

CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

2015

CHAMPIONSHIP



EFL NEWS

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

2015

CHAMPIONSHIP

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MANNINGNIFICENT!



Peyton Manning



17

MUSTANGS



27

PATRIOTS

Peyton Manning of the Charleswood Patriots lifts his arms in celebration after leading his team to a 27-17 victory over the Aurora Mustangs in the 9th EFL Championship Game. It was the second Gale Sayers Trophy of his EFL career.



17-2-0



CHAMPIONSHIP



18-1-0

Aurora

17

GALE SAYERS
GAME

27

Charleswood

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Ryan	25	33	303	2
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Foster	18	51	2.8	0
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Boldin	9	152	16.9	1

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
Aurora	7	7	0	3	-	17
Charleswood	14	3	7	3	-	27

Play of the Game

Holding onto a 17-14 lead in the 3rd quarter, the Patriots faced 1st & 10 at their 33 yard line. **Lamar Miller** got the call and broke through a keying Mustangs defence for a 67-yard TD run.

TEAM LEADERS

Passing	Cmp	Att	Yds	TD
Manning	20	33	194	0
Rushing	Car	Yds	Avg	TD
Miller	18	117	6.5	3
Receiving	Rec	Yds	Avg	TD
Johnson	6	61	10.2	0

IT'S MILLER TIME!

PATRIOT RUNNING BACK RUSHES FOR 117 YARDS AND 3 TOUCHDOWNS TO LEAD PATS TO 2nd CHAMPIONSHIP!

MISSION VIEJO (AP) – In comfortable 75-degree temperatures, under clear and calm skies, football fans from across North America filed into His Majesty the King's Royal Coliseum in Mission Viejo to take in the spectacle of the EFL's 9th Championship Game. Played yearly in honour of running back Gale Sayers – whose special blend of God-given talent, dogged determination, sportsmanship and loyalty to his teammates still serve as model qualities for all athletes – the game is the pinnacle event on the EFL calendar. This year's match-up was the ultimate that fans could have hoped for – the two best teams of 2015, with 34 wins and just two losses between them, were about to do battle for the honour of the title, "Champions."

The Aurora Mustangs and Charleswood Patriots had between them won the past two EFL Championships – Charleswood in 2013 and Aurora in 2014 – but the teams had little history of playing each other. In 2014, a rebuilding Patriots team had been one of many hapless victims of the perfectly dominant Mustangs; while a similarly lop-sided skirmish went Charleswood's way over a young Garland team back in 2010. Heading into their third and most important meeting, fans and commentators fiercely debated the merits that lay behind their identical 17-1 records.

It had been just one year, but the Patriots team that had weakly opposed the Mustangs in 2014 bore little resemblance to the one that was about to challenge the defending champs for the title in 2015. A core of developing young talent had been supplemented in the off-season by the addition of accomplished veterans, the most notable of which, **Peyton Manning**, had been the team's quarterback for all but one year of the Patriots' existence. The Mustangs, on the other hand, featured many of the same key players that had led them to the only perfect season in EFL history, with the notable exception of versatile half back, **Matt Forte**, who had been waived to make room under the salary cap. His replacement, **Arian Foster**, had been

QUOTE: "It's always a great feeling to finish on top. The sacrifices we made as an organization last year paid off as well as I could have hoped for. It was great to have Peyton back to lead this team...but this was a true team effort!" Charleswood Owner, **Jason Findlay**.



"We are an organization that holds itself to the highest standards. Losing is never acceptable. But there are times when your opponent deserves credit for simply being better. Today, the Patriots were the better team." Aurora coach, **Rich Liotta**.



ANGRY FAN



titter

HAPPY FAN



James Duthie @efljamesduthie
Maybe the Mustangs were reading their own press clippings. I take partial responsibility because I wrote most of them.



Charlie Wood @Cwoodbannersun

In 2013, when they won their first Gale Sayers Trophy, the Patriots surprised themselves. This year, they surprised everyone else!

making it easy for Aurora fans to forget about Forte; Foster had proven to be a durable and explosive runner during the regular season and was being credited for carrying the Mustangs' offence in the post-season.

"**Arian Foster** leads the post-season in yards from scrimmage and is the Mustangs' leading scorer with four touchdowns, Bill," ESPN play-by-play announcer **Phil Winterall** commented as the Mustangs running back was introduced to raucous cheers from Aurora fans. "Would you agree he's been a revelation in this post-season?"

"He's been a revolution longer than that, Phil. If you think it's just in the post-season you haven't been paying attention," guffawed ESPN colour analyst **Bill Badden**. "He's been like that *Paul Reveal* all year, riding his horse warning everyone that the Mustangs are coming, the Mustangs are coming! People are only noticing now because it's the playoffs and everybody's watching."

"Speaking of keeping a watch on somebody, Bill, how about **JJ Watt**?" Winterall asked, abruptly changing the subject as the TV cameras panned on Watt and members of the Aurora defence fist-pumping in support of the offence as the introductions continued. "What do the Patriots have to do to keep the league's sack leader out of their backfield and off of **Peyton Manning**?"

"Well, they're gonna have to block him, Phil!" Badden exclaimed. "Those big kids in the center of the Patriots' line, *Kelly O'Smiley* and *Cody Linkley*, will have to put their bodies on the line. Get dirty. Maybe cheat a bit. You know Peyton – God Bless him – can't outrun JJ these days. They should haul JJ down any way they can to protect their quarterback."

"**Kelechi Osemele** and **Corey Linsley**, you mean, Bill," Winterall clarified for the viewers.

"Whatever their names are," Badden barked dismissively. "There are no names in the trenches, Phil. Just grunts, groans, mud and blood. After a while you don't care who's on the other side – they all have one name, and that's Enemy."

"Some people are saying this might be Peyton's last game, Bill. He has a chance to go out on top with a win," Winterall made conversation as the team captains strode toward the center of the field for the coin toss. "After the season he's had – ranked 3rd overall in quarterback rating, with 32 touchdown passes – can you see him hanging up his cleats if he wins today?"

"We all know Peyton is Peyton, Phil," Badden replied. "He's one of the best of all time and he's a competitor. He could get his head stomped into the grass and his ribs busted up today and still want to come back and play tomorrow. He could end up being the first quarterback to play in a wheelchair some day. I think it's the media talking about retirement, not Peyton."

The head official, **Craig Wrolstad** stood on the huge EFL logo centered on the 50-yard line and beckoned the players to circle around. His voice reverberated over the stadium PA system as he explained to all, in painstaking detail, the consequences of calling the coin toss correctly or incorrectly. Aurora, in white jerseys and gold pants with red & white trim, were the visitors; Charleswood, in red jerseys and silver pants with blue trim, were the home team. **TJ Carrie**, back-up safety and special-teams captain for the Mustangs, made the call: "*Mustangs Tails*," he barked and it came up tails.

Wrolstad turned to **Ryan Succop**, who was the Patriots' closest representative, and said: "You win the toss."

Succop was caught off guard; the coin had clearly come up 'tails' and Carrie had called "tails." The Mustangs' side immediately went bananas objecting to the ruling. Wrolstad attempted to keep the players under control while the booth called for a review. After a tense couple of minutes, he turned on his microphone and announced to millions of viewers: "Upon further review, the visiting team called tails and the coin came up tails. The Mustangs win the toss and will receive. They will not be charged a timeout."

"That was the right call," weighed in **Bill Badden** as the teams prepared for the kickoff. "Replay usually gets it right."



THE GAME



1st QUARTER (Charleswood 14, Aurora 7) – The Patriots' kicking team lined up at the 35 yard line while **Chris Polk** of the Mustangs waited at the goal line to receive the opening kickoff. Smoke rose from field level as work crews scrambled to clear away launchers and debris from a dazzling post-national anthem fireworks display. The energy of the capacity crowd was palpable and the tension was building as officials waited for the network; it was airing a brand new *Coca-Cola* commercial featuring a green Martian cracking open a bottle of Coke stowed away on NASA's Martian land rover, Spirit. The one-minute segment had reportedly cost the company \$2.5 million – a record amount for an EFL final. When the network returned the clean-up crew was just wrapping up, creating a pause in the action that the broadcast crew dutifully filled.

"The Mustangs have the number one ranked defence in the league this year and they are playing better than ever in the post-season, Bill. Does it surprise you that they elected to receive the opening kickoff instead of putting that defence on the field first?" asked play-by-play man, **Phil Winterall**.

"Not at all, Phil," colour commentator **Bill Badden** replied without hesitation. "Aurora also has one of the league's best offences. Rich Liotta likes to get an early lead and let his defence play downhill. The Pats defenders have been saying all week that they are just as good as the Mustangs. Well, I expect Matt Ryan to attack that Patriots defence on the first series and give them a chance to prove it."

Finally, kickoff time arrived. **Ryan Succop** lowered his arm, dashed toward the ball and lofted a high, arcing kick that landed right at

the goal line. Polk hauled it in, charged straight forward and disappeared under a converging swarm of red jerseys at the 19 yard line. The crowd noise came in waves as Patriots fans cheered the stop, followed by Aurora fans yelling encouragement to **Matt Ryan** as he led the offensive unit onto the field of play.

The Mustangs lined up in a two-tight end set with **Arian Foster** the lone setback. The Pats countered with a standard four-man defensive front and linebacker **Jamie Collins** crowding the line, indicating a blitz. Ryan scanned the field and barked signals. **Anquan Boldin** split off and moved in motion behind him. Ryan took the snap and dropped back to pass, but before he could set himself he caught sight of an unblocked Collins bearing down on him. He ran backwards to avoid the rush but Collins was too fast; he barreled into Ryan's side and brought him down at the 6 yard line, a full 13 yards behind the line of scrimmage. A deafening roar erupted from the Patriots fans in the stands.

"It looked like Ryan was caught unawares on that blitz, Bill," Winterall remarked as the Mustangs huddled inside their end zone.

"That was a run blitz that Arian Foster was supposed to pick up, Phil," Badden replied with authority. As the action replayed in slow motion he used a telestrator to mark up the screen with an elaborate and confusing assortment of electronic scribbles. "Collins is *here*, ready to jump the gap and get at Foster in the backfield, *here*; Ryan sees him but doesn't audible out of the play because that's Foster's guy and the play is going to someone else. Ryan drops back, doesn't fake the handoff and Foster peels off on a pass route without even looking at Collins. Look at Collins split the guard and tackle! Nobody touches him as he makes a beeline for Ryan and BOOM – it's feeding time! That's a big play, Phil!"

Facing 2nd & 23, Ryan strode up under center and inspected the Patriots defence. The coverage was at medium depth but **Lavonte David** and **CJ Mosley** were set in closer to the line, showing blitz. Aurora remained in the two tight end set, but Foster was split wide, emptying the backfield. Ryan barked the signals, which were difficult to hear as a highly boisterous Patriots crowd raised hell in the bleachers behind the Mustangs end zone. He pointed at David and the ball was snapped. Ryan took three steps back and started to turn but Mosley shot the gap over center **Kory Lichtensteiger** and careened into the Mustangs QB at full tilt, jarring the ball loose. Ryan went one way and the ball the other, taking a Charleswood bounce into the arms of Mosley, who tumbled to the turf one yard shy of the goal line. It was Charleswood's ball!

"The Patriots come with the blitz and it pays *huge* dividends, Bill," Winterall observed as Mosely held the ball up high for all to see.

"I'd blitz on every down if I could get away with it, Phil," Badden chortled. "When it works it can be a game-changer. This one might be an early game-changer if the Patriots can punch the ball into the end zone here."

It did not take long for Charleswood to capitalize on the turnover. The Mustangs stacked the line and keyed on **Lamar Miller**, but the elusive Patriots running back made himself small as he stabbed through the center of the line, following a fine block by Osemele on no less than **JJ Watt** himself for the game's opening score. Patriots fans roared their approval. Watt kicked the grass in a rare display of frustration.

"I am sure that was not what coach Rich Liotta had in mind when he elected to take the ball first, Bill," Winterall said dryly.

"You're right, Phil," Badden weighed in. "You take the ball first in order to score first, not get scored on. The Mustangs need to regroup and score this time."

As if following the script just laid out by the hall-of-fame commentator, the Mustangs did exactly that. The Patriot defenders remained focused on the threat of a game-breaking play by Foster and continued to blitz. The Mustangs fought it off with an 8-yard check down pass and a 3-yard dive by Foster to gain a first down. Two plays later, Ryan defeated an all-out blitz by the Patriots with a short hitch to **Anquan Boldin** that turned into a 35-yard play to the Charleswood 18 yard line.

"It looked like the Patriots brought the farm on that play and Matt Ryan made them pay for it, Bill," commented Winterall as the Aurora offence huddled just outside the Charleswood red zone.

"That was what we in the industry call an 'all-dog' blitz, Phil," Badden answered with enthusiasm. "It's like, '*release the hounds*,' you see. It looked like they threw in a cat as well – you can see safety Ha Ha Clinton-Dix getting in there. That's the problem with the blitz, Phil; when it doesn't get through you have a whole lot of open space behind the line of scrimmage. Boldin turned that little pass into a big play because there was nobody to tackle him. That's why you can't blitz on every play, Phil. I'd be very careful about blitzing from here on."

A handoff to Foster on the next play gained 4 yards then Ryan dropped back to pass on second down. Unpressured, he laid an outside pass into a hole in the Patriots zone that Boldin snared easily in the corner of the end zone for a touchdown. The veteran receiver spun the ball in the air and flexed his muscles for the camera as Mustangs fans rose to their feet and applauded.

"It didn't take long for the Mustangs' offence to recover from that early turnover, Bill," Winterall remarked as the extra point split the uprights to tie the game at 7. "That was a perfect throw by Matt Ryan."

"Give Matt Ryan time and he will make throws like that all day, Phil," Badden replied. "The Patriots were in straight zone coverage rushing their four down linemen. A blitz would have helped there. When you play a quarterback like Matt Ryan, you have to make him uncomfortable in the pocket. You have to blitz him on almost every play!"

The Patriots started their next series with great field position after **Knile Davis** returned an angled kick 27 yards to their 41 yard line. But a 3rd down holding penalty on tackle **Nate Solder** set up a 3rd-and-long that **Peyton Manning** failed to convert, brining on the punting unit for the first time. **Kevin Huber** skied one 52 yards to the Aurora 9 yard line. **Julian Edleman** elected to return it, but the slippery punt-returner was quickly bottled up by a gang of Patriots after a 4-yard gain. A slick 8-yard completion to Boldin got the Aurora drive off to a nice start, but it quickly fizzled out when **CJ Mosley**, the Pats defensive tackle, stuffed Foster for a 1-yard loss then **Danny Shelton** pushed aside the center, Lichtensteiger to burst up the middle and bring down Ryan for an 8-yard loss.

"There was pressure on Ryan *again*, Bill, coming up the middle from the rookie Shelton," Winterall observed as the Mustangs' punting unit came onto the field.



Patriot linebacker **CJ Mosley** corrals Mustangs QB, **Matt Ryan** for his second sack of the game. Mosley was a standout on the Charleswood defence, with 12 tackles, 3 sacks and a forced fumble that led to the Patriots' first TD.

"Well, you don't need to blitz when you get plays like this from your interior linemen!" Badden gushed enthusiastically. "Shelton just buries the Aurora center...Linkenburger... like an old boot! It's tough on the center when he gets no help on a bull rush but Linkenbach just doesn't look ready for it. His quarterback was a sitting turducken back there."

The punt from **Sam Koch** traveled 48 yards and returner **Keshawn Martin** dodged the gunner for a respectable 9-yard return to the Patriots' side of mid-field. After Manning's first delivery was batted away at the line by **Randy Starks**, the Patriots switched to a three-receiver formation. That opened up room for **Sammy Watkins** to take a short slant 15 yards to the Aurora 36. As Manning hustled to the line the defence called a timeout.

"Why call a timeout in that situation, Bill?" asked Winterall, as Aurora linebacker, **Karlos Dansby** went to the sideline to confer with his coach, **Rich Liotta**.

"Rich Liotta got caught either gambling or napping, Phil," pronounced Badden with authority. "The Patriots brought a third wide receiver into the game and the Mustangs kept their nickel corner on the sideline. They either didn't notice, or they guessed Miller was going to get the ball and they wanted a third

linebacker there instead. But Manning crossed them up with a pass underneath to Watkins. He was trying to take advantage of that match-up a second time before Liotta smartly called that timeout to change personnel."

When the teams resumed play they both adopted basic formations. The Patriots ran the ball three times to the left side with Miller, gaining a total of 16 yards to the Aurora 20 yard line. Pass completions of 7 & 10 yards to **Dez Bryant** and **Andre Johnson** followed, moving the ball to the 3 then Miller finished off the scoring drive with a run off left tackle into the end zone for a touchdown. Charleswood was back in front, 14-7.

"A nice cut back by Miller there, Bill," Winterall noted. "No Mustang got a hand on him."

"The Mustangs knew he was coming, Phil, but they threw everything they had into a blitz into the center of the line," Badden rasped. "Left tackle Lane Johnson seals off the right defensive end Jackson with a big block. You can see the blitzing linebackers were unable to react in time to the change in direction, giving Miller a free pass into the end zone!"

The Mustangs got the ball back at their own 14 after a short return by Polk. An opening run by Foster off left tackle was good for 6 yards, but he lost all that and more on the next two plays as a blitzing David stuffed the Mustangs back for consecutive losses of 1 and 6 yards.

"Lavonte David was already in the Aurora backfield before Ryan had pitched the ball to Foster," Winterall said. "It's as if he knew the play in advance."

"The Patriots' defence is playing fast – faster than I've ever seen them play, Phil," Badden enthused. "They've got that Mustangs' offensive line totally bamfuddled!"

Sam Koch retreated to just inside his goal line and booted a 49-yard punt that Martin returned for a modest 4-yard gain. The Pats took the field at their own 42 and opened by running Miller off left tackle for 5 yards as the 1st quarter drew to a close. It was the exact same play they had run for their last touchdown. They appeared to be targeting **Malik Jackson** and possibly taunting the Mustangs' defence at the same time. As the whistle blew, signalling the end of the 1st quarter, one team looked confident, bordering on cocky; the other looked frustrated and confused. Few would have ever guessed beforehand that, after 15 minutes, it would be the Mustangs who would be in the second category.

2nd QUARTER (Charleswood 17, Aurora 14) – Sometimes all it takes is a break in the action. When the Mustangs' defence returned for the 2nd quarter they appeared to have recovered their morale. **Patrick Peterson** delivered a violent hit on Bryant as he turned to field a hitch, but the referee ruled that he got there too early, resulting in a 7-yard penalty that brought the Patriots across to the Mustangs' side of mid-field. On the next play, a humiliated Jackson, looking for revenge, made straight for Miller in the backfield. But instead of the Charleswood running back he ran straight into Manning, who was dropping back to pass, and brought him down for a 12-yard loss. The Patriots completed two passes for modest gains but could not make up 22 yards against the Aurora Dime package and were forced to punt. The punt from Huber did not make it out of bounds but it did land inside the 5 yard line where Edelman fielded it and returned it 9 yards to the Aurora 13. It was the fourth time out of five possessions that the Mustangs had started inside their own 20-yard line.

"The Patriots are winning the field position battle, Bill," noted Winterall as **Matt Ryan** sauntered slowly toward the center of the line.

"You're right, Phil. And that means they have less yards to travel on offence than their opponent and a better chance to score. The Mustangs need some first downs here to even the playing field. Better yet, they need to score."

A 16-yard run by Foster and back-to-back completions to tight end **Brent Celek** for 12 and 16 yards, propelled the Mustangs into Patriots' territory and had them closing in on field goal range. But just when the Aurora offence appeared to be hitting its rhythm, linebacker **CJ Mosley** ran a stunt around right tackle **Duane Brown** and corralled Ryan 7 yards behind the line of scrimmage for his second sack of the game.

"It was hard to see Mosley coming on that play, even from up here, Bill," Winterall commented.

"I think that's because he had his eye on Foster, Phil," Badden said as he pondered the replay. "You see, there he goes after Foster, who is breaking to the right side. He notices Foster doesn't have the ball and finds himself with a clear lane to the quarterback. Sometimes in this crazy game you just find yourself in the right spot. Mosley took advantage of an opportunity and now Aurora is facing 3rd and long."

The Mustangs were unable to convert third down, but a pinpoint punt by Koch pushed Charleswood back to their 9 yard line. The Patriots went straight back to Miller off left tackle, but Jackson was waiting for him and held him to 1 yard. Soon, Huber was punting again – another booming kick – a 54-yarder that Edelman returned 5 yards to his 37 yard line for his team's best starting field position of the game.

The Patriots' defence remained focused on Foster while the Mustangs answered with an added wrinkle to a familiar play. Ryan dropped back seven steps and fired a long slant to Boldin, who had faked his usual hitch route before turning up field. The completion was good for 29 yards and brought them close to field goal range. Two plays later, they caught the Pats in an all-out blitz with a screen to Foster that might have gone the distance but for a saving tackle by corner **Aqib Talib**. A scramble by Ryan for 6 yards followed then a 13-yard medium out pass to Boldin gave them a 1st and goal at the Patriots' 5-yard line. Three plays later, Ryan checked down to wide receiver **Andre Holmes** inside the pylon for a touchdown to tie it. Over the 8-play drive the Mustangs had not called a single running play and had covered 63 yards in slightly more than three minutes.

"Holmes looked uncovered on that play, Bill," **Phil Winterall** observed with a note of concern.

"That's because he wasn't covered, Phil," **Bill Badden** chortled. "Tramon Williams had him, but lost interest real quick when he saw Ryan looking toward Boldin. Holmes is a kind of a secret weapon for the Mustangs. He actually finished second on the team in catches with 54 and 6 of those were for touchdowns, but most people, even some coaches, don't know who he is and don't care. But he's been effective playing in the shadow of Anquan Boldin and he just made a name for himself here with a touchdown in the Gale Sayers Game."

The Mustangs Faithful in attendance finally came to life. This was the Mustangs team they knew: a team that held opponents to three-and-outs and struck back quickly through the air. The momentum that had been entirely on the Patriots' side at the end of the 1st quarter had clearly shifted. With 3½ minutes remaining in the first half a quick defensive stop could put Aurora in position to grab the lead. Gold towels waved in the

stands while chants of '*Mustangs Charge!*' reverberated throughout HMK Royal Coliseum.

Another angled kick from **Nick Folk** found the up man, **Duke Johnson** and the rookie ripped off a nice 30-yard return to the Charleswood 40 yard line, where Manning took over at the helm of a three-wide receiver set. The Mustangs deployed their nickel package and the air war was on as time ticked away in the first half.

Manning had not yet made much noise in the passing game, throwing for a humble 54 yards to that point. But he made no pretence of anything other than throwing the ball on this drive. He connected on his first two attempts, good for a total of 17 yards and a first down, but threw off target on his next two, bringing up 3rd and 10 at the Aurora 43 yard line. With the drive on the line, Manning tossed a wobbly lob into a soft spot in the Mustangs' zone that Bryant snatched for 10 yards and a first down. The Patriots' faithful roared approval as the whistle signalled the two-minute warning.

"Those aren't pretty throws, Phil, but they're getting the job done," Badden remarked. "That's why Peyton Manning is one of the greats – he knows where to go with the ball in situations like those. The Mustangs rushed three and JJ was triple-teamed on that play, so Peyton had time to throw and he got the ball there – that's all you can ask of your quarterback."

Operating exclusively out of the shotgun, Manning continued to fire away at the Aurora secondary, but the predatory Mustang defensive backs were in good position, forcing ultra



Lamar Miller forces his way into the end zone for the opening score of the game. Miller finished the day with 117 yards rushing and 3 touchdowns to lead the Charleswood offence and win the MVP award.

safe and usually off-target passes. A high throw over the middle was miraculously caught by the big veteran **Andre Johnson** for 12 yards and a timed fly pattern to Johnson clicked for another 8, but when 3rd and 2 came up at the Aurora 13 it was Miller who got the call and he was stoned by **JJ Watt** for no gain. The Aurora defence had held in the red zone but had failed to get the quick stop they needed to turn the tables before half time. Succop came onto the field in a bid to put his team in the lead. In near perfect weather conditions, the 31-yard try was close to a chip shot. Succop's kick was true, putting the Patriots were in front once more, 17-14.

"It was important to get points on that drive, Phil," Badden broke in as the field judge signaled a successful kick. "If the Patriots don't score there, the game is still tied and it's even footing in the 2nd half. They would much rather be in front *and* getting the ball to start the second half."

A seeing-eye squib kick-off by Succop danced all the way to the goal line, where Polk fielded it and attempted a return. However, he was tripped up at the 10 yard line by a pack of Patriot special teamers. There was still over a minute to play in the 1st half – certainly enough time for the Mustangs to get into field goal range – but, saddled with poor field position, it looked as if they had uncharacteristically thrown in the towel when they took the field with two tight ends and ran three consecutive handoffs to Foster for 13 yards and a 1st down. However, with 21 seconds left and facing 1st & 10 at their 23 yard line, Aurora suddenly called a timeout.

"What do you think is going on here, Bill?" a surprised Winterall inquired of his booth partner.

"The Mustangs have called a timeout, Phil. They want to stop the clock to prevent time from running out. This means they want to run a play," Badden replied without a touch of irony.

Sure enough, after conferring with Coach Liotta, Ryan returned to the field in the company of four wide receivers while the Patriots countered defensively with their quarter package. The Pats sensed an opportunity and the Mustangs looked to seize one. Neither team seemed inclined to play things safe. Ryan took a deep drop as



Center **Kory Lichtensteiger** ponders what went wrong after a 1st quarter sack by Patriots' rookie **Danny Shelton** ended a Mustangs drive. It was not a good day for the Aurora front five.

Boldin, Holmes and **Albert Wilson** streaked down field. Edelman hung around near the sideline about 10 yards away. As he scanned for gaps in the deep zone, the Mustang QB did not see corner **Jerraud Powers** flying in from the edge. The Patriots' corner blind-sided Ryan, dumping him for a 15-yard loss and nearly jarring the ball loose.

"That was a real close call, Bill," exclaimed Winterall as Ryan was helped to his feet by one of his linemen.

"It was a very close call, Phil! If Powers is about 15 pounds heavier he probably pops that ball loose," a hyped-up Badden added. "Charlewood didn't go into straight prevent on that play – they sent Powers on a corner blitz! Jason Findlay's Patriots are playing for keeps, Phil. This game could get really exciting in the second half!"

3rd QUARTER (Charleswood 24, Aurora 14) – With just 3 points separating the combatants and big plays on both sides, nobody could argue that the game to that point had not already been an exciting one. But last year's battle between Carthage and Aurora had been similarly close through two quarters before the Mustangs galloped away in the third quarter and trotted casually to victory in the fourth to complete their perfect season. The memory of last year's second half domination by the Aurora defence pre-occupied the halftime analysts as **Ellie Goulding** performed at center field for stadium spectators. Many openly wondered if **Peyton Manning** would be able to finish strong in the face of the halftime adjustments that the league's no.1 defence would be making in the locker room.

"What are the Mustangs going to have to do to turn this around, Bill?" **Phil Winterall** started as Folk set the ball on the tee for the kickoff to open the second half.

"They're going to have to stop the Patriots from scoring and they're going to have to score some points – at least 4," Bill **Badden** replied authoritatively. "Now, they probably won't score 4 points, because that would mean two safeties. As good as the Aurora defence is, I think they probably don't get a shot at two safeties in the second half. I don't even know if any team has ever scored two safeties in one half. If it happened, it was way back when the rules were different and offences would take them on purpose to get the ball back. So, they probably need to score a touchdown, or two field goals, or a field goal and one safety. Of course, all that changes if the Patriots score. Then the Mustangs would have to

make up that score and score the other points I just mentioned. It can get pretty complicated, Phil. Best to leave it to the coaches to figure it out. But if I was coaching the Mustangs I'd be telling my defence to stop the Patriots the way they can and I'd be telling my offensive line to get ready to protect Matt Ryan because we're throwing the ball and putting points on the board!"

Folk lowered his arm and charged toward the ball to start the second half. It was another angled kick and this one was perfect, forcing Johnson to field it at the corner of the goal line. He was quickly hemmed in by the swarming Aurora special teams unit after a 10-yard return.

The Patriots opened with a 12-yard pass to Johnson and a first down but were soon punting after a pair of Manning misfires brought up 4th and 5 at their 27 yard line. Huber got off another nice punt that Edelman did well to return 9 yards, giving Aurora the ball in healthy field position at their 34 yard line. The Mustangs opened in their signature two-tight end set and split Foster wide. They could do a number of different things from this formation, including running Foster, but they stuck to the pass. Ryan tried to connect with **Heath Miller** but **Ha Ha Clinton-Dix** made a nice play to tip the ball away at the last second. An end-around to Edelman went nowhere and a 3rd & 10 cross to Miller was limited to 7 yards to bring up 4th down.

"Two attempts to Heath Miller on that series, Bill," Winterall noted. "We hardly called his number in the first half. What do you think is behind that strategy?"

"The coaching staff must have seen something on film that made them think Miller would be open," Badden replied ponderously. "I didn't see it – he was well covered. Plus he's not very fast, so a young fellow like Ha Ha Clinton-Dix – don't you just love that name, 'Ha Ha?' Who names their kid 'Ha Ha?' It makes me go 'ha ha' just thinking about it – anyway, a young kid like Ha Ha can get the last laugh by catching up to a guy like Miller, even if he does get open for a bit."

The punt from **Sam Koch** went out of bounds at the Patriots' 10 yard line, backing them up for the second consecutive possession. They led with another run off left tackle by Miller that Jackson sniffed out and stuffed for a one-yard loss. The Mustangs' defender did an impromptu "sack dance," but had the presence of mind to turn to the crowd as he did so to avoid a taunting penalty. The Patriots switched to the air and the Mustangs looked ready for it, but Manning tossed another perfect lob to Johnson for 13 yards then checked down under blitz pressure to **Jason Witten** for 11 more yards to secure a pair of first downs and breathing room at the 33.

"Peyton showed some mobility in the pocket on that last play, Bill," Winterall said. "He was able to find Jason Witten for a first down."

"The Mustangs came with the blitz that time, Phil," Badden remarked. "But Manning saw it all the way and timed his sidestep to buy an extra second to find Witten. He's looking calm out there, Phil. He's not grimacing or giving his receivers dirty looks. He's managing the game well at this stage. But the Mustangs look like they are tuned in to the Patriots game plan; it's just a matter of time before they make some plays."

Sure enough, the Mustangs targeted **Lamar Miller** on the next play. With the snap of the ball Jackson, Watt and linebacker **Jelani Jenkins** all converged on the Patriots running back as he cut around left tackle. It looked as if Miller would hit a wall, but tackle **Lane Johnson** caught a piece of the right defensive end, Jackson, and Miller abruptly cut inside, avoiding Jenkins as he hurtled toward him at high speed in a likely bid for a big hit and turnover. Watt had taken the inside gap to prevent a cutback, but he had over-pursued and found himself lunging backwards as Miller darted by. All of a sudden Miller had open space in front of him, but it was rapidly closing as Aurora's prize safeties, **Eric Weddle** and **Earl Thomas**, moved in to challenge the Patriots running back in the open field. Thomas went for the strip and Miller dodged him easily as he barreled past, but Weddle had taken a good angle and came in low to wrap up his legs. That is when Miller made a move that will adorn Championship highlight reels for years to come. In mid-sprint he leaped sideways at the last instant, causing Weddle to grasp air as he hit the grass. Miller landed untouched but off balance. He stumbled forward, uncertainly at first, reached down with his left hand to steady himself then took off like a rocket with Peterson, the closest Mustang, in hot pursuit. The Aurora corner closed in on him near the 10 yard line but at the precise moment that he was ready to lunge, Miller cut back. Peterson went flying by and Miller jogged the final 10 yards into the end zone to finish off a 67-yard scoring play and mark his third touchdown of the game.

The Patriots fans in Mission Viejo went berserk, but the stadium was not at its loudest due to simultaneous dead silence from Aurora-backers. The Mustangs defence had been flat out beaten in a big moment. Nobody could remember it happening quite so glaringly.

"*What-a-play-by-Lamar-Miller!*" intoned Winterall, emphasizing each syllable with equal force.

"We may have just witnessed the turning point in this game, Phil," Badden declared with solemnity. "It is still early, but the way the Patriots' defence is playing, 10 points will be a difficult deficit for the Mustangs' offence to overcome."

Chris Polk brought Mustangs fans on the edge of their seats with a 33-yard kick-off return that looked like it would be much more before a shoestring tackle by special team rookie **Dee Ford** prevented a showdown between the kick returner and the kicker. Feeding off their special teams boost the Aurora offence got off to a nice start with a screen to Foster that defeated the Patriots' blitz for 12 yards and a first down. Undeterred, the Patriots switched to man coverage and continued applying pressure with a variety of blitzes. On 2nd & 10, from their 45, Mosley shot the gap, ran over an attempted block by Foster and hauled down Ryan for a 10-yard loss. Now facing 3rd & 20, the Mustangs brought in 5 wide receivers and the Patriots responded with their quarter package, their defensive backs arrayed in a deep zone to take away the deep strike, but yielding room underneath. Ryan faded back five steps and looked toward an open Edelman running a medium slant, but before he could unload the ball he was unloaded on by a blitzing **Aqib Talib**, who whipped him down for another 10-yard loss.

"Matt Ryan did not see that coming either, Bill," Winterall stated matter-of-factly.

"It was a corner blitz out of a preventative formation like the one we saw at the end of the first half and it caught the Mustangs by surprise again, Phil," Badden declared. "Right tackle Duane Brown is backing up in his stance, looking for someone to block and – *whoosh* – there goes Talib right by him! That's seven sacks of Matt Ryan today and we're just in the third quarter!"

Koch came on for his fifth appearance of the day and sent a high boomer that Martin returned 7 yards to the 27 yard line. Manning took over with a chance to put some real distance between his team and their opponent, but the drive went backwards. A busted play resulted in Manning taking the ball himself for a 2-yard loss then a screen pass to Miller was almost intercepted by Dansby. On 3rd & 12, Manning held on to the ball a fraction too

long trying to find an open man and **Willie Young** bagged him for a 7-yard loss.

"The Mustangs' defence looked impressive on that series, Bill," Winterall observed as the Charleswood punting unit came on the field.

"We may have just witnessed the turning point of this game, Phil," Badden declared solemnly. "The Aurora defence made a statement with that stand. They're saying, '*you're not moving on us.*' I expect to see the Mustangs' offence take some inspiration from that right here!"

A 14-yard punt return by Edelman gave the Mustangs excellent field position at their 43 yard line. After a pair of Foster runs gained 5 yards, Ryan threw a perfect pass in tight coverage to Celek for 8 yards and a first down. Two plays later, with the Patriots keying again on Foster, Ryan found Boldin on a hitch route for 22 yards to the Patriots 17 yard line. A run and a pass brought them to the 6 yard line, but a false start on the right tackle, Brown pushed them back to the 11 yard line. On 1st and goal Foster was stonewalled for no gain on a nice play by interior lineman **Johnathan Hankins** as time expired in the third quarter. Then the curtain fell on the third act, with the Mustangs trailing by 10, but knocking at the door.

4th QUARTER (Charleswood 27, Aurora 17) – When play resumed the Aurora offence had switched from their two-tight end formation to a three-wide set in an attempt to spread the field.

"The false start penalty seemed to rob the Mustangs of some momentum, Bill," Winterall began as the networks returned to air.

"They need to get some points here, Phil," Badden replied. "They don't need to score a touchdown, but they definitely need to come away with points. That offensive line is skittish. The Patriots have been unloading on them all day and they look like they don't know what to do about it."

As if to prove Badden's point, Charleswood linebacker **Jamie Collins** crowded the line, behind teammates Hankins and Mosley (the lineman), and hovered menacingly over right guard **James Carpenter** as Ryan barked signals. Knowing it was his man, Carpenter flinched just before the snap. Collins pointed excitedly as the whistle blew and a flag flew onto the field – *another* false start. Now facing 2nd & goal from the 16-yard line, Ryan threw complete to a double-covered Boldin at the 5-yard line, but another flag fell behind the line of scrimmage in the area of the umpire – holding on left guard, **John Greco**, who had hauled down **Cameron Heyward**.

"The Mustangs had first down and goal at the 6. Now they are facing second and goal from the 26 yard line," Winterall deadpanned.

"The Mustangs are flubbed right now, Phil," Badden sputtered. "They can't get off the ball fast enough. The Pats have them spooked."

Aurora attempted to slow down the Charleswood blitz with a screen to Foster, but a charged up **CJ Mosley** tracked the running back down and flattened him after a 5-yard gain. A third down pass underneath to Boldin was good for 9 yards and set up 4th down at the Patriots' 12. With the way the drive was going, **Rich Liotta** did not hesitate to send in the field goal unit. Folk came on and booted an easy 30-yarder to bring the Mustangs within 7 points, trailing 24-17, with 13:20 still remaining in the game.

"That was the right decision, Phil," Badden offered without being prompted. "But the Mustangs have to be very disappointed with the way that drive ended. They took some terrible penalties there. Give some credit to the aggressiveness of the Patriots' defence for that. We may have just witnessed the turning point of this game, Phil."

The Patriots got the ball back at their 17-yard line after an 11-yard kick return by Johnson. It soon became clear that the offence was not going to take chances. They stuck to short passes and runs with Miller. The strategy was good enough to get them across mid-field, where they faced



The trophy presentation completed and the speeches finished **Peyton Manning** waves to his fans as he leaves the field. Media were already speculating that his victory over the Mustangs could very well have been his last game as a Patriot.

3rd & 3 at the Mustangs 48-yard line. Manning took a three-step drop and looked for Watkins on the short slant, but the Mustangs played it perfectly while sending **Trent Cole** on the blitz. Seeing his receiver was covered, Manning pulled in the ball just before he was leveled by the veteran pass-rusher for a 7-yard loss. The Mustangs had given up some ground, but their defence had finally held. On came the punting unit for Charleswood.

Kevin Huber, who had had a strong day, saved his best for last. He lofted a rainmaker of a punt that Edelman gamely tried to return. But by the time the ball landed the coverage unit had him surrounded and he fell forward for just 1 yard to the Aurora 4. Almost as quickly as Edelman had been collared, the Mustangs' drive ended after a sluggish three-and-out: Foster was stoned for no gain; eked out a 3-yard gain on a short cross then on 3rd down & 7, Pats' corner **Desmond Trufant** batted away a ball intended for Boldin, bringing in Koch to punt from his end zone. He got good hang time on a 44-yard punt that Martin fair caught at his 49.

"What do you do if you are Charleswood,

Bill? Do you take a shot here or do you play it safe?" Winterall queried.

"I play it safe *and* take a shot here, Phil," Badden replied without hesitation. "That way you take some time off the clock and make a big play that maybe puts this game away. But beware of the turnover – the Mustangs lived off of them this year!"

The Patriots chose to play it safe with a couple of Miller runs off left tackle that gained a total of 2 yards. Facing 3rd & 8, Manning kept the drive alive in the face of good coverage by the Mustangs with a nifty check down to Miller, who darted 9 yards for the first down to put them close to field goal range. The tension in the stands and on the field was mounting. The Mustangs loaded up to stop the run on first down, expecting more clock management tactics from the Patriots' offence, but Manning crossed them up with a neat fake to Miller and a perfect dart to **Dez Bryant**. He caught the ball in stride and dashed 21 yards before being brought down by **Brandon Boykin** at the 19 yard line.

"Beautiful fake and a perfectly thrown ball by Peyton Manning there, Bill," hailed Winterall. "Charleswood is in good shape now."

"We may have just witnessed the turning point of this game, Phil," Badden elucidated with appropriate gravity. "Unless the Mustangs can come up with a turnover, or something else happens, the Patriots are going to make this a two-score game."

Miller was flattened for no gain on the next play by an aggressively swarming Mustangs D then was leveled by **Jelani Jenkins** on a short cross that fell incomplete. On 3rd & 10, the Patriots decided to take no chances and ran a draw to Miller that was good for 4 yards. On 4th & 6, on came Succop to kick what surely must have felt like the most important field goal attempt of his brief EFL career. If he was nervous, he didn't show it as he calmly and deliberately booted a 33-yarder dead center to give the Patriots a 27-17 lead with just 2:38 remaining to play.

The Patriot Faithful in the still jam-packed Royal Coliseum stood and cheered joyfully in anticipation of victory. Mustangs Loyalists sat glumly as the Patriots congratulated their kicker, but then rose to their feet for one last hurrah as their kick return unit took the field. Aurora needed two scores and they had all of their timeouts. They clung to life, but the 10-point hill was a steep climb, even for an explosive offence.

The drive to stay alive got off to an inauspicious start when a holding penalty on the kick return pushed the Mustangs back to their 9 yard line. But soon Aurora was on the move with a 20-yard screen to Foster. With breathing room they paused and waited for the two-minute warning. After the break, Ryan continued to move his team, stringing together 4 straight completions to reach the Charleswood 27 with 1:06 left and the clock ticking. For some reason, however, the offence took its time getting to the line, burning a full 30 seconds off the clock. In the inexplicable confusion to get set, the offensive line was slow off the snap and big defensive tackle **Johnathan Hankins** took advantage, bull-rushing past the guard and center to sack Ryan for a 14-yard loss at the 41-yard line. Ryan popped up and immediately called his first timeout, but the damage had been done.

"The Mustangs are down to 32 seconds, two timeouts, and 10 points to make up, Bill," Winterall noted. "Is there any hope for them?"

"I'd say there's no hope, Phil," Badden replied, "but these are the Mustangs, so anything is possible."

But there would be no comeback for the ages on this day. A 10-yard pass to Boldin put the Mustangs in field goal range but **Nick Folk** missed the 49-yard field goal attempt. With 18 seconds left on the clock, **Peyton Manning** strode confidently onto the field to an exuberant ovation from the throngs of Patriots fans. The *Gatorade* fell on Patriots' owner, **Jason Findlay** on the Charleswood sideline. The Mustangs, defeated, did not bother to call their remaining timeouts as Manning took a knee, closing out the final game of the 2015 season in magnificent victory.

POST GAME

The return of Peyton Manning to Charleswood brought with it hope of redemption for a franchise that had appeared to lose its way after winning a Championship in 2013. But would a quarterback, even one as accomplished as he, be enough to galvanize a young and inexperienced team to perform at an elite level? Dominance in the regular season had not been enough to convince most sports writers that the Patriots could hold their own against the reigning Champion Mustangs – a team that had looked as invincible in these playoffs as it had looked during all of last year's one and only perfect season. But in the biggest game of all, Peyton Manning and the team Jason Findlay hastily assembled for him in the off-season delivered beyond expectations. On this day, they were meaner and hungrier than their daunting opponent. Second-year linebacker CJ Mosley played like a man possessed behind a defensive line that surged with surprising strength and ferocity, overwhelming an often dazed and confused Aurora offensive line. Matt Ryan had a good day statistically, throwing for over 300 yards and completing 75% of his passes, but 8 sacks, many in critical situations, undid all of it. Never had the Mustangs' QB faced such consistent pressure, literally from the first snap to the last. That pressure was a fortuitous by-product of an aggressive defensive game plan designed to contain post-season dynamo, Arian Foster. Blitzes, coming from all directions and in any situation, prevented the Mustangs from getting into a rhythm. As for the league's no.1 ranked defence; it held its own in limiting a savvy, veteran quarterback to pedestrian numbers, but it yielded precious ground in short field situations and failed to generate a single turnover. It also had no answer for Lamar Miller, the Patriots running back who came out of nowhere to play the pivotal role in his team's offence with 3 touchdowns, including a highlight reel 67-yarder that turned the tide irrevocably in the Patriots' favour. At 38 years of age, this championship victory could end up being Peyton's crowning glory – a well-earned last hurrah. If he goes out on top, he can thank his entire team for playing a game he can remember for many years to come.



*Who was slick in
the
Championship?*

**"BRYLCREEM" THE
EFL'S FIRST SPONSOR**



**Lamar Miller
RB
Charleswood
Patriots**

**18 Carries, 118 yards, 3 TDs. 5
catches, 37 yards. Offensive MVP.**



**CJ Mosley
LB
Charleswood
Patriots**

**12 Tackles, 3 Sacks, 1 PD, 1 Hur., 1
FF. Set the tone early with big T.O.**



Charleswood 27 Aurora 17



	1	2	3	4	F
Charleswood	14	3	7	3	27
Aurora	7	7	0	3	17

Scoring

1	14:07	Charleswood	TD	Miller 1 run (Succop) (1-1-0:04)	7-0
1	10:20	Aurora	TD	Ryan 14 pass to Boldin (Folk) (6-67-3:41)	7-7
1	2:46	Charleswood	TD	Miller 3 run (Succop) (8-51-3:42)	14-7
2	3:38	Aurora	TD	Ryan 5 pass to Holmes (Folk) (8-63-3:22)	14-14
2	1:12	Charleswood	FG	Succop 31 (11-47-2:15)	17-14
3	9:09	Charleswood	TD	Miller 67 run (Succop) (5-90-2:34)	24-14
4	13:20	Aurora	FG	Folk 30 (11-45-6:38)	24-17
4	2:38	Charleswood	FG	Succop 33 (8-36-4:29)	27-17

Player Stats

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Manning	33	20	194	0	0	0	3	77.1
	33	20	194	0	0	0	3	77.1

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Miller	18	117	6.5	5	1	67	3
Manning	2	-3	-1.5	0	0	0	0
	20	114	5.7	5	1	67	3

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Johnson A	6	0	8	61	10.2	3	0	13	0
Bryant	5	0	8	56	11.2	3	0	21	0
Miller	5	1	8	37	7.4	2	0	10	0
Watkins	2	0	4	22	11.0	1	0	15	0
Witten	2	2	5	18	9.0	2	0	11	0
	20	3	33	194	9.7	11	0	21	0

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Mosley C	0	1	0
	0	1	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Johnson D	3	51	17.0	30	0
Davis	1	27	27.0	27	0
	4	78	19.5	35	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Martin	3	1	20	6.7	9	0
	3	1	20	6.7	9	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Succop	2-2	33	3-3	9

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Huber	6	297	49.5	0	3	0	54

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	25	In	Td	Sk	Rate
Ryan	33	25	303	2	0	2	8	123.7
	33	25	303	2	0	2	8	123.7

Rushing	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	10	Lg	Td
Foster	18	51	2.8	3	1	16	0
Ryan	1	6	6.0	0	0	6	0
Edelman	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	20	57	2.9	3	1	16	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Avg	FD	25	Lg	Td
Boldin	9	0	13	152	16.9	6	2	35	1
Foster	8	0	8	71	8.9	4	0	20	0
Celek	3	0	3	36	12.0	3	0	16	0
Holmes	2	0	2	21	10.5	2	0	16	1
Cooper	1	0	1	5	5.0	0	0	5	0
Miller	1	0	4	7	7.0	0	0	7	0
Wilson	1	0	1	11	11.0	1	0	11	0
Edelman	0	0	1	0	0.0	0	0	0	0
	25	0	33	303	12.1	16	2	35	2

Fumbles	No	Rec	Td
Ryan	1	0	0
	1	0	0

Kick Returns	No	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Polk	6	118	19.7	33	0
	6	118	19.7	33	0

Punt Returns	No	Fc	Yds	Avg	Lg	Td
Edelman	6	0	42	7.0	14	0
	6	0	42	7.0	14	0

Kicking	FG	Lg	XP	Pts
Folk	1-2	30	2-2	5

Punting	No	Yds	Avg	Tb	20	Bk	Lg
Koch	6	285	47.5	0	2	0	55

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Mosley C	12	3	1	0	1	1	0-0
Talib	7	1	3	0	0	0	0-0
David	7	0	0	2	0	0	0-0
Clinton-Dix	6	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Shelton	5	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Powers	3	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hankins	3	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Abdullah	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Trufant	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Collins	2	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hayward	2	0	0	0	2	0	0-0
Spence	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Johnson L	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams T	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Jansen	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Succop	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ford	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mosley C	1	0	0	1	0	0	0-0
Lawrence	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
	63	8	6	3	3	1	0-0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	Int
Dansby	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Cole	5	1	0	1	2	0	0-0
Jackson	5	1	0	2	0	0	0-0
Norman	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Weddle	5	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jenkins	4	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Watt	3	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Boykin	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thomas E	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Carrie	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Young	1	1	0	0	0	0	0-0
Starks	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Pierre-Loui	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Peterson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Thompson	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Celek	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hughes	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Mohamed	0	0	2	0	0	0	0-0
Avril	0	0	0	0	1	0	0-0
	50	3	5	3	3	0	0-0



18 Carries, 117 yards, 3 TDs. Game-breaking 67-yard TD run in 3rd won it.

	Charleswood	Aurora
First Downs	17	19
Rushes	20-114	20-57
Passes	33-20-194	33-25-303
Sacked	3-26	8-82
Fumble	0	1
Penalties	4-35	11-74
Turnovers	0	1
Missed Tackles	9	5
Dropped Passes	3	0
Bad Passes	0	2
Passes 25+	0	2
Runs 10+	1	1
Blitzes	44	20
Time	27:27	32:33
Third Down	4-12	3-10
Fourth Down	0-0	0-0
Red Att/Td/Fg	4/2/2	3/2/1
Net Offense	282	278



AT THE EFL CHAMPIONSHIP *With Spats McChad*

MISSION VIEJO, CA – This city is proof that imagination, creativity and a touch of ingenuity will overcome formidable challenges. One of the largest master-planned cities ever built in the United States, the picturesque, tree-lined, idyllic residential community of Mission Viejo is set on hilly chaparral once thought to be undevelopable. That is, until an urban planner named Donald Bren drafted a plan that laid out roads and homes along the natural contours of the land. Add a dash of Spanish architectural influence, an artificial members-only lake in the city center, a Mediterranean climate and you have an exotic suburban paradise in the midst of sprawling Orange County, California.

Mission Viejo, much like Garland, Texas, falls into the category of “nice place to live, wouldn’t want to visit.” While a fine destination for a day trip – to view the architecture, lounge in the parks, enjoy a light lunch, or go hiking on the Oso Creek Trail – it is no vacation spot. The city is constituted mostly of residences; and the predominantly affluent citizens who live in them don’t need your tourist dollars, thank you very much. So, how would thousands of brash and boisterous football tourists and sports media intermix harmoniously with the genteel local populace for a full week without getting bored and having to brave the one-hour-plus drive to Los Angeles, on the country’s most dangerous freeway, for the sake of entertainment?

Enter.....Ferraroland! This gaudy blight on the charming urban landscape of Mission Viejo is an ambitious attempt to merge Disneyland, Las Vegas and Medieval Times into one complex. Wedged inside a 150-acre swath of land between Riley Wilderness Park and Ladera Ranch, east of Mission Viejo, it is the Mad King’s “vision” of a homeland – his capital-in-exile – a place to brood in comfort as he waits for his moment to seize the Crown of Portugal.

Built on freshly-seized land surrounding His Majesty the King’s (HMK) Royal Coliseum, Ferraroland is a testament to what can be done when you have a ready supply of cheap but high-quality labour and local politicians in your back pocket. About the only thing “King” Ferraro lobbied for but didn’t get was sovereignty for the Kingdom of Ferraronia, the name for Ferraroland under the original plan to set up a Principality in the middle of the United States, like Monaco or Vatican City. He might have received it if Mission Viejo Mayor, Frank Ury, had had a say. But the Feds – the level of government with ultimate authority over whether or not little countries pop up in the middle of the USA – were not nearly as impressed by the regal trappings of His Pompousness and told him rather rudely to go fly a purple kite.

In addition to a renovated and expanded HMK Royal Coliseum, Ferraroland features three hotels, five full-service restaurants, a food court in the central plaza, a conference centre, four soccer fields, a roller coaster, a casino, a mall and a meticulous 5/8-scale reproduction of a portion of the Alfama district in Lisbon complete with São Jorge Castle set imperiously on top of one of Mission Viejo’s ever-abundant hills over-looking the entire complex. There is more on the grounds of Ferraroland that I was unable to discover for reasons that will become apparent as you read on.

Ferraroland is at best kitschy and at worse bordering on obscene. It is American-style commercial overkill done in purple and gold with the disconcertingly creepy *Burger King*-like image of Chris Ferraro staring mockingly down at every visitor as they enter through the main gates. The incongruous presence of a precise replica of an historical part of Lisbon, populated by actors dressed in authentic 16th century period costume, adds to the ‘Bizarro World’ effect. Having said that, the care and attention to detail that went into recreating São Jorge Castle and its surrounding neighbourhood is impressive, I must grudgingly admit.

Despite my natural inclination to reject this strange and haughty pastiche of Portuguese culture, American consumerism and ego worship, I might have come to appreciate more aspects of Ferraroland had I been allowed to relax and “enjoy” it like most of my colleagues. But, nooooo! **Chris Ferraro** would not let that happen without attempting to exact some measure of revenge for the many real and perceived slights I had occasionally directed towards him, and his team, in my column.

ENTERING FERRAROLAND

I was knowingly entering the lair of my sworn enemy and for that many of you will dismiss me as stupid. Fair enough, perhaps it was stupid to walk in through the front gate without a disguise and a false identity. But my Media credentials, my

hotel voucher, my syndicate credit card, my free ticket to the game and my assortment of Ferraroland ride coupons all had my name and face embossed on them with micro chip bar codes. It was either walk in as **Spats McChad** or book a room at the ‘Motel 6’ in Menifee, the closest vacancy over 50 miles away, and swindle my way into somebody else’s free ticket and credentials. I can fast talk my way out of trouble in a pinch, but I am no “Jackal” on the hunt for Charles de Gaulle.

I figured I would be taking a greater risk with the Orange County Sheriffs by attempting to steal my way through Gale Sayers Week than I would by having to evade the **Red Pimple** and other assorted carnival-style Ferraro henchman bent on doing the would-be King’s bidding. Plus, I was willing to bet that His Maniacalness was not stupid enough to risk a scandal such as the abduction, torture and murder of a world-renowned journalist (me!) while he was basking in the glow of the EFL and National Media limelight. So, in broad daylight and with a bare face, I debarked from my cab, strode unabashedly up to the front gates of Ferraroland and presented myself at one of the dozens of security checkpoints.

“Ticket please, *senhor*,” said a park employee with a curly moustache wearing a stocking cap, baggy shirt, gold sash and black trousers. He was attempting to look and sound officious but the stocking cap muted his air of authority. I think I smirked.

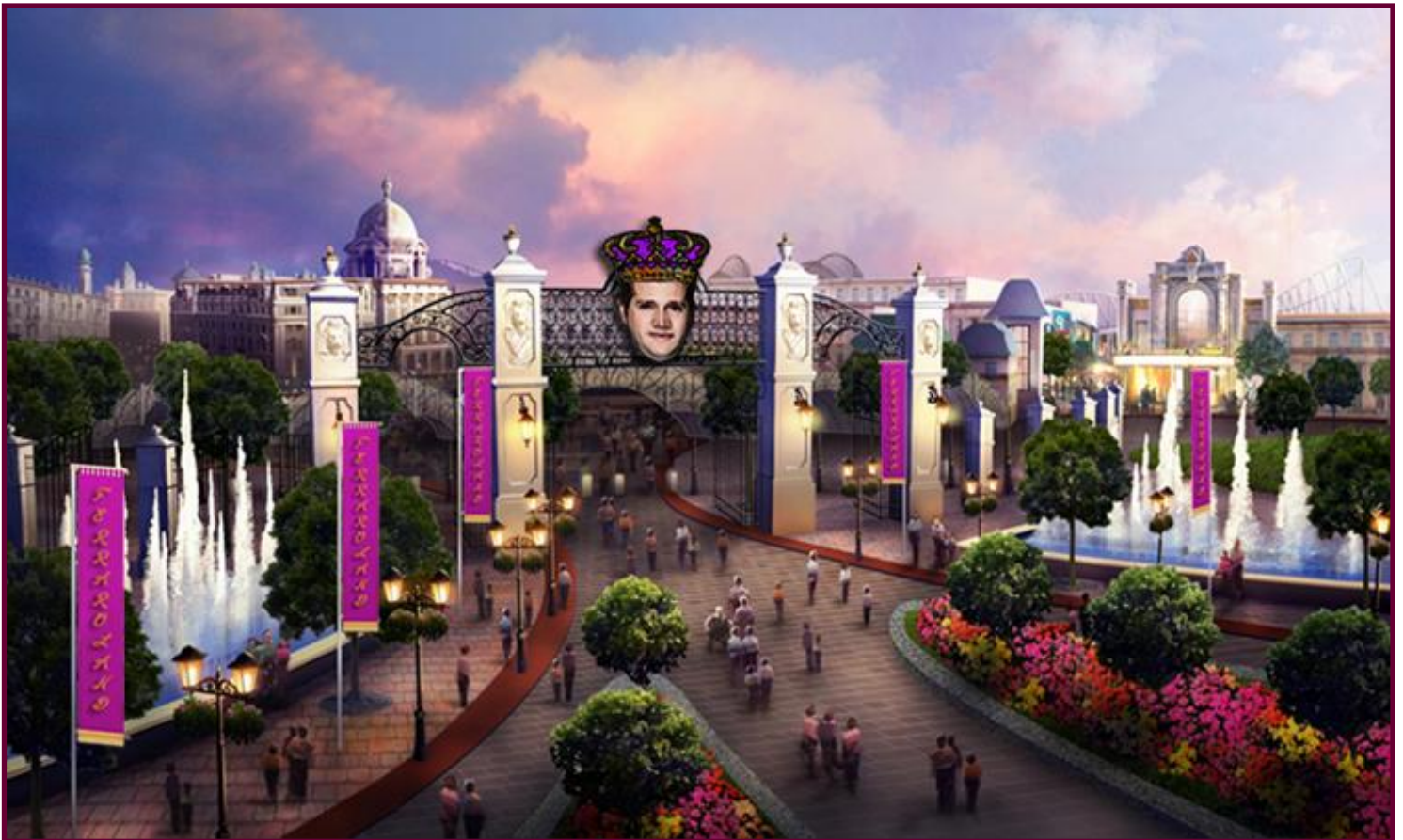
As if my bemused reaction had been anticipated, a very stern-looking security guard packing an authority-laden .44 calibre pistol stood close by, fixing his expressionless gaze upon me. It popped into my head at that moment that it would *not* be good idea to pull on the tassel of the ticket taker’s stocking cap just for the fun of it.

I presented my shiny Ferraroland pass along with my Media credentials. The ticket taker scanned my park pass then my Media Pass. Upon my scanning the latter, a loud buzzer sound emitted from the device and the red LED flashed ‘**CODE S.**’ He looked startled. He pulled a black memo book from his back pocket, removed a card and read.

“Ah....sir, you must enter by the special media gate. That’s number ‘0’ over there,” he said as he pointed to a gate at the east end of the main entrance.

I looked over. It was a fair distance off but stood out because it was black, not purple or gold or silver like the other gates. I trudged off, luggage in tow behind me, toward the black gate marked ‘0’. It would have been helpful to put this little piece of information in the brochure; it would have saved me time and energy if I had known to direct my cab to that spot rather than the center of the entrance way.

As I approached Gate ‘0’ I passed silver Gate ‘1’ next to it. Above that entrance was a sign that read ‘MEDIA.’ The sign



An artist’s rendition of the Kingdom of Ferraronia: the original blueprint for what would later become Ferraroland. The finished product retained most of the original artist’s concept, minus the gushing fountains on the left and the domed palace in the background. In its place a 1/4 scale replica of São Jorge Castle and the surrounding Alfama District of 16th century Lisbon formed the centerpiece of this unique and bizarre theme park.

above Gate '0' read 'SPECIAL MEDIA.' It gratified me to see that I was finally being recognized as special. I had spent too many EFL Championships mingling with the riff raff of the local print media. It would appear that my blog and the international syndication of my weekly column with the EFL's expansion into Asia had raised me to the rank of the elite sports columnists, such as **Peter Prince**, **Kris Hortenson** and **Adam Duhl**. Although I don't like to blow my own horn, I felt I had earned my place among that esteemed group. While I was clearly moving up the pecking order, I vowed to never forget where I came from when I took my place beside my new friends in the luxury press box at the HMK Royal Coliseum. I would certainly keep in touch with my old buddy **Jean Boisvert** of the *Swampland Proof* and I might even sneak a pint at half time with **Charlie Wood** of the *Charleswood Banner* – if I could find him in the crowded media pool that is. It would be nice to get away from that loud-mouthed hack, **Aristedes Kalogiannis** of the *Pickering Post*, and not have to wipe the drool off the chin of **Lanny McDonald**, of the *Markham Economist & Sun*, in the fourth quarter when guarding him from choking on his own vomit. I would miss *LA Daily News*' **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven** (Gabby), of course, and would do what I could to get her into the upper echelon.

My heart was full of anticipation as I strutted up to Gate '0' and presented my credentials to the sharply dressed Ferraroland official in the black suit and gold-embroidered royal purple tie. This guy did not look like a medieval Portuguese peasant. And the guy with the ballistic vest and submachine gun slung over his shoulder standing in the shadows behind him did not look like a \$35/hr armed security guard. *These guys are the real deal*, I thought to myself; nothing less than the best for celebrities like me.

The man in the suit did not even glance at my documents. He looked me directly in the eyes and smiled as he lifted an arm to guide me toward the entrance way. "Ah, Mr. McChad, we've been expecting you," he said with the slightest hint of a foreign accent. He was sporting a red lapel pin in the shape of a bulbous squash. *Weird*, I thought, but this was Ferraroland after all.

I smiled back. I was about to say something suitably gracious when I was distracted by the sudden presence at my side of what must have been some kind of porter. He wore a floppy beret and a uniform emblazoned with the familiar 'Pipo the Rooster' crest of the House of Ferraro. The porter snapped up my bags and loaded them into a golf cart as the man in the suit explained that my bags would be brought to my hotel while I registered at the Castle.

"The 'Castelo do Rei,'" he added, possibly detecting my quizzical expression. "A reception is being held there for our *special* media guests of whom you, good sir, are one." He placed emphasis on the word "special."

He smiled broadly as he guided me toward a waiting automobile. It was a compact smart car-style vehicle with a tiny rear cab and black tinted windows. The rear door opened automatically as I approached. It looked too small for a grown man. But before I could point that out to the gentleman in the suit, the square-jawed gentleman with the submachine gun helped me get a better grasp of the physics involved by wedging me tightly into the cab with a firm and forceful shove.

The door slammed shut behind me before I could right my position in the cramped rear seat. I was tilted to my right with my knees bunched up against my chest, the top of my head pressing up against the roof light. It was an uncomfortable position but I held it for a few moments as I attempted to grasp my situation. Something was wrong. I was pretty sure that Ferraroland was not supposed to be a replica of Munchkinland.

A solid partition with a sliding window separated the rear cab from the front seat. The window was shut, making it impossible to see the driver. The car started suddenly, jostling me so that I fell on my side, face pressed on the fabric seats. I struggled to right myself and ended up frozen in an undignified pose as the partition window slid open. At first I saw nothing. Then, after a couple of seconds, a bulbous shape appeared from the shadows. There was no mistaking that longish snout, crowned at the tip by a swollen pustule that throbbed in scarlet, septic torment. My blood ran cold as I realized I had fallen into a trap.

"Ahhh, Spats McChad, we meet-ah again-ah!" hissed my pasty-faced nemesis. "Thees time-ah you weel not escape-ah!"

IN THE CASTLE OF THE KING

At that moment if I could have I would have banged my head against something hard for being so incredibly stupid; or for being too smart. I had successfully talked myself into believing that during the week that the football world was watching, "mad" King Ferraro (who I did not often miss an opportunity to label as such) would be rational enough to distance himself completely from the **Red Pimple** and refrain from displaying any hint of animosity toward me for exercising my First Amendment rights. It's not as if one could subtract me from the Gale Sayers Week equation and nobody would notice. Thousands, if not millions, of my readers would be waiting for my take on the venue and the game. I would be missed! At least, I fervently hoped that I would be.

The **Red Pimple** made an attempt at a maniacal laugh, but fell well short of the Jack Nicholson bar. It was more like a creepy giggle, slightly effeminate, and totally spoiled at the end by an involuntary cough. The sinister-laugh-fail emboldened me to register my defiance.

"Oooohhh, I'm scaayr-ed!" I taunted back.

"Oh you will-ah be-ah, McChad! You will-ah be-ah very soon-ah!" he spat back in irritation then slammed shut the sliding window.

It was a rough ride to wherever we were going and I felt that it was intended to be that way. The window tint was so



One of the images of Ferraroland, where Medieval Portugal and Modern America meet, as depicted in a postcard available for sale throughout the “Kingdom.” I’m not sure what the attraction is here, apart from the cute little brunette in the right foreground.

dark and my head movement so limited that it was difficult to make out any landmarks along the way. I did manage to catch a glimpse of a bright red neon sign emblazoned with the words **“FIGHTING COCK CASINO”** and another in silver that read *‘Casa de Sardinhas.’* After a few minutes I could tell we were on a winding road with a steep upward grade. This portion of the trip lasted another minute or so then the vehicle stopped for about 15 seconds before moving slowly and sharply downward for about another minute. Finally, we parked. I could see nothing outside of the car but I could hear voices speaking in another language, presumably Portuguese.

The door suddenly opened and I was pulled out of the cab by two burly men wearing matching Beefeater-style costumes, but coloured purple rather than red, with gold lining and broader, floppier hats. A cartoonish red rooster crest adorned the center of the tunic – leaving no doubt who these two clowns served. I swore I had seen these men before, but in the anxiety of the moment I was unable to recall under what circumstances.

One secured my right arm and the other my left as the **Red Pimple** advanced toward me at a slow, measured pace. When he was less than one foot away he stopped and brought his face right up to mine so that I could feel the heat from the pulsating boil on the end of his nose. His face was caked in white make-up and the shape of his bloodshot, piercing eyes was accentuated by heavy purple eyeliner. His nose was running very slightly and he smelled of mint and caraway seeds. I fought off conflicting impulses to both laugh and scream.

“For years I have been-ah waiting to do thees-ah, Spats McChad!” he whispered breathily as he brought his two forefingers up to the boil on the end of his nose.

At the very last instant I realized what was coming and shut my eyes. It was lucky that I did. The **Red Pimple** pressed sharply on the boil, causing a burst of hot pus to splatter all over my face. I choked profanities as the volatile substance burnt into my skin and the scent of rotten eggs filled the air. My tormentor let loose a childish tee-hee in a vain attempt to sound villainous while the two heavies in the floppy hats chuckled moronically.

“Now take-ah heem to the dungeon, Inácio and Narciso. Put him in one of the small cells,” the **Red Pimple** barked at my two guards. **“I will inform His Highness-ah.”**

Despite the irritation on my skin and stink of the pus from the Red Pimple’s caustic boil, my mind was working overtime on a plan to escape. The problem with the plan was that it involved overpowering these two thugs, who were both much bigger and stronger than me. I also noticed that they were armed with not-so ceremonial-looking halberds. I remembered from my days of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* that a halberd could inflict 2d8 of damage, so it was nothing to trifle with unless you were wearing full plate armour, which I was *not*. So, deciding that a craftier plan was required to eliminate the possibility of having one of my limbs lopped off, I decided to buy some time by allowing myself to be marched through the narrow, low-ceilinged halls of the dungeon of King Ferraro’s model castle.

The guards said nothing as we plodded, hunched over, through the stone corridors. We passed several open rooms where implements of torture such as the stocks, the rack, the Iron Maiden, the spiked chair, and a thing called the Head Crusher were prominently displayed as if in a museum. But I got the sick feeling that these could be more than mere models of a dark past when the Inquisition reigned supreme. I was starting to get worried, but panic had not yet set in. Possibly this was because I had the feeling that Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee, currently holding me captive, were dumb as stumps but not necessarily psychotic. The **Red Pimple**, on the other hand, was clearly afflicted with rare diseases, both physical and mental.

I was thrown rather roughly into a very small cell labelled, 'WITCHES.' It was no bigger than a coat closet. There was no furniture, no space to lie down and no place to do one's business (if you know what I mean). The thug named Inácio slammed the cell door shut with brutal panache. And it bounced open. He slammed it again, and again it bounced back open. He tried another time with the same result and then another and another and another.....

"There is no latch you idiot!" I finally yelled at him after about the 10th time. "There is no lock! It's not a real prison cell door!"

The guards looked at me then at the door. The one named Narciso bent down and examined it closely. He closed it slowly then pulled it back gently. He tried it again, slightly slower this time then again and again and again.....slower each time.

"Look, you morons, it's not going to close," I said in exasperation. "But even if it could close, do either of you have a key?"

Their eyes widened and they looked at each other in shock and surprise before anxiously checking their pockets. Sure enough, neither of them had a key. Even these dimwits could figure out that without a key to a door without a lock there was no way to hold me here. They stared at me and I could smell the proverbial wood burning as they tried to think of what to do next. But before either of them could speak a voice and many footsteps could be heard approaching from down the hall.

"And this is the dungeon. The real one in São Jorge Castle is closed and not accessible to the public, so our modellers had to consult old notes from the Portuguese Inquisition for descriptions of the cells and the torture devices used back then." The voice was reverberating louder as it got closer.

The guards looked suddenly worried. "*É Sua Alteza!*" Inácio gasped. They stumbled into each other as Inácio tried going one way and Narciso the other. After some more jostling they agreed, through an exchange of grunts, to head off in the direction away from the voices in the hall. They scrambled off, forgetting their halberds in their haste. By their reaction to the official sounding voice I drew the conclusion that they were not probably supposed to be here. *Ahhhh, maybe there's been some kind of mistake*, I thought.

But just in case I was wrong, I grabbed one of the halberds and stepped out of the cell as the sounds of footsteps on stone reached the turn in the corridor. The wall torches cast forward shadows and I could see the silhouettes of a group of people. I held the halberd high as the first person turned the corner.

"And here, we enter the cell area where prisoners would wait – *WOAAHHH!*" the head of the group reared up as he saw me, halberd pointed straight ahead, blocking his way. He looked startled then horrified then puzzled as he perused my person. He may have been struggling to place me, but I had no doubt who I was facing. The crown on his head gave it away.

"You're not a guard. Declare yourself, intruder!" the would-be King Ferraro commanded in a voice wavering with uncertainty.

Before I could answer I heard a female voice ring out and saw **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven** push herself to the front of the group: "Spats! Oh my dear!" she shrieked. "What are you doing here? What's that on your face?" she added with a tinge of disgust.

Ferraro's eyes widened in recognition. "Spats McChad! How in the world did you end up in the dungeon?" he asked with an air of true bewilderment.

That crazy pimple head assassin of yours brought me here by force, Your *Highness*," I replied mockingly. Then I raised my voice to ensure that Gabby and the group behind her heard me. "You hear that, people? I was kidnapped by the pretender's hit man!"

Ferraro looked at me, saw the putrid, toxic, steaming pus on my face, and knew that there was no denying in front of his guests that something untoward had happened to Yours Truly. "I will...ah...launch a *Royal Inquiry* into what happened," he pronounced hesitatingly. "This is....ah...unacceptable. Put down your weapon, Spats and come with me. I will get you cleaned up."

I surveyed the group – they appeared to be media types, some of whom I recognized immediately. In addition to Gabby, there was my old buddy **Jean Boisvert** of the *Swampland Proof* and my drinking companion of recent years, **Charlie Wood** of the *Charleswood Banner*. These must be the people invited to the reception that the official at the gate had mentioned, I thought. I was a little disappointed. Not that I didn't get along with Jean and Charlie, but I had expected "special media" to be a little more special than those two.

I felt I had enough witnesses that the Mad King would be discouraged from slipping into a homicidal rage and ordering my execution. Although my animal survival instincts resisted, my rational mind prevailed. I reluctantly set aside the halberd and put my fate in the hands of the man who, just last year, had publicly directed his guards to "seize" me in punishment for an article I had never written. Could I trust him?

IN THE COURT OF THE KING

In his haste to cover up the crimes of his minions, the Dark Overlord took care to separate me from the others on the pretext that I needed immediate medical attention. It was true; I needed some kind of first aid for the burning itchy pus from the Red Pimple's grotesquely infected boil, but I suspected there were other motives.

I was brought to a room with a tall chair, a table and walls of shelves stocked with hundreds of tiny ceramic jars. A tapestry hang from the ceiling displaying a picture of the zodiac with what I assumed was supposed to be a drawing of a man in the center. **There** were symbols dotting the body of the crudely drawn man. I failed to make most of them out, but one was clearly a flame.

After about a 5-minute wait, a man entered the room from behind a curtain. He had a long, looked-to-be fake, white beard, bushy eyebrows and huge eyes. He was dressed in robes decorated with stars, moons and astrological symbols. He looked like Merlin the Magician, but more disheveled.

“You have to be kidding!” I exclaimed once I had taken stock of him. “Let me guess – you are an authentic replica of a medieval doctor.”

“*Sic ego sum a medicus,*” he replied, then lifted his voice and intoned: “*O Deus sapientiam huius curare!*”

I was flabbergasted. Was he speaking to me in Latin?

It turned out that he *was* speaking Latin and, after playing along with me for a bit, he finally switched to the *lingua franca*, English. That didn’t improve things much. He lit some incense and spent the next 20 minutes quizzing me about my diet, consulting my astrological chart, and pressing me for details about the weather in New York City and Guilford, Connecticut, where I was born. I finally got exasperated and declared my intention to walk out. He finally “treated” me by selecting a jar from a shelf and smearing its greasy contents all over my face.

“What the hell is this? It stinks!” I protested.

“I don’t know, but it is for rashes,” he answered without further comment.

As if on cue, His Screwballness entered the room. “Ah, Spats, you look better now. Come to the terrace and we’ll enjoy a drink!”

INTERVIEW WITH A KING

The owner of the Mission Viejo Monarchs and Pretender to the Throne of Portugal is a complex man with a lot on his mind. I discovered this over the course of the ensuing 12 hours, during which time I absorbed enough information to write a short biography. I can’t say that I came to like him much more as a result, but I certainly came to an understanding of why he is the way he is.

I had suffered temporary disfigurement from the acidic pus of the Red Pimple’s boil. Pink blotches on my face marked the spots where the vile secretion had landed. The greasy ointment applied to my face had made the rashes shiny. It appeared to all who did not know the story – which was everyone – I was suffering from a skin disease. It was humiliating and it affected my confidence. But even more demeaning were the measures I would be required to take later to protect myself from the **Red Pimple** and his league of flunkies.

It turns out that His Pretend Highness and the **Red Pimple** have a connection that goes back centuries to the early years of Portugal itself, in the Court of King **Afonso I**. But the history of that period, as told by Ferraro, differs substantially from the official historical account. Few people would notice (or likely care), that he omits Afonso’s victory over the Moors in the *Battle of Ourique* as the seminal event in the birth of the Portuguese Kingdom, dismissing it as a “sideshow.” But when the events of those far bygone times reverberate with potentially life-alerting consequences in the present, it is important to pay attention and keep an open mind.

“The Moors were on their way out of Iberia anyway. Afonso skewered a few stragglers and called it a battle,” Ferraro sneered dismissively as he poured himself another glass of *Flagman’s Colheita Port*, an expensive import from the Mother Country.

We were drinking port and eating sardines under a canopy on the terrace of what I called ‘Castle Ferraro,’ enjoying a lordly overview of Ferraroland. The building was actually an authentic ⅘ scale replica of São Jorge Castle in Lisbon, down to the very fine details, such as medieval *garderobe* toilets, which were basically a long stone chute with a lid. His Usurperness had made the castle his “Football Week Headquarters” during the day, while in the evenings he retired to his luxury penthouse on top of the Royal Palace Hotel next door. The castle setting made him feel, in his words, “more regal than usual.”

“I admit I don’t know much about Portuguese history,” I offered for the sake of conversation. “But I would think that such an important battle would be tough to fake, even through the fog of nine hundred years.”

“Think again, Spats!” Ferraro countered. “Try to find a coherent description of that battle anywhere. You won’t. They don’t know where it happened or who the opposing Arab general was. Afonso had a *Divine Vision* before the battle (who didn’t in those days?) and presto! – His badly out-numbered Portuguese forces win the battle the next day. *Suuure they did.....* All medieval propaganda, Spats; kind of like your weekly column!” he laughed wildly at that last comment.

I was unsure how to advance the conversation from that point. I took a sip of port and nervously poked the huge sardine on my plate as I gathered the courage to take a bite. The head was still attached; and I hate eating things that still have heads.

Sensing he was in control of the converstaion, Ferraro carried on with his slander of the origins of the Portuguese Crown: “A brave, divinely inspired victory over a great enemy was a basic first step toward legitimacy back then, Spats. It was mandatory to have at least one visit from a dead Saint and another one from Christ or the Virgin Mary if any new King hoped to get the blessing of the Pope. The truth is, Afonso was a venal cheat who rebelled against his mother and stepfather at the head of a bunch of angry nobles in order to get what he could then sold out to the Pope to keep his cousin, the King of Leon, from spanking his ass and taking it back. Doesn’t make for a very heroic birth-of-a-nation legend, does it?”

I didn't have anything to say about this impromptu historical discourse that would have endeared me to my captor. (I still considered myself a "captive" even though His Megalomaniacness was attempting to be hospitable) I wondered how he knew these supposed facts that ran contrary to the official record and, if he was making it all up, how such a loon was able to effectively run a multi-million dollar property development empire and manage a professional football team.

"Well....that's interesting," I ventured feebly, feeling compelled to say *something*. "I bet you won't read that anywhere."

"Wrong again, Spats! It is written down. How do you think I know all of this?" he paused to pour himself another glass of port. "I know you think I'm crazy, but I am not. You know of the Legend of Joao Pedreiro and Pipo the Rooster! You wrote about it in your column when I first entered the EFL. You presented it well, I must admit, but I could read the unwritten mockery underneath. You don't believe it happened. But the Red Pimple is proof that it did."

"How so?" I asked. My curiosity was suddenly piqued. Everything I could learn about the Pimple was of benefit to me in dealing with him, so I listened intently as the Mad King rambled on for over two hours describing the hidden history of Portugal as recorded by his long dead ancestors and their network of supporters. To keep this article from turning into an epic, I will summarize the points that are relevant to how I survived a week in Ferraroland and managed to successfully take in a football game at the same time.

THE BLOODY MONKS OF BADAJOZ

According to His Revisionistness, not everyone was happy to see **Afonso I** rise to power in Portugal. This was particularly the case with **King Alfonso VII** of Leon, who had crowned himself "Emperor of All Spain" and viewed the many Kingdoms of the peninsula as rightfully falling under Leon. Wary of the Pope's protection, **Alfonso VII** did not press a military campaign against Portugal, but he flooded the "rebellious province" with spies and plenty of bribes in order to stay informed and to manipulate the court.

One of those spies was a courtier named **Baltasar Baltasão de Bãoão** (pronounced "bow-wow") who hailed from the legendary court of **Prester John**; or so he claimed. He amazed the young King with fantastic tales of the Orient and flattered him with fictions describing how word of his holy vision and miraculous victory on the battlefield at *Ourique* had reached the ears of the mythical eastern



Christian Patriarch. Baltasar styled himself a '*Ziam*,' or pious missionary of noble descent, sent on a diplomatic mission from **Prester John** himself to form ties with the most zealous Christian Holy Warriors of the West.

The so-called *Ziam* de Bãoão was in actuality an Andalusian orphan of mixed descent who had been trained in the secret art of *Bhule-á-chit* by the 'Bloody Monks of Badajoz' – a breakaway sect of peaceful Albertine monks who got tired of being persecuted and slaughtered by Muslims in southern Spain and gradually turned really, really violent. Considerably out-numbered in predominantly hostile territory, the 'Bloody Monks of Badajoz' became masters of subterfuge and guile in pursuing their revenge against their Arab oppressors. They are credited with inventing and perfecting the suicide stabbing, spending years getting close to their targets before unleashing a barrage of knives on their unsuspecting victims. Once the Bloody Monks had you in their sights, there was no escape.

However, the Bloody Monks' numbers dwindled as each successful mission meant the loss of one or more of their number. Being celibate and largely cut-off from the rest of Christendom, their ranks could not be replenished fast enough. Eventually only the high masters remained and, being old, had lost their vim for violence – or at least for delivering it themselves. They decided to retire from their murderous monastery in Andalusia and seek refuge in the friaries across the Tagus River in the southern tip of Leon.

Once they crossed the river into Leon they were welcomed as long lost Christian brothers and taken in by the friendly Salamonian Monks of Monticulo-Ovejos. You won't find any references to the Salamonian Monks in conventional histories today because soon after the arrival of the Bloody Monks they disappeared entirely. Their friary, however, remained and became the base of operations for the Bloody Monks, who changed their name to the *Fraternidade de Bada*, or Bada Brotherhood, named after Badajoz, their place of origin.

Monasteries were the schools and universities of medieval times, but the one run by the Bada Brotherhood was very different from the others. It doubled as an orphanage, where the healthiest street urchins were brought after being gathered off the streets of Salamanca by child farmers. Occasionally, a destitute family would approach the Bada Brotherhood with an offer to sell their surplus offspring.

The orphans were put to work performing labour and favours for the monks and the stronger and keener among them were educated in letters or in a trade. The very best from among this group were set aside for special education in the secret art of *Bhule-*

á-chit. Upon graduation they were initiated into the Bada Brotherhood as *Bhule-á-chit Artists* and hired out as spies, bodyguards, assassins, actors and even gigolos to support the Brotherhood. They were versed in anything that required a substantial amount of *Bhule-á-chit* to pull off. This included pretending to be an emissary from a mythical Kingdom in the Orient – a Christian island in a sea of heretics – that nobody west of Constantinople had ever claimed to visit and that history has failed to establish actually existed.

Baltasar de Bãoão – real name **Rui Granariz** – was one such *Bhule-á-chit Artist*, hired by no less than **Alfonso VII** himself to infiltrate the Court of **Afonso I** as part of an elaborate scheme to expose the fact that Afonso had forfeited the Crown of Portugal to a bricklayer named **Joao Pedreiro** in a lost bet on a cock fight. (For those of you who have not been reading my column for very long, or have forgotten, I refer you to the 2011 Conference Final Edition of the EFL Newsletter, ‘*The Tale of King Joe*,’ for an historical account of that cock fight).

You see, **Pablo the Bad Monk** – the chronicler of that cock fight and the drafter of the written agreement between **Afonso I** and **Joao the Bricklayer** – fearing for his life after witnessing the unlikely death of ‘Juaninoto el Magnifico’ (Afonso’s prize cock) had fled Coimbra with the evidence and sought sanctuary with the Bada Brotherhood. Once there, he related the story of his involvement to the Grand Master of *Bhule-á-chit* but became nervous later when he inadvertently overheard the Grand Master and his advisors discussing how they could acquire the agreement from Pablo (which he had hidden in a safe place) and sell it to either Afonso I or to his enemies. The fate of Pablo himself was not explicitly stated, but the inference was clear.

Pablo stole away in the night and doubled back to the village of Lama where the grieving family of **Joao Pedreiro** lived. He arranged for a meeting with Joao’s son, Rodrigo, passed on his knowledge of the circumstances of Joao’s death and surrendered to him the original agreement between Afonso I and Joao. He also warned him that he would be a target of both Alfonso’s friends and enemies if his lineage to Joao became general knowledge.

The story of how the Pedreiros escaped detection and became the Ferraros is a story for another time – or perhaps never. But if you haven’t put the pieces together yet, I’ll draw it out for you: **Chris Ferraro** is the direct descendant of **Joao Pedreiro**, the bricklayer, and inheritor of his legacy along with reams of family history that call into question the official accounts of early Portugal.

The Bada Brotherhood was incensed that Pablo and his dangerous, but valuable, document had slipped out of their clutches. Nevertheless, the knowledge that such a document existed was in itself valuable. The Grand Master of *Bhule-á-chit* took the extraordinary step of leaving the Bada monastery and travelling to the city of León to seek an audience with **Alfonso VII**. The reputation of the Bada Brotherhood by then was such that even the King of Leon had heard of the order and feared it. But his intense curiosity overcame his healthy fear of the cutthroat cult and he granted the Grand Master an audience.

The King was amazed at what the Grand Master of *Bhule-á-chit* had to tell him, but was vexed at the lack of proof. If a legal claim could be made against **Afonso I**, the backing of that claim by the “*Emperor of All Spain*” might be enough to convince the Pope to rescind his protection and bring the “rebellious province” back into Greater Leon. The two made a blood pact whereby the King of Leon would finance the Bada Brotherhood in a search for the ‘Abdication Document’ (as they referred to it from thereon) or “*any other proofs of illegitimacy against Afonso I.*” Once found, and **Afonso I** was successfully deposed in favour of the direct descendant of **Joao Pedreiro**, the Bada Brotherhood was promised privileges exceeding those of the Cistercian Order and a grant of lands near Badajoz upon completion of the *Reconquista*.

It was a win-win proposal – provided the Bada Brotherhood could pull it off. And the Grand Master of *Bhule-á-chit* had a plan to do just that. Based upon his recollection of the account of **Pablo the Bad Monk**, he set about acquiring the right materials to create the perfect forgery. The physical execution of the forgery would be child’s play for a good *Bhule-á-chit Artist* specializing in calligraphy and the Bada Brotherhood had several of those.

The principal obstacle to this plan, however, was Afonso’s signature. Reputedly ornate and elegant, it would be impossible to forge without a good example. In a day and age when literacy was just beginning to become a functional necessity for the nobility and administrative officials, written signatures were very rare; usually personal seals marked the end of letters and legal documents. But **Pablo the Bad Monk** had been very specific that, there being no wax in the cock-pit that night, Afonso had had to sign his name to the document and that it had taken some time to execute all of the flourishes.

The orphan Rui, whose large ‘Roman’ nose suited the role of eastern noble (as it was believed in European Courts of those days that Byzantine nobility sported big honkers) was hand-selected by the Grand Master to take on the mission of infiltrating the Court of **Afonso I** for the purpose of acquiring an example of his personal, hand-written signature – and anything else he could find of usefulness. For this task, Rui assumed the exotic name of Baltasar – one of the names of the Three Magi – and dressed in expensive and flamboyantly coloured silks to convey a fantastic Oriental image. He even invented a language consisting mostly of gibberish with some Latin-esque words thrown in. It was classic *Bhule-á-chit*, but in those days, credulity often prevailed.

Baltasar’s goal was to trick the King into physically signing a Treaty of Alliance with the Nestorian Kingdom of *Poontang*. Baltasar would bring the treaty back to **Prester John** accompanied by a Portuguese military emissary who would help the two kingdoms coordinate their efforts in the Crusades (which were ongoing at that time but were at low ebb). In reality, he would bring the false treaty back to the Bada Brotherhood to enable Afonso’s signature to be forged. The military emissary would simply be killed and disposed of.

At first, Baltasar's mission went according to plan. He was received with acclaim and sat at the head table at a Royal Feast in the Palace held in honour of **Prester John**. He was lauded with toast after toast and gently lampooned in traditional fashion by **Retardo**, the Court Jester. In turn Baltasar regaled the Court with tales of *Poontang*, a land of perpetual light set in a valley, where "the moon and the sun occupy the sky together to gaze upon the pastoral beauty of the land." It was a land blessed with a "harvest for every season," where the "oxen were the size of elephants and elephants the size of thoons and bound to do man's will by the Will of God." Alas, "it would be Eden if not for the periodic penetration of Poontang by the cursed Mongols and Turks."

He discussed theology with no less than the Bishop of Coimbra; and the latter was surprised and impressed by the adherence of the Nestorians to the vital tenets of the Catholic Faith. In fact, "if one did not know better, one might guess that you had received your theological education in Portugal," the Bishop had remarked after an evening dialogue with Baltasar about the nature of God. This comment was apparently meant as a commendation, but its effect on Baltasar was cautionary. Did the cunning Bishop (all Bishops were cunning in those days) suspect something was amiss? Was he testing him in some way; or worse, laying a trap? The gears began to turn in his head as he flashed a modest smile and raised his empty glass to signal for more wine.

"God is in all things and reveals himself to the true faithful wherever they be!" piped up Afonso's court jester, **Retardo**, who had been sitting cross-legged in silence on the floor poking a rat that had been caught in a floor trap. The sudden interjection of the Royal Fool surprised the Bishop, who seemed to have forgotten his presence in the room.

Retardo was usually with, or close by the King, but had taken to following Baltasar around since his arrival at the palace. He jested that Baltasar was "a fool in training" because of his colourful clothes and "bulbous snout." Although granted licence by his station to speak his mind, **Retardo** had caused the King and courtiers to gasp when he had joked upon Baltasar's arrival that he hailed from "a nation of fools judging by his dress!" Uncertain at the time whether the Court of **Prester John** also had the tradition of the Court Fool, the King apologized profusely and offered to "have my fool whipped" but Baltasar had graciously relieved him of the obligation by assuring His Highness that: "we have our share of fools in Poontang, enough to test the Grace of God." It had been a line that had affected a double purpose: diplomatic relief for the court and refreshingly comedic relief for the usually stern clergy. It had paved his way for what had been a friendly reception and early halcyon period.

The Bishop looked at the jester as if for the first time. Then he smiled benignly and turned to Baltasar. "This is evidence that this Fool is indeed touched by God, *Ziam de Bãoão*," he said, using Baltasar's formal title.

"Indeed, he must be, Your Excellency," replied Baltasar, relieved that a perfectly reasonable explanation of how Nestorian Christians might not differ in any fundamental respect from Roman Catholics, despite thousands of leagues of separation, had been advanced without any effort on his part. He relaxed and took another sip of wine but his relief was short-lived.

"So I take it then that the faithful of Poontang have repudiated the heresy of Nestorius?" the Bishop asked, the smile gone from his face and replaced by an inquisitorial frown.

Baltasar suppressed the urge to spit up his wine. *What heresy of Nestorius?* He thought. Nobody at the monastery had mentioned that! But instead of playing dumb, Baltasar attempted to *Bhule-á-chit* his way through. "Vehemently so, Your Excellency!" he declared with zeal. "Even now, Nestorius' body suffers for the sins of his soul in the dungeons of the Inq.....ah, the Holy Questioners!" He had started to call the religious authorities of Poontang the 'Inquisition' but had caught himself at the last moment. He did not need another ecclesiastical coincidence.

"Then why, pray tell, do the faithful of Poontang continue to refer their church as *Nestorian*?" the Bishop pressed with a slight trace of suspicion in his tone.

"That's a good question, Your Excellency," Baltasar drawled slowly, buying precious seconds to think. "It does seem odd. I guess it's just tradition and....ah...cost! Yes....all the gold 'Nestorian' signs adorning the churches are expensive to replace and we have the Crusades to fund at the moment. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, I think I do, *Ziam de Bãoão*, I think I do," the Bishop rejoined. He rose from his seat rather abruptly and gathered his robes. "I do apologize, but I must retire to the Abbey for vespers. We shall have an opportunity to discuss these matters again, I am sure. And perhaps then you can tell me how the Archbishop's body continues to suffer for the sins of his soul 700 years after it expired."

The Bishop dismissed himself without further formality, leaving a flustered Baltasar and the King's Fool alone.

"My guess is that you have between one hour and the crack of dawn to make good your escape, *senhor*," **Retardo** stated matter-of-factly as he jumped to his feet. "*Holy Questioners*? Really? I almost coughed up a guffaw at that one. But seriously, the Bishop is not going to vespers. He's going straight to the King and it will take him between one hour and a full night's sleep to convince him that you are a spy."

Baltasar began to object that he was not a spy, but **Retardo** raised his hand to silence him. "I have been a fool long enough to know a fool when I see one," he said frankly. "And I recognize *Bhule-á-chit* when I hear it. But I like you anyway. You are an unusual spy. You have potential. I suspect you were rushed into your mission. So here's what I will do for you....."

And so **Retardo** hatched a plan that enabled Baltasar to escape the castle before the King was led to question him more formally and forcefully about his mission and his origins. He gave Baltasar a suit of Fool's clothes from his wardrobe and a horned imp mask from his collection and described a route through the palace to a service entrance at the rear.

“People will think you are me. If you chant ‘*pa-pa-pa-pa-ping....pa-pa-pa-pa-ping*’ while jingling your toe bells they will probably leave you alone,” he explained. “Once you reach the exit, there is a black cloak on a peg by the door. That’s my carousing cloak for going out on the town. Put that on to cover your costume and steal away into the night. Do not return – *ever*! Now hit me on the head!”

“What? You want me to hit you on the head?” asked Baltasar incredulously.

“Yes, but not too hard, just hard enough to draw a bit of blood. To make it look like you over-powered me. Come on now!” Retardo was becoming impatient. “You don’t have much time.”

“Why are you doing this for me?” Baltasar asked as he raised the hilt of his short sword.

“Because I’m a Fool, you idiot, and I do foolish things!” **Retardo** replied, adding an inane hoot at the end to punctuate his claim.

Baltasar landed a sharp blow to the fool’s head and **Retardo** fell to the floor as if struck dead.

“Oh no! I have killed him!” Baltasar exclaimed.

Retardo lifted his head, gave him a wink and returned to his death pose without another word.

“I will repay you some day,” Baltasar promised. “I don’t know how or when, but some day I will.”

And so it passed that “Baltasar,” or **Rui Granariz** as he was known at the monastery, escaped King Afonso’s palace at Coimbra and returned to the Bada Brotherhood in disgrace. The Grand Master of *Bhule-á-chit* was not at all pleased at the outcome, but after a cooling off period of several months – during which Rui worked at the hardest labours and performed the foulest of favours for the senior monks – he came to understand that it was not entirely Rui’s fault. Rui had not been instructed in the Nestorian Heresy, nor did he have a clue that Nestorius, the Byzantine Archbishop that gave his name to the heretical belief that Christ was not One with the Father, had died hundreds of years earlier. Nevertheless, Rui had broken one of the cardinal rules of *Bhule-á-chit* by attempting to bluff his way through a subject in which his adversary had expertise. This error was called ‘*making chit up*’ and it was a classic novice panic move.

Eventually, Rui was reinstated into active duty as a *Bhule-á-chit Artist* with strict conditions: the most onerous of them being a blood vow (every agreement the Bloody Monks made involved blood) to divest **Afonso I** of his throne and replace him with a descendant of **Joao Pedreiro**. Like all blood pacts involving the Bloody Monks, unless expressly stated there was no time limit. And so **Rui Granariz** spent the rest of his life attempting, unsuccessfully, to put a Pedreiro on the throne of Portugal. Furthermore, until the mission was complete, he was compelled to pass his burden on to his descendants. And thus the **League of the Red Pimple** was born.

In addition to the strictures imposed on him by the Bada Brotherhood, Rui also made his own personal vow. He would repay Retardo by vowing to “never harm a Fool.” It is a vow that to this day remains unbroken.

“And there you have the story, Spats,” Ferraro slurred as he drained the last drop of port from his glass, “every word of it true and recorded faithfully in the annals of the Ferraro clan and in the records of the League of the Red Pimple. You are welcome to read it for yourself, but the writings are in Old Portuguese and the oldest entries are in Medieval Latin.”

“That is.....incredible,” was all I could think of to say.

“So, you see Spats, I have no real control over the descendants of Ruiz Granariz,” Ferraro continued wearily. “My father warned me the day would come when the Red Pimple would appear and offer his services – services I would not be able to refuse – and I didn’t believe him. But about 8 years ago, when my company, Royal Lands Inc., began to take off with the public stock offering, the Red Pimple knocked on my door, so to speak. I was freaked out by his nose. It was bigger than my father had described. He introduced himself as Rui XVI, a 29th generation descendant of the original Rui, duty bound to offer his loyalty and assistance to me. He stated that he felt that conditions for a comeback by the Portuguese Monarchy were the best they had been since the exile of 1910. He pressed me to stake my claim to the throne in opposition to the 24th Duke of Braganza, the official heir to the throne, who was manning a tiny office in Portugal at the time, monitoring public opinion polls that showed support for a return of the monarchy to be holding steady at 16%. I didn’t like the odds or the prospects for my company if I were to become bogged down in Royal controversy, so I declined. But the Red Pimple wasn’t discouraged. He went to work laying the groundwork and next thing I know, the Ancient History Channel is contacting me looking to film a documentary. Word spread and then the EFL Committee came knocking. They heard I loved football and wanted to upgrade the social class of EFL owners, so they offered me a franchise if I wanted it.”

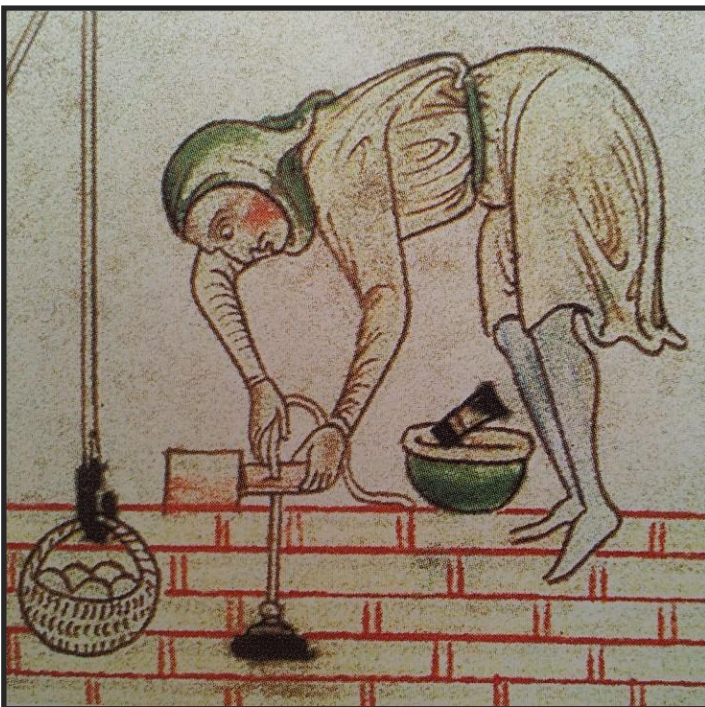
“So, are you trying to tell me you aren’t really interested in being King?” I asked, feeling in that moment like the therapist for some screwed up rich guy. Everything he had done, said, and built since entering the EFL screamed ‘I WANT TO BE KING’ but the truth seemed to be the opposite.

“I think I’d make a good King,” he concluded after giving it some thought. “But, off the record, I think that being a King in the 21st century makes no sense, especially in America, a country born of rebellion against a Monarch. I like *pretending* to be King – it’s good for business!”

Pretending to be King had certainly helped **Chris Ferraro** prosper in a number of ways. I had to pause and consider that he



Afonso I of Portugal (above) officially became the first King of Portugal after winning a great military victory over the Moors – or so they say. **Joao Pedreiro** (pictured below) was a humble bricklayer who won the Kingdom of Portugal from Afonso in a bet on a cock fight – or so they say. The controversy still rages behind the scenes 900 years later at the EFL Championship Game.



might not be so mad after all. Or perhaps he was suffering from a split personality disorder that pitted Ferraro the American businessman against Ferraro the wannabe Monarch and that right now I was listening to Ferraro the pragmatic businessman. That would make him *crazier* than I originally thought.

“But enough about me, Spats!” he suddenly stood up and his bleary, port-sodden eyes focused in on me. “It’s time to make sure you’re protected from the Red Pimple. You have an article to write and you won’t get it written if you’re getting *pused* on by a maniac!”

THE FOOL

“Here you go, Spats. Put this on!” Ferraro ordered as he tossed a colourful bundle of fabric into my lap. I picked it up and heard the jingling of bells. It was a jester suit.

“You have to be kidding,” I said to my host.

“I am dead serious, Spats. This is the only way to guarantee that the Red Pimple won’t bring harm to you,” he replied with a grave look on his face.

“Why don’t you just tell him and his flunkies to back off?” I asked incredulously. “You are the King after all.”

“Technically, I am *not* the King – at least not King enough to absolve Rui XVI of his family vow.” Ferraro explained. “Have you not listened to anything I have told you? The Red Pimple is bound by a vow that has lasted over 800-f^*king years! The Bloody Monks of Badajoz, the Bada Brotherhood, still exist, under a different name of course. They discreetly own the *Bata* Shoe Company, where they launder the proceeds of international arms deals. They have their bloody hands in all sorts of bloody business. They have so much money in a Swiss bank (can’t remember the name of it) that they practically own it. This isn’t going away.”

“You know, I can’t even remember why the Red Pimple wanted to capture me in the first place,” I protested. “It’s not as if I am standing between you and the worthless Crown of Portugal. Doesn’t he have anything better to do?”

Ferraro shook his head. “You’re a debunker of the myth, Spats. Your skeptical and cynical world view has no place for the dream of a Ferraro ascending to the throne of Portugal. Your voice is dangerous to the Cause. These are all things that could obstruct the Red Pimple’s mission. Plus, I ordered your death three years ago. I was just kidding, of course, but it appears that the Red Pimple doesn’t have a sense of humour.”

“Oh yes, that’s right, I remember! You protest that you have no control over

the Red Pimple but he jumps at your command to execute me for daring to question you. That makes a lot of sense,” I remarked bitterly. “Why don’t you admit that you like watching me squirm?”

Ferraro laughed at that. “Well I do enjoy seeing that, but you have squirmed enough, my friend. It’s time to let bygones be bygones; time to start fresh. I’ll do what I can to call off the Red Pimple, but there are no guarantees. Once he’s focused on something he can’t easily let go. To be safe, wear the outfit.”

I looked at the suit. It was ridiculous like you would expect a jester outfit to be. I thought my dignity was worth the price of hiring a bodyguard instead and suggested so, but Ferraro was quick to warn against that idea.

“A \$50/hr armed guard is no match for the Red Pimple in Ferraroland,” he said calmly. “You managed to evade him in New York City because he underestimated you and the toughness of New Yorkers. He won’t make such mistakes here. He captured you once already, in broad daylight. You think you stand a chance once you start tossing back pints with Charlie Wood?”

He had a point there. But I still felt that something was just not right about everything that had happened so far. That feeling might have had something to do with the liquor, which had been free-flowing since I was rescued from the dungeon. It might have had something to do with the ever-changing attitude of my host/captor, who vacillated between being warmly social like a congenial host, domineering like a tyrant, and just a regular guy who happened to have an extremely weird family history.

I frankly did not know what to think at that point. So I opted to stop thinking entirely and take Ferraro's advice. Reluctantly I went to the *garderobe* and changed into the jester outfit. The stocking hat and tunic were blue & red, the tights (yes, tights!) bright yellow, and the shoes (curled upward at the toes) were green with silver bells. The suit came with a baton with a little jester head attached at the end and a satchel tied off to a belt adorned with sewn-in cloth tongues. Weird.

I returned to the room where His Derangedness was getting ready to leave. He looked at me and a wide smile spread across his face. "It suits you actually," he said sincerely, as if commenting on a sweater or a tie.

I rolled my eyes, walked over to a mirror and looked at my reflection. I looked like a fool.

WELCOME TO THE HOTEL FERRARO-CALIFORNIA

After what had felt like a week already but had in fact been a single long and bizarre day, I retired to my room. His Haughtiness had made arrangements for a "carriage" to take me from Castle Ferraro to the Ferraro Hilton Hotel where most of the media were staying. A "carriage" was the term for a cab in Ferraroland. It looked like a horse-drawn carriage but without the horses. It was motorized and driven by a man in a peasant outfit. He looked at me in my jester suit and mistook me for staff.

"Nice outfit. Long day at the palace?" the cab driver asked.

I was too exhausted to protest and lazily played along. "You don't know the half of it," I replied.

"Business is good for me, too. All the media came today. ESPN hired me for the whole day to drive their people around," the driver continued. "You some kind of juggler?"

I didn't want to get into a conversation but did not want to be rude either. "Yes, I juggle," I replied wearily. "And I dance, sing, do flips and eat fire – all the things that were really popular hundreds of years ago but hard to make a living at today, unless you work in a place like this." My bullshit meter was registering high at that moment.

That prompted the cab driver, a Portuguese-American named Mike, to talk about Ferraroland from the perspective of a local trying to carve out a living. His brother was in the building trade and had organized gangs of cheap labour from the traditional rural California Portuguese communities to work on the construction of Ferraroland. This had reduced costs significantly as these groups were happy to work for fruit-pickers wages and three meals a day. Mike was quick to point out this was not exploitation, however. "*It is our duty to help out our noble sire, Chris, who will be King of the Homeland some day,*" he explained. He had obviously drunk the kool-aid.

Mike dropped me off in front of my hotel. I had no luggage with me, as that had been taken away by golf cart when I entered Ferraroland. I wondered if it had made it here in one piece or whether it was locked away in the dungeon of São Jorge Castle. I would find out soon enough.

I attracted a lot of attention as I jingled my way through the lobby and up to the check-in counter. I kept my head down, hoping nobody would recognize me. A horned imp mask would have come in handy at that moment but it was the one piece of the costume that Ferraro had left out. I could hear the blustering and uniquely irritating voice of **Russ Flont** rising above the din at the hotel bar; an open concept sunken lounge plunked in the middle of the lobby. "*THIS IS POSSIBLY THE BEST FOOTBALL TEAM OF ALL TIME,*" the voice blared, in probable reference to the Mustangs. I could not hear the other side of the debate but after several seconds I heard the thundering retort: "THEY WERE THE BEST OF THEIR ERA, FOR SURE, BUT I AM TALKING *ALL TIME!*"

I expected it would not be the last time this week I would hear the all-time-best-team debate centered on the Mustangs, especially if they won. But at the moment I did not care. My focus was on getting into my hotel room as quickly as possible with a minimum of fuss. I still had my wallet and ID as well as my hotel voucher and luggage tag. I presented the voucher and my ID to the check-in clerk – a swarthy man with a curly moustache wearing a bicorne on his head, a bright red silver-trimmed waist coat and a white cravat. Normally I would have made a dig at how silly he looked in that outfit, but I was wearing a jester suit and was in no position to judge.

He looked me up and down with obvious curiosity and amusement but refrained from commenting on my appearance. "Checking in, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, that is why I am here at the check-in desk," I answered brusquely. "Can we make this quick, please, Ronaldo?"

"My name is Gustavo, sir," he corrected me with just a hint of admonishment. He looked at my ID and said in clear and loud voice: "And you are.... Spats McChad, sir?"

I cringed. "Yes, yes, I am. You don't have to announce it to the world, Gus! Here is my voucher, it also has my name on it – no need to repeat it – and here is my credit card; you will note it is in the same name as the one you just yelled out. Yelled out even though I am, like, two feet away from you!"

"I am sorry Mr. McChad," he replied. "I just wanted to make sure I was pronouncing it correctly. Spats McChad is an unusual name. I think this is the first time I have seen the name Spats McChad on any document."

With each mention of my name I shrunk a little. I looked around furtively in an attempt to see who was nearby and in a

position to hear. Nobody I knew was in earshot, but I caught sight of a teenage girl snapping photos of me with her I-phone and laughing. I suppressed the urge to go over to her, knock the phone from her hand and stomp on it.

After an uncomfortably long time watching Gustavo study his computer screen and move his mouse around on a purple mouse pad with a gold 'F' on it, I was presented with a pair swipe cards for my room. "Room number 1139, Mr. McChad," he said in a clear and well-projected voice. I squirmed again and started to slink away, but then I remembered my luggage.

"I believe my luggage was brought here separately when I entered Ferraroland," I said as I produced my tag.

Gustavo looked at it, turned in the direction of the porter's desk and shouted in a very loud and clear voice: "*Armando, do you have luggage tag 0003 for Mr. Spats McChad?*"

"*Spats McChad?*" the porter bellowed across the 15 feet separating them.

"Yes, tag number 3, Spats McChad – *M-C-C- H-A-D. McChad!*" Gustavo yelled back.

"Let me see.....number 3....McChad....McChad," the head porter was perusing some type of list and repeating my name as he scoured the sheet. "Ah yes, it is here!" He turned to a porter wearing a floppy beret and white pants that rose almost to his chest. "Rudolfo, take the luggage of Mr. Spats McChad to room 1139, please! That's Mr. McChad over there!" he pointed at me directly.

My face was red with humiliation and blotchy from the pus. I vowed that if I got through this without anyone recognizing me I was going to ditch this stupid costume and take my chances with the **Red Pimple**. Who knows, maybe the would-be King had convinced him to back off – at least for this weekend. But if not, I felt I would rather go down fighting than die of embarrassment.

I hurried to the elevators with Rudolfo in tow behind me. *So far, so good*, I thought. I was attracting curious stares but, miraculously, nobody I knew had witnessed the ridiculous exchange at the check-in desk. I could still hear the roaring voice of **Russ Flont** cutting through the din of the bar lounge and I thought I caught a glimpse of **Kris Hortenson**, host of ESPN's *Sports Central* and outspoken commentator **Will Simons** sitting at a table. The TV media looked to be here but so far no sign of the print journalists and bloggers.

We rode the empty elevator up to the 11th floor without stopping and followed the arrows to room number 1139. Rudolfo put down my bags; I tipped him five bucks and shut the door behind him as he left. I suddenly felt a wave of relief wash over me for the first time all day. *Time to take off this stupid suit*, I thought.

I went to the dresser and pulled open the top drawer. That's when I heard a 'click' from the direction of the front door. I turned around sharply then froze in horror. Protruding from inside the closet next to the entrance was the bloated scarlet snout of the **Red Pimple**. Projecting out beneath it was the gleaming silver tip of a sword. In one swift motion the Pimple leaped out of the closet and faced me, nose pulsating, rapier blade extended.

We both screamed at the same time: "*DON'T KILL ME!*" I bellowed; "*AAAARRRGHH!*" he howled.

Now it was his turn to freeze. His wild eyes stared at me in incredulity. He slowly lowered his sword and, eyes fixated on me the whole while, sheathed it. He took one step backwards, so that he was directly across from the bathroom door, and raised his hand. "*Inácio, Narciso! Put your pistols away-ah,*" he ordered.

The two lugs who had marched me to the witches cell in the dungeon of Castle Ferraro emerged from the bathroom. This time they wore a kind of musketeer uniform: a velvet bowler-style purple hat with a tall red feather, a brass breast plate over a striped tunic and stuffed paisley-patterned breeches. They each carried a heavy matchlock pistol from which a slow-burning fuse smoked over the firing pan. In that moment it occurred to me that they looked even more ridiculous than me and I would have probably howled with laughter if I hadn't been more worried that they had no idea how to safely handle their antique pistols. They took one look at me and their eyes widened in surprise.

The Red Pimple's countenance changed from one of deranged fury to sober curiosity. He broke the awkward silence with a question: "*Are you a Fool?*" he asked.

"You bet I am!" I replied. I followed with a little dance step so that the bells on my toes jingled. "*Pa-pa-pa-pa-ping! What a fool am I!*" I chanted in a randomly sing-song way. "You weren't expecting that, were you pus-nose?"

Rather than react angrily to the taunt, the **Red Pimple** lowered his shoulders and addressed me without malice: "*I will-ah not harm you-ah, gentle fool,*" he said in a subdued monotone. And with that he turned away from me and walked out of my hotel room. Inácio and Narciso continued to stare at me, dumbfounded. But they were soon shaken out of their stupor by the angry bark of the **Red Pimple**, who had stuck his nose back in my room to call them out: "*Inácio! Narciso! Come!*" The two bumped into each other several times as they both attempted to be first out the door, but finally made their exit without accidentally discharging their smoking pistols.

I immediately locked the door, engaged the privacy latch and searched through my belongings for my phone. It had been in 'airplane' mode for the trip and I turned it on for the first time since arriving in Ferraroland. I sat by the room phone ready to dial 9-1-1 while my cellular phone booted up. I fully expected the **Red Pimple** to come back with a cruel "just kidding" and skewer my bright yellow breeches. But minutes passed then an hour, then two hours without any sign of danger.

There were 22 messages on my phone, but I was initially too hyped up and then too tired to retrieve them all. I listened to a few that had come in while I was on the plane to Mission Viejo. One was from my geek nephew, Byron, the 16-year old MIT professor and computer science genius who had accompanied me to the EFL Championship game in 2009. It had been almost 6 weeks since I had asked him to look into the FootballOutriders.org football simulation system and he was finally returning my call. I had

nearly forgotten about it. Today, however, the validity of **Arpin Plunderflunder's** math, purporting to support the hypothesis of a supernatural curse on the Blue Eagles, was one of the last things on my mind.

I listened to Byron's long voice message, filled with technical terms that meant little or nothing to me, and I struggled to make sense of it. Finally he finished his inscrutable technical explanation, paused and said: *"but you always tell me to get to the point, Uncle Spats, so here's the point: Arpin's math is reliable up to a point, but it is too simple to accurately determine subtle variables like the 'force - X' he describes. You need to employ sophisticated chaos formulas and plug them into a supercomputer to even begin to do that. But even if you could isolate the 'X' factor that is causing the Blue Eagles to diverge from predictable models, it wouldn't be, by definition, 'supernatural.' You can't isolate a supernatural force using a mathematical model. A 'singular' event, like the Big Bang, would be supernatural.*



Here I am in my jester's costume emerging from the washroom as other journalists mill around in the Conference Center on Media Day. Those who didn't think I was some kind of nut thought I was directing things.

You cannot rule out a supernatural force with his system – and Arpin knows this – but you cannot say it is a supernatural force either. You have to find it to prove it. Oh, and by the way, I think I've found it. Give me a call back when you get a chance."

I had been nodding off on the bed while listening to his message, still wearing my jester suit. But those last two lines jolted me up. I looked at the clock. It was almost 4 AM in Massachusetts – Byron would be still playing 'World of Warcraft' at this hour and would be unreachable. My best chance was to catch him in the morning at MIT before his first class at 9:00 AM. I set my alarm and lay on my bed. My mind was spinning now even more than before, but it had stopped effectively processing information. Finally, my exhaustion overcame my nerves and I fell into a broken sleep full of anxious dreams. It had been one hell of a long day!

THE FOOL'S GAMBIT

As you might imagine, I slept in after having survived two attempts on my life. In my fatigue I had inadvertently set the alarm for 8:00 AM, intending to be up an hour before Byron's first class, but forgetting I was on the west coast. By the time I woke up my nephew was well into whatever made up the day of a teenaged genius, tenured professor of computer science at MIT. Meanwhile, my curiosity to learn what he had discovered about the so-called "curse" of the Blue Eagles was quickly overtaken by numerous personal concerns and a busy Gale Sayers Week schedule.

I took off the fool's costume, showered and dressed in my normal clothes. Showers are miraculous in many ways. Clean and wearing crisp new clothes, the insanity of yesterday now felt like a crazy dream. My rational mind was in control and convinced my instinctive emotional mind to shut up and take a chill pill.

I checked my messages. There were now close to 30 of them – 9 from Gabby alone. Hers graduated in tone from playful, to serious, to annoyed, to concerned, all the way up to frantic. In the last one, left when I was in the shower, she said she was going to call the police out of fear that something had happened to me at the castle. I dialed her up.

"Spats! Is it you? I was so worried," she began. "You didn't look happy to be in that dungeon."

"Well, you're right about that, Gabby," I answered. "But what's done is done. Today is a new day. What's cooking with you?"

Gabby was getting ready to head over to the Ferraroland Royal Plaza for Media Day. The plaza was the focal point of the expansive Ferraroland Convention Center and a multi-purpose space perfectly suited to a human circus like the EFL Championship Media Day. Everybody in the sports media world would be there, from small local outlets to national network broadcasters.

"Where are you staying, Spats? Nobody has seen you since the episode at the Castle." Gabby had switched the topic back to me. She sensed that I was not myself and was prying.

"I'm at the Hilton. I was jet-lagged and hit the sack early after getting lost in the castle," I lied.

"Lost? But you said you had been kidnapped!" she countered.

"It felt like I'd been kidnapped. I got lost going to the reception and two guards thought I was trespassing," I lied again. At that point, I did not want to get into what had really happened. Gabby would spread it all around Ferraroland and I wanted to control the narrative. The journalist in me knew that I had a story if I survived the week and it might be damaged by a premature and inaccurate

release of information by the Queen of Gossip.

“You poor thing,” she commiserated. “And now you are at the Hilton! Why in the world are you there? Charlie, Jean and a bunch of us are at the Royal Palace Hotel. It’s quite nice – five stars. The Ritz designed it.”

“My voucher was for the Ferraro Hilton, Gabs, I don’t know why,” I replied. I guessed that the syndicate was trying to reduce expenses but I could not rule out other reasons for being excluded from the five-star hotel.

The conversation quickly devolved into a one-way chatter with Gabby doing all the chattering. This always happened with Gabby and I had learned to filter out the dross and key in on the important information. In this case, 10 minutes of chatter boiled down to *‘I’ll meet you at the Starbucks in the convention center in 1 hour.’* That gave me time to grab a quick bite to eat in the hotel.

I gathered myself together and stepped out of my room. I turned up the hall toward the elevators and stopped in my tracks. At the end of the hall were two tall masked figures dressed in dark red robes and tall conical hats. They could have been only two people: Inácio and Narciso. My suspicions were confirmed seconds later when I heard the steely grate of sword on scabbard. I turned around to see my nemesis, dressed like a 17th century marquis, in full creepy make-up, emerging from the fire exit behind me at the opposite end of the hall.

“Thees time, Spats McChad, you will-ah not escape-ah!” hissed the **Red Pimple** as he advanced toward me. At the same time, Inácio and Narciso, hampered by their Inquisition outfits, plodded slowly toward me from the elevators in the opposite direction.

I was trapped.....or maybe not. I was perhaps 15 feet from my room and the Pimple was at least three times that distance away. I made a mad dash for the door and swiped my card in the lock. It opened and I slid in, slamming the door behind me just as the Pimple arrived. I heard him banging on the door as I dialed 9-1-1. *Enough of this*, I thought. *I’m calling the cops.*

The 9-1-1 receptionist reacted to the description of my attackers the way you might expect – with palpable pessimism. She made me repeat myself several times then started asking me questions that I suspected were from a list used to determine whether or not I was a crazy person.

“Look! I am not crazy!” I yelled into the phone. That seemed to be enough to convince her that I was because she did not bother to keep me on the line as they do in the TV cop shows, but told me a car would stop by and hung up.

Meanwhile, I could hear mumbling in Portuguese coming from the other side of the door; they were planning some type of assault, I was sure. If it succeeded I did not like my chances dressed like **Spats McChad**. In desperation I frantically changed into the jester outfit and waited. But nothing came – no further whispering and no thumping on the door. I looked out the peephole – nothing visible there.

I could not trust that they had left and decided to wait it out for the cops. About 20 minutes passed before I heard a knock at the door and an American-sounding male voice bark: “Security!”

I peered through the peephole and saw a young man in a brown uniform standing there. He was flanked by two burly police officers in khaki green shirts. I opened the door.

“I’m glad you’re here officers,” I said with relief. “People are trying to kill me.”

The expressions on their faces when they set eyes on me made my heart sink. If there had been any thought in their minds that I was sane, sober and in imminent danger it surely vanished when they saw me dressed in a court jester suit.

“Of course they are,” said the burly black cop on the right soothingly. “And they must have vanished just before we arrived, right?”

“Well, maybe not *just* before, but they left, yes,” I replied.

“Just to make sure, we’re going to take a quick look around, okay sir?” said the tall white cop on the left in a parody of concern. “We’ll be right back.”

The security guard stayed as the Orange County Sheriffs went off down the hall in the direction of the elevators. My shoulders slumped as he asked me a series of questions about myself that had nothing to do with the alleged crimes against me. Eventually he ran out of questions, informed me that he was submitting an incident report and left. The cops never did come back.

I looked at my watch. An hour had passed since I had spoken with Gabby. I was late.

FOOTBALL WEEK IN FERRAROLAND

For those of you who have stuck with me to this point in the story – faithfully read every word of my personal odyssey in Ferraroland and churned through my select excerpts from Chris Ferraro’s previously untold history of Portugal – I commend your patience and your stamina. If you read some of it but skipped other parts, I don’t blame you; what I might find cathartic you might find totally boring and beside the point. If you skipped everything in order to get to here, the football part, I can’t blame you for that either. After all, writing about the EFL is what I get paid for and reading about the EFL is what you pay for. So, with only occasional and necessary divergences, here I go with a rundown of ‘Football Week in Ferraroland’ followed by my thoughts on the game itself.

I went to my rendezvous with Gabby and the Boys dressed in my protective Jester outfit. Several factors combined to make me swallow my pride. Clearly, the cops here would only be of use in taping up the crime scene after my murder. As well, the outfit had been my only effective defence against the Red Pimple to that point; and while I had my doubts after the last attack that it would deter the Red Pimple a second time, I could not think of another defensive option that involved staying in Ferraroland.

I arrived at Starbucks late but everyone who had planned on meeting me there were still there when I arrived. The strange

circumstances in the dungeon and my subsequent disappearance had been the subject of much discussion and some concern, I was later told, and they wanted to see me. When my friends and colleagues saw me dressed in a Joker's costume the concern turned to deep worry for those who actually cared about my welfare and into a good laugh for those who cared a little less.

"Oh dear, Spats!" Gabby declared with a surprised and troubled look on her face. "What kind of outfit is that you're wearing? Is it a *Libertine* design?" She tried unsuccessfully to read the tag on the back of my tight-fitting collar.

"Holy F^&k!" howled **Quentin San Pedro** of the *Chino Champion*. "You're really getting into the spirit of this place, buddy!"

"Did you start drinking without me, Spats?" **Charlie Wood** hollered before bursting out laughing.

"Wow, Spats! That's a....*different* kind of suit," said a confused-looking **Jean Boisvert**.

"Finally, Merlin has somebody to hang out with," quipped Twin Cities chronicler, **Lars Odegard** of the *Valhalla Press*, in reference to the eccentric correspondent for the *Excaliburs*. At that, I made a mental note that if the ridicule became too much to bear I would find company with some of the kookier writers, of which Merlin was one of a few who consistently found themselves with plenty of "alone time" at these large media events.

"*Eeehaww!*" yelled **Johnny Rebb**, Regulators correspondent for *The State*. "What did they do to you in that dungeon, Spats?"

These people in front of me were all familiar faces and friends of the sort that develop over years of professional contact. I should have been able to tell them straight up that I was dressed like a fool to protect my life. But if they already suspected I was losing my mind for wearing this outfit, they would certainly lose all doubt if I tried to describe what had happened. The truth was so bizarre that I hardly believed it myself – and I had just lived through it. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction. So I decided to go on the attack.

"I wanted to fit in with the rest of you so I dressed like a fool," I jabbed, big fake grin on my face.

"Ooooh, touché!" chuckled **Charlie Wood**. "But you do realize that nobody is going to catch on to the joke. They're just going to think you're a fool!"

"One thing I've learned over the years of coming to these games," I explained, "is that writers tend to be an eccentric and quirky bunch, while TV types are generally superficial and very attractive in a mainstream way. I stride both realms – being both attractive and deep – but I have always felt that you, Charlie, and those like you, hold my good looks against me. Therefore, you don't take me seriously as a writer. But now that I'm dressed like an idiot and have a rash on my face, you are all going to have to listen more respectfully to my opinions!"

"Holy f&*king sh*t, Spats!" **Quentin San Pedro** shouted, "You're the Sultan of Smug, brother! You look like you just stepped out of a deck of cards and you're talking sh*t to us?"

"Okay boys, let's all get along, shall we? We are already behind schedule so we should be on our way, don't you think?" Gabby employed her skills as a party hostess to deflect attention away from the simmering quarrel and whisk us in motion toward the Starbucks

exit. It hit me at that moment that she looked very different today. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and she sported a dark blue pant suit. She wore dark horn-rimmed glasses and her make-up was subdued. She looked like a corporate lawyer.

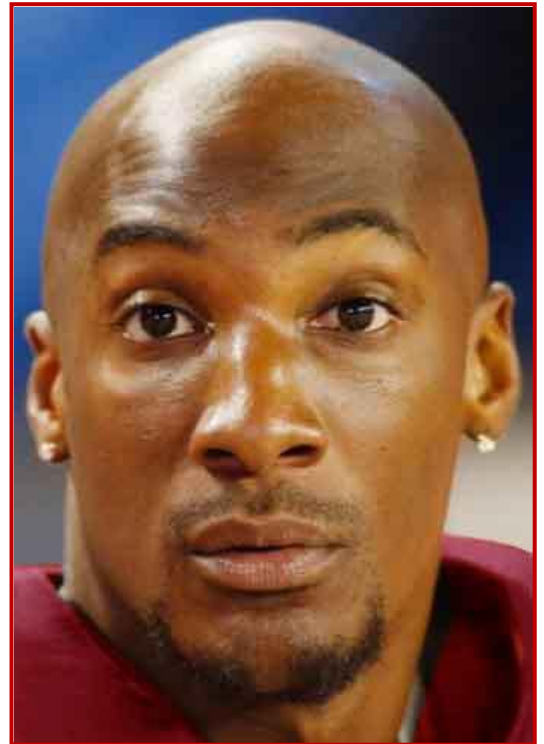
"Is the business look fashionable in LA these days, Gabby?" I asked.

"Oh no, Spats! Culottes and off-the-shoulder neck lines are raging at the moment," she replied. She cocked and eyebrow, smiled broadly and added, "they are quite chic."

She spoke rapidly but in hushed tones as we hastened our way together to the convention center only 100 or so meters away. "It's such a coincidence Spats," she said. "You want people to see the artist in you, so you dress up like a jester. I want the football people to take me more seriously as a sports writer so I decided to look more....*business-like*. I'm hoping they'll let me ask a question this time."

We arrived at an open air concourse lined with tables and booths. We had to register for our passes in order to enter the main plaza where players, coaches, team and league officials were milling about, making themselves available for questions. There were two large podiums at opposite ends of the hall, one for the Mustangs and the other one for the Patriots. They were in controlled areas where the principals from both teams – such as the President, GM, Head Coach and star players – would be available for a limited time then allowed to duck out the back if they did not wish to mingle any further.

The Mustangs' line-up for the premium podium interviews consisted of: GM/Coach **Rich Liotta**; QB, **Matt Ryan**; RB, **Arian Foster**; safety, **Earl Thomas**; WR, **Anquan Boldin**; veteran LB, **Trent Cole**; and safety, **Eric Weddle**. The notable absence of **JJ Watt** became the main controversy of the day, leading to all kinds of speculation as to the real reason behind the team's decision to "*excuse JJ from his Media Day commitments for personal reasons*."



Charleswood cornerback, **Aqib Talib**, looks confused by a question from **Sir Reginald Malcom Clapham** during Media Day. Words like 'balley-bangers' will do that to you.

Skippping Media Day at the Championship was something that happened very rarely. The last time anyone could remember was back in 2012 when Death Valley's **Aaron Hernandez** had failed to show in Garland and was retroactively excused by the Undertakers and the EFL for "*family reasons*." It came out two years later in a *Deathspun* column, and after that at his trial, that Hernandez had missed Media Day because he was disposing of a firearm and a car he had used to kill two people in a drive-by shooting after they had ordered food "*Aaron didn't like the smell of*" at the table next to him at a popular Garland restaurant.

For members of the teams, Media Day was one of those events that one either relished or despised. Watt had never been one to speak at length to the Media, but he was not known to shun reporters either. The league's Defensive MVP was considered one of the principal reasons the Mustangs had made it back to the EFL Final – making up almost entirely on his own for a depleted line-backing corps that certainly missed **NaVorro Bowman** in the run game. His non-attendance bordered on scandalous.

"I'm disappointed," said Gabby. "I wanted to see that hunk in the flesh."

"His flesh is being cryogenically frozen at the moment getting pumped up for the big game," **Randy the Desert Rat** of the *Mohave Torch* sneered. The stocky, hard-nosed former Special Forces soldier with the disturbing tattoos was known to have a thing for Gabby and had saddled up to us as we entered the conference center.

"You believe that story, Randy?" I asked seriously, as if I was not wearing a jester suit.

He turned to me and his astonishment was plain to see. "Spats? I didn't recognize you. Why are you dressed like a fairy?"

"It's a long story. And it's a jester suit not a fairy suit," I replied testily.

"Whatever," he said dismissively. "It makes you look like a fairy. And, yes, I believe that story. I used to work for the government – sort of – and there isn't much I don't believe anymore. The Mustangs' owner, Beauregard, has connections to some secret projects through his oil business. His company, *Project Adam* is probably way behind what the Pentagon can achieve in bio-engineering but way ahead of most EFL teams."

I rolled my eyes. "Next thing you're going to start claiming that aliens are involved," I joked.

"Not with Beauregard, but they are with Bobby Elder and the Hellfire," he dead-panned; he was serious. "I'm working on a story right now, in fact. Elder is desperate to turn around his basket case franchise. Can't tell you about it though – you'll have to wait for it to come out next year."

The hall was teeming with media, cameras and microphones. The chances of me not being caught dozens of times on video dressed like an idiot were zilch. But on the other hand there a surprisingly high number of strange-looking people milling around, whether they were eccentric print journalists or "super-fans" who had won and/or purchased a limited number of tickets to enjoy Media Day live.

The first media personality to take some of the pressure off my bruised ego was **Kokopali Crimpton** of the *Carthage Carving*, the white-bred American boy who had "gone native" in Samoa. He still followed football, but from the perspective of someone who had adopted the teachings and values of some type of Polynesian warrior cult. He had arrived at the Mustangs' podium wearing a grass skirt and rope sandals with his **Marcus Mariota** jersey. Combined with his blue hair and war paint, he seemed to be going to great lengths to draw attention to himself; or else he was sliding down the coconut tree of madness.

Then there was the aforementioned **Merlin the Magician** of the *York Round Table Chronicle*, who arrived soon after, wearing bright green robes and a long stocking cap emblazoned with silver stars and half moons; the insidiously disquieting **Marquis de Sade** of the *Viriden Eviscerator*, who dressed like the **Red Pimple**, but less flamboyantly, (and who looked every bit as dangerous); and the toga-clad **Marcus Aurelius** of the *Gwinnett Tribune* rounded out a quartet of obvious fruit loops who joined our group and served as my convenient cover.

First up on the Mustangs' podium was GM/Head Coach, **Rich Liotta**. He was a pro at dealing with the media and everybody knew it. There was almost no point in asking him any questions because he simply would not give up anything of value that wasn't already well known. Still, sound bites were important on these occasions and so over a dozen TV and print journalists took turns firing questions at him, hoping for a slip-up or a perfectly delivered, clever deflection they could air.

In her effort to make a name for herself as a serious sports writer, Gabby was determined to land a big fish right off the bat. Liotta fit the bill. She kept her hand raised as the Mustangs coach went around the room, picking out his favourites, or those pointed out by the EFL media handler standing behind him. It had been years since Gabby had been allowed to ask a question at a high profile media scrum not involving the Knights. But being one of the few female journalists on hand, and being not immediately recognizable at a distant in her conservative business suit, the league media advisor finally bit and pointed at her. Liotta looked at her and said, "yes?"

Gabby was as shocked as anybody that she had been picked. For an instant she froze. I gave her a gentle nudge and whispered: "he's talking to you, Gabs."

"Ah...Gabby...ah...Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven...LA Daily News," she stammered then paused to consult her notes. "Ah...Coach Liotta...if your team was an animal...what kind of animal would it be?"

Chortles and groans and the clicking of camera shutters were the only sounds for a few seconds as the room absorbed the inanity of the question.

Liotta smiled and paused for effect: "Well, we would be mustangs naturally, Gabrielle," he replied to a burst of laughter from

the fans and media. “Next question....yes, James,” he said, nodding to **James Duthie** of TSN, a native of Aurora who had already asked him three questions to that point.

I turned to look at Gabby; she appeared crushed. Her face was flushed with embarrassment. “Oh Spats, I meant that question for the Patriots! I read the wrong question!” she whined.

“That’s okay,” I said gently, trying to comfort her. “Your question brought some levity to a boring interview. What was your question for the Mustangs?”

“It did, didn’t it,” she agreed, in reference to her question breaking up the boredom of a Liotta press conference. She smiled a little in spite of her agitation. “My question for the Mustangs?” she consulted her notes. “Ah, yes. *‘If your team was a human, what kind of human would it be?’*” she read.

I told Gabby not to ask any more questions unless she ran them by me first. I was gentle but firm about it. I explained to her that sports fans wanted to know about three basic things: injuries, strategy, and intangibles. The first two are always the same questions – the journalist’s art coming out in the way the questions are asked. The third depended entirely on what was going on around the team that might affect the team’s performance on game day. For example, the return of **Peyton Manning** after being traded – will that inspire the Patriots to rise above its talent and knock off a powerhouse like Aurora?

“Football is driven by betting and fantasy sports, Gabby,” I continued. “Few fans really care about the intricacies of the sport itself. All they really want is to know the score in advance, who the main players are who will affect that score, win a bet or a fantasy league using that knowledge and brag about it to their friends afterwards. Fans who are emotionally attached to their team are fanatics who care about the same things, but with the focus being strictly on their team winning. They are personally attached to the success or failure of their favourite team and they can become quite bitter and angry when things go badly. They think they know better than the GM and coach in those situations. You have a choice to either play to the crowd or suck up to management when things aren’t going well. If you try to be ‘neutral,’ neither side will trust you and you will lose ‘credibility’ – even if you’re right. Keep those basics in mind when formulating your questions and you will keep your readers interested.”

She looked at me like a child who had just been told there was no Santa Claus. “You mean it’s not all about the jerseys?” she asked incredulously.

Talking football with Gabby was, as always, difficult. I decided to shift gears and get us to move over to the Patriots’ side of the great hall. It was not as crowded, fans and media being more interested in the team that looked poised to be the second team in EFL history to win back-to-back championships. The draw for fan interest in the Pats was the Manning “homecoming” and what the plan might be to pull off an upset – not that many expected them to succeed, but discussing the plan was fun.

The Patriots’ press conference line-up was headlined by **Peyton Manning**. Owner/GM **Jason Findlay** was in attendance but declined to field formal questions. The rest of the podium line-up included WRs, **Dez Bryant** and **Andre Johnson**; TE, **Jason Witten**; linebackers, **Lavonte David**, **CJ Mosley** and **James Harrison**; and CB, **Aqib Talib**. Only one of the players, **CJ Mosley**, had been on the 2014 edition of the Patriots: 3-13 tragedy of premature rebuilding, according to the critics; and the foundation for a glorious return to the final in 2015, according to the boosters. The 2015 version of the team featured rising young talent and veteran stars who had posted a 15-1 finish, tied with the Mustangs at the top of the league. Such resounding success had been the result of Findlay’s highly active off-season trading activity. It had been a strong bid to make the most out of what many expected to be Manning’s last season as a starter.

The Peyton portion of the presser had been going on for over 30 minutes and was showing no signs of slowing down by the time we arrived. Manning, as always, was comfortable talking about himself and the reporters, as always, bordered on sycophantic in their “questions,” which consisted of positive statements that Manning was expected to agree with and elaborate on.

Peyton finally left the podium after the twelfth retirement question, but his presence lingered as every member of the offence felt obliged to give him credit for their own successes and every member of the defence felt it necessary to mention that they played better knowing the offence, led by Peyton, was going to score.

I had been interested in what **Lavonte David** and **James Harrison** were going to say. David had opposed the Mustangs in the championship last year as a member of the Cannibals and now faced the prospect of losing to them two years in a row with different teams. Harrison had been a member of last year’s championship Mustangs team and now had the opportunity of becoming the first player to win back-to-back championships with different teams. When they finally got in front of the microphone they delivered predictably pat lines about “focusing on playing football” and “being a good teammate” while denying that last year’s championship game had any impact on this game – all of which was pure bullsh*t.

Charlie Wood, of the *Charleswood Banner & Charleswood Sun*, was setting the tone. He was awarded multiple questions for each of the Patriots players and made sure there was an emphasis on the positive. He scowled when **Sir Reginal Malcolm Clapham** of the *Durham Diggatell & Pick* raised his hand and asked corner **Aqib Talib**: “Your reputation as a hot head precedes you, sir. How will you keep your temper in check in the face of the bally-baggers passing attack of the Mustangs?”

To which, Talib replied: “what language is that you’re speaking, Bro? Speak American and I’ll try to answer your question.”

I thought of a few annoying questions I could ask the Patriots players to get under Charlie’s skin. For example, nobody had brought up the fact that their 15-1 record had been built on one of the weakest schedules in the league. Nor had anybody thought to take a jab at **Peyton Manning** for attempting just 10 passes over 15 yards *all season*, including the playoffs. The topic of Peyton’s

ageing arm and his tendency to fade in the second half of games was not an on-camera discussion point apparently, even if it was the subject of a behind-the-scenes whisper campaign after his effeteness in the second half of the Conference Final almost blew a huge lead against the Cubs. Manning was the equivalent of football royalty. Few dared to challenge his reputation publicly.

I decided against spicing up the Pats presser and raising the ire of my Manitoba rival. For one, I was wearing a jester suit and everything I might have said would have been discredited by my bizarre appearance. Second, I just could not bring myself to contribute to the Media Day circus any more than I already had. Did it really matter what had happened before this week? What mattered was what would happen in five days. Game plans for the final could change drastically. Players performed differently under the mammoth weight of the pressure of that game.

The Patriots and Mustangs finished their main press conferences and we milled around the great hall listening in on impromptu interviews with lesser lights and gossiping amongst ourselves. The prevailing theory about **JJ Watt** was that he had injured himself chopping wood, perhaps lopping off a toe, and that he was undergoing super-advanced surgery and rehabilitation before the Mustangs were required to report their injuries. Watt's preference for wood-chopping over conventional weight room exercises had been an inconvenience for the team as his contract required that they ensure a ready supply of wood and a safe area for chopping it wherever they traveled. Proceeds of the sale of the firewood produced by the exercises went directly to the *JJ Watt Foundation*, a charity focused on a cure for childhood 'Gigantism.'

There had been a stir when 83-year old **Granny Gee** of the *Garland Gazette* fainted while posing a question to **Eric Weddle**. Media outlets in the City of Garland, the original home of the Mustangs, continued to cover the team closely two years after their departure for northern climes. Many fans in Garland clung to the belief that the Mustangs would return to Texas some day. They also felt that since they had suffered through the lean years, while the core of this championship team learned the hard way under **Doug Shirley**, they had earned a right to bask in glory. Granny had been brought to the *Sisters of Mercy* Medical Clinic near the entrance to Ferraroland where she received treatment for dehydration. Her penchant for drinking only tea and sucking on scotch mints had apparently caught up with her.

The consensus of the gathered throng of reporters was that the Mustangs would win and that it would be an ugly exit for **Peyton Manning**. The Aurora defence had not been as dominant in the regular season as they had been in 2014, but they had choked out the offences of the Corn Kings and Thunder Lizards in back-to-back playoff wins, holding them to 3.0 yards-per-play, a playoff record pace. They were peaking at the right time. If Manning had any designs on throwing deep against the safety tandem of **Earl Thomas** and **Eric Weddle** he had better get it out of his system early, before they were expecting it, because (all agreed) the savvy veteran would not be able to "savvy" the extra zip required to beat double-coverage deep downfield.

In spite of so much of the same old, same old, the day passed quickly. The constantly replenished and varied spread of food and open bar in the Royal Plaza kept us busy. Journalists like to eat out, especially when they aren't paying for it. The EFL and Ferraroland had shared expenses to make this Media Day the most extravagant any of us had ever witnessed, going back to the days of the defunct NFL.

The over-indulgence was just beginning.....

THE ROYAL FEAST

The ensuing days before game day passed like a blur. EFL Championship Week in Ferraroland was like being at an all-inclusive resort or on a cruise ship. Everything was right there, practically within walking distance, on the 150-acre property. Security was pervasive but unobtrusive, unlike last year's police state experience in Columbia. We had free reign of the entire facility except for the two teams' practice fields and São Jorge Castle, which was invitation-only. The freedom and convenience led to a much more relaxed atmosphere and genuine conviviality. Under these conditions, the medieval theme eventually caught on and after around three days of wearing the jester suit I had started to become fashionable. Soon people were asking me where I had bought my hat.

Gabby sent pics of my outfit to a designer friend of hers in LA and within 24 hours a sample line of jester apparel labelled simply, '*Fool*,' arrived in Ferraroland to be worn by volunteers for promotional purposes. It was eagerly scooped up by people who wanted to be on the cutting edge of LA fashion. By Friday I was the object of envy rather than amusement or scorn and I would have been embarrassed to have gone out of my hotel room in anything *other* than my jester outfit.

As for the **Red Pimple** and his henchmen – they seemed to have given up after two days of staking out my hotel room. The night of Media Day I had returned late to my room at the Ferraro Hilton to find **Inácio** and **Narciso**, dressed up in the black masks, heavy boots and thick elbow length leather gloves of medieval executioners. Armed with axes they had stood guard at either end of the hallway while the **Red Pimple** emerged from the service elevator behind me. But, as before, when he saw me in the jester suit he froze and his attitude quickly changed to one of docility and subservience. "**I weel not harm-ah you, gentle fool,**" he had said as he retreated back into the elevator and my would-be executioners backed down the fire exits.

Another ambush was attempted the following night but, like the others, my jester suit had the magical effect of switching off the Pimple's homicidal fixation and turning him into a limp-wristed fop. This was the ultimate proof – if dressing up like a 17th century swordsman in public and trying to murder someone in broad daylight was *not* – that the **Red Pimple** was a total nut job. Part of me felt sorry for **Chris Ferraro** that he had inherited such a burden. But another part of me – the spiteful part – found it amusing and fitting that he would have to worry constantly about what the Pimple might do next under the pretext of "serving" him.

Once I felt totally safe and comfortable in the jester suit I took in what I could of Ferraroland. I went to the **'FIGHTING COCK CASINO'**, even though I don't gamble, and got satisfaction from watching **Aristedes Kalogiannis** lose his shirt at roulette. I dined at the expansive, three-storey, *'Casa de Sardinhas,'* even though I don't like sardines, and was entertained by the sight of **Michael S. Hickenbottom** of the *Orange County Register* bouncing off of patrons' tables after losing a brandy shooter drinking contest to **Lanny McDonald** of the *Markham Economist & Sun* in the 'Fisherman's Net' lounge. I rode the Ferraroland roller coaster, even though I hate amusement parks, and was greatly amused at the spectacle of **Mike Myers** of the *Scarberian* getting sick all over Triumph spokesperson **Molly Qerim** after flirtatiously jumping into her car for the wild ride.

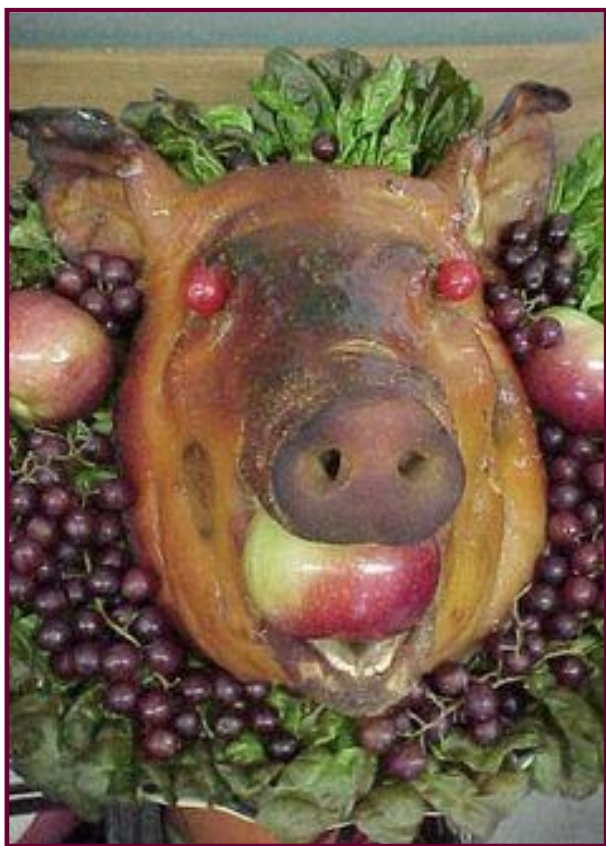
I had to admit that, after a rough start to the week, I was having a good time in Ferraroland. By the end of the week the only thing that continued to vex me was my inability to get in touch with my geek nephew, Byron. The curse of the Blue Eagles had been one of the big topics of discussion and, having gone on the record in my weekly column as undertaking an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon; people were asking me for my opinion. They were pressing me hard after I had made the mistake of letting it slip during a night of drinking *Sagres* at 'Chorizo Heaven,' that I had proof that there was a curse. I did not, of course, but I expected I would know where to look once I had spoken with Byron. Unfortunately, he was being typical Byron and not picking up his phone.

The week's festivities culminated in a great 'Royal Feast' at the Grand Banquet Hall of the Royal Palace Hotel. Short of the game itself, this was the marquis event for Championship Week. League officials, team owners, players, media and 50 lucky lottery-winning fans were invited. Roughly 750 people filled the banquet hall for the 24-course meal, presided over by a Head Table consisting of "King" Ferraro, Mustangs' owner **Haus Beauregard**, Patriots' owner, **Jason Findlay** and all 10 members of the shadowy EFL Committee – the people who ran and controlled the league.

The wine and port was free-flowing as the assembled guests dined on a variety of breads, seafood, meats and cheeses, culminating in the main course of elderberry-glazed squab and honeyed chestnuts. The entire meal, except for the ice cream, consisted of Americanized variants of traditional Portuguese fare dating back to the middle ages. While they feasted, guests were entertained by dancers, musicians, jugglers and acrobats dressed in traditional Portuguese costume.

At the end came the speeches. As good and as interesting as the food and entertainment had been, the speeches were dull and uninspired. However, there was much surprise and applause when pop singer, **Lorde** made an unannounced appearance immediately prior to the host's speech. Dressed in peasant girl garb, she serenaded King Ferraro with her song, *'Royals.'* After a hearty round of applause, Ferraro stood up and declared: "you can rule me anytime, Lorde," to much laughter from the audience.

Ferraro's speech went gradually downhill from there. It was one of those 'I'd like to thank ---' speeches where the list of people



The centerpiece on my table at the Royal Feast stared at me judgementslly throughout the entire meal. It was a disconcerting experience to say the least.

nobody knows goes on and on and on. If one had paid close attention, one would have counted over 14 Portuguese-American clubs and associations among those organizations credited with building Ferraroland and contributing to a great experience for visitors to Mission Viejo during EFL Championship Week. The content was torturous, but the delivery was nevertheless full of pomp, accompanied by musical flourishes from a cornett-playing medieval troubadour.

One would have thought that the royal host would have had the last word at his own feast, but that was reserved for honoured guest, **Yorgo Kaldis**, Co-Chairman of the EFL Committee. He wore a drab, dark grey suit of a style not seen since the late 50s; and that was the most interesting thing about him. Without the benefit of a cornett to break up the monotony, Kaldis launched straight into his speech, reading from a prepared script. Apparently unaccustomed to public speaking, he droned on for five minutes in a monotone, never taking his eyes off the paper. He ended the speech as suddenly as he had begun, without any modulation in rhythm or tone to indicate that the end was coming. The last line, wishing both teams good luck in the game tomorrow, just fell off a cliff. He turned and was halfway to his seat before the audience realized it was over and started to clap.

"Oh brother! I hope he's not awarding the Gale Sayers Trophy tomorrow," whispered **Jean Boisvert**, who was seated on my right. On Jean's right, **Orville Smucker** of the *Cowtown Plain Dealer* sat slumped with his head back and mouth open, a faint, spasmodic snore rising from his throat.

At least somebody is making good use of the time, I thought.

HIS MAJESTY THE KING'S ROYAL COLISEUM

It was game day and something much more than the 75-degree temperature, clear skies and calm breeze made it a perfect one. After the Royal Feast I had been informed that my media pass to the game had been upgraded from Balcony



LA Knights' correspondent **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven** models a piece from her Spats-inspired 'Fool' clothing line. An official launch is planned for the early summer in LA.

'D' to the 'Lords Balcony' right beside the 'Grand Tier,' compliments of His Majesty. The upgrade included one guest of my choosing. I assumed that some kissing up was involved in the decision to place me in the higher snack bracket. I had survived five attempts on my life in Ferraroland so, doubtless, forestalling a post-Championship Week lawsuit was now at the forefront of Chris Ferraro's mind.

The 'Grand Tier' was the name for the owner's personal luxury "box." It had been upgraded and expanded for the EFL Championship to make it more like a penthouse-style luxury condo than a "box." It featured ostentatious amenities, such as a small fitness center, heated Jacuzzis, massage tables, pool tables, table soccer, video games, a wine cellar, personal mini-bars, butlers, and a full-service Japanese steakhouse. It jutted out over the field to give King Ferraro and his guests an unobstructed view of the action, but its immense size also obscured the view of a portion of the northeast sideline for fans seated in the cheap seats above. Oh well, too bad!

The 'Lords Balcony' was less extravagant, but still far more luxurious than a run-of-the-mill luxury box. I was actually stunned into awe-struck silence when I entered the dining lounge that adjoined the box itself. There were tables set with fine china, six huge hi-def flat screen TVs, a sumptuous 'all-you-can-eat' buffet featuring 8 types of meat, fish and seafood; a live piano player, a smoking lounge and an open bar. The seats in the box were made of padded leather and featured drink holders, folding stowaway snack tables and small TV screens that allowed you to monitor broadcasts via satellite. The huge box seated 28 with plenty of foot space and standing room if one wished to mingle or feel closer to the action by standing at the edge.

I had felt obliged to ask Gabby to be my guest due to the fact that she would have never forgiven me had I denied her the opportunity to mingle with the media elite. But it turned out that she was already assigned to the 'Lords Balcony' and had

been all along. Her social connections in LA were apparently highly valued by His Pretentiousness.

"Oh, that's nice," I had said when she confessed. "When was I going to learn about that, after the game?"

"I'm sorry, Spats," she had said. "I didn't think it mattered to you. You never talk to me during the game anyway!"

She was right. Talking football with Gabby was kind of like explaining death to a four-year old. Even now, eight years after she had ditched her gossip column to write about the *"latest hot thing to hit LA"* (the Knights, of course!), she would listen to me with a mixture of fear and bewilderment whenever I had to explain to her what a first down was.

I ended up inviting my old buddy, **Jean Boisvert**, of the *Swampland Proof*. He was extremely grateful, having been previously relegated to a roped off area of the mezzanine, called 'Balcony E.' The class conscious King Ferraro had arranged Media seating according to his own constantly changing set of rules that gave priority to national media over local; TV over radio; radio over print; and print over "internet blogger." Furthermore, he had sub-divided the local media according to how well their teams had performed in 2015. It meant that Boisvert, a print journalist for a small Florida paper that covered the 1-15 Swordfish, was near the bottom of the media pecking order, one step higher than a "freelance bloggiest" from a non-EFL community. Now he was near the top.

I soon found out that the seating protocols described above could be drastically altered by 'Royal Decree.' For instance, Monarchs' beat reporter, **Michael S. Hickenbottom** of the *Orange County Register*, as a "host journalist," was given a seat in Lords. So, too, were radio and print journalists from finalist cities, Charleswood and Aurora, as well as their conference final rivals, Durham and Iowa City. That meant that **Charlie Wood**, **James Duthie**, **Sir Reginald Malcolm Clapham** and **Sparky McGillicuddy** made the cut in addition to radio personalities, **Buck Rodgers**, the *"Bucking Bronto"* of T-LIZ 900 Radio in Durham; and the "voice of the Cubs," **Bucky "Papa Bear" McCready**, of AM 1100 THE-IOWA radio in Iowa City. Broadcasters for Charleswood and Aurora, **Kent "Buck" Turnbull** of AM 660 PATS-Radio; **Jim Buck** *"the Horse Whisperer"* of AM 840 Aurora, were actively calling the games in the 'Broadcast Salon' on the opposite side of the stadium.

"Do you have to be named 'Buck' to get a job in radio these days?" I asked after the introductions.

There was an awkward silence for several seconds before *"Papa Bear"* turned to **Sparky McGillicuddy** and asked: "do you know what he's talking about?"

The luxurious and festive atmosphere in the media boxes threatened to overshadow the game itself. If you were a member of the media and not actively working one of the multiple live broadcasts, chances were very good that the focus of all your attention and discussion in the hours leading up to the game was on the opulence of the facilities and amenities at HMK Royal Coliseum, and not on whether or not Peyton Manning's arm would survive 60 minutes in the ring with the Aurora defence.

"Do you know what this is?" **Sparky McGillicuddy** asked me as we loaded up our plates at the buffet. He was pointing to a tray of curly white tube-like things in a brown broth.

"It looks like squid, Sparky," I replied.

He made a face. "Oh! I thought it was some kind of pasta," he muttered. Sparky was a simple, straightforward guy. Overwhelmed by the selection, he ended up spooning some plain macaroni salad onto his plate and ordering a hamburger from the server, a cute black-haired young lady dressed up like a medieval castle wench, but with a revealing blouse that likely would not have withstood the scrutiny of the Catholic church of that day.

As time passed before game time I stuffed my face and sampled local microbrews while making the rounds. It became clear that the Lords Balcony was not the place for the highest profile members of the media, but rather for those Chris Ferraro wished to honour or impress, undoubtedly for some ulterior motive.

FootballOutriders.Org, *Pro Football Focal-Point* and *Scouts Ltd.*, three ratings agencies producing analytical products that were reshaping the way football was being viewed in the mainstream, had seats in the Lords. Those groups were attempting to do for football what analytics had done for baseball and no doubt Ferraro wanted the inside track on their better products. **Severin Handfottner Jr.**, creator of the column '*Coaches Call*,' was gaining prominence for his shrewd commentary on the coaching styles and tactical decisions of EFL coaches. With the days of **Shane Falco** numbered as coach of the Monarchs, no doubt Ferraro was preparing an approach to Handfottner to help him, off the record, in his search for a new coach. Also in Lords was **Jimmy the Geek**, the Las Vegas-based sports bookie who shredded Vegas betting lines every week. Perhaps a lucrative "partnership" with the acknowledged expert in football betting could be established with enough beer and pretzels and a comfortable lounge chair at the EFL's Big Event.

The 'Grand Tier' was reserved for His Arrogance and the most politically important attendees at the game. This included all members of the murky EFL Committee, other team owners, and grandees of the national EFL Media like **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* (the "supreme suck-up" as he was known among his peers) and **Cowan Bullherd** of the syndicated radio show *Morning Bull*. This last was particularly galling to anyone in the industry with a shred of credibility left. Bullherd was the brashest BS artist in sports, an arrogant blowhard who recently had become so obnoxious that the number of callers to his show had fallen to an average of 3 per day. How he managed to keep his radio pulpit was a source of endless speculation. Most believed he had pictures of somebody in a high place frolicking obscenely with a goat. Also invited to the 'Grand Tier' was pop singer **Ellie Goulding**, with whom His Lecherousness was obsessed.

As the teams were introduced in protracted fashion, each name punctuated by a two-bar (da da-da da! da! da daaaah!) blast of a dozen long trumpets, discussion in the box finally turned to the game. A group of us who tended to stick together out of familiarity, not necessarily because we were friends, clustered together behind the fourth row of comfy chairs.

Sir Reginald Malcolm Clapham of the *Durham Diggatell & Pick* got the debate started by sidling up next to me, pipe in hand and declaring loudly: "I dare say, Spats, that was a sticky piece you wrote about the Lizards two weeks back. Care to open your sauce box and declare who will take the egg today – *before* the festivities begin?"

"If I spoke Victorian gibberish I would take it that you are setting me up for a wager, Sir Clap," I replied, allowing a touch of disdain to show. "But I don't speak gibberish, so you are going to have to spell it out for me in 21st century English."

Sir Reginald snickered nervously – the English did not enjoy direct confrontation and he knew that I knew it would set him on his back foot to have him speak plainly. But he also realized he would have no choice if the rest of the group were to partake in his attempt to humble me. "Umble-cum-stumble, Spats," he nodded, getting one last Victorian phrase in. "You dissect a game well *after* it is played – tell us now what you think *will* happen today."

"If you had read my *entire* column last week, Clappy, you would have caught my thoughts on the matter," I reminded him. "And, two weeks later, I am even more convinced than ever that the Patriots will win the game!"

I had decided to be bold and categorical. After six beers and all the shrimp I could eat, there was no sense in mincing my words or appearing to be on the fence. The moment called for boldness and, after seeing my life flash in front of my eyes more than once this week, I didn't really care if I was wrong.

"Woah, Spats!" barked **Charlie Wood**. "I wish I was that confident in my Pats!"

"You're losing your touch, Spats," **James Duthie**, the Canadian sportscaster, shook his head and smiled. "You're becoming sentimental in your middle age. You'd like to see the old guy Peyton go out on top and you're wishing it would turn out that way. The Spats of seven years ago recognized a dynasty in Florida when he saw one and called it. History is on the road to repeating itself with the Mustangs and you're not on the bus, Spats."

Duthie had been sucking back the suds and not eating very much. Memories of trying to kill **George W. Bush** at last year's EFL Championship in South Carolina may well have been troubling him. I decided not to take his bait and turned instead to **Sparky McGillicuddy**, probably the most decent and thoughtful man of all of us in that luxury box. "Do you think I'm too sentimental, Sparky?" I asked with feigned indignation.

"I believe any sentimentality coming from you is purely accidental, Spats," Sparky replied with the slightest of grins. "You have your reasons for liking the Pats, I'm sure. I just don't know what they are."

Sparky was trying to draw out my rationale, but I was not prepared to give it to him – or to anyone else for that matter. The problem was that I did not really *have* rationale. I could have concocted a scenario for my journalist friends that would have sounded like rationale, but the real reason I liked the Pats boiled down to a gut feeling. I *felt* that the Patriots were going to win and that Peyton would have something to do with it.

“I just hope it’s a great game and everyone has a good time together,” Gabby interjected. She always became uncomfortable when we started debating football in earnest. The hostess in her was always on the alert for signs of conflict in order to defuse it. She didn’t understand that we liked the conflict. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t like talking football.

Our attention was drawn by a sudden dip in the crowd noise and the voice of the PA announcer calling all to rise for the national anthem. We temporarily broke up our little party and turned to the field. In the center was



Ellie Goulding belts out ‘*On My Mind*’ while staring up at the Royal Balcony, Chris Ferraro’s luxury box. The owner of the Monarchs’ obsession with the English pop star made her the **GSIX** halftime show headliner.

this little waif of a thing dressed in a loose-fitting white blouse with an acoustic guitar slung over her shoulder. She was all alone sitting in front of a microphone. It was Mission Viejo native, **Kina Grannis**, the singer-songwriter who was catapulted into fame back in 2007 when her song ‘*Message From your Heart*,’ won the ‘*Doritos Crash the EFL Championship*’ contest. It was fitting that she be nominated to sing the national anthem in her home town at an event that had launched her career, but her delicate, folksy style strained to be heard over the natural din of an announced crowd of 74,558 and the insufficiently amplified microphone.

“Well, at least I was able to recognize the tune,” quipped **Charlie Wood** as fireworks erupted with the final note, drowning out both Grannis and the PA announcer.

That was indeed a blessing. Grannis was no belter, but she had been faithful to the music, adding just the right amount of guitar-picking to support a contemplative and respectful rendition of the *Star Spangled Banner*. The fashion of recent years tended toward artists making the national anthem their own – transforming the style and in most cases, the character of the Nation’s song. After *Madison Rising’s* “grunge” version in South Carolina last year, Grannis was a welcome respite.

“*America the Beautiful* would have suited her voice better, in my opinion,” piped up **Harry Shultz** of Football Outriders. We hadn’t thought of it, but we all agreed.

The usual problem with the coin toss and the extra-long *Coca-Cola* commercial pushed back the opening kickoff a few minutes from its scheduled 3:35 pm West Coast start time. But when the time finally arrived to get under way, most of the media were glued to their seats, digesting their food with their electronic devices in hand as they all tried to out-do each other in their Titter updates.

The first big highlight came early in the Mustangs’ opening series and it wasn’t the one most were expecting. Aurora quarterback **Matt Ryan** was sacked on consecutive drop backs, coughing up the ball on the second one and turning it over to Charleswood at the Aurora one yard line. **Charlie Wood** leaped to his feet and bellowed something primal that sounded like “*yeah*” while **James Duthie** looked on, expressionless and aloof.

“CJ Mosley!” **Michael S Hickenbottom** proclaimed loudly, as if nobody else in the room had seen who had stripped the ball.

“He is having quite a season,” commented **Mumbar Thakar** of *Pro Football Focal-Point*. Three of the company’s top analysts had been invited to the Lords to watch the final. Thakar had been introduced as the ‘first Indian football expert,’ at which he had giggled like a child and added: “*and probably the last one too!*” He smiled and laughed at everything and, at around 5’5” in platform shoes and about 120 lbs soaking wet, he was harmless. But he did have an annoying habit of insinuating himself uninvited into conversations with relative strangers.

“Best player on the defence,” chimed in Charlie and took another swig of ‘*Holy Jim Falls*.’

“Oh yes, he was exactly that,” agreed Mumbar. “He was our highest rated defensive player after JJ Watt. That is in the league, not only the Patriots. He had a cumulative PFFP rating of 57.6 this year – with only one negative game all season. But the media does not talk about him much. I think it is because he does not get sacks. Did you know that sack he made just now was only his second sack of the entire year? Impossible, you say. Well, you can check the numbers. He had zero in the regular season, one against Twin Cities in the playoffs. Go and check, I tell you.”

Mumbar talked rapidly and while his English was good, he spoke with a very strong accent. **Sir Reginald Malcolm Clapham**, who had spent a portion of his youth in India, understood him easily, however, and helped us through his dissertation.

"I dare say, Thak, you seem to have the numbers in your head, young man. What happened in the one negative game?" asked Sir Reginald.

"That is the strangest thing of all. He did not play very well against the Swordfish," Mumbar answered as his eyes widened in seeming amazement at his own words. "He missed a tackle on a screen pass to Robert Turbin that gained 41 yards and he was knocked down by a block by Jermon Bushrod on a 17-yard run by CJ Anderson. Bushrod was a -19.8 run blocker this year – he did not push around very many defenders."

"Add that piece of trivia to this year's Swordfish puzzle," **Jean Boisvert** commented wryly. "They could make good teams look silly at times but in the end they always lost."

"Oh, *ho-ho-ho*!" chuckled Mumbar, giddy at the attention he was receiving, apparently something he was not accustomed to. "That is because their defence was one of the most terrible of all time <*ho-ho-ho*> according to our ratings. Were they worse than the Patriots defence of 2012? Me, *I* think so, but not everybody in my office agrees with me. But we all agree they were very, very bad <*ho-ho-ho-ho*>. They gave up 7 yards average every play – bad, bad, bad, bad, bad!"

Mumbar's lecture was suddenly interrupted by another rousing cheer. **Lamar Miller** had squeezed through a wall of Mustangs to score a touchdown on the first play after the turnover. Charleswood had the early lead.

"The Patriots could not have started much better," **Sparky McGillicuddy** remarked laconically.

"If this is going down in the Pats' favour like you say, Spats, this is how it's got to get done! Shorten that field with turnovers!" Charlie effused.

"If the game comes down to turnovers, I'm not worried. The Mustangs force a lot of them," challenged **James Duthie**, who appeared unfazed by his team's disastrous opening drive.

It was true. Aurora had the kind of defence that took advantage of opponent's errors better than most. This capacity was enhanced whenever they had a lead in the second half – which was most games. Against a team that had only lost one game in two full seasons, it was too early to consider the Pats' early score a turning point. But in a game of such magnitude, with emotions high strung, an opening blow like that could provoke extreme reactions on both sides. Nobody would know until the end just how much of an effect it had had on the game.

If the Pats had started as well as could be hoped for, the Mustangs reacted to the early setback as well as could be expected. They made short work of the Patriots' defence with a 65-yard drive that Ryan finished with a pinpoint out pass to **Anquan Boldin** in the end zone for the equalizer. The Mustangs' top receiver celebrated with great spirit as Aurora fans rose to their feet as one to applaud.

"Ryan to Boldin!" Hickenbottom blared, as if he was calling the game for a radio audience.

"Now we're talking!" Duthie exclaimed as he signalled for another beer. "That's the sign of a champion right there! They came right back and stuffed it down their throats."

"Impressive drive," commented **Buck Rodgers** of T-LIX 900 radio in Durham. "Ryan looked calm in the pocket against a pretty aggressive blitz."

"Live by the blitz, die by the blitz," **Severin Handfottner Jr.**, writer of '*Coaches Call*,' joined the discussion with a cliché unbecoming an analyst of his stature. But he quickly redeemed himself with an acute observation that the rest of us had missed: "but those were run blitzes aimed at Arian Foster. If the Pats' ends went after Ryan instead of holding their lanes I don't think it ends as well for him. That offensive line looks shaky to me."

"Why would they run blitz?" questioned Hickenbottom. "Everyone knows Aurora is a passing team!"

"Not in these playoffs," replied Handfottner Jr. "Foster ran for almost 400 yards against the Corn Kings and Thunder Lizards. He gashed them good. The Patriots look more worried about Foster than Boldin."

After a nice kick return by **Knile Davis**, **Peyton Manning** came on to the field for his first real drive of the game. The question of how he would fare against the league's best defence was a major sub-plot of the ninth EFL Championship Game and the subject of much controversy behind the scenes. If you only watched ESPN or read **Peter Prince**, you would think all people worried about was how the Mustangs' defence would handle the sagacious Manning. But among those who studied the game for a living, the off-the-record commentary revolved around Manning's diminished physical capacity, which had been observable at times late in the season and as recently as two weeks ago in the second half of the Conference Final win over Iowa City.

"If I were Rich Liotta, I would blitz the living hell out of Manning starting right now," Hickenbottom declared with his usual know-it-all air.

"Oooh, that would probably be a mistake," **Mumbar Thakar** cautioned. "Peyton Manning performs well against the blitz. He reads it very well and he gets rid of the ball very quick. He does not on many occasions need time to throw because all of his passes are of the short or medium length. Oooh, no-no-no... I think they play very close coverage, would be better."

Hickenbottom looked down at Thakar as if studying an insect; his thick glasses made his eyes look unnaturally large and this had an intimidating effect on the diminutive analyst. "I meant to *hit* him, Mumbles," Hickenbottom barked. "You know – *football*! A few good hits is all they need to knock gramps off his game!"

"Oh yes, but of course, the hitting part! <*ho-ho-ho*>" Thakar laughed nervously. "That is good one! Yes! You are right!"

They should just hit the old grandfather and knock his teeth out! <ho-ho-ho-ho!> That is good one!”

The first drive was not much of a test of anybody’s pet theory. The Mustangs came with the blitz twice, first forcing a holding penalty on **Nate Solder** that wiped out a first down then pressuring Manning to throw a split second early and miss on 3rd and 12. The veteran had looked calm and was not hit on either rush. The Mustangs had looked disciplined and strong.

“Peyton Manning could have a good game and still get nowhere against that defence,” **Jean Boisvert** said.

“Brees was right *batty-fanged* by them!” voiced Sir Reginald.

Assuming that meant something bad for **Drew Brees**, I nodded in agreement and tried to steer the conversation back into the 21st century. “I am not expecting miracles from Manning, but my prognosis of a Charleswood victory includes him making a few plays before the day is done,” I pronounced. “That, and the Pats’ defence has to play the game of their lives.”

I must have been channeling my inner Nostradamus because on the very next series the Patriots’ defence came up big with a stuff of **Arian Foster** and a third down sack of Ryan by rookie defensive lineman, **Danny Shelton**, forcing a punt. It appeared as if the Patriots had been expecting a handoff to Foster, but Ryan had dropped back instead. Shelton had mauled center, **Kory Lichtensteiger** and had appeared in Ryan’s face before the Mustangs’ quarterback had had time to look up field. He had swallowed him whole for an 8-yard loss.

“Shelton sacks him!” Hickenbottom declared loudly.

“Yes, we *know*,” **James Duthie** replied with a hint of irritation in his voice.

“We call that a big stop,” **Mumbar Thakar** explained to me. He had lowered his voice, unsure whether Hickenbottom would take offence at his unsolicited commentary. “In PFFP rating it is worth double points.”

“Why double?” I asked.

“Because it was third down and the defence was ‘non-committed.’ That means they did not know if it was going to be a pass or a run. The defender made the play without help in a non-committed circumstance. That is a big stop! <ho-ho-ho!>” Mumbar chuckled at hidden humour that only he appreciated and looked up at me with a beaming smile.

The ‘Big Stop’ by the defence charged up the Patriots’ offence. They took over in great field position at their 49 and proceeded to mix in short passes with runs by Miller behind left tackle **Lane Johnson**. In no time they were at the 3-yard line. From there they punched it into the end zone thanks to a perfectly executed seal block by Johnson and a nifty cutback by Miller.



The Aurora Mustangs offensive line (from left to right) **James Carpenter**, **Trent Williams**, **Duane Brown**, **John Greco** and **Kory Lichtensteiger**, sit and wonder what the hell is going on. 8 sacks of **Matt Ryan**, 6 of them attributable to the offensive line, were certainly out of the ordinary; as was the appearance of the Cowled Figure in their midst for a brief period in the second half. As usual, the strange apparition disappeared without a trace.

“Jumpin’ Jehosaphat!” cried **Bucky “Papa Bear” McCready** of THE-IOWA radio. “The Mustangs looked like they darn well knew that run was comin’ and they still didn’t stop it!”

“Nice read by Miller there,” added **Harry Shultz** as a colleague of his nodded in agreement. Harry’s friend had not joined in the conversation to that point, keeping mostly to his seat at the far corner and staring at his I-Pad. But he had gravitated over to us when he had heard Hickenbottom loudly extol the virtues of the blitz. He was a funny-looking, prematurely-aged young man with a slouch, a receding hairline and a slightly hooked nose.

“That makes two touchdowns by Miller. That is his maximum according to these models,” the hooked-nosed man said in an aside to Shultz, while pointing at his I-Pad screen.

“What’s the projected score?” Schultz asked.

“Hold on...” he tapped the screen several times. “Aggregate score out of 10,000 is.....Mustangs 34, Patriots 20. No more touchdowns for the Patriots and a break out by the Mustangs in the third quarter 53% of the time and fourth quarter 28% of the time. There is a 17% chance we will see the shift in the second quarter and a 2% chance of a big play to even things up with what is left of the first quarter.”

“Hmmm, interesting,” Schultz mused.

I was curious. I shifted a little closer to Schultz and his balding friend. “What is that you’re running?”

Schultz was the first to speak. “We’re testing our live in-game modeller,” he replied. He turned to his slouched-shouldered colleague then back to me and explained: “This is Arpin, the stats analyst at Outriders. He is using a program modified from our macro analysis model to see if the principles hold up over a smaller data set. He plugs in the result of each play and interfaces that with all of the available historical data to arrive at a set of predictions that are, for lack of a better word, *fused* together to give the most likely outcome of the game at any given point. We started testing it during the playoffs and we have had good success.”

“Oh really? What’s your success rate?” I asked, still curious and wondering if it was still possible to lay a bet somewhere at this stage of the game.

“100% in terms of wins-losses, about half of that in terms of score differential,” Schultz replied. He turned to his colleague: “What is our rate of success in getting the differential, Arpin?”

“Exactly 50%, Harry,” he answered with a smile.

“Is that 50% within the spread?” I asked.

“No, 50% getting the actual score differential,” he answered, evidently quite impressed with his own work.

“And where were you off?” I asked, even more curious.

“We were on the button in three of the four quarter-final games, missing by 4 points on Twin Cities versus Charleswood,” Arpin jumped in; it was evidently his baby and he wanted people to know it. “We were slightly off on Charleswood over the Cubs, missing by 3 points in favour of the Cubs. We were way off on the Durham-Aurora game – we had that pegged at a field goal differential for Aurora going in; the projection held up through the first half and even after Foster’s big touchdown run in the third, but the game got out of control for Durham after that. It was shocking really. We are working to find out what we missed there.”

By that time I realized that I was talking to **Arpin Plunderflunder**, who had recently gained notoriety for his open speculation that there was a supernatural curse on the Blue Eagles.

“Do you think it was a supernatural curse on Durham, then?” I asked mischievously.

Plunderflunder raised his eyebrows and flashed a humourless smile, “I haven’t ruled that out,” he replied.

“Naturally,” I replied. “But you can’t rule it in either and never will.”

I presented the thought plagiarized from my nephew Byron so confidently that Plunderflunder took me for an analyst. He began discussing some of the intricacies of his predictive modelling formulas. He was talking way over my head, but for the sake of maybe picking up something of value that I could understand, I played along, nodding and ‘*hmm-hmmming*’ as he rambled on in Mathese.

After minutes of droning on, interrupted only by the entry of play data on his I-Pad, I finally heard words that I understood: “....do you agree?” he asked.

“Well, I can see your point, but are you sure that you have the algorithm right?” I answered, having no idea what I was talking about but thinking ‘*what would Byron say?*’ as I said it.

That answer launched another five minutes of one-way conversation during which I detected the words: “deviation,” “model,” “projection,” “influence,” “history,” “luck,” “percentage” and “average,” as ones I understood on their own. What they meant in relation to each other and to the other arcane words he was using, I had no idea. That did not stop me – 7 beers into the afternoon – from saying this: “Yes, that’s all well and good, but I don’t think you are on the right track. And in any case, I know the answer.”

His eyes bulged wide and his face turned flush. “You do? Seriously?”

“Yep,” I answered with a confident smile.

“Well, what is it, then?” he asked, clearly flustered and anxious.

“I am sorry, Arpin, but I can’t tell you, even out of professional courtesy. You see, I intend to break the story in a few weeks,” I

answered. "I can't give it away now – even to a colleague." I used the word 'colleague' even though we were not, strictly speaking, in the same field; he just thought that we were.

So caught up had he been in his own theories and his eagerness to talk about them that he had forgotten to ask my name. The prospect of a rival breaking a story on his work, however, forced the question.

"Who *are* you anyway?" he asked.

"Why, you don't know me?" I asked, feigning surprise and offence. "I'm Spats McChad, Arpin, and I know it all!" And with that, I tipped my glass to him and said, "cheers!"

My conversation with **Arpin Plunderflunder** had temporarily distracted me from the game. When I returned my full attention to the field it was half way into the second quarter and **Ken Huber** of Charleswood was setting up to punt from his goal line. The score was still 14-7 for the Patriots and it looked like the defences had taken over the game.

"The Pats' defence is hanging in there," **Jean Boisvert** answered when I asked him how the teams were looking. "Lavonte David stuffed Foster for 6-yard loss on third down. It was unbelievable – like he knew the play in advance. Mosley got another sack. They are really mauling that Aurora line. Ryan is starting to look frustrated."

"But Peyton can't get the offence rolling," broke in **Charlie Wood**, his own frustration as a fan showing. "They just went three and out. Receivers are covered, Mustangs' pressure forcing throws underneath. I don't know how long our defence can keep a lid on things."

The answer came swiftly: not very long. **Matt Ryan** opened the next series with a 29-yard completion to **Anquan Boldin** and that set in motion a classic Mustangs' passing drive that finished in the end zone with a check down to a wide open **Andre Holmes** from 5 yards out. The game was now tied, 14-14.

"Ryan-to-Holmes, TOUCHDOWN!" yelled **Michael S. Hickenbottom**, just in case nobody had seen it.

Charlie winced as his left ear caught the blast from the young Mission Viejo scribe. "Please *stop* that," he grimaced.

"Game on, everybody!" hooted **James Duthie** as he stood up in his seat. "That's Mustangs' football right there!"

"The Patriots are determined to keep Foster in check but that is opening up the passing game for Ryan," Handfottner Jr. remarked coolly. "And we know the Mustangs love to pass."

It was true. Aurora had thrown the ball over 600 times during the regular season. While running back Arian Foster had been highly effective in his role, the engine of the Mustangs' attack remained the combination of Ryan to Boldin. That order of attack had been reversed in the playoffs, with Aurora's opening round opponents focused on thwarting the air assault, thus creating room for Foster, who had taken over both of those games. But in their effort to avoid the same fate, the Patriots ran the risk of playing right into their opponent's hands.

After the extra point there was a lull in the mood. All of a sudden nobody had anything smart to say, so people took advantage of the exceedingly long commercial break to refresh their drinks or run to the washroom. I took time to look around. I could see part of the Grand Tier around to our right and I noticed some of the members of the EFL Committee, in their dark overcoats and fedoras, standing in conversation with California Senator, **Patricia Bates** and other local luminaries. There was no sign of His Gloriousness, but that did not mean he wasn't nearby, basking in the glory of the opulence he had placed on display for the entire football world – much of it bought and paid for by the taxpayers of Mission Viejo and virtual serfs from the Portuguese-American community in rural California.

I scanned our box. Gabby was sitting by herself, her green and red 'Fool' stocking cap with the yellow felt stars was set back on her head. She was texting on her phone and looking unusually pensive. Introspection of any kind was not in her DNA so something must have been bothering her. I went and sat down next to her.

"Hey, what have you got say, Gabs?" I asked, using my extra-chummy nickname for her.

"I'm *booorr-eedd*, Spats," she sighed. "There's nobody to talk to here! All anybody wants to talk about is football, football, football!"

I stared at her. As a friend I felt obliged to say or do something to cheer her up. But what does one say to that? Pointing out that football might be the predominant topic of conversation in a room full of football writers at a professional football championship game would only make her feel stupid. And I knew from past experience that there was no point in encouraging her to partake of the football conversation on the basis that she, herself, was the main beat reporter for the LA Knights. I had been down this road with her before.

"Why don't you crash the Grand Tier?" I suggested. "Kina Grannis is there and they say Ellie Goulding and her entourage will be there after the half time show. Who knows who else that Mad Monarch has invited."

Her eyes lit up. "But Spats, won't I get in trouble?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it," I replied. "You have that way about you, Gabby. You could probably walk right in and nobody would say a thing."

She looked excited. "Will you come with me?" she asked.

I figured that my luck had run out in Mission Viejo. Plus I was more interested in what was being talked about in the Lords Balcony. These were *my* people, sad to say, and the Championship Game was our annual pilgrimage. Much as most of them irritated

me, it was important for us to share our thoughts on this experience.

"I'd love to, Gabby, but I'm afraid I would hold you back," I lied. "As much as you have 'that way' about you, *I* do not. I would probably get stopped and ruin it for you. I'll tell you what: text me if you get in. If you don't, come back and we'll take a tour of the other media boxes."

"That's a great idea, Spats!" she said excitedly. "I *do* have 'that way' about me, don't I? It's time for me to use it."

Gabby rose from her chair and made as quickly for the Lords exit as her dignity would allow. She looked cute in her 'Fool' wardrobe and I had no doubt she could charm her way through the gauntlet of purple-clad peasants with the Tasers that acted as security on the club level.

Manning went to work answering the Aurora touchdown. The Patriots deployed three wide receivers and turned to the air game. Manning attempted 9 consecutive passes, completing 5 of them for a total of 47 yards. The longest pass traveled 9 yards through the air and was carried an extra 3 by **Andre Johnson** for a first down. His nicest pass was a third down strike to **Dez Bryant** for 10 yards and a first down. There was nothing impressive about it apart from the slow and steady progress he was making against the Mustangs' nickel package.

"He's going to bore everyone to death playing like that but it could win him the game if he can keep it up," **Harry Schultz** of Outriders broke the quiet pensiveness of the room.

"He is getting time to throw," observed **Severin Handfottner Jr.** "The Mustangs are sitting in coverage, letting JJ do all the work up front and he is hitting a brick wall in the center of the line. Manning can still be accurate, even if he's not testing his receivers' hands with high velocity."

JJ Watt was a name that had not been called very much to that point. When it had been, it had been to point out that his name hadn't been called very much. Left guard **Kelechi Osemele** had drawn the Watt assignment and had been holding his own, with occasional help from the center, **Corey Linsely**. It was a critical edge for the Pats in the invisible war going on in the trenches.

The drive ended at the Mustangs' 13 yard line. On 3rd and 2, Miller was stoned for no gain by **JJ Watt**, who rose to the occasion as if he had just heard us speaking about him in the booth. **Ryan Succop** came on and gave the lead back to Charleswood with a 31-yard field goal.

It was now 17-14 with one minute left in the first half. The score would stay that way going into halftime, but not before a bizarre last shot by the Mustangs' offence. Starting at their 10 they appeared content to run out the clock with three straight carries by Foster. But they abruptly called a timeout with 21 seconds left and the ball at their 23 yard line. Switching to a 4-wide set they stretched the field. But the play took too long to develop and Ryan did not see corner **Jerraud Powers** coming on the blitz. Ryan took a nasty hit from the blind side, almost losing the ball, and fell backwards for a 15-yard loss. It could have been another turnover but fortune had smiled on Aurora.

"Weird," said **Jean Boisvert**, shaking his head. "What was that about?"

Nobody had a ready answer – even the coaching expert Handfottner Jr.

"Damfino!" Sir Reginald declared.

Nobody understood exactly what that word meant, but it sounded as if the *Durham Diggatell & Pick* correspondent was as confused as the rest of us. It was a strange possum-like gambit to end what had been a hard fought and generally well-executed first half of football. The Charleswood faithful had reason to feel upbeat after 30 minutes – until **Michael S. Hickenbottom** pointed out that that had been the score in favour of Carthage at half time last year.

"The Mustangs have not played their best football yet," declared Hickenbottom, going out on a limb with a prediction.

"I agree," agreed **James Duthie**. "Rich Liotta makes the best half time adjustments in football, in my opinion. It's not talked about enough."

That prompted a heated half time debate about coaching that had almost everybody detesting **Severin Handfottner Jr** by the end of it. The coaching expert had an opinion and a counter opinion about every coach, in the game and out of it, and seemed to get perverse pleasure out of blowing up everyone's pet theories. About the only thing everyone agreed on was that **Jack Buffolano** of the Meadowlands Swamp Dogs had been the worst coach and GM the league had ever seen.

While we were arguing amongst ourselves the rest of the crowd enjoyed an energetic half time show fronted by British pop star **Ellie Goulding**. She had been selected to perform over California native mega stars, **Katie Perry**, **Bruno Mars** and Pennsylvania-born **Taylor Swift** due to King Ferraro's obsession with her. Posters of Goulding were second in number only to pictures of **Chris Ferraro** in Ferraroland.

She opened with an extremely powerful rendition of a lesser known and darker hued hit, 'Figure 8' then slid seamlessly into a full version of 'Lights' before shifting down tempo into 'Love Me Like You Do.' After a short monologue in which she shouted out to "King Ferraro" in thanks for being "the best Championship host ever," she sang 'On My Mind,' looking up to the Grand Tier the whole time then wrapped up her five-song set with a upbeat and heavy guitar version of 'Burn' that climaxed with a blast of purple, red and gold fireworks.

"What are the chances of Mad King Chris asking Ellie to be his queen when all this is over?" **Charlie Wood** asked of nobody in particular as the smoke cleared the field.

“100%, and I don’t need my I-Pad to figure that out,” quipped **Arpin Plunderfunder** in an uncharacteristic attempt at humour. He was on his second beer and it was hitting him hard.

While attention focused on the stage at mid-field, many of the media figures began to mingle outside of their assigned seating “zones,” moving with apparent freedom from balcony to balcony. That is how **Lanny McDonald** of the *Markham Economist & Sun* and **Mike Myers** of *The Scarberian* ended up stumbling into the Lords Balcony and, upon seeing me drinking beer with **Charlie Wood** and **James Duthie**, made their way over for more free drinks.

“Hereyouare Spats....we’vebeenlookinallovafoya!” a glassy-eyed McDonald slurred as he knocked over a glass of beer then head-butted a glass out of Duthie’s hand as he bent over to pick it up.

“Gentlemen! And I use that term loosely,” beamed a flushed Myers. “How about I buy you a beer? Oh! It’s *free*, you say? Well, let me get it for you then.”

The tenor of all conversations from here on in was about to take a drastic downturn with these two clowns taking up air time. Don’t get me wrong, I love those guys, but they are complete idiots when they drink.

The second half finally got under way. It had been the longest intermission in the history of the Championship and it was difficult to imagine any type of momentum, good or bad, carrying over into the second half. It felt like a brand new game – but one where the Mustangs had spotted the Patriots 3 points.

The Patriots received the kickoff and started at their 10 yard line. They passed for a first down before having to punt from their 27, giving Aurora decent field position at their 34 yard line. The second half adjustments by Coach Liotta seemed to consist of targeting **Heath Miller** in the passing game. The result – a three-and-out on the Mustangs’ first possession – called Duthie’s half time boast into question.

“So *that’s* the answer to the Mustangs’ problems, James? *Heath Miller?*” teased Hickenbottom.

The TSN sportscaster and *Auroran* beat writer did not look amused. He had been cranky for most of the game anyway and the lacklustre start by his team’s offence had done nothing to improve his mood. He rolled his eyes, tossed a throwaway, “still plenty of game left” at Hickenbottom and took another swig of beer.

It felt like the game was about to turn into a defensive slog. The Patriots’ defence continued to be quick off the ball and fast in pursuit and that was upsetting the rhythm of the Aurora offence. The offence, by contrast, appeared to be moving at a pre-season pace as the disciplined and seasoned Mustangs defenders kept them contained.

And then.....it happened....

Out of the blue, running back **Lamar Miller** turned what had looked initially like a 2-yard loss into a 67-yard touchdown run, evading four Mustangs tackles, gaining the open field and speeding his way to one of the biggest post-season plays in Patriots history.

The Royal Coliseum shook with the roar of Patriots fans, almost completely drowning out a “Touchdown, Lamar Miller!” bellow from **Michael S. Hickenbottom**.

Charlie Wood leaped out of his seat and yelped inanely with joy while an incredulous **James Duthie** raised his arms and screamed, “Where’s the holding call??”

Harry Schultz turned to look at **Arpin Plunderfunder**, who was furiously punching away at his I-Pad. He faced Schultz with a look of confusion on his face and shrugged his shoulders. Miller was not supposed to get 3 touchdowns. Charleswood was not supposed to score that many points.

“The Mustangs looked like they had that play bottled up and Miller just....I don’t know...he just got out of the way and ran like a bandit!” **Jean Boisvert** remarked in amazement. “That’s one of the greatest runs I’ve ever seen! Let’s watch the replay.”

“WhahappenSpats?” garbled **Lanny McDonald**. The roar of the crowd had woken him out of his standing stupor.

“I think that calls for another drink!” **Mike Myers** shouted. “Who will join me?”

It was now 24-14, Patriots. If there ever was a general sense that they might actually pull off an upset over the mighty Mustangs it had begun to settle in in the afterglow of that run.

“We call that a ‘big play’ and it is worth double points,” **Mumbar Thakar** announced from somewhere below and to my left. I looked down at him, big smile on his face and a beer in his hand. “Miller made a play that he should not have made. He made it against a good defence that was ready to stop him but he broke free. <Ho-ho-ho> that is a big play!”

“And that, Mumbar my friend might be the biggest understatement of the day,” I replied.

The entire media level, from the Grand Tier all the way to Balcony ‘F,’ was gradually devolving into a jumble. There did not seem to be enough security people willing or capable of preventing the King’s media “guests” from leaving their assigned areas and visiting friends and colleagues in other areas. The food and drink had been flowing freely – all complimentary – and almost nobody had to drive home afterwards, with all of the hotels within walking distance or a short carriage ride away. Most journalists who were inclined to imbibe had done so to the point of near or total intoxication.

In this atmosphere the largely unexpected outcomes on the field were creating a dream-like state in our collective consciousness – or more like a nightmare state if you happened to be a devoted Mustangs fan. With over nine minutes remaining in the third quarter it was far too early to rule out an Aurora comeback; 10 points was not insurmountable deficit for any Mustangs team

that had taken the field under **Rich Liotta**. But there may have been an element of panic setting in for the team and its fans after its world class defence had given up such a big score.

Signs of discombobulation were in evidence on the Mustangs' next drive. A badly missed block by Foster allowed **CJ Mosley** to break through for his third sack of the game then a corner blitz by **Aqib Talib** was completely ignored, turning **Matt Ryan** into a sitting duck for another 10-yard loss. It was the seventh sack of Ryan so far.

"I thought you were grand-standing when you predicted a Patriots upset, Spats, but now I am beginning to think it might actually happen," a perplexed-looking **Sparky McGillicuddy** commented as he raised a cup of tea to his lips. Sparky was one of the few still sober journalists left in Lords. He and **Lazor Ponk** of *Scouts Ltd.*, another teetotaler, had just emerged from a long discussion that had begun during half time. "I was talking at length with Lazor and we agree that the Aurora offence looks, for lack of a better term: 'spooked.'"

It was a good term. The Mustangs were certainly haunted by the Patriots' blitz, which had been vicious and unrelenting. It was starting to take its toll, even when it wasn't getting through, in the form of general hesitation and un-crisp execution by the Mustangs' line. This came into evidence in dramatic fashion at the end of the next Aurora possession, when a 1st and goal at the Charleswood 6-yard line turned into a 3rd & goal at the 21 due to a pair of false starts and a holding penalty. With 7 defensive backs defending the goal line on third-and-long, Ryan went underneath to Boldin for 9 yards and the Mustangs settled for a field goal to make it a "one-score" game, 24-17.

Although it was an important 3 points for the Mustangs, the failure to punch it in to the end zone from the 6 yard line had the feel of a win for the Patriots. This was evidenced by the reaction of their most partisan fans.

"That could have been much worse," sighed **Charlie Wood**, a smile of relief on his face.

"Dumb a\$\$ penalties," **James Duthie** announced with *Hickenbottom-like* obviousness, frustration showing on his face. "They missed a golden opportunity there!"

"They have nobody to blame but themselves," drawled a familiar but unexpected voice.

I turned to see **Johnny Rebb** of the *The State* standing next to me. He was flanked by **Randy the Desert Rat** of the *Mohave Torch* and **Lars Odegard** of the *Valhalla Press*. All three had been relegated to Balcony C, but now they were here in the Lords. "Hey



Charleswood owner and GM, **Jason Findlay** is doused by Gatorade as time ticks away in the fourth quarter with his Mustangs leading Aurora by 10 points. It was the second Championship win in three years for Findlay's Patriots and the sweeter of the two because he actually planned it.

guys!” I said. “I thought you were in the cheap seats. Whose butt did you kiss to get in here?”

“Nobody’s – we just walked in,” Randy answered.

“All the Security have all been called down to field level for a disturbance,” Johnny added.

“They say there was a sighting of the mysterious man in the black cowl,” Lars broke in. “The Big Foot Hunters are storming the field. You didn’t know?”

“When did this happen? Where was it seen?” I asked, bewildered that nobody in the Lords had noticed, or at least heard something.

“They say it was seen behind the Aurora bench sometime in the third quarter,” Johnny answered.

“Who are *‘they’*?” I asked.

“Titter,” Randy cut in. “It’s all over Titter. #cowledfiguremissionviejo is trending.”

The cowled figure had appeared very briefly on the network broadcast as the camera panned the Aurora bench after the Miller touchdown run. A vine of the clip was circulating. The figure was small enough and its appearance brief enough that most viewers had missed it. But with millions of TV viewers worldwide, enough people had seen it that alarm bells had rung on social media. The network was not running replays, which added fuel to the fire of conspiracy theorists who believed there was a massive cover-up going on regarding the EFL’s biggest mystery.

“It’s the Greys!” declared **Randy the Desert Rat** with certainty. “The government is forcing the EFL to help them suppress the alien connection. Earth is an alien battleground and the government knows it. The fighting must be getting pretty heavy for them to get involved in football.”

“With all due respect, Randy....you’re nuts!” **Mike Myers** joked. “Have a beer, brother!”

Randy took the beer and fixed a withering glare on the writer for *The Scarberian*. “With all...due...respect...Austin Powers, you don’t know what you’re talking about! I’ve seen these Greys with my own eyes!”

That set off a drunken debate about the secret of the mysterious cowled figure that ended up branching off into several cacophonous sub-debates about loosely related topics, such as Randy’s sanity, Myers’ drinking problem and the cruddy coaching of the Blue Eagles.

Meanwhile, the game on the field continued. Mustangs’ supporters were buoyed by a third down sack of Manning by veteran **Trent Cole** that pushed the Pats back onto their side of mid-field. With **Kevin Huber** in to punt and over 8 minutes remaining in the game, there was plenty of time left for the Aurora offence to tie the game and, if their defence continued to clamp a vice on the Patriots offence, eventually grab the lead.

“Okay, here we go! We’re coming back!” **James Duthie** grinned as he rubbed his hands together then took a swig of a fresh beer that had just been set down in front of him by a sultry ‘serving wench’ (their name for themselves, not mine).

His hopeful prediction did not come to pass, however. The Mustangs started at their 4 yard line and promptly went three-and-out, with **Desmond Trufant** getting in front of **Anquan Boldin** to knock down a pass on third down. They had gained just 3 yards. The only thing worse would have been a turnover.

“The Pats just look faster today,” **Jean Boisvert** remarked. He had stuck to watching the game while most of our colleagues were devouring the free snacks and clowning around with talk of the cowled figures and alien conspiracies. “Even when they look out of position they recover quickly. They really want this one!”

The Patriots had given the Mustangs bulletin board material when **LaVonte David** bragged that the Patriots defence was as just as good as the Mustangs’ and that **Matt Ryan** had not seen the likes of them yet this year. Few had agreed with him and most wrote off the boast as hot air from a player still sore at losing the Championship to these Mustangs last year when he was a member of the Cannibals. But halfway through the final quarter of this year’s Championship his words were starting to look prophetic.

The Patriots took over at their 49-yard line with a chance to drive home the knife. A younger **Peyton Manning** would have won the confidence of our room, but this older version prompted plenty of doubt.

“If Peyton sticks to the short stuff here they might as well punt it now,” **Michael S. Hickenbottom** declared to the room.

Not many heard him. But **Severin Handfottner Jr.**, perhaps trying to get back in the general good graces of the others, decided to be agreeable for once. “I agree with you,” he said to Hickenbottom. “Not a single pass over 5 yards down field on the last drive – the Mustangs will stuff that in a hurry.”

Sure enough, the Mustangs started playing a short zone and it paid off in limiting **Lamar Miller** to 2 yards on 2 carries. They stayed short and blitzed on 3rd & 8. They appeared to have the Patriots receivers shadowed, but the offensive line picked up the blitz nicely. With plenty of time, Manning checked down to Miller in the flat and the star of the show made a nice move to find room for a 9-yard gain and an important first down.

Now at the 40 of the Mustangs, with a new set of downs, handing off to Miller looked like the safe and sensible choice. Aurora obviously thought so, because they loaded up to stop the run. But Manning crossed them up without the benefit of a single ‘Omaha.’ He threw a quick slant on target to **Dez Bryant**. The receiver stud snared the pass and jetted diagonally across the face of the zone until he reached the sideline then cut back toward center. He was finally hauled down by **Brandon Boykin** at the 19 yard line after a 21-yard gain. It was the longest pass of the day for the Pats and it came at the right time.

“YESSSSSS!” **Charlie Wood** pumped his fist as he sprung to his feet and swiveled his head around. “Did you see that, people!” It wasn’t a question; it was a statement. “Now let’s not f&^k this up!” he yelled and sat back in his seat.

The Mustangs defence played with a renewed sense of urgency. On a day when the Charleswood defence was playing like they usually played, they knew it was critical to avoid falling behind by two scores. They needed a turnover but, failing that, they needed to hold the Patriots to no more than a field goal. A touchdown and it was over.

This time the Pats handed off to Miller on first down and he was swiftly stoned for no gain by **Trent Cole**. Manning looked to throw to Miller on second down, but the Mustangs had sniffed it out and put two men on him. **Jelani Jenkins** nailed Miller as the pass arrived and knocked it out for an incompletion. Facing 3rd and 10, the Pats played it safe with a draw to Miller that put them 4 yards closer to the uprights. **Ryan Succop** then calmly booted a 33-yard field goal to put the Patriots up 27-17.

James Duthie said nothing but inhaled deeply and leaned back with his head up in exasperation. **Charlie Wood** managed to restrain himself with a quick little fist pump while hissing “Yessss” under his breath. With 2:38 remaining, the end was in sight and for the Charleswood faithful, it was about to be a happy ending.

“That was what we call a ‘big kick,’” **Mumbar Thakar** noted. He had slid over in my general direction when I had decided to ditch the crazy talk in the lounge and focus on the game. “It was not a very long kick, nor was it a short kick. It required skill and was very important. So it was a ‘big kick.’”

“Let me guess, it’s worth double points,” I said, trying to be sociable, not sarcastic, but at the same time being fairly drunk, tired and quite capable of saying the wrong thing in the wrong way.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho, yes! Quite! Yes! Oh-oh-ho-ho-ha!” he laughed like a Frenchman at a Jerry Lewis movie. “But, no, actually, not double points – one and a half points. It would be double points if it had tied or won the game from more than 40 yards from the goal posts,” he clarified.

As I thought of ways to extricate myself from another impromptu lesson in qualitative football analysis, I was distracted by the unexpected yelling of my name by a familiar female voice. I turned to my left and saw Gabby prancing in my direction, her tasseled fool’s cap bobbing with each step. It was her version of running.

“Spats! Spats!” she cried. “I have great news!”

When she got within 15 feet of me she stopped running and glided up to my side with the art of a precision ballroom dancer. She caught her breath and her news came spilling out.

“I met a Marquis who wants to fund my line of ‘Fool’ clothing,” she said excitedly.

“Really?” I replied, doubtful of her claim. The only Marquis I knew was the **Marquis de Sade** of the *Virden Eviscerator* and he was probably more interested in torturing Gabby than financing her line of clothing.

“Yes, it’s true. A real Marquis!” she beamed. “He’s coming to meet you. I hope you don’t mind. I thought since you started it all by wearing that silly costume you should meet the person who is going to make us rich. He should be right behind me!”

She turned back toward the entrance to the Lords Balcony and her eyes brightened. “There he is!” she said. “Oh Rui! Rui!

Over here!” she waved.

I looked in the direction she was waving but could not see him. *Rui*? I thought. I felt overcome by a sudden chill. *Rui*? Before I could make the connection in my memory the answer emerged in the flesh from the cluster of journalists, stats analysts, mathematicians and bookies crowding around the buffet and bar. ‘Rui’ was wearing a scarlet red tuxedo with a frilly white cravat and a powdered white wig. Rui was the **Red Pimple**!

I had one second to absorb the shock before he too recognized me. He came to an abrupt stop and his eyes widened with a broad mixture of surprise, bewilderment, curiosity and fury – roughly in that order. “**Spats McChad!**” he rasped malevolently. “**We meet-ah again-ah!**”

He had that homicidal look in his eyes that I knew all too well. But I was dressed in a jester suit – albeit a toned down ‘Fool’ version of one – and that should have stayed his anger. Then it dawned on me that I was not wearing my hat; it was on my chair in the viewing box. *So, it was the hat all along!* I thought.



Aurora running back **Arian Foster** tears up during a post-game interview. The Mustangs’ MVP over the first two playoff games was held in check by the Patriots in the Final. He still finished with a solid 51 yards rushing and 71 yards receiving.

Gabby looked totally confused. “So, Rui...Spats...you know each other?” she asked apprehensively. She could sense something was wrong; that maybe we weren’t best friends from school or the like.

The Pimple checked his anger and forced a smile as he turned to address Gabby. “Yes-ah my dear,” he cooed. “You might-ah say-ah we know each other through...ah.....ah...”

“...our mutual friend, His Highness,” I jumped in, realizing the Pimple was having trouble dissembling. He clearly did not want to upset Gabby or be accused in public of attempted murder, but his instinctive impulse to kill me was interfering with his imaginative faculties.

“Yes-ah, His Highness, our very good-ah mutual friend-ah.....,” agreed the Pimple. He then looked back at me as if inviting me to continue, but Gabby broke in.

“Are you talking about King



His Imperiousness enjoys the spotlight next to members of the EFL Committee as they wave to the crowd during the Gale Sayers Trophy award ceremony. His Monarchs finished 5-11, but **Chris Ferraro** finished a champ by hosting the EFL’s most ostentatious spectacle to date.

Ferraro?” she asked. “King Chris Ferraro? But you’ve always told me that you think he’s a knob, Spats, that he just *thinks* he’s a King.” She blurted out in her guileless way.

The Pimple and I both winced at that, but for entirely different reasons. I acted quickly to move the conversation in a more survivable direction. “Oh, I was just kidding about that, Gabby,” I lied. “You take me too seriously at times. Rui and I both have, let’s say, a unique and special relationship with His Highness that causes us to come into contact with each on a semi-regular basis. But enough about His Highness – may he live forever – what is this about a business proposal?”

Gabby hesitated. She knew something was wrong. But after a few seconds of fruitless contemplation on what it might be, her power-hostess side took control. She papered over our conflict with a glut of information about her encounter with the **Red Pimple** in the Grand Tier.

Among all of her asides – describing the decor of the Grand Tier, the celebrities who were present and what they were wearing – I was able to piece together that my nemesis had been struck by Gabby’s ‘foolish’ clothing and drawn to her beauty (Gabby is, after all, an attractive woman who appears younger than her age). He had bamboozled her with a fancy title – the *Marquis de Granariz* – and had seduced her with flattery and a claim of great wealth. As for the bulbous blight that festooned the end of his nose – he had explained that was the product of centuries of marrying cousins and proof of his noble pedigree. He had been quick to point out, however, that the *Granarizes* were no longer marrying their cousins, causing the size of the family noses to shrink over the past century.

There is something about royalty that still fascinates and captivates the chattering classes of America despite our Republican political traditions. Gabby was one of the chattering classes, albeit one I admired for stepping outside of her comfort zone to write (not often successfully) about football. She had been obviously flattered by the attention and captivated by the prospect of a wealthy European Noble financing her line of clothing. (She had already decided to change the name from ‘Fool’ to ‘Royal Fool.’) So as she recounted the story of their meeting she occasionally cast the **Red Pimple** a coquettish grin or batted her eyes flirtatiously. He responded in kind, as best he could for a murderous maniac, and I noticed that his nose seemed to swell in size and throb with greater intensity with each playful exchange.

Then something very strange happened. I stopped hearing Gabby’s words. I could hear her voice, but I no longer understood what she was saying. The sound of guests conversing and the cheering of Patriots fans in the stands blended together in one amorphous, keening din. The Red Pimple’s head appeared to grow. At its center, the bloated ball at the end of his nose ballooned until I could no longer see his face, except for his eyes; bloodshot and aflame with mockery, they burned into me. I could hear his foppish giggle. Was he laughing at me, or was it just a memory of how he had when I was prisoner in his Ferraroland smart car? Or

after he had popped his caustic pustule onto my flesh and imprisoned me in a toy dungeon? I felt a geyser of fury building up inside of me.

And then I snapped....

Depending on who you ask, I bellowed either “*Die Motherfucker,*” “*Go to Hell Bastard,*” “*Fuck you big Nose,*” “*Keep your hands off her,*” or some running combination of all of the above, as I launched myself at the **Red Pimple** and cold-cocked him square in the nose. My memory of it is a messy collage of images, feelings, thoughts, sounds, smells, not necessarily in a correct or coherent order. I was, by all accounts (and to the best of my recollection) out of my mind with primal rage.

The Red Pimple’s nose exploded as he tumbled to the floor with Yours Truly on top of him, fists flailing. Gabby screamed. Corrosive, rancid discharge from his broken knob sprayed me and the few unfortunate bystanders who had not already backed away. I felt myself being lifted up and saw the **Red Pimple** lying dazed and bloodied on the floor. I felt hands, arms and legs locking me down. For a moment I couldn’t move. I heard the voice of **Randy the Desert Rat** in my right ear. I couldn’t understand what he was saying but the tone was insistent. I heard **Jean Boisvert** in my left ear call my name. My chest was heaving, my ears were pounding and I felt the blood rising in my temples.

I remember seeing the **Red Pimple** rise to his feet, blood and pus flowing from the center of his face. His glazed eyes shifted back into focus then fixed on me. In a flash he drew a long knife from under his jacket and advanced toward me, hissing something menacing. I felt the arms around me loosen and suddenly I was free. The **Red Pimple** lunged forward and I recall hurling myself onto the floor at the last instant and knocking his feet out from under him. He toppled like a bowling pin.

I heard another scream and people yelling. I felt hands and arms on me. Suddenly I couldn’t breathe. I felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest. I heard many voices. Someone was calling my name. Somebody definitely farted. And then it all went to black.....

FAREWELL TO FERRAROLAND

“Please take this as a token of my appreciation for all you have done, Spats,” **Chris Ferraro** said as he handed me a ‘Special Edition’ bottle of *Flagman’s Colheita Port*, in memory of our conversation on the terrace of ‘Castle Ferraro.’ “And please accept this as a wholly inadequate token of apology for putting you through, let us say, *difficulties* during your stay here at Ferraroland,” he added, handing me an envelope.

I hoped it was money, but it was a lifetime pass for two to Ferraroland Inc. and all of its subsidiaries; of which there were none at present.

We were standing out front of ‘Castle Ferraro.’ My carriage was waiting on the street to take me to my cab at the entrance to Ferraroland. The would-be King was dressed in a blue business suit; he had real work to do today. The time for playing King had passed with the final departure of the last members of the Media and EFL officials.

“And for you, Randy,” Ferraro turned to the Desert Rat, “I present you with ‘The Golden F,’ the highest honour of Ferraroland, for your bravery in the face of grave danger.”

Ferraro handed him a black case lined in purple velvet with an ornate gold **F** laid out in the center.

Randy took the gift and examined it with his good right eye – his left eye was still patched with gauze where he had been wounded. The prognosis for recovery was good, but the infection remained inflamed and sore. “Is it real gold?” he asked.

Ferraro smiled. I rolled my eyes. “Yes, Randy, it’s real gold.”

The Desert Rat smiled and I imagined that the next time I would see the golden **F** would likely be on an episode of *Pawn Stars*. I had learned last week at the ‘**FIGHTING COCK CASINO**’ that Randy was as weak as **Aristedes Kalogiannis** when confronted with a full service casino, but he was a much better craps player.

“You were indeed a true hero, Randy,” praised Gabby then quickly turned back to me and said: “and you too, of course, Spats, darling.”

“I never thought I’d hear those words coming from you in reference to me, *Your Majesty*,” I said, shading the word ‘majesty’ with a touch of irony. “But it has been the kind of week where nothing would surprise me anymore.”

“And I never thought I would say them either, never mind *mean* them sincerely,” chuckled Ferraro. “The conflict between you and the Red Pimple actually brought about some good in the end.”

The Man-Who-Would-Be-King was referring to the strange outcomes that resulted following my assault on the **Red Pimple** in the final minutes of the Championship Game. Gathering together my episodic memory of the event and comparing it with the accounts of witnesses found in the police report, I had pieced together an accurate description of what had happened.

I had gone berserk without warning. The adrenaline from my fury had endowed me with incredible strength and, as a result, I had shattered the Red Pimple’s nasal bone and broken my hand in the process. I fell upon him before he could recover and, if not for the intervention of Randy and **Jean Boisvert**, I might have killed him with my bare hands. It had taken those two and three others to hold me down while others tended to the **Red Pimple**. But my nemesis recovered quickly, shook off the good Samaritans who had started first aid, and came at me with a long dagger he had unsheathed from under the back of his waistcoat.

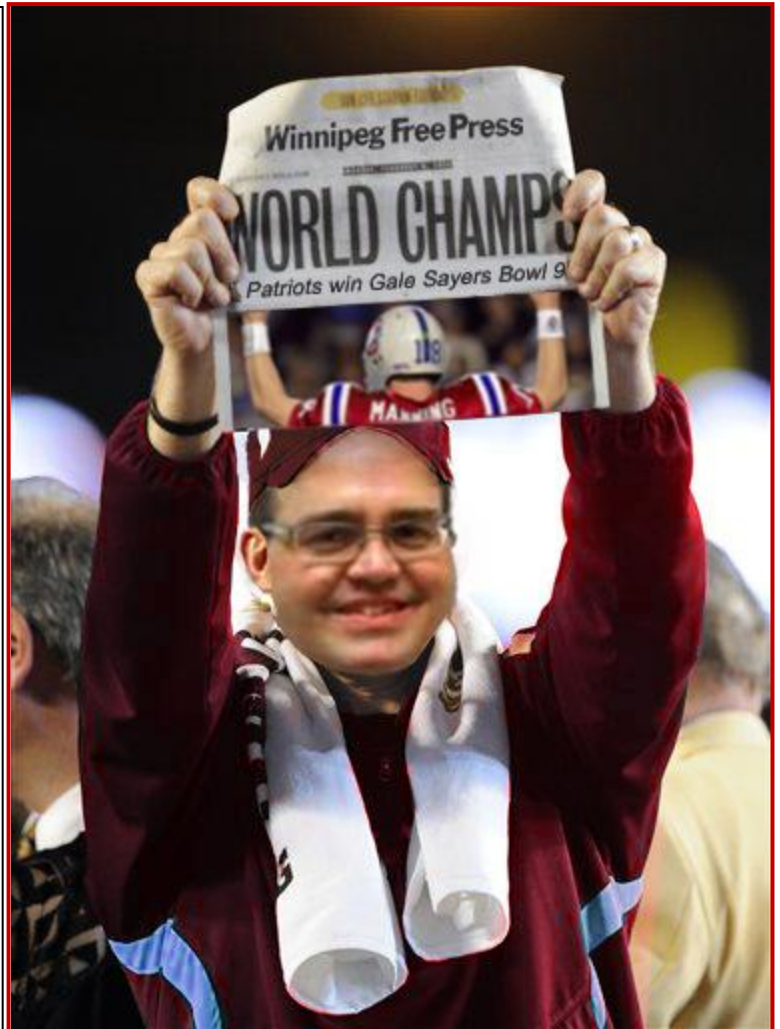
They had let me go to flee, but instead of fleeing, I had foolishly hurled myself at him, “like a special teams gunner,” according to Jean’s statement to the police. I had tackled him but while doing so he had grazed my back and shoulder with his blade.

I was in a vulnerable position and, according to witnesses, about to be “skewered like a souvlaki” when Randy spun around “like a discus thrower” with a stool in hand and clobbered the Pimple with all of his might. The force of the stool blow knocked the dagger back in his face, accidentally lopping off the fleshy bulb at the end of his fractured proboscis. The severing of the massive abscess had caused another geyser of pus to shoot out, striking Randy and blinding him in the left eye.

By that time security guards had arrived. One of the larger ones sat on me, causing me to temporarily lose consciousness. The **Red Pimple** was disarmed and secured. We were both transported to Mission Hospital for treatment and there we were interviewed by astonished detectives, who didn’t believe a word of what had happened to me prior to game day and hardly were able to believe what had transpired that day in front of dozens of witnesses.

While the **Red Pimple** and I recovered from our injuries and the Orange County Sheriffs debated what charges to lay, a frantic **Chris Ferraro**, concerned about his image and reputation, worked behind the scenes to make the whole incident officially go away. In this he was greatly aided by a dramatic turn in the condition of the **Red Pimple**, who was well on the road to recovering from his physical injuries and was exhibiting a completely different mental outlook in his convalescence.

It turns out that the root of the Red Pimple’s evil lay in that festering furuncle on the end of his nose. With each generation it had grown in size and virulence, leading to the belief that it was a “family curse” laid on by the Bada Brotherhood that would only be lifted once the “family mission” was complete. Occasional attempts by different



Patriots owner and GM, **Jason Findlay** lifts up an advance copy of the Winnipeg Free Press. The largest circulating Manitoba daily had their front page mocked up before the game in anticipation of a Pats upset.

generations of Granarizes to remove it had resulted in grave sickness and sometimes even death. The reasons for this were not well understood, but the despair of having an incurable carbuncle linked to a mission impossible was enough to drive any family crazy.

In this case, however, the recovery of Rui XVI from the involuntary surgery of his own dagger was fast and near miraculous. With the assistance of top-of-the-line plastic surgery at Mission Hospital, the “new” Rui looked almost normal. At first I did not recognize him when he came to my hotel to apologize for trying to kill me.

Yes, the Red Pim – ah, *Rui*, please – had actually sought me out for a reason other than homicide. He had come to seek forgiveness and to vow never again to use violent means to install a Ferraro on the Throne of Portugal. Seeing immediately that he was a changed man, I had accepted his apology and offered my own, somewhat half-hearted apology, for trying to kill him, too; which brings me to another, more personal, topic.

While lying in my hospital bed trying to piece together what had happened on game day I became introspective. What had caused my fear of the **Red Pimple** to suddenly turn into a homicidal rage? It was the first time in my life I had assaulted anybody with murder in my heart and it scared the hell out of me. I made up all sorts of reasons – I’m clever like that – like too much beer, not enough sleep, stress, the constant fight-or-flight option the Pimple was forcing on me finally coming up “fight,” extended jet lag.....etc. None of them rang true in my heart.

Then Gabby came to pick me up as I was being discharged from the hospital and it hit me like a ton of bricks. It was Gabby! It was the attention he had paid to her and that she had paid back to him that had driven me over the edge. My mortal enemy was flirting with my...with my....with my....*girl!*

Once I had allowed myself to admit that, at some level of deepness yet to be determined, I had feelings for Gabby, the reasons for my temporary madness became crystal clear and very scary because – except for myself – I had never had strong feelings of affection for anyone before. At least, not since I snuck a pack of Chiclets into Kim Fry’s home room desk in Grade 6 as a gift because I had a crush on her but was too scared to talk to her.

There had been a change in the way Gabby looked at me when I had looked at her in the dawning moment. For the first time

since I'd known her neither of us said anything upon first meeting, not even something vacuous or shallow to break the ice. We just stared at each other for about 10 seconds that felt much longer.

Finally, she had stepped forward and given me a hug. "Spats, I am so glad you are alright!" she had said.

"Well, you two enjoy yourselves at Universal Studios," Ferraro ordered with mock authority as he addressed Gabby and me. Our carriage was rolling up and I grabbed our bags.

I had decided to remain on the west coast for an extra week to hang out with Gabby and meet her LA designer friend, the one who had made the prototypes for the 'Fool' clothing line she had worn during Championship Week. That was the other thing: in his effort to make amends for my near-murder at his amusement park, **Chris Ferraro**, the businessman, had offered to finance an opening run of 'Fool' apparel. If it took off, further investment would be forthcoming. If not, we could keep the clothes as mementos. It was an exciting prospect for Gabby and, although I had no interest in the design part, I had a keen interest in seeing how much money my 25% stake in 'Fool' would make for me.

"See you next year, bro," **Randy the Desert Rat** said to me. "I'd shake your hand but it's broken, so give me a fist bump with the other one and please don't break my nose!"

"Maybe I'll visit Mohave next year," I said, then chuckled and added: "or *NOT!*"

"Bye Randy!" Gabby leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for saving my Spats!"

Rnady flashed a wry smile. "Give me a call when you get tired of him," he grumbled.

Gabby and I got in the carriage and took one last look at Ferraroland as we rode out of the miniature Alfama District and through the tiny streets lined by shops, restaurants, theatres and hotels. During the drive she and I did not say anything to each other and it felt good. Words would have spoiled the moment. We reached the entrance to the Great Purple Park and transferred into a waiting taxi cab; it would be about a one-hour cab ride to Hollywood but I didn't care – after all, **Chris Ferraro** was paying for it.

CHAMPIONSHIP MVPS

I – 2007

LaDainian Tomlinson
Chino Convicts

II-2008

Will Witherspoon
Florida Dragons

III-2009

DeAngelo Williams
Florida Dragons

IV – 2010

Chris Johnson
Pickering Spartans

V – 2011

Josh Freeman
Los Angeles Knights

VI – 2012

Eli Manning
Markham North Stars

VII – 2013

Jacoby Jones
Charleswood Patriots

VIII – 2014

Brandon Boykin
Aurora Mustangs

IX – 2015

Lamar Miller
Charleswood Patriots

THE LAST WORD

As the **Red Pimple** and I were trying to kill each other in the luxury box and members of the North American Big Foot Hunters Association blanketed the stands searching for the mysterious cowed figure, the Patriots were executing a death sentence on the field for any Mustangs' hopes of a second consecutive EFL Championship.

The **Ryan Succop** field goal to make it 27-17 for Charleswood had felt like the final word when it happened and, as it turned out, it was. An urgent Mustangs counter-attack had become inexplicably discombobulated at the Patriots' 27 with one minute left. As time ticked away without a timeout being called, **Jonathan Hankins** sacked **Matt Ryan** for a 14-yard loss to turn on the taps for the Gatorade shower on the Charleswood sideline. It had been the 8th time the Aurora pivot had been dumped in the game – a fittingly symbolic way to end a day in which the pressure of the Charleswood defence had taken its toll.

Rich Liotta had ripped off his headset in visible disgust when he had realized it was all but over. It was the first time the Aurora coach had ever been caught on video losing his cool on the sideline. Of course, it was only his second loss in 38 games as a head coach. On this auspicious day for his opponent, things had gotten out of his control. For a head coach there is no more frustrating feeling than watching from the sidelines as another team flat-out beats your team, despite your pain-staking pre-game preparation. In 36 out of 38 games Liotta had watched his team get the better of their opponents. On this day, he experienced the other side.

On the flip side, Patriots' Owner/GM **Jason Findlay** had watched the game from the sidelines dressed in coach's gear. He had wanted to be front and center as a reminder to his coaching staff to stick to the plan – that there was no tomorrow, at least as far as one very important player was concerned, and to go for it. Perhaps therein lay the critical difference between the Mustangs and the Patriots on this day – the 'Peyton Factor.'

As an on-field contributor, **Peyton Manning** had managed the game in true **Trent Dilfer** style. His longest pass play, 21 yards, had traveled just 5 yards in the air before **Dez Bryant** had carried it the rest of the way. He had not stretched the field once, nor bothered to try. He could hardly have been credited with winning the game with his arm, yet he made no mistakes with it either. His non-panicked presence on the field had carried an impact on both sides of the ball. He looked like he was not intimidated by the Mustangs and that confidence had spilled over to the rest of the team: an assortment of young and old talents, many of them homegrown and others hired this year for one purpose: to win it all. They had fulfilled that purpose through exceptional execution of complimentary strategies on both sides of the ball.

On defence, the Patriots had come in with an aggressive defensive game plan designed to penetrate the line of scrimmage in all situations with the blitz. It was a risky strategy and on occasion it had backfired, but they had stuck with the plan.

Having a plan is one thing, but executing it is another. And on this score, the Patriots get an A+ for execution. The young players played like there was no tomorrow. The Aurora offensive line was not up to the task of stopping the dogged determination of **CJ Mosley**, the relentless power of **Danny Shelton** and **Johnathan Hankins**, the rush of **Jamie Collins**, or the sideline-to-sideline speed of **Lavonte David**. The Pats won the war in the trenches, most of the tiny battles unseen by the prime time audience but having an effect on the outcome nonetheless.

Conversely, on offence the Pats had stayed conservative, willing to punt rather than force a high-risk throw into coverage. This too could have backfired against an equally disciplined Aurora defence; after all, you can't win if you can't score. But the Patriots got turnovers from their defence and a gift from their running back, **Lamar Miller**, who made plays he shouldn't have made to keep his offence moving in crucial situations. His 67-yard game-breaking touchdown run had blasted a hole in the *Mustang-centric* universe most of us were living in at the time. It will be part of the Gale Sayers Game great-play highlight reel for many years to come. His two short yardage touchdowns put both his strength and agility on display for the prime time audience and will be the subject of reminiscences by the Charleswood Faithful for generations. He deserved to be named MVP of Gale Sayers IX. It is also a tribute to the writers who selected him that they resisted awarding it to **Peyton Manning** in what might have been his final championship appearance.

The second Championship win in Patriots' history was an upset in the books, but it did not *feel* like one, despite the Mustangs' dominance of the gridiron over two full seasons. If all one had ever seen of both these teams was this single contest, three out of four would judge the Patriots the better team. I, of course, had thought the Pats would win all along; and the outcome had just added to the Legend that is **I**.

Not everything worked out perfectly in Gale Sayers Week. It was back to the drawing board for **Arpin Plunderflunder** of FootballOutriders.Org and his experimental in-game modeller. It had shown promise, but when it was wrong, it was really wrong. Arpin is apparently working on factoring in intangibles such as the 'Peyton Factor' and the "human spirit." Good luck with that, Arpin.

The cowed figure once again made good its escape. Few eye witnesses caught a trace of it after it had appeared briefly on camera behind the Mustangs bench. It remains a mystery still to be solved.

I never did reach my geek nephew, Byron to ascertain what he had discovered about the so-called X factor that was skewing performance predictions for the Blue Eagles. But he did leave another incomprehensible voice message in which he invited me to MIT in order to "explain" what he meant.

And, of course, there was no happy ending for the Mustangs. They will have to wait at least two more years before they can find themselves again in a position to win back-to-back Championships. One has to feel some empathy for the players and fans for missing out on such a rare opportunity. But I would not get carried away pitying the Mustangs; they have a core of elite talent that will surely keep them in the championship discussion this upcoming season. Don't be surprised if you see them back in Canton, the announced location for next year's 10th anniversary of the EFL Championship Game, in 2016.

Of course I will be there too, bringing you everything you need, and don't need to know, about the Championship from my unique and no-holds barred perspective. Until then, my Dear Readers, 'Spats From the Championship' is signing off. Good night.

BUG THE BOOKIE!

JIMMY THE GEEK WRAPS UP ANOTHER SPECTACULAR SEASON!

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ANCIENT HISTORY CHANNEL

PRESENTS

This Week in EFL History

With Professor Sterling Smitherman

FROM THE EFL ARCHIVES – 2009 – There were no upsets in the Quarter Final round but LA squeaked out a one-point victory in the only way they know how: defence. Sure, QB **Jason Campbell** threw a pair of TD passes to score the winning points, but it was the 'Blue Shield' that put the LA offence in a position to succeed and held on to a 1-point lead for 24 minutes to prevail 14-13 over the Cubs.

Charleswood made short work of Chino, 23-7, despite an awful outing from **Peyton Manning**. **Adrian Peterson** picked up the slack with a 179-yard rushing day and the game's only offensive touchdown. Both teams had a pick-six to help boost the point total.

In the Can-Am, top seeded Florida dominated Cowtown early, overcoming two costly turnovers to build a 20-3 lead heading into the 4th quarter. An eventful 4th period inflated the final to 30-15 in favour of Florida.

Michael Turner broke the ice with an 81-yard TD run to lift Durham over Gwinnett 31-10. The Glads never stood a chance with **Matt Cassell** at QB.

In the Conference Finals, the LA Knights dialed their magic number with another 14-13 victory – this time over the Charleswood Patriots. LA CB, **Charles Woodson** took a **Peyton Manning** pass to the house for the opening score.

Aaron Rodgers led the Dragons to a 34-27 besting of the Thunder Lizards, throwing for 288 yards and 2 TDs passes. With 9 seconds left, **Brandon Marshall** galloped 34 yards through the Durham secondary for the winning points.

Defence does win championships, but when a great defence is paired with a forgettable offence, the defence will occasionally fail to win. The LA Knights' defence was the best on the field in the EFL Championship Game, but it got beaten a few times by a balanced and effective Florida offence. That was enough to make them fall 23-17 in the final, despite a good showing from their part-time starting QB, **Jason Campbell**, who threw 2 TD passes with no interceptions. Florida got bookend touchdowns from two big stars to overcome a smothering defensive effort by LA. **DeAngelo Williams** opened the game with a 75-yard run then took 3 tries to get the ball into the end zone for the opening score. **Brandon Marshall** made a finger-tip catch with 6 minutes left for the deciding TD in the 4th quarter. It was the Dragons' second consecutive championship – an achievement yet to be repeated.

EFL ANNOUNCES MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS



OFFENSIVE M.V.P.



PEYTON MANNING
CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS
RUSSEL WILSON
IOWA CITY CUBS

The only thing AP writers could agree on was the position. 75% of votes cast went to QBs. But writers could not decide between the consistency and 15-win season of Peyton Manning and the flashy dual threat of the "comeback kid," Russell Wilson. It would be difficult to argue against either choice, so we won't. This year it will be a Most Valuable Players Award.



DEFENSIVE M.V.P.



JJ WATT
AURORA MUSTANGS

There wasn't much of a race in the defensive MVP category. JJ Watt garnered 75% of votes cast. The results were a shock only because 25% thought the league leader in sacks and top-three pass defender (from a defensive line position!) was *not* the best defender on the field. While there were plenty of outstanding defenders in 2015, there was only one JJ Watt – and he was the best!