted some time before **Chris Kluwe** dropped his 4th punt of 4 inside the 20, pinning the Dragons back at their 3 yard line. To their credit, the Dragons fought to the end in a lost cause. The drive and determination that knitted together 53 victories in 3 seasons did not suddenly disappear at the first challenge. The Spartans were simply better on this day; a great team in their own right peaking at the perfect time on their quest for glory.

* Playoff * 02-12-2011 Dragonmount Temp: 75 Wind: Calm None MVP: **Chris Johnson**

	1	2	3	4	Tot
2009 Pickering (1-0)	7	14	0	7	28
2009 Florida (0-1)	0	0	3	6	9

1 9:29 Pickering	TD Favre 3 pass to Johnson (Kasay) (9-71-5:18)	7-0
2 12:00 Pickering	TD Johnson 6 run (Kasay) (1-6-0:07)	14-0
2 3:53 Pickering	TD Favre 9 pass to Harvin (Kasay) (6-60-3:01)	21-0
3 10:33 Florida	FG Longwell 29 (9-55-4:14)	21-3
4 13:58 Pickering	TD Johnson 32 run (Kasay) (8-98-4:00)	28-3
4 8:14 Florida	TD Rodgers 8 pass to Jackson (2 - failed) (13-71-5:31)	28-9

	PIC	FLD
First Downs	18	21
Rushes	31-207	22-88
Passes	16-11-133	47-29-342
Sacked	1-10	5-29
Fumble	0	1
Penalties	5-50	6-37
Turnovers	0	2
Time	27:01	32:59
Third Down	5-10	5-15
Fourth Down	0-0	3-5
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/3/0	4/1/1
Net Offense	330	401

PICKERING

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate
Favre	16	11	133	1	1	0	2	133.6

Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD
Johnson	24	200	8.3	10	6	32	2
Jennings	3	7	2.3	0	0	8	0
Harvin	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Favre	3	0	0	0	0	2	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Gonzalez	4	0	5	43	10.8	2	0	14	0
Harvin	3	0	4	60	20	3	1	32	1
Johnson	2	1	3	12	6	1	0	9	1
Jackson	2	0	3	18	9	1	0	10	0

FLORIDA

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate
Rodgers	47	29	342	5	3	2	1	73.2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD
Rice	16	58	3.6	5	0	9	0
Stewart	5	31	6.2	1	1	17	0
Rodgers	1	-1	-1	0	0	0	0

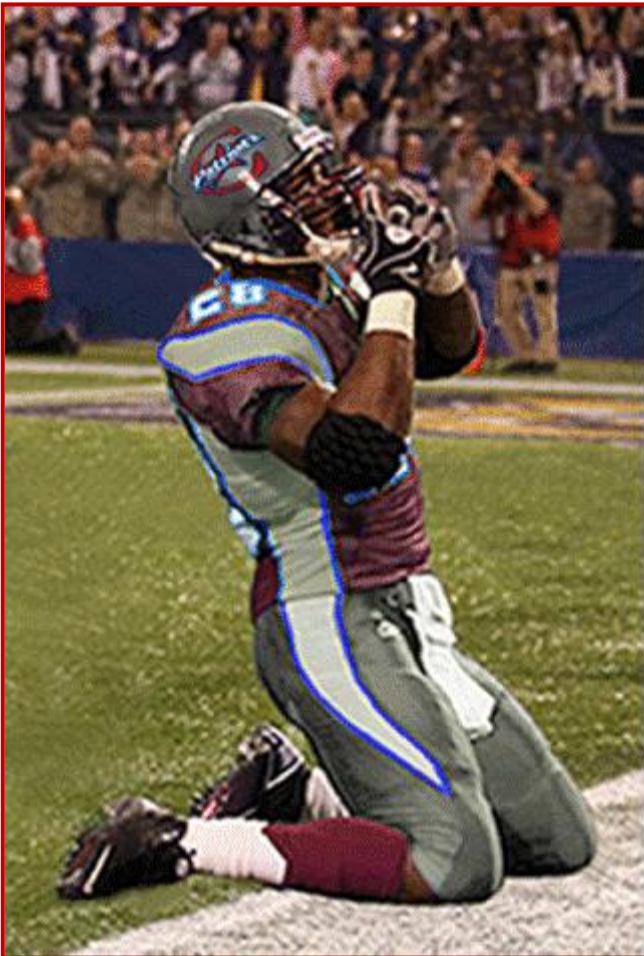
Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Jackson	8	1	14	179	22.4	6	3	48	1
Rice	7	0	10	42	6	1	0	9	0
Cotchery	6	0	11	54	9	3	0	15	0
Miller	4	0	4	31	7.8	2	0	13	0
Marshall	3	0	5	28	9.3	1	0	13	0
Whitworth	1	0	1	8	8	0	0	8	0



PACIFIC ATLANTIC CONFERENCE



PATS LOCK UP CONVICTS, BERTH IN FINAL *PETERSON RUNS FOR 2 TDS / PATS FORCE 3 TURNOVERS*



CHINO

3



CHARLESWOOD

20

M
V
P

Adrian Peterson – Charleswood

"I give credit to the Lord for giving me the strength today. God was in my legs and in my arms today. Today was a great day for the Lord and our team...and our offensive line."



Adrian Peterson (LEFT) humbly thanks the Lord for a second quarter TD that put the Pats ahead 10-3 before half time. Peterson scored 2 TDs and gained tough yards in the trenches to lead Charleswood past Chino, 20-3.

CHARLESWOOD – *Do unto others as they did to you* was the Patriot's motto going into this playoff contest against conference rival Chino. In their only previous match-up this season, the Convicts completely shut down the Pats' running game and forced 4 turnovers to eke out a 13-9 victory at The Big House. The Pats gained 0 net yards rushing in that game, a league record for incompetence in the running department, and had to suffer some well-earned jeers and catcalls from fans frustrated that

a team with arguably the best physical running back in football and an elite quarterback could be embarrassed so thoroughly. Although there was finger-pointing in many directions, the player who shouldered most of the blame for that ground game fiasco was **Adrian Peterson**. "It's on my shoulders," he said after the game. "I have to be better than that. The team is counting on me to be better."

Peterson entered the PAC Final determined, for the sake of his team, to be better than he had been that day in Chino. He succeeded, but he did it the hard way. The Convicts made it hard. There appeared to be a bounty on Peterson's head as the linebackers keyed and blitzed liberally trying to corral him in the back field. He refused to go down willingly, and the result was 2 touchdowns and 80 of the toughest yards gained by a running back in a single game all season.

Peterson's trial started modestly with gains of 1 and 2 yards on Charleswood's first two plays from scrimmage. That effort did not make 3rd down manageable enough and the Pats went three-and-out on their first series, bringing back instant memories of Week Ten. The Convicts did the same but **Shane Lechler** managed to back the Pats up with a 49-yard punt to the Charleswood 9 yard line. **Peyton Manning** responded with a hot passing hand, completing 5 consecutive passes for 68 yards to move quickly into Chino territory. The Pats returned to Peterson but the Convicts were waiting for him, stopping him for no gain at the 23 yard line. That stopped the momentum and the Pats had to settle for a 31-yard **Stephen Gostkowski** field goal to break the ice. Although they had 3 points and a slim lead, courtesy of their quarterback, the Charleswood coaches had to be concerned that Peterson would be a non-factor and force Manning to the air too often for comfort.

The Convicts replied in kind with a 12-play drive that featured a 22-yard screen pass to **Knowshon Moreno** to put them in field goal range. The Pats defence stiffened and almost stole the ball away, forcing two consecutive fumbles that the Convicts were able to recover. That

set up the tying field goal – a 29-yard effort by **Jeff Reed** – that put the teams back at square one to start the second quarter. As they had in the first quarter, the teams traded three-and-outs before the Pats took over at their 22 yard line. What followed was one of the finest ball control drives ever witnessed in a post-season game. Determined to establish the running game at all costs, the Pats sent Peterson into the Chino line 14 times for 53 yards in an 18-play, 78-yard drive that ended with the Charleswood star narrowly breaking the plane of the goal line on 4th down and inches against the heart of a stacked Chino defensive line. Patriots Place erupted in a roar of pent-up exuberance after fans had been sitting on the edge of their seats for over 9 minutes of possession that had seemed like an eternity. Peterson emerged from the pile, ran to the back of the end zone, and fell to his knees as if thanking God for redemption. With that score, the mood was set. The Pats were a threat in both dimensions of the offence and their defence was just getting started making life hell for **Donovan McNabb**.

Starting the second half down 10-3 and with possession, the Convicts' opening drive stalled after a holding penalty on **Randy Moss** put them into a hole. Lechler boomed a 69-yard punt all the way to the end zone for a touchback and the Pats took over at their 20. They gained a single first down before having to punt it back, giving the Convicts another shot at tying the game. But on 3rd down and 2, safety **Michael Lewis** made the defensive play of the game by intercepting McNabb at the Chino 49 yard line. Riding the wave of excitement generated by the turnover, Manning completed passes of 10 and 37 yards to **Marques Colston** to set up Peterson's second touchdown of the game; a 2-yard run off left tackle against a goal line formation to make the score 17-3.

With 20 minutes remaining in the game, there was plenty of time for the Convicts offence to make a comeback if their defence could switch into "lockdown mode." But the Charleswood defence was not in a giving mood, unless it meant repaying Chino for the indignities their defence had visited upon the Pats in Week Ten. **Steven Jackson** could find no place to run to take the heat off McNabb and the passing game. In desperation, Chino tried and failed to convert 4th downs at the Pats' 45 and, early in the 4th quarter, at their own 26 yard line. This second failure to move the ball under pressure set up an easy 36-yard field goal by Gostkowski that made it a three-score game with 11 minutes remaining.

A comeback was still possible, if not likely, but nothing the Chino offence tried worked against the fired up Pats. They turned the ball over once more on downs and then turned the ball over the more common way – by two interceptions in the waning minutes. A frustrated McNabb was replaced by **Jay Cutler** for the final series, which fittingly ended on an interception by **Quentin Jammer**, setting off a jubilant celebration by the normally reserved Charleswood fans, who began dancing in the stands, singing Patty the Patriot's "Patriots Song," waving red flags, and high-fiving their neighbours. For the second time in their history, the Pats had a ticket on the train to the big game.

* Playoff * 02-12-2011 Patriot Place Temp: 75 Wind:

MVP: **Adrian Peterson**

	1	2	3	4	Tot
2009 Chino (0-1)	0	3	0	0	3
2009 Charleswood (1-0)	3	7	7	3	20

1 6:06 Charleswood	FG Gostkowski 31 (9-77-5:11)	0-3
2 14:19 Chino	FG Reed 29 (12-63-6:33)	3-3
2 1:43 Charleswood	TD Peterson 1 run (Gostkowski) (18-78-9:20)	3-10
3 5:00 Charleswood	TD Peterson 2 run (Gostkowski) (3-49-1:25)	3-17
4 11:06 Charleswood	FG Gostkowski 36 (4-7-1:51)	3-20

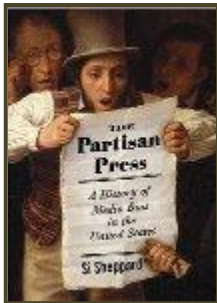
	CHI	CHP
First Downs	8	15
Rushes	23-54	38-86
Passes	31-14-170	19-15-171
Sacked	1-5	1-3
Fumble	2	1
Penalties	4-25	6-37
Turnovers	3	0
Time	24:14	35:46
Third Down	6-16	3-13
Fourth Down	1-4	1-1
Red Att/Td/Fg	3/0/1	3/2/1
Net Offense	219	254

CHINO

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate	
McNabb	27	12	115	1	0	2	0	26	
Cutler	4	2	55	0	1	1	0	56.3	
Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD		
Jackson	20	45	2.3	2	1	14	0		
McNabb	1	5	5	0	0	5	0		
Moreno	1	4	4	0	0	4	0		
Cribbs	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		
Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Moss	4	0	9	37	9.3	1	0	18	0
Ward	3	0	7	56	18.7	1	1	46	0
Massaquoi	2	0	3	18	9	1	0	9	0
Moreno	2	1	3	26	13	1	0	22	0
Jackson	1	0	1	10	10	0	0	10	0
Olsen	1	0	3	10	10	1	0	10	0
Caldwell	1	0	2	13	13	1	0	13	0
McNabb	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fasano	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0

CHARLESWOOD

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate	
Manning	19	15	171	1	1	0	0	104.2	
Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD		
Peterson	27	80	3	7	1	13	2		
Portis	6	11	1.8	0	0	4	0		
Manning	2	-2	-1	0	0	0	0		
Tebow	3	-3	-1	0	0	0	0		
Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Colston	6	0	6	86	14.3	3	1	37	0
Witten	5	0	7	49	9.8	3	0	19	0
Rice	4	0	6	36	9	1	0	14	0



The Partisan Press - Reaction in the News

"After a while winning or losing becomes habit-forming. Once you learn how to win, it becomes easier. The easier it becomes to win, the less value you place on winning, while expectations and pressure to win shoot upwards. There was a Brady-like complacency about Aaron Rodgers late in the season. That complacency caught up with him today against a hungrier team." – *William Wyrnawright, South Florida Tribune*

"We may find out later that he was hurt. I certainly hope that was the case, because the other theory is that Donovan McNabb is over-the-hill. Credit to the Pats, but this was still a no-show by the Soup Man." – *Quentin San Pedro, Chino Champion*

"This game was pure vindication for Coach Findlay and his entire team. It was also a rebuke to critics who jumped down the player's throats at the first sign of trouble. Another monster defence tamed by the best quarterback in the game; another tougher-than-tough gang of thugs beaten down by the most physically supreme athlete to play the running back position in decades. A defence that made the veteran Chino quarterback look like a broken down old man. What more does the national media want from the Pats to prove they have returned to the elite ranks? No doubt the big city "experts" will predict a Pickering rout in the championship game; which means I am going to have to go through this ritual of scolding my near-sighted colleagues once again after we watch Peyton Manning and Ed Reed hoist the Gale Sayers Trophy over their heads in Durham two weeks from now." – *Charlie Wood, The Charleswood Sun*

"OPA!! Glory of glories! The Mightiest of the Mighty are the Spartans of Pickering! I worship at the feet of greatness – Slayers of the Mighty Dragon! What do you think of the Mighty Chris Johnson and the power of the run now, you stupid Spats? Where is your smart comments and know-it-all smug face? Eh? You are a stupid, stupid, man! You go and cry in your bed with your boyfriend Aaron Rodgers, you strange person! The Dragons proved they are the best team ever in history. Better even than Panathinaikos FC! I respect the Patriots. They have good hearts. They will lose in a good way I know they will. Hail to the Spartans! Hail Victory! Down with Spats!" – *Aristedes Kalogiannis, Pickering Post.*

CAST YOUR VOTE FOR EFL M.V.P.

OFFENCE

- ☐ **Chris Johnson**
- ☐ **Brett Favre**
- ☐ **Aaron Rodgers**
- ☐ **Drew Brees**
- ☐ **Peyton Manning**
- ☐ **Wes Welker**
- ☐ **Andre Johnson**
- ☐ **Reggie Wayne**
- ☐ **Adrian Peterson**
- ☐ **Joe Thomas**

DEFENCE

- ☐ **Jon Beason**
- ☐ **Sheldon Brown**
- ☐ **Brian Cushing**
- ☐ **James Harrison**
- ☐ **Darrelle Revis**
- ☐ **Darren Sharper**
- ☐ **Jason Taylor**
- ☐ **Mario Williams**
- ☐ **LaMarr Woodley**
- ☐ **Charles Woodson**



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

NEW YORK – I went to Mickey's for the Conference Finals, looking to borrow some insight into this quirky EFL season from the drunken altered states of its football-addicted patrons. "Frenchie" was there, sitting at the far corner of the bar next to the server's entrance. So were Mitch and, unfortunately, Asper. Joe "The Donut" Baker was missing. I later found out this was because he had had a baboon heart transplant that kept him alive but had caused some undesirable side effects; such as bright red and itchy buttocks, hair growth on his forehead and an uncontrollable urge to throw his feces at people after a few beers. The manager had banned him from the premises after taking a fistful of poo in the side of the head as Joe celebrated his pitcher-chugging victory over Fat Matt Abbatt on two-for-one Chili Dog Day. Mitch was there and couldn't stop laughing when telling me the story.

I had a good time watching the games with the guys, but I came away a little disappointed at their lack of penetrating vision into the true nature of the game this year. Even the usually frank and direct Frenchie was non-committal in his assessment of the season and the playoffs. I got the feeling that the anchors that held everyone's views about the game in place were drifting with the unpredictable tide of the power struggle occurring at the very top of the league. This struggle came to a head in the Can-Am Conference Final in Florida.

THE BATTLE OF THE TITANS...THAT WASN'T

Most would agree that the four best teams made it to the final four in 2010. Most would also agree that those final four teams were very evenly matched heading into the Conference Finals. For once, the pre-game "hype" around these big games was almost entirely lucid, fact-based analysis (Russ Flont's prediction of 1,400 yards of the offence in the Pickering-Florida match-up and 16 turnovers in the Charleswood-Chino game notwithstanding). Most commentators, including me, expected both games to be close and capable of going either way.

I went to Mickey Mantle's on Sunday expecting to be treated to a pair of classic games. For the first time this year I was actually giddy at the prospect of watching a game for fun the way I used to before I had to write about them for a living. I even recorded both games at home on two separate televisions to make sure I had true copies of the broadcasts for posterity. It was going to be a fantastic football Sunday!

Then the games happened.

The winners were not exactly a surprise – any of the four teams could have won – the surprise was the *manner* of winning; particularly how easily they both won. In both contests, the momentum was established early and the team that grabbed it first carried it the rest of the way. Could it be that the match ups were so big that the tension of anticipation created a hair-trigger tipping point for player morale on both sides? Like in the old-style Super Bowls, in the Conference Finals the team that got hit first dropped to the canvass and was groggy until the end.

NOT SO PERFECT

Nobody's perfect. We can go back to saying it now that the mighty Dragons have been slain. Even their nemesis, Pickering, is not perfect. The Dragons put that question to rest in Week Four with a 34-31 overtime victory. What was perfect was the way both teams robbed each other of the mantle of perfection. *That* was poetry!

With one more game - the biggest game - left to be played, it would be premature to suggest that the loss to Florida in the early regular season will be Pickering's only blemish. But I've been premature before, in more embarrassing situations, so I see no reason to protect my ego now when it comes to stating what every football fan knows is just an injury to **Chris Johnson** away from being a foregone conclusion - the Spartans could have been stopped in their march to the Championship *only* by the Dragons, and vice-versa. In most years either powerhouse could have, without much trouble, strode unchecked to claim the EFL's ultimate prize. But this year they had each other to contend with; meaning one of them had to fall before the final.

If **Jim Heaton** had to lose one game and was told he could do it all over again and choose which one, it goes without saying he would reverse positions with Pickering and take his chances against the Patriots to try and earn an even

more impressive "Three-peat" Championship title. But since he cannot, it must be some minor consolation to know that his team was the first to post a perfect 16-0 record in the regular season - a feat not likely to be matched for a very long time, if ever.

The Dragons of 2010 were a Championship-calibre team that got eliminated by an equally impressive Championship-calibre team. Although history might forget that part, it will never forget that 16-0 record. Sure as heck, many a geeky young lad 20+ years from now will be pouring over old stats and see "16-0" next to "Florida" and wonder why that team did not win the title. It is in that way that the story of the loser will be told along with that of the winner for as long as football lives - a rare type of immortality for a team that did not win it all.

THE MASTER AT WORK

As if to prove a point that there are no good or bad calls, just good or bad execution, **Gus Kostantakos** stayed with his ground game during the late stages of the Can-Am Final game in order to maintain their momentum going because the running game was still executing well. Admittedly, it was assisted in its execution by the Florida defensive game plan, which called for 5 of 6 defensive backs with the occasional blitz by **LaMarr Woodley**. Therefore, the calls, or at least the personnel on the field, made a degree of difference to **Gus Kostanatakos'** offensive decision-making.

But tellingly, when the Dragons abandoned their 'Stop Favre' focus and turned their attention on Johnson; that is when Pickering's Wizard of Wanderlust cranked his game up a gear. The spear in the Dragon's eye came when the "Firewall" tried to torch Johnson with a run blitz on the second play of the 4th quarter. Johnson had just burst through a flat-footed Florida line for a 28-yard gain to the Dragons' 32 yard line, prompting the first of several rare reactions from **Jim Heaton** on the sideline. He angrily gestured at his defensive coordinator, **Dom Capers**, and pointed at the Pickering running back.

Anyone who was paying attention knew exactly what was coming next on defence. But rather than call 'Play Action,' Kostantakos decided to play his hot hand - like he had in Week Four when it was clear that the Dragons were getting tired of Johnson running over them. Johnson then juked Woodley out of his shoes and slipped through a crack between **Dwight Freeney** and **Brodrick Bunkley** to find nobody behind them. The result was a 32-yard TD run that broke Florida's will.

As I watched Pickering methodically extinguish the Florida "Firewall" and the Dragons flail powerlessly against the shields of the Spartans' defence it dawned on me that there is practical value in losing. Having almost no experience falling more than two scores behind an opponent, the Dragons were unable to organize a comeback at the critical time while it was still possible. It was unknown territory for them and, in a word, they "panicked." Not blindly so, but they lost enough composure to cause the same effect against a team the calibre of Pickering.

HOME FIELD ADVANTAGE

When Charleswood visited Chino in Week Ten, the Convicts shut down the Patriots' offence in a way unheard of before: they held the Pats' running attack to net 0 yards and surrendered almost 400 yards passing without giving up a touchdown. Weird. Chino won 13-9 in a game characterized, despite almost 400 yards of offence for the loser, as a defensive struggle.

Fast forward to Charleswood in the PAC Conference Final – the Pats did not exactly reverse the strange regular season result, but they definitely turned the tables on their conference rival from the west. The Pats forced 3 turnovers and completely shut down **Donovan McNabb** and the Chino offence in the second half to prevail 20-3. They head into the Championship Game with a boost of credibility to their chances after handling the "Lockdown Crew" with accomplished professionalism. **Adrian Peterson** and **Peyton Manning's** number are not eye-popping, but anyone who watched the game should be impressed by them given the tenacious opposition of the Chino defence. The crowd also deserves credit for registering a noise level of 119 decibels in the third quarter – an unofficial league record this season. The Pats fans can be loud, assisted greatly by the amplification in the dome. They are a good-natured loud, however, and there was never a fear of a popcorn-induced riot in the stands. When the Patriots are struggling, Patriot Place can turn eerily quiet, but never murderous.

GOD'S STATS

God carried the ball for a 5.5 average and scored 5 TDs this weekend. How do I know? **Chris Johnson** stated plainly that "God was in my shoes" and **Adrian Peterson**, after gaining just 3 yards the Pat's previous match-up against Chino in the regular season, claimed that finding God gave him the strength this week to break through the 'Magenot' Chino defensive line to score 2 of the most brutal touchdowns you'll ever see. God apparently chose to inhabit the bodies of running backs this week to impose His Will on the Conference Championship outcomes. Satan's running backs, **Ray Rice** and **Steven Jackson**, stumbled to a combined 2.9 yards per carry and failed to break the plane of the goal line as their teams got the "Hell" beaten out of them. It will be interesting to see whose body God chooses to inhabit during the Gale Sayers Game.

M.V.P. VOTING

The A.P. voting is underway for Offensive and Defensive MVP and Yours Truly gets a vote. Yyyeeesss! Oh ye-ah! Oh ye-ah! It's an exclusive privilege having an MVP vote, and one that must be exercised with appropriate solemnity. We are

deciding the *MOST VALUABLE PLAYER* this year and that is extremely important because it means *somebody wins a car*. Winning a car has to be the most important event in most people's lives, if judged by reactions on *The Price is Right*.

Although we've all heard and used those words before – "*most valuable player*" – do we really know what they mean? To me, it means identifying the player who had the greatest positive effect on his team's overall performance. Sounds simple right? It's never so simple. Performance is a relative thing. Based strictly on impact to the team's performance, **Drew Brees** or **Tom Brady** are both viable candidates because their sad sack teams actually won some games that they would not have won without them. But it has got to be more than that. The team itself has to perform at a high level, or the player has to stand way above his peers.

OFFENCE: Only one person truly qualifies for this award. **Chris Johnson**, **Pickering** set a new single season rushing record (2,156), a new single season TD record (29), and earned 12 single game MVP awards. Is there another choice? If you have to put someone against him, his teammate, **Brett Favre**, led the league in passer rating (110.4), yards passing (4,013), finished second in TD passes (31) and earned 3 single game MVP awards. **Aaron Rodgers**, **Drew Brees** and a bunch of others fill in the ballot, but if you consider any of them above the first two, you are a bonehead.

Benny Clamp, host of 'Crush' – a weekly ABC football feature focusing on the trenches – made a case in his show last week for LA tackle, **Joe Thomas**, as Offensive MVP. Benny is great. He cracks me up with his theories, drawn from years of playing Guard and then coaching the line for the Temple Owls in the 1990s. He got his great TV gig because of his enthusiasm, off the shelf one-liners, and his bullet-shaped bald head - one of the standard physical features of the ultra-tough man's man. He makes the case that **Kurt Warner** is one of the toughest QBs to block for due to his lack of mobility and random brain-freezes. This theory is not borne out in sack stats, which place Warner historically near the middle of starting QBs in sack % (6%) over his career. But eyebrows do rise when one looks at the fact that in 12 games with the Knights, Warner was sacked just 9 times for a sack rate of 2.5%, the best rate of his career. Thomas allowed just 2 of those sacks protecting Warner's blind side. In addition, according to Clamp's "Big Run" blocking stat, (an unofficial stat in every sense of the word), Thomas made the key block in 23 runs of 10+ yards and only missed 3 assignments that caused losses or no gain. Given the Knights' struggles to move the ball and score this year, those are All Pro achievements by the LA left tackle. As a result, he'll get my one of my All Pro votes for that position. But it is a far cry from MVP material.

Clamp obviously reached far trying to make a point that linemen are important, but his point is essentially a stupid one because it actually proves the inverse – that quarterback is the most important position. Despite having arguably the best tackle in the game protecting him, Warner could not move his team with any consistency. He sucked, despite Thomas' efforts, and therefore his team sucked. He could have stood behind the Great Wall of China in the pocket and still failed to find the open man downfield. So, good job Joe - you deserve an assist for helping your QB limp pathetically into the playoffs but you have no business being in the running for the award traditionally presented to players who actually move the ball.

DEFENCE: The list is a long and intriguing one. There is no clear favourite in my opinion, but I tend to favour **Darrelle Revis** of the **Florida Dragons**. His "flash" numbers, 4 interceptions with one returned for a TD, 42 tackles and 11 deflections are very good but not distinctive compared with Charleswood corner, **Sheldon Brown**, Kutztown safety, **Darren Sharper**, or LA corner, **Charles Woodson**. The stat that grabs my attention is opponent's passer rating against Revis. Opposing quarterbacks targeted him 98 times, completing 39.7% for 470 yards, 3 touchdowns, and 4 interceptions for a passer rating of 48.4. When one considers that he was facing, in almost every game, the top wide receiver of the opposing team, they are phenomenal numbers.

If sacks and turnovers are your cup of tea, **LaMarr Woodley** of Florida (18 sacks, 4 stuffs and 2 forced fumbles); **Mario Williams** of Iowa City, (14 sacks, 39 QB pressures, 8 stuffs and 5 forced fumbles); **Jason Taylor** of Pickering (13 sacks, 5 stuffs, 6 deflections, 2 interceptions, 3 forced fumbles and a fumble recovery returned for a TD); and **James Harrison** of Chino (14 sacks, 15 stuffs, 8 QB pressures, 8 deflections and 4 forced fumbles) all are worthy candidates. If tackles are the essence of defending, then **Brian Cushing** of Garland (166 tackles, 2 sacks, 16 stuffs, 3 interceptions and 7 forced fumbles); or **Jon Beason** of Charleswood (142 tackles, 15 stuffs, 9 deflections, 3 interceptions and 7 forced fumbles) combined consistency with big-play ability.

FEARLESS PREDICTOR

With the elimination of Florida I am technically disqualified from being able to claim Supreme Oracle status for predicting the EFL Championship winner. The Dragons disappointed me in the Can-Am Final and, like every team that lets me down, I now hate them with an unrelenting destructive and cancerous passion. It is especially worse now that I have to endure the lame-brained taunts of Pickering's Propaganda Minister, **Aristedes Kalogiannis**.

With nothing to lose I will go out on a limb here and predict a *close game*. Charleswood has proven that they belong on the field and **Peyton Manning's** veteran leadership will ensure they are not embarrassed. However, there is no real debate as to the eventual winner. Pickering has already proven they are the best by beating the best. They will finish the job and make it all official with a win Durham.

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JIMMY'S CHAMPIONSHIP PICK

(Gale Sayers Game)

At Jurassic Park, Durham, Ont.

CHARLESWOOD (14-4) @ PICKERING (17-1) (line – SPARTANS by 6)

OVERVIEW: For the first time in the game's four-year history two teams will meet in the final game that have not met in the regular season. Without a dress rehearsal to go by there is uncertainty about how these two teams will react to each other. There is less uncertainty, however, about the final outcome – a Pickering victory is expected. It is the margin of victory that is open for debate and on this point there is a gaping hole in the consensus. The current Vegas line, Spartans (-5), is a middling of two highly divergent points of view. The statistics-based bettors favour Pickering by a large margin. The 'angle' bettors favour them by much less. The "anglers" (as I call them) attempt to quantify intangibles through a process known as 'playing a hunch.' While the stats-based bettors win over the long term if they stick to the system, the bettor who plays a hunch is the one who can win big (or lose big), on a single game. There is only one game left and it is a big one; on a neutral, and probably wet, field. So, put me in the category of one who will take the statistical record under advisement, but who will feel free to play my hunch.

WHEN THE PATS HAVE THE BALL: The PAC Final against Chino was a brutal test for Adrian Peterson. He did not explode for big yardage but he exploded into the Chino line for 80 of the toughest yards you will ever see. Peterson's hard-running unlocked the passing game for Peyton Manning, who used it sparingly but effectively, completing 79% of his passes. Expect the Pats to take the same approach in this game while hoping for more than just the tough yards from Peterson. He is going to have to break some long gainers to induce the Spartans' top-ranked pass defence to take their eyes off playmakers, Sidney Rice, Marques Colston and the always open, Jason Witten. If Peterson stalls, so will the Pats' attack.

WHEN THE SPARTANS HAVE THE BALL: The Spartans proved against Florida that they can dictate the pace of play against any defence. Barring a bad day at the office, Pickering will move the ball quite freely against the Patriots using any method it chooses. However, turnovers could throw a wrench into the gears of the "Blue Machine." Not that it's likely – Pickering has the fewest turnovers (18) of any offence this season – but it's certainly possible since Charleswood's defence forced the highest number of turnovers (46) in the league this year. Much will depend on how the Pats choose to defend the indefensible. Chris Johnson can be as explosive on the ground as Brett Favre and Vincent Jackson can be through the air. So, the question is, how does Charleswood want to die? In picking their poison, the Pats might inadvertently select their own antidote if either Sheldon Brown or Jon Beason can continue to take the ball away as they have all season.

WHO WILL WIN? Unfortunately, for Charleswood supporters, the win is all but a foregone conclusion in favour of Pickering – there is no other way to read the numbers. But, in reserving my right to play a hunch, I am going to bet that the Pats to keep the game surprisingly close. The turnover magic that has followed the Pats everywhere they have played this year and the veteran leadership of Peyton Manning are enough to make me pause in jumping blindly on the Pickering bandwagon. Oh, I'll get on it, like everyone else, but I'll be one of the last ones and I won't be singing a song. **Pick: CHARLESWOOD**

INJURY REPORT: PIC – Tank Johnson (Out); CHP – None.