



CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

February 1, 2009

FLORIDA'S "FIREWALL" BURNS CUBS!

DRAGONS 'D'FORCES 3 TURNOVERS, SCORES TWICE



IOWA CITY

9

QUICK TAKE

The Cubs let the game get away from them in the second half with sloppy ball security. A mediocre passing attack was not up to the task of coming from behind.



Tom Brady stands on the podium and basks in the glory of the moment during the official presentation of the Gale Sayers Trophy following the EFL Championship Game at Gwinnett Coliseum. Brady had a relatively quiet game but the Florida defense made a raucous noise, scoring two touchdowns to pave the way to a 38-9 rout of PAC winner, Iowa City.



FLORIDA

38

QUICK TAKE

The Dragons got two big scoring plays from their defense and wore down their opponent with a strong running game on offence to dominate the gridiron in Gwinnett.

GWINNETT – If past performance is the best indicator of future performance then the writing was on the wall, bold and in capital letters, heading into the 2008 EFL Championship Game. It read, simply, that Florida would win. In the week leading up to the game paid commentators justified their salaries by attempting to discern the fine print underneath the writing on the wall describing exactly *how* the Dragons would win. The discussion quickly revolved around the method of execution rather than the sentence – which was understood by most to be ‘Death’ to the Cubbies.

Yet, as in all civilized trials, the Accused has the right to a defense. Assembled in a tiny corner of the large Court of Public Opinion, a small clutch of football experts dreamed and schemed of a way the Cubs could thwart the inevitable. The game had not been played, they argued, and it was in the playing of the game that the verdict would be read. Anything could happen – and although it was unclear what form of “anything” could possibly upset the balance of power favouring Florida, the fact that “anything” *could* happen was indisputable. In other words, the Cubs would need good luck, and lots of it, to prevail.

For those who predict the outcomes of football games based on mystical premises, the Cubs were generally considered to be

the luckier of the two teams – all other things being equal – based mostly on past performances in 2007 when they scored a trio of big upsets to make the playoffs. Yet when it had come to big breaks during the 2008 regular season and the playoffs, the Florida Dragons were unparalleled in coming out on the better end of a sudden change-of-possession, boasting a dominating +34 take-way differential over 18 games. 11 of those had resulted directly in touchdowns scored by the defense, by far the most in the league. Heading into the final, 14% of all points scored by the Dragons had been by the defense.

The Cubs Faithful, who clung to the saying “better to be lucky than good” when countering the cold logical arguments levied against their team by Dragons boosters, were apparently content to ignore the fact that not only were the Dragons a good team, they were arguably a lucky team as well. With the stars quietly lining up against them alongside the mass of humanity protecting Tom Brady’s backside and the predatory Antonio Cromartie, the Cubs took the field at Gwinnett Coliseum clinging to the vain

*** Championship * 01-28-2009** Gwinnett Coliseum Temp: 41 Wind: 0-5, MVP: **Witherspoon**

2007 **Iowa City** (0-1) 0 6 0 3 -9
2007 **Florida** (1-0) 7 7 14 10 -38

1 0:41 **Florida** TD Jackson 1 run (Nugent) (11-63-5:24) 0-7
2 8:46 **Iowa City** FG Feely 29 (11-74-6:47) 3-7
2 2:21 **Florida** TD Williams 29 run (Nugent) (10-80-6:21) 3-14
2 0:09 **Iowa City** FG Feely 45 (11-48-1:59) 6-14
3 13:28 **Florida** TD Landry 36 yd fumble recovery (Nugent) (0-0-0:00) 6-21
3 10:41 **Florida** TD Jackson 2 run (Nugent) (5-34-2:41) 6-28
4 6:02 **Florida** FG Nugent 25 (8-26-6:11) 6-31
4 4:53 **Florida** TD Umenyiora 36 yd fumble recovery (Nugent) (0-0-0:00) 6-38
4 2:00 **Iowa City** FG Feely 32 (9-46-2:42) 9-38

	ICC	FLD
First Downs	17	21
Rushes	36-196	40-176
Passes	26-16-149	16-12-132
Sacked	3-29	0-0
Fumble	4	1
Penalties	8-45	1-5
Turnovers	3	0
Time	25:52	34:00
Third Down	4-13	7-10
Fourth Down	4-6	1-2
Net Offense	316	308

< Iowa City >

Passing Att Cmp Yds Sk 25 In Td Rate
Garcia 26 16 149 3 0 0 0 77.2

Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD
Jacobs	17	105	6.2	5	3	13	0
Brown	15	79	5.3	3	2	11	0
Parrish	1	18	18.0	0	1	18	0
Garcia	3	-6	-2.0	0	0	1	0
	36	196	5.4	8	6	18	0

Receiving	No	Dp	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Fitzgerald	6	0	68	11.3	5	0	16	0
Winslow	4	1	24	6.0	2	0	8	0
Brown	3	0	30	10.0	1	0	22	0
Evans	1	0	3	3.0	0	0	3	0
Jacobs	1	0	9	9.0	0	0	9	0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	INT
Ryans	13	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Willis	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Wilfork	7	0	0	2	0	0	0-0
Williams	6	0	0	1	1	0	0-0
Hall	5	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Crowell	3	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Rolle	2	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Gamble	1	0	1	0	0	0	0-0
Birk	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Udeze	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Whitner	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Washington	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Atogwe	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Ellis	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0

< Florida >

Passing Att Cmp Yds Sk 25 In Td Rate
Brady 16 12 132 0 0 0 0 99.0

Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD
Jackson	21	82	3.9	6	1	10	2
Williams	10	66	6.6	3	1	29	1
Stewart	5	17	3.4	1	0	8	0
Brady	4	11	2.8	1	0	8	0
	40	176	4.4	11	2	29	3

Receiving	No	Dp	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Houshmandza	7	0	80	11.4	5	0	19	0
Jackson	2	1	11	5.5	1	0	11	0
Williams	1	0	3	3.0	0	0	3	0
Cotchery	1	0	16	16.0	1	0	16	0
Marshall	1	0	22	22.0	1	0	22	0

Defense	Tkl	Sk	Def	Stf	Hur	FF	INT
Witherspoon	13	3	0	1	0	2	0-0
Landry	9	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Suggs	8	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hamlin	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Revis	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Tatupu	4	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Umenyiora	2	0	1	2	1	1	0-0
Henderson	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Bodden	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Freney	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Cromartie	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Oliver	2	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Jackson	1	0	0	0	0	1	0-0
Condo	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Marshall	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Williams	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Hawk	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Rubin	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0
Steltz	1	0	0	0	0	0	0-0

FUMBLES/LOST: **ICC** – Garcia 2/1, Jacobs 1/1, McGlover 1/1; **FLA** – Brady 1/0. FUMBLE RECOVERIES/TD: **ICC** – Garcia 1/0; **FLA** – Umenyiora 1/1, Mankins 1/0, Bodden 1/0, Hamlin 1/0, Landry 0/1. KICK RETURNS: **ICC** – Robinson 4-32, Jean-Gilles 1-5, McGlover 1-4, Parrish 1-3; **FLA** – Figurs 1-19, Condo 1-0, Martin 1-0. PUNT RETURNS: **ICC** – None; **FLA** – Jackson 1-11. FIELD GOALS: **ICC** – Feely 3-3; **FLA** – Nugent 1-1. PUNTS: **ICC** – Brooks 1-44; **FLA** – McBriar 1-41.



GAME MVP WILL WITHERSPOON FLORIDA DRAGONS

AFTER THE GAME

“This is a great honour, but it isn’t about individuals, it’s about the team! The team! This is a great team! We have some great individual players, but we come together as a team to win. I’ve been working hard all year as an individual so I can contribute to the team! The team, man! That’s what it’s all about, the team! I really want to continue playing for this team. I hope they see that. I know I have a contract, but they have to step up and show they’re part of the team too! ” –

Will Witherspoon

Game Line – 13 Tackles, 3 Sacks, 1 Stuff, 2 Forced Fumbles.

hope that their lucky star would outshine the Dragon's flame at the critical moment, if only they could do their part on the field to keep the game close.

FIRST QUARTER (Florida 7, Iowa City 0) – The Dragons won the toss and elected to receive. **Yamon Figurs** was contained to a 19-yard return giving Florida the equivalent of a touchback as starting position for their opening drive. Out trotted **Tom Brady** and the vaunted Florida offense to the cheers of what sounded like better than half of the capacity crowd – the proximity of Gwinnett to Florida making for a relatively easy trip to the big game for Dragons fans.

In typical conservative style, the Dragons opened up with plays designed to grab small chunks of yardage while testing the Cubs' line. 5 straight handoffs to **DeAngelo Williams**, a predictable staple of the Florida offense, earned 29 yards and couple of first downs while Iowa City hung back in nickel and dime packages designed to stop the pass. When the Dragons finally switched to the pass it looked a lot like a handoff, a short flare to **Steven Jackson** smothered by **DeMeco Ryans** for no gain. A real pass followed to **T.J. Houshmandzadeh** for 14 yards and a first down then, two plays later, the Dragons took their shot. Brady faded back to pass, looking for **Brandon Marshall** deep across the middle. But while the protection held up, the



Steven Jackson appears to be stopped shy of the goal line by Iowa City's **Vince Wilfork** and **DeMeco Ryans**. The Cubs lost the replay challenge and the ruling on the field of a touchdown was upheld, giving Florida an early 7-0 lead.

secondary swarmed with Cubs defenders, forcing Brady to run the ball. For a fleeting moment it looked like the Cubs would catch the kind of break they were practicing for all week when **DeMeco Ryans** closed in quickly on Brady and punched the ball loose. But **Logan Mankins** brushed aside **Angelo Crowell** to recover the ball for Florida and the drive continued. A pitch to Williams came up one-yard short of the first down at the Cubs' 24 yard line, prompting Mike Nugent to start heading on to the field, only to be suddenly called back by **Jim Heaton**, who signaled for Brady to stay put. Lining up in a two-tight end set, the Dragons looked like they were going to pound the ball up the middle. When the ball was snapped, however, Brady faded back to set up a screen pass. With the Cubs defense closing in, Brady tossed the ball to Jackson, who started to run before he had control of the ball and dropped it. The Cubs supporters, less numerous in the stands but decidedly louder, erupted in excited approval as the Dragons walked off the field without a point and **Jeff Garcia** sprinted on.

Their first play from scrimmage seemed auspicious for Garcia and the Cubs as **Larry Fitzgerald** somehow fought off tight double coverage on a short route to come away with the ball and a 12-yard gain. But the Cubs gave it all back on the next two plays as Garcia ran the ball for a 2-yard loss and Florida linebacker, **Will Witherspoon** broke through the Cubs' line to sack Garcia for a 10-yard loss. The Cubs punt netted 33 yards after the return and Florida took over at their own 37 yard line.

Two completions to Houshmandzadeh brought the ball into Cubs territory where the Dragons turned conservative once again and executed flawlessly. A short pass to **Steven**

Jackson netted 11 yards then 3 straight runs by Jackson brought the ball down to the Iowa City 1 yard line. Facing a stacked Cubs line, Jackson got the call again and bulled forward behind a block by **Logan Mankins** and looked to kiss the edge of the goal line with the ball before being pushed back by **Vince Wilfork**. The referee signaled touchdown but Cubs coach, **Deron Redding** was not convinced and threw the red challenge flag. A few tense minutes, and dozens of views later, the referee came back unable to find evidence to overturn the ruling on the field. The touchdown stood and the Dragons were ahead 7-0.

SECOND QUARTER (Florida 14, Iowa City 6) – The Cubs responded with their finest drive of the afternoon. With the Dragons' secondary stuck to the wide receivers like glue, the Cubs turned to Brandon Jacobs to move the ball and he did, gaining 15 yards on 3 carries. A short pass to Ronnie Brown on 3rd down and 3 came up inches short of the first down at the Cubs 41 yard line. Without flinching or pausing to consider the ramifications of failure, Redding kept the offence on the field to convert the fourth down. The play that followed was bold as brass on both sides of the ball. The Dragons sold out to stop

the run, adding a fifth down lineman, closing the center, and sending two linebackers charging into what ever gap might be created by the offensive line. On the Cubs side, Garcia faked the hand-off, pump faked to Fitzgerald, then threw a laser 10 yards downfield to the half back, **Ronnie Brown**, who ran another 12 yards before being corralled by safety, **LaRon Landry** for a 22-yard pass play. Striking while the iron was hot, Garcia completed two more passes, including a 15-yarder to **Roy Williams**, to bring Iowa City into the Florida red zone at the 16 yard line.

The Florida defense had had enough. Continuing with the air show, Garcia's pass to **Kellen Winslow** was foiled by blanket coverage by the Dragons' secondary. Then **Will Witherspoon** made a great individual play, breaking through the Cubs' line for another sack, his second of the day, and a 9-yard loss. A false start penalty on **Matt Birk** pushed Iowa City back to the 30 yard line where they faced 3rd down and 24. Knowing their secondary had the situation well in hand, the Dragons defended the run on 3rd and long and guessed right – sort of. Instead of Brown, however, the Cubs sent **Roscoe Parrish** on the end around. Parrish turned the corner and almost broke it the distance but for a shoestring tackle by **Ken Hamlin**. The play went 18 yards in total – not enough for the first down, but enough to give **Jay Feely** a comfortable 29-yard kick for 3 points to put the Cubs on the board.

A touchback gave the Dragons the ball back at their own 20 yard line. **DeAngelo Williams** was stuffed by **Mario Williams** for a 4-yard loss on the first play, but Brady fired right back with a 16-yard hitch to **Jerricho Cotchery**. Four plays later, Florida had crossed mid-field and faced 3rd down and 3 at the Iowa City 47 yard line. Finding his receivers completely covered, Brady tucked the ball in and ran for 8 yards, ducking beneath a dangerous clothesline tackle attempt by **Oshiomogho Atogwe**. A third down offside penalty against **Chris Kelsay** gave Florida a first down at the Cubs' 29 yard line, where **DeAngelo Williams** got the call off right tackle. Following **Jammal Brown**, Williams made a move that got **Patrick Willis** moving the wrong way and broke him free into the secondary, which was playing loose expecting the deep pass. Another move on the safety, Hamlin and Williams was completely free and running the distance to Cubs end zone for a touchdown and a 14-3 Florida lead.

Curiously, **Mike Nugent** squibbed the following kick-off to **Roscoe Parrish** and the strategy worked. Parrish had trouble handling the bounce and wound up returning the ball a paltry 3 yards to the 24 yard line. With just 2:14 remaining in the first half, the Cubs went to work using their timeouts to stop the clock while running the ball with **Ronnie Brown** and **Brandon Jacobs**. That strategy got them into Florida territory, but with time running out, Garcia was finally forced to the air. Two straight incompletions brought up 4th down and 2 at the Florida 36 yard line with 30 seconds remaining and no timeouts – too far for a field goal. **Ronnie Brown** ran the ball inside just enough for a first down but the ground play ate up precious time. A 5-yard pass on the next play forced Garcia to spike the ball on the Florida 28 yard line with 9 seconds left. On came the Iowa City special teams unit and **Jay Feely** booted it true from 45 yards to narrow the Cubs deficit to 8 points, trailing 14-6 at Half Time.

THIRD QUARTER (Florida 28, Iowa City 6) – If Cubs fans were optimistic at half time, their rosy outlook soon turned dark. Iowa City started at their own 19 yard line after PAC Final star, **Koren Robinson** was held to just a 17-yard return on the opening kickoff. Two plays later, facing 3rd down and 3 at their own 26, disaster struck at the precise moment when excitement was peaking on the Cubs' sideline. With the Dragons' secondary tied up in double coverage, **Jeff Garcia** found **Brandon Jacobs** open in the middle of the field for a 9-yard completion. But as he turned to run up field, **Will Witherspoon** lunged at Jacobs and somehow stripped the ball loose. **Ken Hamlin** snatched it up and started to run it back but was engulfed by **Ben Grubbs**. As he fell he lateralled the ball to **LaRon Landry** who leapt over a sprawling **Lawrence Vickers** and broke for the sideline. Nobody would be able to catch him and in a flash Florida was up by 15 points, 21-6.

Continuing a novel first half kicking strategy, Nugent squibbed the ensuing kickoff and it was fielded by back-up linebacker **Darrell McGlover**. Or rather, it wasn't fielded. McGlover juggled the ball as he pushed forward on the return and coughed it up almost immediately into the hands of Florida's **Leigh Boddin**, who was tackled at the Iowa City 34 yard line.

Seeing an opportunity to knock the Cubs down flat, if not out, Brady threw long to **Brandon Marshall** on the first play. The Cubs saw it coming and sent **Ken Lucas** over to help **Antrel Rolle** against Marshall, but the two of them could not defend the indefensible – a perfect pass from Brady and a leaping shoestring catch by Marshall that netted 22 yards and put the ball at the Cubs' 12 yard line. Taking advantage of the Cubs' dime packages on defense, the Dragons handed the ball to **Steven Jackson**, four times in a row, and he covered the remaining distance to the end zone, scoring his second touchdown of the game on a nice run off right tackle behind pulling guard, **Vince Manuwai**. Less than five minutes into the second half, the Dragons had scored two touchdowns to extend their lead to 28-6.

AFTER THE GAME

"The feeling at half time was good. We felt we hung with them enough and that late field goal was a boost to our confidence. The way they were playing, we felt we could come back with Jakes and Brown Man (**Brandon Jacobs** and **Ronnie Brown**) to control the play in the second half. Then they came out and got those two quick touchdowns and that fired them up huge. They're a great team. You can't let them get fired up like that or they'll burn you." – **Matt Birk, Center, Iowa City Cubs.**

AFTER THE GAME

"They were giving it all they had and we felt we had let some chances slip by and were still up 14-6. We felt good at the half, definitely. Spooner (**Will Witherspoon**) was like a man possessed. Nobody wanted to talk to him because he looked half crazy." – **Matt Light, Offensive Tackle, Florida Dragons.**

Another squib kick, returned for a meager yard by Robinson, gave Iowa City the ball at their 36 yard line. A methodical and steady drive ensued that featured frequent hand-offs to Jacobs interspersed with a mixture of different passing plays. The Cubs were moving, but they were eating up time. The Dragons, realizing that time was now on their side, hedged their bets with a four-man line and five defensive backs, and gave the Cubs the small game. The Cubs steadfastly pushed down field, covering 61 yards in slightly less than 6 minutes, reaching the Dragons' 3 yard line where they finally faced 4th down and goal. With the confidence of a Riverboat Gambler on a hot streak, Heaton countered Redding's 3-wide set with 7 defensive backs, leaving only 3 down linemen to face the Cubs' ground game. Showing the obstinacy of a competitor trying to make the boldest of statements, Redding apparently ordered Garcia to follow through on the original play call, a corner fade to **Roy Williams**. Garcia took two steps back and lofted a high looping pass towards the back right pylon. But Williams wasn't there; stopped in his tracks by a bump by **Richard Marshall** at the goal line. What would turn out to be the Cubs' best chance at a major score hit the ground, untouched, at the feet of a kneeling photographer.

With Florida starting in a hole, the angry Cubs unleashed the dogs on **Tom Brady**. But the unflappable Dragons pivot calmly stood in the pocket, as his line picked up the blitz, and slung a rope to **T.J. Houshmandzadeh**, who carried it a little further before being stopped for a 19-yard gain. Then the Dragons' line put their hard hats on and, in workmanlike fashion, paved the way for 23 yards of **Steven Jackson** on 5 straight carries, stopping at their own 45 yard line when they fell short of a first down by a few inches. With the smell of the Championship wafting across the Florida sideline, **Jim Heaton** suppressed his urge to gamble and sent out **Matt McBriar**, who dropped a punt inside the Cubs' 20 yard line as the third quarter came to a close with Florida in control, leading 28-6.



A dejected Jeff Garcia slowly walks off the field after a bobbled hand-off to Ronnie Brown was returned for a TD by Osi Umenyiora. Garcia, who says he will not return to Iowa City next year, ended his two-year Cubs career on a down note.

FOURTH QUARTER (Florida 38, Iowa City 9) – The Cubs were trying very hard not to panic, realizing that to do so would play right into the hands of the rapacious Florida “Firewall.” But if they were going to get back into the game, there was precious little time left to do it, even *if* the Cubs' defense was up to the task of containing the Florida offence. After a 13-yard run by Jacobs and a 10-yard medium out pass to Fitzgerald, Garcia finally went deep, looking for Fitzgerald on the post pattern. But although Fitzgerald had a step on the safety, the ball was slightly overthrown and fell incomplete. After a Jacobs run of 5 yards brought up third-and-manageable, confusion in the huddle led to a careless delay-of-game penalty that pushed the Cubs back into 3rd down and long. A pitch to **Brandon Jacobs** brought a smattering of boos from frustrated Cubs fans as **Osi Umenyiora** lassoed Jacobs for a 2-yard loss, putting the Cubs in an uncomfortable 4th down and 12 situation: ball at their own 44 yard line, down by 22 points, with just over 12 minutes remaining in the game. With 6 defenders in the backfield, Heaton sent Witherspoon on the blitz and the added pressure was enough to crack the Cubs' porous pass protection. Witherspoon raced through the line untouched to knock Garcia down and force a fumble. Garcia pounced on the ball, but it did not matter except to keep it from being picked up by a Dragon, as it was fourth down. The Dragons, interested more in clock management than movement at this stage, ran the ball down to the Cubs' 8 yard line where **Mike Nugent** kicked an easy field goal of 25 yards to extend the Dragons lead to 31-6.

With 5:53 remaining, the game was all but over. Florida fans hurled their yellow, orange and red “fire” streamers in the stands while Cubs fans sat glumly on their hands. Coliseum Security and Gwinnett County Troopers suddenly found themselves occupied removing rowdy drunks from the stadium. But the Cubs players had not officially signaled surrender. Out came **Jeff Garcia** and the first string team for another shot at the Florida “Firewall.” Two pitch plays to Brown, however, signaled that the Cubs felt their best chance at movement still remained on the ground, an obvious losing strategy. On the third running play, Garcia and Brown got crossed up and the hand-off bounced off the leg of the running back. Florida's **Osi Umenyiora** gathered the ball up and ran it back all the way, 36 yards, for a stinging final touchdown, giving the Dragons an insurmountable 38-6 lead with 4:53 remaining.

The Florida sideline began to celebrate. Off to the side, **Jeremy Zuttah** and **LaMarr Woodley** could be seen stealthily dragging a cooler full of grape juice into position behind an absorbed **Jim Heaton**. The rest of the game played out with a meaningless Cubs drive ending in a meaningless **Jay Feely** field goal to round off the scoring. Signs, perhaps, of wounded pride surfaced in the final possession as Iowa City burned their final timeouts in a lost cause, and **Jonathan Stewart**, on fourth down and 1 with 49 seconds remaining in the game ran into a stacked Iowa City line that played as if the game were on the line. Rather than take

a knee, Stewart ran off tackle for 7 yards to burn off the final 8 seconds, creating a bit of a scrum between the teams as the gun sounded and a 10-litre cooler of Concord grape juice came cascading down on **Jim Heaton's** head. Oblivious to the indelible staining qualities of dark grape juice, a purple Heaton smiled and raised his arms and eyes to the sky. As if it spoke for him, an orange and aqua banner popped up in the stands at that moment that read, 'Mission Accomplished.' The Year of the Dragon was complete.

POST GAME – While the EFL's "Showcase Game" in 2008 was not as dramatic or as competitive as its inaugural Championship Game between Chino and Charleswood in 2007, the game will be memorable for the fact that it consummated a season of dominance by the most complete and daunting team to take the field in the league's brief two-year history. The 2008 edition of the Dragons were one game, one Jeff Reed field goal away from perfection. They rose to the top over the shoulders of another team, the **Charleswood Patriots**, so dominant in their own right that it took the Dragons, and the Dragons alone, to beat them. Going forward and looking back through the lens of history, **Jim Heaton's 2008 Florida Dragons** will surely rank as one of the EFL's top teams of all time. In that respect, history was made in Gwinnett on January 28th, 2009.

Their opponent, the **Iowa City Cubs**, was the best the PAC could offer – a very good team; one worthy, perhaps, in a leaner year, of a Championship victory of its own. But faced with the titanic task of standing toe-to-toe with the league's premiere heavyweight, the Cubs offered a few weak left jabs that barely hit the mark then turtled in an attempt to survive the second half Florida onslaught and remain standing. When **Steven Jackson** crossed the goal line for his second touchdown of the game to make it 28-6 for the Dragons, the contest portion of the game was over and the exercise portion of the game had begun.

Although he was clearly frustrated on the sideline as his team met its match on both sides of the ball, **Deron Redding** has reason to be proud of the Cubs' 2008 campaign. What more could he have asked of his team? There was no shame in falling to the Dragons and every reason for pride in getting the opportunity to win the Gale Sayers Trophy. The usually effusive Redding was, nevertheless, very quiet in the locker room after the game, speaking only very briefly with reporters before holding a final closed door team meeting.

Taciturn Florida coach, **Jim Heaton** continued his boycott of the Media, refusing to speak to a throng of reporters in a post-game scrum. But on the podium in front of thousands of Dragons supporters in the Gwinnett Coliseum, he spoke quietly but passionately, thanking his team for their effort and his family for their support throughout a long season. In what many read as a dig at sniping *Miami Herald* columnist, Merlin Pendragon, Heaton introduced **Tom Brady** to the crowd as, "our team MVP and our Leader on the field." With that, the crowd erupted in triumphant jubilation and the post-game celebration by Florida fans across the continent began.

¶CHAMPIONSHIP NOTES¶

DO NOT FEED THE LIONS – A lion was responsible for the demolishing the reception area reserved for Media and Team Officials next to the Florida locker room. Tables and chairs were overturned, carpet torn, and approximately 14 dozen little sandwiches, several trays of '*hors d'oeuvres*,' coolers filled with refreshments, a large coffee urn, and two giant tubs of ice cream were either devoured, split, or splattered on the walls and ceiling. The lion was one of half a dozen in the stadium inventory at Gwinnett Coliseum which, in addition to being the home of the EFL football Gladiators, is also the base of a professional gladiatorial combat school. The lion was eventually distracted and lured back into its cage when a quick-thinking trainer held up a poster of Carson Palmer dipped in steak juice and tossed it into the cage.

DUELING TAILGATES – Hours before the players had taken the field, fans of the Cubs and the Dragons were busy competing for the Top Tailgate Award sponsored by the International Barbeque Association. While exotic Florida offerings such as BBQ Alligator steaks, BBQ shrimp and eel burritos, and 'Tula's Tarpon Chowder,' made with Alder plank grilled Florida tarpon, grabbed a lot of attention and raves from the members of the Evaluation Committee; the top prize went to Iowa's Tully "Bammer" Bamford, whose pulled pork and oatmeal sandwiches served with BBQ sweet potato wedges were the perfect compliment to a questionable clear beverage served in tin cups by Tully's wife, Chantalle, from the back of their pick-up truck. The drink, simply called "Hoop!," (the exclamation mark signifying a sudden rise in vocal pitch immediately prior to enunciation of the "p") caused most who consumed more than a cup to fall down or spend the rest of the day staggering around the fringes of the Coliseum singing quietly to themselves and looking for spare change.

FLORIDA FANS DANCE IN THE STREETS – Florida fans at the game took to the streets of Gwinnett by the hundreds to celebrate the Dragons' first ever Championship in a miniature replay of last week's spontaneous display of exultation outside Dragonmount. Although fewer in number than the thousands that snarled South Florida traffic last week, the numbers were enough to prompt an extreme reaction from angry local commuters. Four Florida fans were reportedly recovering in hospital from gunshot wounds received from drive-by shootings and at least eight others suffered serious injuries after being variously knocked down or run over by motor vehicles. Gwinnett County Sheriff's Department spokesman, Lt. Harry Beachem issued a stern warning to visitors that "unruly fans breaking the law by disobeying crossing signals at intersections and jay-walking through flowing traffic cannot expect the protection of law enforcement. In Gwinnett, we obey the law!"



AT THE EFL CHAMPIONSHIP With Spats McChad

GWINNETT – Are there no buses in this place? They claim to be the 6th fastest growing County in the country but apparently they haven't heard of Public Transit. I was late for Media Day because the highway from my hotel to the park was jammed with traffic. The only good thing is that the Cab Drivers here are civil and helpful and don't charge too much.

I TOLD YOU SO!

The Hate Mail I received from Cubs fans after my “bold” prediction last week of a Florida rout in the Championship Game would have reduced a more sensitive man to tears. However, being completely insensitive, (except to emerging opportunities for inappropriate humour) the effect on me was similar to the effect that horse flies have on a noble stallion of the highest pedigree – mildly irritating but ultimately inconsequential. A couple did tickle my funny bone, however. One Iowa hick, ‘*Dave from Iowa*,’ attacked my very manhood in a peculiarly Iowan sort of way. “*You city slick probably naw (sic) on Big Leegue (sic) Chew, not Redman. Pusy!(sic).*” Another questioned my sexual preference, but not in the way you might think: “*You are a pig-f\$#@er!*” stated ‘*CubsFan*.’ Simple and to the point, I like that. The strangest one came from ‘*Wendy*’ from a place called Elk Run Heights, who accused me of mutilating her cows.

There was one writer, however, who attempted to lay out a structured argument as to why I would be wrong in my prediction. While acknowledging the superiority of the Dragons’ talent, ‘*Fred Chudleigh of Iowa City*’ claimed that coaching would be the difference and it would favour the Cubs. Best to quote him directly: “*Coach Redding is an inspirational man and a leader. He cares about his team. He is passionate. The young players gravitate toward him and they will put everything they have on the line to not let Coach Redding down. The Florida coach is a detailed planner, but when things go against his plan he is poor at making adjustments. Plus, he comes across as cranky all the time. When he realizes his team is in a tough game, his frustration will show and it will bring his team down. I look forward to your retraction and apology in your column after the Big Game.*”

Well, Fred, so much for inspirational leadership overcoming an overwhelming edge in “fire” power. Watching the game unfold, the only thing that surprised me was the obvious lack of inspirational leadership on the Iowa City sideline. The Cubs offense played a “safe” game, even when down by 22 points in the fourth quarter, while the defense laid down in their assigned positions and watched passively as the Dragons’ offense performed surgery on it. Despite all of their precautions to avoid turning the ball over, the Cubs lost it anyway, giving away 21 points in the process. It could have been worse. I swear that if the Dragons’ offence had a mind to, they could have easily added another 14 points to their total, but instead felt it best to lock a vice grip on an easy win by running out the clock.

The clearest indication that Coach Redding was playing to prevent a blowout rather than to win the game, was the decision to try a field goal, down 38-6, with 2 minutes left in the game. The farcical symbolism of that decision was underlined in its futility by an attempted onside kick right afterwards. Why bother? So the Cubs could kick another field goal and finish in double digits? As plucky as the Cubs are when facing their rivals in the PAC and other top teams in the CAC, they were clearly beaten mentally and emotionally even before they took the field in the Big Game. The Dragons were inside their heads and no number of ‘hallelujahs’ or gritty emotional pre-game speeches could knock them out.

GAME DAY WITH SPATS

I wound up hanging out on game day with a Florida writer named Jean (pronounced “John”) Boisvert (pronounced “Boycevert”) from a small local paper near Dragonmount called *The Swampland Proof*. Although I was vaguely familiar with the name, I had never met him personally until I was introduced to him on Media Day. Apart from sharing similar views on the importance of Print Media and its inherent

superiority to the “fast food” electronic media outlets such as television and radio, I found him to possess a degree of cultured arrogance that I admire, having once been, prior to landing a job as a sports writer, a Heraldic Arms authenticator for the King of Monaco. Boisvert had been released from the *Miami Herald* prior to finding a job with his current employer because, so he claims, he had blurted out at an office Christmas party that writer, Merlin Pendragon’s Coat of Arms – a rampant peacock on a divided field of *azure* and *ermine* supported by a fish and a knight, blazoned with such pride on all of his out garments– was an obvious fraud. An outraged Pendragon called Boisvert a “mealy-mouthed frog” and threatened to sue for defamation. The next day, Boisvert was let go with a severance package and told he would never get another writing job in South Florida. But fortunately for my friend, a rival of the Herald found out about the incident at the party and hired Jean. Jean’s first piece for *The Swampland Proof* was a profile of **Tom Brady** that lauded his character and praised his work ethic. The very next day, Pendragon launched the first of his long series of articles attacking Brady’s leadership and skill. Very interesting!

GAME DAY WITH SPATS (Continued)

The post game press conferences were surreal, or else I was drunk. A lion apparently got loose and trashed the Florida Media Reception Room, which delayed the post game scrum. When it finally got underway, Florida coach **Jim Heaton** did not make an appearance. In his stead, the nameless Assistant Trainer with the aqua bow tie, who spoke for Heaton last week, (nicknamed “Ned” by reporters), read drearily from a prepared statement: “*We are proud to bring the Gale Sayers Trophy to Florida. Many people in the organization worked hard for this day. This is a great day for professional football in Florida. Management would like to especially thank the fans.....*” and so on and so on Ned droned for approximately 5 minutes before taking “questions.” When asked why Jim Heaton would not address reporters, Ned answered flatly, while holding up his written notes, “what would Coach Heaton have to say that is not said here? Is that all? Thank you very much.”

The Iowa City room was like a funeral wake. By the time I got there, Coach Redding had finished and players were being interviewed. Poor **Darrell McGlover** ran out of ways to apologize for losing the fumble that led to Florida’s fourth touchdown. **DeMeco Ryans** defended his \$9 million salary by pointing out that the Cubs had lost to a player with a higher salary, in **Tom Brady**. **Vince Wilfork** claimed to have stopped **Steven Jackson** short of the goal line on Florida’s first touchdown and added, “I don’t care what the replay shows! He was stopped!” **Jeff Garcia** was a class act, thanking the Cubs organization for an “exciting two years” and praising the Florida defense that held him in check for most of the day. **Oshiomogho Atogwe** denied trying to break Tom Brady’s neck near the end of an 8-yard scramble that converted a key third down for the Dragons. Although they were defiant in their words, they were clearly a beaten team if body language were any indication. Iowa City sports columnist **Sparky McGillicuddy** said it best, “they are coming to grips with the realization that they were beaten by a better team, better in every area of play and more disciplined. The Cubs are an emotional team, which makes this hard for them to accept. They are also a talented team, which means they have the tools to bounce back and be better for this experience. Wait until next year!”

GAME DAY SIGHTINGS

Several EFL owners made appearances at the game in Gwinnett. Among them was the new owner of the **South Garland Mustangs**, **Doug Shirley**. He gave interviews freely and spoke enthusiastically of the work being done on his new football stadium, ‘The Corral.’ It will be a dual-purpose facility with a football capacity of exactly 70,243, hosting rodeos and horse races during the off-season and, of course, football during the Fall and Winter months.

It started as a “hearing,” but turned into a “sighting” terrifying enough to freeze a zombie in its tracks. As soon as I heard the harsh, shrill cry piercing the din in the stands at Gwinnett Coliseum, unwelcome suppressed memories flooded back into my mind. I hoped it was a hallucination induced by Chantalle Bamford’s ‘Hoop!’ but I knew that even my twisted mind could not dream up something that horrifyingly palpable, even with the assistance of Iowa moonshine. “*Kill, kill, kill, we eat Dragons bones tonight!*” It could only be one person on this Earth, but how in God’s Infinite Mercy (and keen sense of Celestial Humour) did she get here? I looked up and confirmed my worst fears. The Fat Lady from Row 54, Markham’s “biggest” fan by far, had found her way, (fittingly) to the “biggest” game of all – the EFL Championship. Except at this event, unlike her usual place in the Dawg Pound, there were no special

seating arrangements in place to accommodate her wide girth. So there she lay, box of 'Depends' at her side, sprawled out on an air mattress in the middle of an aisle at the very top of the highest seating level in the Coliseum, apparently lifted in place by a crane rented specifically for the purpose. She had adopted the Cubs as her team based on a first name shared by Iowa City's coach, **Deron Redding**, and Markham's coach **Darrin Jones**. Although spelled differently, it was enough for her that they sounded the same, and reason enough, I guess, to throw her considerable "weight" behind Iowa City. Unfortunately for the Fat Lady, what passes for good fun in Markham is considered disruptive and prohibited in Gwinnett. By the end of the first half, complaints from not only the fans, but the networks, forced the hands of Stadium Security. With considerable difficulty, the Fat Lady was lifted back over the edge of the stadium's top level during the half time show as she shrieked at a pitch never before registered by a human being on audio recording equipment. Strangely, though; after she was removed, the Cubs fell apart on the football field.

Tarvaris Jackson and **Brodie Croyle** of the **LA Knights** were both in the stands, chaperoning LA Sports/Gossip columnist, **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven**. They both sported pink and orange outfits with purples sashes, rumoured to resemble the colours of Gabrielle's secret new uniform design for the Knights. As mentioned before in this column, Laurent-Vainluven is looking to transform football on the West Coast to make it more socially responsible, friendly to the environment, and generally more acceptable to the Hollywood Elite. She was heard boasting to another reporter that no animals were killed while making the outfits Jackson and Croyle were wearing and that they were 100% peanut-free.

A man looking suspiciously like **Chris Worthley**, former head of the now defunct **Death Valley Undertakers**, was observed being removed from the Coliseum after allegedly trying to sneak in without paying. He was taken by Police to the hospital for a mental assessment after placing a "Curse" on the security guard who caught him.

GWINNETT GRIPES

Apart from the lack of buses, I have no gripes about Gwinnett. It's a nice place, actually. I may return for a holiday this summer.

BUG THE BOOKIE!

JIMMY THE GEEK REVIEWS HIS EFL PICK RECORD IN 2008

YOUR SOURCE FOR FANTASY AND ON-LINE BETTING SOLUTIONS



JIMMY'S REVIEW

SHOULD YOU LISTEN TO A THING I SAY?????? HOW I'M DOING AGAINST THE SPREAD

LAST WEEK: 1-0-0

OVERALL: 100-35-0

The answer to that question that I ask every week, my friends, is a loud "YES!" If you threw your money down as I told you to do this season, you would have come out on top of the betting game a whopping 74% of the time. Those are great odds in any sport. And yes, to top it off, I hit the magical "Century Mark," 100 wins. After a short break to count my winnings ('har har!!'), I will back in the business of predicting starting early next season with my opening odds for each EFL team to win the Championship. Until then, keep your eyes open and a hand on your wallet!