

# 2010



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## *THE HEAT IS ON!*

### **DRAGONS SHOW NO SIGNS OF COOLING DOWN IN 2010**

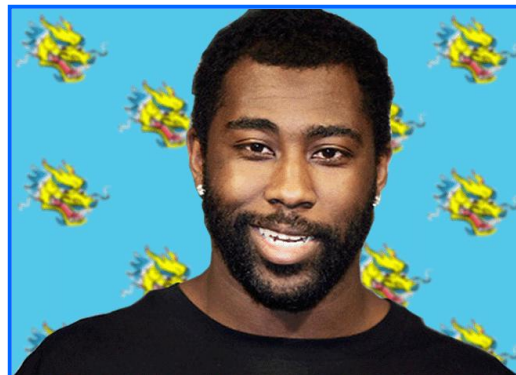


The Florida coach likes what he sees from the 2010 edition of the Dragons. Key trades and a promising crop of rookies have the two-time Champs poised to “three-peat.”

Not many coaches or GMs would dare to cast aside the league Offensive MVP the season immediately following a Championship. Once is bold enough. Imagine twice! Florida coach and GM, **Jim Heaton** is turning such an eyebrow-raising move into standard practice in the Everglades. But as long as he continues to bring Championship trophies to Dragonmount, nobody in Florida, aside from the players involved, is complaining.

Two years ago it was Offensive MVP **Tom Brady**. His trade to the **Winnemucca Outlaws** shocked the football world and brought instant credibility to the league’s most dysfunctional franchise. Brady went from top of the football world to the bottom after suffering a career-threatening injury in the

2009 pre-season that limited him to 2 cameo appearances and 5 pass attempts in the regular season. The prescient move by Heaton thrust young **Aaron Rodgers** into a role few thought he was prepared to play. But Rodgers silenced his critics with a career-defining game-winning TD drive against Durham in the Can-Am Conference Championship Game, then went on to lead the Dragons to their second consecutive Gale Sayers Trophy. Rodgers played his part to perfection – but he could not have done it without 2009 Offensive MVP, **DeAngelo Williams** in the backfield behind him. Williams set an EFL record with 26 rushing touchdowns, averaging 5.6 yards per

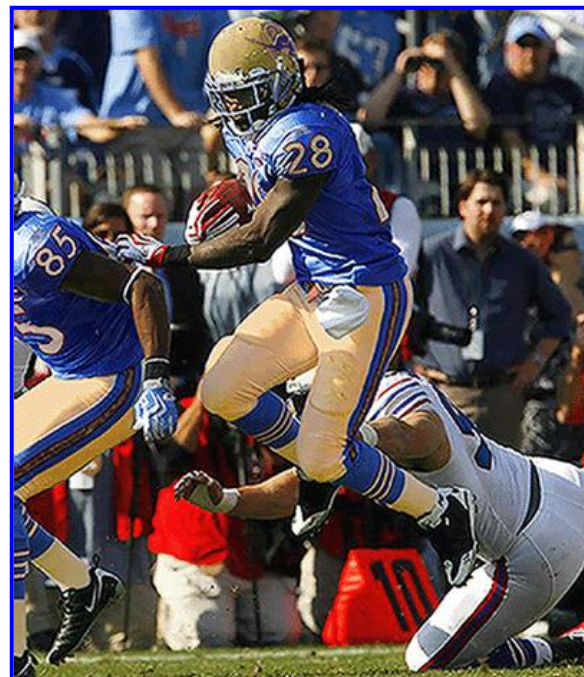


Dragon’s cornerback, **Darrelle Revis** talks to the Media about his new contract. Is he worth the 6.5 million Florida is paying him? 3 interceptions in pre-season have some pundits predicting defensive MVP in 2010.

carry while racking up 1,467 rushing yards – good for second in the league behind Charleswood’s **Adrian Peterson**. Williams continued his dominance in the post-season and ultimately earned Game MVP in the Final against Los Angeles, rushing for 75 yards on the first play from scrimmage to set up his own 1-yard plunge to open the scoring. But with the champagne on his Championship jersey barely dry, Williams was suddenly and unceremoniously dispatched to the woeful **Markham North Stars** for a first round pick. For all the kids – both old and young – who had spent small fortunes on authentic ‘Williams’ Dragons jerseys, the trade was at once an outrage and an insult. But in Jim Heaton’s world, with rookie **Ray Rice** waiting impatiently in the wings and **CJ Spiller** looking for a professional home, it was simply a good business decision.

“As a coach and a human being, it hurts to have to make these types of decisions,” Heaton explained in a telephone interview from his summer home on the Dragon River in Yangshuo, China. “But it would hurt even more to lose. As a GM, I cannot afford to get emotionally attached to any of my players. I get paid to win and I’ll do what I have to do to make the team better.”

Heaton certainly hates to lose. 8 complete sets of broken office furniture replaced during Florida’s inaugural 8-8 season is testimony to that. With each office chair an authentic replica of the Dragon Throne from the Q’ing Dynasty, the losses cost the team more than games in the



Pickering’s **Chris Johnson** dodges a tackle in pre-season action against the Cubs. The completely revamped Spartans are going on the attack in 2010.

standings. Heaton is loathe to discuss that first campaign, referring to it cursorily as a “dark period” in his career as a coach and GM. “But it was necessary,” he adds stoically. “For the painful memory of each loss forged our team’s will to win. Never again, I vowed, *never again*.”

Fortunately for the furniture budget, since they dropped a 28-13 decision to Mohave in the 2007 quarter final Florida losses have been few and far between. The Dragon’s record since then, including playoffs, stands at a formidable 36-2. That is no typo. 36-2. This stretch of dominance was built through shrewd trades, clever manipulation of the salary cap, and a scouting system perhaps unparalleled in the EFL. It is a dynasty that shows no sign of decline in 2010.

Key off-season acquisitions through the draft – **Ndamukong Suh**, **Russell Okung**, **CJ Spiller** and **Sean Weatherspoon** – and via trade – **Brandon Meriweather** and **Bart Scott** – mean that the Dragons enter this year’s campaign no weaker than they were last year, and perhaps even stronger. **Aaron Rodgers** has come of age and **Ray Rice** is emerging in camp as the duel ground-air threat that **DeAngelo Williams** was not. **Brandon Marshall** continues to run like a wild beast through opposing secondaries and **DeSean Jackson** is a threat to score from any spot on the field. As difficult as it is to imagine, the Florida offence may have become stronger with the departure of last year’s Offensive MVP.

### EFL.COM FAN POLL

Who will win the EFL Championship in 2010?

- ☐ Durham
- ☐ Florida
- ☐ Charleswood
- ☐ Chino
- ☐ It's Going to be a Big Surprise!

VOTE TO SEE RESULTS

On the defensive side of the ball, the “Firewall” has added fuel to the fire and appears as hot as ever, with the play of shutdown corner **Darrelle Revis** causing even the taciturn GM who drafted him to flash a rare smile of approval. “Darrelle is playing at a high level,” Heaton said after the Dragon’s final pre-season game, a 35-10 toasting of Markham in which Revis did not play. “He earned the night off. I don’t expect him to miss a beat in our season opener.” Although **Justin Tuck** reported to camp 20 pounds over last year’s playing weight of 272 lbs, the defensive line remains intimidating. **Dwight Freeney** appears poised to have a great year and rookie **Ndamukong Suh** looks already to be an upgrade over departed veteran tackle, **John Henderson**. **Brandon Meriweather** replaces the already forgotten **LaRon Landry** at strong safety, and newcomer, **Bart Scott** will stay at home to allow outside linebackers, **Terrell Suggs** and **LaMarr Woodley** to play hit-and-run on the edges.

Many respectable analysts are unhesitatingly predicting a third consecutive championship for the Dragons. Most are not even qualifying their opinions with the usual “ifs, ands, or buts.” The Dragons have



acquired an almost Tiger Woods-like mystique – beating their opponents mentally before even taking the field.

However, as we have seen very recently, Tiger Woods is human. And so are the Dragons. Two seasons of dominance also means two seasons of hunger for their opponents. One of those opponents, a top candidate for the Pacific-Atlantic title, seems to have the Dragon's number. The **Chino Convicts** are responsible for the two blemishes on what would otherwise be two perfect seasons for Florida. The Convicts are no strangers to the winner's circle, being the only team to win the Gale Sayers Trophy other than the Dragons, and they have retooled for another run at glory.

A two-year experiment with **Jay Cutler** at the helm failed to return the Boys from the Big House to the Big Game. So

Chino GM, **Rob Nazar** decided to swallow his pride and retrofit his team with proven winner, and original Convict, **Donovan McNabb**. McNabb's two-year exile to the expansion hinterland in Pickering and then Markham taught him it was best not to harbour a grudge against the franchise that dropped him suddenly after winning a Championship in 2007. When the Convicts knocked on Markham's door in the off-season, McNabb did not hesitate to accept the trade.

In Chino, McNabb will have the weapons he needs to guide his team to a West Division Title, and possibly a Championship berth. Workhorse running back **Steven Jackson**, acquired from Division rival Los Angeles, replaces the breaking down **LT** in the backfield, while **Hines Ward** and **Randy Moss** provide complimentary medium and deep threats at wide receiver. McNabb is low maintenance in the pocket, which should ease the burden on line anchors **Jahri Evans** and **Bryant McKinnie**. But while Chino expects to improve on last year's 11<sup>th</sup> place offensive ranking, they are banking on their defence, especially the pass rush and the secondary, to tip the balance in their favour against the league's elite teams. Word from the Yard (Chino's practice facility) is that the Convicts plan to live up to their name and lead the league in takeaways this season. They will play a gambling style, trusting their offense to have their back, and literally try to steal games from their opponents.

Poised to nab the Convicts and lock them out of the final are Conference rivals, Charleswood and Los Angeles. Both teams are in the running and will pose serious challenges to all comers. In a blockbuster trade with basement-dwelling Virden, the Pats brought in **Sidney Rice** to bolster a weak receiving corps that was



**Philip Rivers** of the Durham Thunder Lizards must prove he is capable of winning the big game. Good numbers, no Championship.

the Pat's 'Achilles heel' in the 2009 campaign. **Peyton Manning** will have better options and that means more points for the Pats. On defence, the loss of **Asante Samuel** will be felt in the secondary, but the squad remains deep in nickel and dime packages. An accomplished set of linebackers and a respectable defensive front four round-out a deceptively strong group.

The Knights are all about defence again this year with **Charles Woodson** and **Kevin Williams** leading a squad capable of going toe-to-toe with the best offences and denying them. Quarterback questions remain, as always, but **Jason Campbell** has adequate support with **Joe Thomas** guarding his blind side and **Jamaal Charles** and **Steve Smith** capable of breaking open big plays at any time. Can coach, **Jeff Dohrn** raise the level of his quarterback play yet again this year? If so, LA will be a Dark Horse (or Dark Knight) to return to the Big Game.

In the Can-Am Conference the **Durham Thunder Lizards** will once again attempt to beat the Dragons back into their mountain lair. In the off-season they made three key moves: signing **Philip Rivers** to a lucrative long term contract, and acquiring linebackers, **Elvis Dumervil** and **Jonathan Vilma** in trades with Ringgold and Garland. Dumervil and Vilma are impact players at positions the Dinosaurs have neglected in the past. They compliment an underrated secondary that has quietly built a reputation with EFL insiders as one of the most dangerous in the league. **Jared Allen** is a force off the edge of the line but the line could use another pass rush threat to mitigate the impact of double teams.

The Durham offensive line remains the class of the league, particularly in the interior, and will elevate everything behind it. Two great pass-catching tight ends in **Antonio Gates** and **Vernon Davis** will attract a lot of attention, but will it be enough to open up room for the receiving corps, where **Calvin Johnson** stands alone as the one elite threat? Charleswood discovered last year that the double tight end air attack cannot stand alone against good opponents. The pressure is squarely on Johnson and veteran **Mushin Muhammad** to get open from the outside and spread the coverage.

As in the past, the Lizards look good on paper – they always do. Where they seem to fall short is in that vaguely understood and unclassified "intangibles" category. Despite eye-popping numbers for a second straight year and a new contract,



**Tom Brady** shouts his approval after connecting for a TD with **Jeremy Shockey** in pre-season action. How far will new digs and a fully recovered Brady take the York Excaliburs in 2010?

**Philip Rivers** is under sentence from both the fans and management to deliver a berth in the final. Anything short of that could very well cement his growing reputation as a talented quarterback who chokes in the clutch. His two second half interceptions against Florida in the 2009 Conference Final remain a source of recrimination from certain outspoken local reporters and impatient fans. When asked if this is a make or break year for the 3-year vet, Durham GM and coach, **George Kaldis** struggles to conceal his irritation. "Philip is our quarterback. Next question," he says.

While much of the pre-season focus has been on how Durham will handle Florida in the post-season, analysts from the rogue agency, Football Outriders.Org refuse to drink the 'Kool-Aid' when it comes to Florida and Durham.

"Giant reptiles, both fire-breathers and meat-eaters, are heading for extinction in 2010," writes **Harry Schultz**, the site's founder and statistical guru. From the writer who successfully predicted a dynasty for the Dragons a year before it started, this statement has to raise some eyebrows and some concern for those with a desire for the 'status quo.'

*Outriders* points to the **Pickering Spartans** and, shockingly, the **Ringgold Crimson Hawks**, two 4-12 teams from last year, as squads ready to emerge and challenge the Dragon's and Dinosaur's dominance of the Can-Am Conference.

"They looked bad last year and fans have that imprinted on their memories," Shultz says of the Spartans. "But they've been very, very active in the off-season and the moves they've made are serious upgrades.

A team can turn it around in one year in this league. Watch the Spartans. There is no match for them in their own Division and they have the talent to take down a team like Florida. Watch them – after a few weeks you'll see what I am talking about."

Last year the Spartan's house was in almost total disrepair. The defence was ranked dead last. Their secondary was a sieve, surrendering more yards than any other team, and the run defence was never tested. They were last in takeaways and second last in points surrendered. Their offence fared better, due to the constant threat of running back **Chris Johnson**, but it was not capable of keeping up with the scoring pace of their opponents. The Spartans tried, but they were nowhere near good enough to finish 500, let alone compete for a title. The Spartan's ineptness humiliated their proud owner and GM, **Gus Konstantakos**, and he vowed very publicly to do something about it.

In one of the more surprising trades of the off-season, the Spartans acquired **Asante Samuel** from the Charleswood Patriots. He now pairs up with **Jonathan Joseph** to form one of the better starting CB tandems in the league. They also brought in future hall-of-famer, **Tony Gonzalez** to be the full service tight end that **Tony Scheffler** was not. They upgraded at offensive tackle, acquiring **Jonathan Stewart** to provide balance to a line strongly weighted on the left by stalwarts **Jake Long** and **Kris Dielman**, and snatched up **Percy Harvin** and veteran safety **Brian Dawkins** from York.

But the 'coup de grace' was a cutthroat deal worthy of Jim Heaton. In order to clear cap room, Konstantakos sent **Eli Manning** packing to Gwinnett in exchange for **Carson Palmer**. A happy Palmer arrived in Pickering for the Press Conference only to be told, over a glass of 'ouzo' by a grinning, stogie-smoking Konstantakos, that he was being released. The Press Conference, as it turned out, was to announce Pickering's signing of **Brett Favre** away from the SFL's Driftwood Bullies. Meanwhile, **Carson Palmer** is now pitching pigskin for the Monterrey Jacks in the Tex-Mex League.

Most bold of all, perhaps, is the *Outriders* take on the team they call "fireproof" – a reference to their belief that the **Ringgold Crimson Hawks** will challenge Florida for the South Division title. "At worst, they will finish a close second and earn a wildcard berth," states *Outrider* analyst, Alpin Plunderflunder.

The agency bases this bold prediction on an anticipated breakout season by 3-year underachiever, **Ben Roethlisberger**. "He finally has a line to protect him and a running game to lean on. Big Ben will bust out." Most, including this writer, do not share the *Outrider's* opinion of Ringgold, the league's most disappointing team in 2010. But we would be remiss if we overlooked the possibility that targets like **Andre Johnson** and **Santonio Holmes** might lift Big Ben into an MVP-calibre season; or that any team that feels it can trade away the likes of **Elvis Dumervil** and **Gary Brackett** and still be competitive has, if nothing else, the necessary cockiness to challenge the Florida machine and slap them down when they are not looking.

Regardless of where you stand on predicting the final outcome of the EFL's 2010 campaign, everyone seems to agree that getting there will be a thrill. The level of competition among the top teams is high, the will is strong, and anything can happen when that whacky ellipsoid known as a football starts bouncing.



## The Fiery Depths – Satan's Playroom



By BILL BLATT, EXTREME ADVENTURER

HELENDALE, CA – Hell has a price tag. The going rate is one human soul at the end of an intoxicatingly great time on Earth – not a bad deal until you realize that your soul is all you really have at the end of it all – and you just gave it away.

But there is good news for those of you who want to experience Hell without forfeiting the quintessence of your being to the angel of the bottomless pit. For as little as \$30 admission, plus the cost of a tube of 80 SPF sun block and a good wide-brimmed hat, you can enjoy hell without suffering permanent damage to your body or your soul. Call it “brimstone on a budget.” And it’s right here on Earth – a mere 30 minute drive from Victorville along a well-preserved stretch of historic Route 66 in the Mohave Desert.

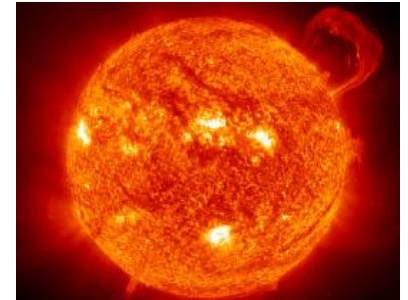
The Fiery Depths is the vision of one man – reclusive venture capitalist, Bobby Elder, owner of the Mohave Hellfire of the Elite Football League. The first stadium in the United States powered completely by solar power, it promulgates an image worthy of the Devil Himself while furnishing enough creature comforts to ensure the safe return of the fan base. This does not mean that there are no real and inherent dangers in plopping a full-service stadium in the middle of one of the hottest and driest places in the country. But like Jurassic Park in Durham, it is *mostly* safe if you follow the rules – I learned this the hard way.



The Corporate logo of Hellfire Consultants Ltd. The powerful and esoteric entity that owns the Mohave Hellfire has a murky history.

A little historical perspective is in order here. The demise of the NFL also meant the end of the “Old Boys Club” of professional football and its three-way incestuous relationship with the networks, politics and organized crime. With the Old Establishment shut out of future prospects in the profitable football entertainment industry, a new era of previous outcasts – eccentric billionaires and wide-eyed community ownership groups previously considered too unstable (or too honest) for membership in “The Club” – was ushered in. They are the New Establishment. It is a curious group. One of the more curious of this bunch is Bobby Elder.

After a failed enterprise to farm intelligent porpoises in the Niger Delta for the US Navy, Elder sold



The sun over Hellendale, home of Hellfire Consultants Ltd., looks like an image from Dante's Inferno – surreal, other-worldly.

his stake in financing giant, Slaughter House Inc. and started Hellfire Consultants Ltd with the help of an enigmatic business partner; one Mr. Sammael Mastema Baphomet, Chairman of the obscure Bank of West Hades. Elder established his new company in the Mohave Desert, purportedly at 666 Tartarus Pit Pathway in Helendale. This is a location that, I discovered, is apparently impossible to find for anyone other than a Hellfire employee, but from which Elder can assert tight control over several lucrative and somewhat secretive ventures both at home and abroad.

Hellfire Consultant's low public profile as a corporation contrasted intriguingly with its public stature as the source of wealth for the Mohave Hellfire football club. Who or what, exactly, was behind the franchise? Having never been to a game in Mohave, but knowing that it offered an extreme football experience, I was curious to find out more.

It is not my style to arrange formal appointments when I can drop in unexpectedly and hopefully extract a little candor from my surprised host. So, without calling ahead I decided to take a trip to Helendale early one Tuesday morning to visit Elder at the Hellfire's head office. I left my hotel in Victorville around 8:00 am. Two hours later, with my Jeep running on the edge of ‘empty’ and hopelessly lost, I placed a desperate call to Bobby Elder on my cell phone from a place that, as far as I know, does not exist on any current commercial maps of the Mohave Desert.



As an experienced *Extreme Adventurer* and third term President of the Toronto Chapter of the Indiana Jones Society, getting lost was something I was trained to deal with. I had never stayed lost for long and had always kept a cool head when I found myself temporarily misplaced. But this time there were several reasons for me to experience uncommon consternation, bordering on panic, at my current and sudden predicament.

First of these was that the heat radiating off the desert floor was so intense that I was beginning to lay rubber without applying my brakes. While temperatures on the desert floor of the Mohave have been known to exceed 130° F at high noon, this heat was not a natural heat and, at 10:00 am, not a natural time for it. Second was the absence of an actual road and directional signs. Not that I normally needed either to stay on course when driving off-road, but in the past when I had strayed off the beaten path I had always had a sense of where the sun was; which brings me to the third and most alarming aspect of the situation – there was no sun! But there was light – a rosy red light, fairly evenly distributed across the horizon, dotted with the odd wisp of smoky black cloud. With a sense of foreboding and intuition I asked myself; “where the *Hell* am I?”

When Elder finally answered the phone I whispered under my breath, “thank *God*,” then sharply yelled in pain when I immediately felt a stab, almost like a pitchfork, poke my rear end. I looked around but there was nothing around me....except of course the vaguely hellish landscape I have already described.

After first apologizing for not arranging an appointment to see him, I explained my situation and asked him very politely, as sweat rolled off my forehead, whether he might be able to take some time out of his busy schedule to give me some directions to his office and grant me an interview. I added, almost choking on humiliation, but too full of trepidation to be proud, that I seemed to have gotten.... *lost*!

“Ah,” he said affably, “no problem at all, Bill. It can be a little tricky to get to, yes. I keep telling Amy to put the directions on the website but she always comes up with some excuse. Anyway, let me take a look here.” There was a long pause, then, “yes, I see you! Oh dear, you really got off the beaten track didn’t you?”

There was a sound like a hand covering the mouthpiece and I could hear him barking something to somebody about “fourth level,” then his voice became clear again and he said, “I’m sending someone out to get you, stay put. Oh...and how do you like your coffee?”

It did not take long for someone to appear....literally. Whether it was due to heat exhaustion or deer-in-the-headlights inattentiveness I cannot say, but my rescuer caught me by surprise. I did not see or hear him coming – he just seemed to be there suddenly, in a black car with red lights, tinted windows and a silver-horned goat hood ornament.

He rolled down the window. For a split second I thought I saw a large snake in the driver’s seat but after I blinked I saw only a dusky-skinned man with dark glasses glaring at me condescendingly. He introduced himself as Bagat and gave



**A line of SUVs travels to Fiery Depths II on game day in the Mohave Desert. For fans, finding the stadium is easy, but expect one hell of a time trying to find the head office of Bobby Elder’s Hellfire Consultants, Ltd.**

the peremptory command, “follow me exactly. Do not mind the river of lava coming from the Swamp of Fire on your right; it cannot harm your vehicle if you follow my path.”

I hadn’t noticed the Swamp of Fire before but as he pointed it out there it was; flaming, smoking and spewing molten rock from crevices ten yards wide at places. Was that a scream I heard coming from one of them?

I cannot say for sure if it took an eternity or merely seconds for the scenery to change to something more familiar because I had fallen into a haunting reverie behind the wheel that obliterated any certain memory of my trip. Vague shapes, unnerving sounds, foul smells, and a strange ‘*déjà vu*’ memory of someone named Chris Worthley telling me, “don’t sign, don’t sign,” flitted in and out of my consciousness before I could fix them in my mind. *Worthley....where do I know that name from?*

The experience, if you could call it that, left me physically drained and feeling pathetically grateful to suddenly see road signs for the National Trails Highway (Historic Route 66) and a Mobil Gas bar with real cars in the parking lot, their silver hubcaps gleaming in the bright mid-morning sun. Ah, yes, the Sun!

Bagat was driving fast and I was having trouble keeping pace, but it didn’t matter anymore. I felt strangely confident that I knew how to get to Hellfire Consultants even though I could not have described the route. Like a road driven many times without thinking, I followed a path that became familiar as I moved along, each landmark leading me to the next. I was unsurprised when I saw the sign at the side of the road indicating that my exit was approaching: ‘EXIT 666,’ and underneath it, ‘HELLENDALE Tartarus Pit Pathway.’ Odd, I thought. I did not recall seeing an exit 666 on my Rand McNally road map.

The exit ramp turned sharply to the right and down a steep grade that temporarily put my jeep in the overlapping shadows of two large scrub-topped hills. It wound again almost as sharply to the left and between two tall and gnarly Joshua Trees that seemed briefly to bend in the hot and windless air as I drove past them. After about a quarter mile the road leveled and straightened and I was able to look far ahead across a great expanse of nothing but rock and creosote bush to see a small reddish bump on the horizon.

Like much of the Mohave Desert, the road leading to Hellfire Consultants is desolate to the eye but pulses with the energy of hidden life. The senses are keener when not overloaded with the white noise of civilization, and the knowledge that all life, including your own, clings tenuously to its existence in such extreme environments sharpens them further. It is that feeling of sensual empowerment that drives the ‘Extreme Adventurer’ to explore the hidden and rugged regions of the world; and to drink copious amounts of beer afterwards when forced to retreat and



**The original Fiery Depths was actually the refurbished old Mohave College football stadium. A lack of comforts on the field and in the stands caused sunstroke, injury, and several deaths. The plans for Fiery Depths II, 'Solar Stadium' were expedited with the launching of a class action lawsuit following one game vs. Meadowlands.**

recoup from the experience.

With Bagat and some curious inner compass as my guide I eventually arrived at the Head Office of Hellfire Consultants, Ltd. I could have searched for a decade and never found it, so well is it hidden.

I can tell the reader that it is located in Hellendale, a "suburb" of Helendale, near Silver Lakes Resort. You will not likely find Hellendale unless somebody at Hellfire Consultants wants you to find it. But on the slim chance you were to accidentally stumble upon it you would certainly not find the Hellfire offices before their security descended upon you, drugged and interrogated you, and then dumped your unconscious body at the side of Route 66. This, Bobby later explained to me, was the treatment I might have received if he had not authorized my passage into the town. And it was perfectly legal, as a 'Level 10 Authorized Consultant' to the Pentagon, for Hellfire staff to do this. What was left unsaid, but implied, was that dumping an unconscious captive at the side of the road was on the benevolent side of the scale of possible outcomes for one caught trespassing.

I was met by Bobby Elder in the underground parking lot. He looked relaxed and comfortable in a maroon track suit. He brought me up to the main lobby through a surprisingly tight internal cordon of security. I was not permitted to see the entire complex, but the public areas of

Hellfire Consultants were quite impressive in their design and very comfortable. I was assigned a hostess, a blonde-haired Japanese woman named Izanami, to attend to my desires.

"Whatever you wish is yours," she informed me, in such a way that I was inclined to take her literally. I asked her for a Red Bull because I was feeling drained. Her eyes betrayed fleeting disappointment but she nodded and in less than a minute I had a can of Red Bull in my hand – impressive.

Bobby had invited me to one of the private lounges for the interview. Far from being offended at my attempt at a surprise visit, he seemed genuinely glad to have me there. Izanami led me in and Elder stood up immediately and extended his hand. "I've read your work, Bill and I'm really impressed. I liked your piece on the Machu Pichu Ball Hockey team – cutting edge, really. It reminded me of my early days in the consultancy business. It could get pretty dangerous too and I was on the edge a few times."

"It would depend on who you were consulting for, I guess," I added helpfully, trying to show a measure of adventurer solidarity in spite of my doubts about what may have been his daring exploits. He was a business man after all, and the only risks I could envision him taking involved securities and derivatives.

"I must caution you, though," Elder's voice took on a serious tone, "It is important that you stay with me while you are in Hellendale and don't go off on your own. Remember that giant boulder that almost trapped you in that Incan ruin? Fairly straightforward stuff compared with the kind of trouble you can get into here, trust me."

His words brought to mind a question that I had been waiting to ask him since his employee, Bagat had found me roasting in the middle of nowhere this morning. "Where was I when I called you this morning? I thought I was on the road to Helendale. The maps don't show anything like it."

"Ahhh..." Elder paused to consider his response, "It's hard to explain and I am not sure it would be in the best interests of my organization to be frank with you. You must understand that Hellfire Consultants does a great deal of sensitive work for the government as well as for several very large international corporations. We do business by appointment only and we have taken precautions to guard ourselves against unexpected visitors. For security reasons, you understand."

"Who are you guarding yourselves against, if I may ask?"

"We have a number of competitors that seek to undermine us and steal our secrets. Eternal Paradise Advisors Ltd is one such company that always seems to be in the bidding with us when we are looking to make acquisitions. They even tried to follow us into the EFL, but their bid for the Saint Gabriel Apostles fell through fortunately."

"I've never heard of them," I said.

"There are many influential and powerful corporate entities I am sure you, and the public at large, have never heard of. They don't advertise much, if at all. We, for instance, do not rely directly on the public to support us, but how the public behaves can have an indirect effect on our business. Therefore, we offer professional advice and support, and invest in ventures that further our interests and allow us to grow." It was an enigmatic response but delivered with authority. I had no doubt that there was something big and substantial behind what he was telling me even if I was no closer to a deep insight about Hellfire Consultants.

"Why invest in football in the desert?" I asked, getting to the main point.

He laughed, "Because I like the idea."

When I didn't respond to that, he added, "I've always wanted a professional football team. I used to be a huge Redskins fans back in the days of the NFL but I hated Snyder. I always thought I could do a better job. Now I'm trying my hand at it."

“But why play in the desert? Especially here – there’s hardly anybody around.”

“It’s a challenge, for sure. But I am building more than a football facility here in the Victor Valley. Eventually this area will be like a Desert Disney World,” his eyes fixed on an uncertain point directly ahead of us and his face took on a dreamy air. “*Hell World*,” he intoned with simmering passion, “*One Hell of a Time for the Whole Family*.”

In between over a dozen phone calls and other interruptions, Elder spoke about the Mohave Hellfire and the football facility he had created – Fiery Depths II, the Solar Stadium. He avoided offering details about the prime businesses in the Hellfire Empire, but he did claim that running his “business interests,” as he put it was relatively easy compared with managing his EFL franchise. He described the problem of finding a place to play.

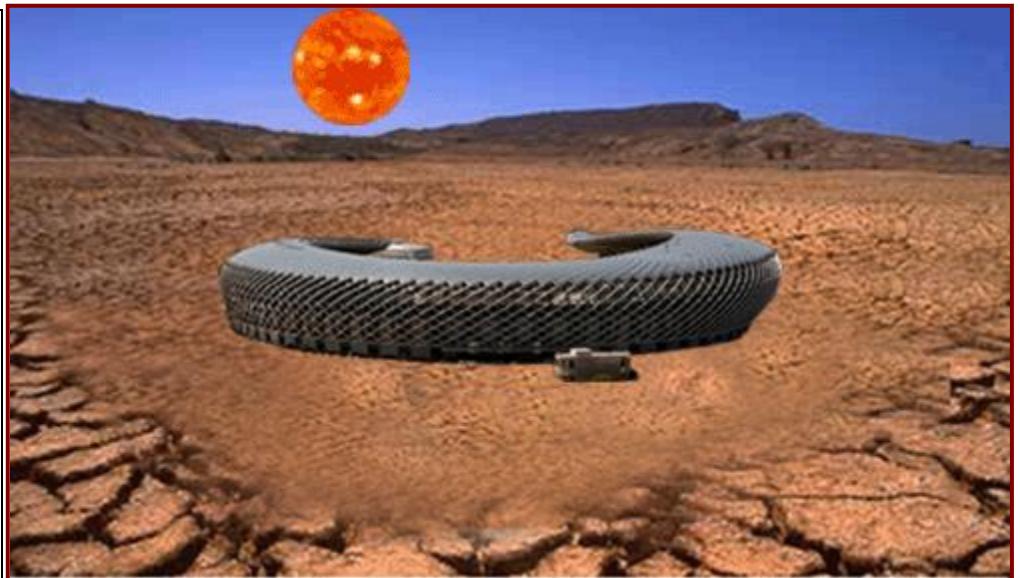
Due to the short start up time to get a league together following the unexpected collapse of the NFL, the Hellfire had played their inaugural EFL season in the hastily refurbished old Mohave College football stadium. Nick-named The Fiery Depths, it certainly had lived up to its moniker. In one 2007 contest against Meadowlands, temperatures in the stands reached 121 degrees while on field measurements recorded a high of 128 degrees in the second quarter. Several players collapsed, including the entire Swamp Dogs offensive line on one play, although it took a minute for people to notice. The ‘*Flaming Succubi*’ (the Hellfire Cheerleaders) were forced to limit their celebrations to after Mohave scores only. One water boy died of heat exhaustion after making over one hundred trips to refill the player’s water bottles. 10 fans died after collapsing in the stands and over 600 others were treated on site or in local clinics and hospitals for heat exhaustion.

It was a mess and the ensuing scandal resulted in class action lawsuits that threatened the viability of the franchise and the league. The team considered moving afternoon games to night time but found the desert as cold at night as it was hot during the day. So upon the conclusion of that first season, Elder put his company to work to build the ultimate desert football experience.

“We wanted to capture the rugged extremities of the desert environment without an unacceptable risk to life,” he explained. “The league imposed certain safety conditions on the experiment and we met those conditions whole-heartedly. Our goal was to create a test of endurance for the players and for those fans who wanted it, but one that could be failed without death or permanent harm and attempted over and over again if necessary.”

“Danger without risk,” I interjected.

“Exactly, Bill!” he rose up from his chair and pointed his index finger in the air. “Most people want the kind of thrill you and I might seek in our real and dangerous adventures, but don’t want to pay the price for it. At Fiery Depths II, the player or the fan



**An artist's virtual rendition of Fiery Depths II – Solar Stadium, prior to construction, complete with red hot sun. The deep and copious BBQ pits in the grounds around the stadium were not conceptualized in the planning stage. They sprung up later due to fan demand.**

*perceives* that he has put his life on the line for football but he is able to go home safe and sound at the end of the day. It’s a truly American entertainment experience and a win-win situation for everybody. Look, why talk about it when you can find out for yourself?” he said, and then presented me with a ticket to that Sunday’s game against Durham. “Enjoy,” he said with a smile.

I was about to see exactly what the Fiery Depths experience was like from a fan’s perspective.

Fortunately, Solar Stadium is not difficult to find. In fact, you cannot miss it if you continue north past Helendale on Route 66. There it is, visible from the highway – like a giant spaceship plopped in the middle of a square mile of parched earth – not a shrub or lichen to be seen. So flat and hard is the earth around the stadium that there is no need for paved roads – only painted lines in the dirt and sign posts directing motorists to the various parking areas.

Along the numerous paths to the stadium are dozens of “Last Chance” refreshment stands made up to look like old desert mining camp wells. You can buy sun-block, wide-brimmed hats and various “provisions,” including beer, which come packed in mock plastic saddle bags. Entrepreneurs, dressed up like native Mojave Indians, stand nearby offering cheap souvenirs. Worried new arrivals to the stadium flock to these “last chance” concession stands only to find out later that most of what they purchased at them could be had for the same price or cheaper inside the stadium. The “Last Chance” stands do offer a couple of good bargains, however; the relatively cheap local cigarettes, *Mohave Hellsmokes* and lighter fluid at half the usual price to start the barbecues of the tailgaters.

Unique among facilities in the EFL the general parking around Solar Stadium is free of charge – first come, first served. Exceptions include the players and employees parking areas, which are off-limits to the public and require passes, and the VIP zone next to the east wall which is reserved for Platinum Season ticket holders and guests of the club.



Scattered throughout the parking areas are literally hundreds of BBQ pits dug into the parched earth. If authentic mesquite BBQ is your thing, the Fiery Depths may be the best place for it and worth the trip even if you don't attend the game. An instant tradition began in the team's first season when a local restaurant set up a 'Mesquite Grill Pit' on game day to serve cheap but delicious burgers, steak and chicken. Now, several other restaurants and dozens of individuals have set up their own grill pits and the Victor Valley Chamber of Commerce is involved in organizing promotions and competitions.

The stadium is huge when viewed from the outside due to the space required for the over 8,000 solar panels. However, the actual field area is only 93,000 square feet and the seating capacity a relatively modest 66,666. When not in use, Fiery Depths II is capable of providing power for the local communities of Helendale, Hodge and Oro Grande.

I toured field level on Saturday before the game. The team benches feature canopies, huge fans, and dozens of misters to cool off players and coaches. Refrigeration units are actually built into the field level retaining wall to provide ice, Gatorade, water, and a local Mohave favourite, 'Hola Aloe,' a soft drink made from the *aloe vera* plant, known for its moisturizing properties.

The first ten rows of spectator's seats, reserved for Gold season ticket holders, are similarly equipped to withstand the rigours of the sun and provide comfort. Each seat is fitted with a small retractable canopy and a "mini-mister." In addition to those luxuries, a team of stewards fetch food and attend to other needs of the fans in the Gold seats.

The actual field is not so hospitable. In order to guarantee a miserable experience for the non-acclimatized visiting team, the field is allowed to heat up without respite. Officially classified as "turf," the grounds at Solar Stadium are composed of an original mixture of brick oven-baked peat moss, creosote oil, saguaro cactus paste and heat-cultivated Buffalo, Kentucky Bluegrass, and Bermuda grass seeds. This custom blend produces a durable, stable, slip-free surface that retains heat and locks it in so efficiently that the field can be as much as 20 degrees hotter than the ambient temperature around the stadium. This can be, of course, extremely taxing on the players.

"We were playing Ringgold in the home opener and guys were dropping on both sides," explained Kurt Warner, who I bumped into as he was leaving practice on Saturday. "It was like 125 degrees at field level we were told later. Anyway, we were in a hurry-up near the end of the first half and Brian (Westbrook) starting having these weird visions. He'd come back to the huddle all wide-eyed saying stuff about the spirits being angry and we'd be cursed if we didn't get off the field. I kept telling him he was imagining things but that made it worse. Finally I looked at him straight in the eye and yelled, 'you're right, they're angry! And they'll be friggin' more pissed if you don't score a touchdown!' On the next play I threw a sideline pass to Brian and he took it the distance, about 50 yards, as if the Devil himself was on his tail! I think we laughed all through half time. We still laugh about it."

The Mohave players for the most part have grown accustomed to the conditions. They practice twice a week under the blazing Mohave sun on Griddle Field, which is really nothing more than a roped-off extension of the parking lot. Keeping hydrated is a challenge, but a team of doctors and trainers are on standby on the sidelines and monitor the players continuously. Linebacker, Brian Urlacher is philosophical about the desert conditions. "Every time I feel like I can't take it anymore I think that the guy on the other side is probably feeling worse."

Not all players are so sanguine about the experience. Nose tackle, Jamal Williams has been having difficulty keeping up his massive weight, sweating off as many as 10 to 15 lbs during the weeks of home games. When Elder refused to let him skip practice, Williams declared he wanted a trade. He now reportedly refuses to re-sign with the Hellfire and will become a Free Agent when his contract expires.

The fan has several experiences to choose from: season tickets come in Platinum, Gold, Silver and 'Mohave Red' packages. The Platinum Club experience is straight luxury box, air-conditioned comfort at the 400-level – not very different from the high end services offered in other EFL parks. The entire level is sealed off by tinted glass and features rooms of various sizes and seating capacities. Bobby Elder's personal box is located on this level as is the box belonging to his partner at Hellfire, Mr. Sammael Mastema Baphomet. Gold and Silver club packages offer good seating and varying levels of relief from the sun and heat. But the real test of a fan's mettle is in the 'Mohave Red' seats.

The 'Mohave Club' is a no frills fan experience for the "Average Joe." The area encompasses the 500 and 600 levels and both end zones. Seats are hard plastic and fans are expected to take care of their own comfort. This area is where you are most likely to find those fanatic and unhinged fans you often see on television, proving their manhood by brazenly and drunkenly defying the elements. On game day, two such fans; one dressed in a parka and snow pants, the other wearing nothing but a bathing suit and sun tan oil, had collapsed by half time and had to be carted away by medics.

The concessions at Fiery Depths II, Solar Stadium are an interesting collage of southwest American cultural influences and pseudo Satanic symbolism. All in good fun, of course. I spent some time touring all levels and found some very unique features. Among the more notable is the "Dream Life" stand, where patrons can purchase wealth, fame and fortune for nothing more than a signature on a document. A life-sized cardboard cutout of Terrell Owens and a cloud embossed with the words "*Be All You Can't Be!*" frame the stall where a platinum blonde with a bust like two Graff Zeppelins in attack formation stands smiling and beckoning to anyone who ventures a causal glance in her direction. She explains that Terrell Owens (not his real name) was once a depressed 21-year old, 145 lb busboy named LeJulius Jontorius Cuddington, who wanted to be a professional football player. Now he plays for the Hellfire and has 60 million reasons to love his life.

She looked me up and down. After a lengthy pause she suggested that I would make a good Eastern European Dictator – some former Republics of the old Soviet Union are still agitating for independence, she pointed out, and with the right "backing" South Ossetia could be made to break cleanly away from Georgia – all that is needed is the right Supreme Leader to lead the people out of bondage. "Could



**Tired of your life? Rather be Terrell Owens, or Tom Brady, or Bobby Elder? Just sign here. It's that easy! "Dream Life" stands as all the rage at Mohave's Fiery Depths II.**

you be that Leader?" she purred beguilingly. She added offhandedly that Eastern European Dictators live extremely well and enjoy great wealth and privilege until the inevitable people's revolution and brutal execution. "But not to worry," she added encouragingly, "the package comes with a standard 'Painless Death' clause for the principal signatory."

To my secret shame I paused to consider her offer. As if she read my mind her eyes suddenly sparkled red and I felt light-headed. Then my ingrained Adventurer's Sense kicked in like a safety valve – nothing that was so easy was worth it, I thought, countering my wanton ambition with my soul's champion. Her eyes dimmed and I felt my feet under me again. She looked at me with hostility, but a measure of respect. "Begone," she hissed.

Just before the game I had traded the Platinum tickets Elder had given me to a scalper for a fistful of 'Mohave Red' seats in the 600 level of the south end zone in a section known as "The Damned." I handed a dozen out to a gaggle of delinquents selling cheap bottled water on the south stadium road. I do that sort of thing from time to time to shake up the atmosphere and because a Calcutta street urchin once saved me from the evil, Rapja Khan, Supreme Khawaja of the Purple Panfrit, by concealing me in his dung buggy from Khan's Dwarzk Assassins. I had had every intention of experiencing the extremities of the Fiery Depths, and would not be deprived of the 'Mohave' experience even for a pair of rare and expensive Platinum seats. Hopefully Elder would forgive me when I failed to show at his luxury box.

When the game began I reverted naturally into fandom; forgetting the esotericism of life inside and on the periphery of Solar Stadium. For the true fan it's all about the football. By kickoff time there were plenty of those types of fans in attendance – boisterous, bellowing, beer-swilling boosters of the Hellfire and a handful of even more obnoxious Thunder Lizards supporters, struggling to be heard

over the tumult of cheers and jeers. Only at a football game (or perhaps a soccer match or a Malaysian cock fight) is boorishness a boon to the atmosphere. Only at a football game could I sit wearing my tall white Pith helmet and not attract undue attention.

The heat in the stands was intense. On the field it was baking. Muffins rose in tin trays on the sidelines where the owner of a local Bakery & Breakfast Nook had set up shop. A line of water boys passed buckets of ice cold water along under a giant misting rod. Players occasionally teetered on the field and had to be substituted. Official timeouts became longer as the game progressed. I finished off the last of the water I had received from one of the street kids who was grateful for the ticket I had given him. And as the fourth quarter began the frustration of the crowd raised the temperature another degree as they reacted to their Hellfire getting their behinds whopped by the hot hand of Philip Rivers. With little less than 15 minutes remaining, Durham led 17-13.

As the crowd became more and more restless and prone to angry outbursts, I noticed one gentleman, oddly familiar but not placeable in my memory, sitting quietly in the front row of the "Damned" section. He wore a black suit, which must have been extremely uncomfortable in the heat, and sported a coal black goatee and handlebar moustache. He looked far too genteel for the setting and did not look like a football fan to me, despite the red paint all over his face. He appeared more interested in watching the crowd than the game. He was counting people, apparently at random.

The Hellfire took over the ball in their own end with just over eight minutes remaining in the game, down by 4 points. The surly crowd had worked its way into a fuming frenzy. A begrudging cheer rose up as Mohave gained a first down, soon followed by an angry jeer as Terrell Owens dropped an easy pass from Warner on the next play. The heckling reached a fanatic height when Warner then missed an open Shaun McDonald and Jerome Harrison was stuffed for a loss on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10.

At that moment the scene in front of me slowed down and The Man in the suit stood up, drawing all eyes toward him. The play on the field froze behind him and he spoke. Although his mouth moved, his voice resonated directly inside my head, bypassing air travel. *"THE HELLFIRE ARE DESTINED TO LOSE, MY FRIENDS. THEY WILL PUNT NOW AND DURHAM WILL HAVE THE BALL UNTIL THE END OF THE GAME."* He spoke to 4000 pairs of glazed eyes in the "Damned" section. *"BUT IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE SO. YOU CAN CHANGE THE OUTCOME IF YOU DESIRE. CHOOSE NOW!"* he bellowed the last two words but continued to mutter something under his breath. With my keen Adventurer's Senses thought I could dimly make out, in tiny, tiny words, *"and if you choose to alter Fate you forfeit your eternal soul to the Corporation of the 6<sup>th</sup> level of the Underworld, all rights to it hereafter reserved for said Corporation for eternity, or until said 6<sup>th</sup> level freezes over."* He was speaking in fine print!

Suddenly and briefly, the eyes of the crowd re-focused and they were aware again. The drunks in the crowd and a few lunatics raised their hands or pumped fists in the air, yelling approval for the change. The Man counted the number of raised hands and spoke into a cellular phone, "227, Mr. Baphomet, sir. Do you approve the change?" After a brief pause, he nodded and turned to the field, waving his left hand in a half circle. In a flash the crowd was suddenly cheering as Jerome Harrison busted a run for 10 yards on a pitch. Four plays later, the seldom-used Harrison was in the end zone for the go-ahead TD after an 11-yard run. The Hellfire went on to win the game easily by a score of 30-17 against the suddenly snake-bitten Lizards.

In stunned disbelief I meandered away from my seat after the game. Some of the fans headed to another exit I had not seen earlier,



staggering in a trance towards a passageway labelled 'Level 6.' The last two digits of '600' were missing from the concrete façade. The others, including myself, walked out through the Level 600 passage where we had come in. It had been the only entrance.

Nobody else had seemed to notice the bizarre turn of events on the field. The radio talk shows carried on with post-game coverage as if nothing unusual had occurred. Nobody talked about the Owens drop. A few callers commented that Harrison had run like a man possessed and thought he should replace Brian Westbrook as the starter. I decided to place a call to Elder.

"How did you enjoy the game, Bill?" he asked. "We missed you in the box but I hear you found your way to the Section of the Damned where all the diehards go. Not surprised, actually. It's just like you to sniff out the fun and adventure."

"Yes, I did. And something very unusual happened." I answered.

"Yes, we won," joked Elder.

"No, I mean *very* unusual. Like weird, *impossible* unusual." I proceeded to describe my experience. There was a long pause on the other end of the connection. "Bobby? Are you there?"

"Let's have dinner and talk about it. Where are you *right now*, Bill?" Bobby asked finally.



### POSTGAME

Of course, I didn't tell Bobby where I was. My Extreme Adventurer Sense told me it would not be a good idea.

I am writing this exclusive feature from an undisclosed location far away from North America and out of the reach of Hellfire Consultants Ltd. By the time you read this, it is probable that at least two years have passed, as communications from here are difficult.

Although I cannot say for sure that I wasn't suffering from some kind of heat-induced hallucination or dream, I believe that what I experienced late in the game at Fiery Depths II was real. I have no explanation for it and leave it to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. However, I discovered one clue that may, in a world full of subtle miracles and magical mysteries, explain why I remember what happened in Level 600 at the fiery Depths while my fellow spectators and the world at large do not.

In emptying my backpack after the game I went to toss into the recycle bin one of the empty water bottles that the street kid had given me. I paused when a glint on the label caught my eye. I looked at it again and noticed for the first time that it did not read 'Aquafina' as I remembered, although it was written in the identical font. Instead it read 'Aquavitae' and in small print underneath, "Holy Water for the Hellish Heat." I turned the bottle around in my hand and examined the label. When the light hit at a certain angle a holographic trademark suddenly became visible: '**Eternal Paradise Ltd.**'

I heard a faint angelic chorus of hallelujahs inside my head as I contemplated the implications and, without conscious intent, whispered a thank you to that freckly faced street kid. Saved by an urchin....*again!*

## MASCOT MADNESS!

....with Sparky Matcheson, Continental Traveller



Florida's "Pin Head." Doing his best to get a reaction from the fans that have everything.

SOMEWHERE IN NORTH AMERICA – I am Sparky Matcheson, and I travel the continent – North America actually. I have never crossed the Atlantic and I never will, so I've never seen a live European Football fan in its natural habitat. But I hear they are crazy. I have seen an American Football fan up close and I *know* they're crazy! So, it seems to me that football brings out the crazies on both sides of the Atlantic. Fans will lose their heads, or put a new one on, to outdo the lunatic next door in support of their team.

Sparky's travels continue  
on the next page

Europeans have a long history of killing each other. I hear that it's too cramped over there and they have too many churches. Whatever the reason, their football fans can turn really violent. It's like real war for them and their teams are the armies. If the teams don't get it done on the field, they do it themselves. Frig! I love football too, but I'm not ready to kill anyone when my Dad's team, the Tijuana Tacos of the Tex-Mex League, takes it on the chin against the Las Vegas Gamblers (even though I hate their stupid blue chip mascot, "Chippy."). This brings me to the subject of this piece I'm writing.

Mascots can be really annoying. Does anybody really cheer louder because somebody in a muppet suit is dancing on the field or pumping a fist (or a wing or a claw) in the air to the beat of 'We Will Rock you?' Generally speaking, if you get excited at the sight of that you are probably 6 years old and not actually at the game, or else you have not advanced beyond the mental age of 6 and are at the game without a shirt on spilling beer on the young couple in front of you. But I say "generally speaking" because sometimes, not often, the team gets the official mascot right.

The mascot is the *official fan* of the team. "Official-ness" is important these days. An event needs an "official" sponsor, a stadium needs an "official" soft drink, athletes need "official" sports gear from 'Goat' or 'Plode,' the list goes on. But while "official" conveys elevated status, it does not make a product any better. Team mascots are usually lame, while the natural 'Fanatical Fan' is usually more entertaining and in tune with the crowd.

With nothing much to do other than travel the continent, I visited each EFL park at least once last season and took notes of my observations of the mascots and the fans. This is what I found:

### CHARLESWOOD

Official Mascot: "**Patty the Patriot.**" As one of the league's marquis franchises, the Patriots do not want to create any kind of controversy that might jeopardize their squeaky clean image. "Patty the Patriot" steps so far back from the edge that he makes Ronald McDonald look indecent by comparison. The costume suggests he might be a soldier, but the absence of any weaponry, the big fluffy white mittens, big red round nose, and oversized mukluks bring to mind a cross between Frosty the Snowman and a lumberjack. His trademark "Patriot Dance" is performed at midfield prior to the coin toss to the Canadian version of "This Land is Your Land." The dance is a feeble geriatric shuffle with the occasional slow motion fist pump. You watch it only once, waiting for something to happen that never does, and you never bother to watch it again. After the dance, Patty fades into the background – something very hard to accomplish when your head is the size of an exercise ball. **MASCOT RATING:** ★



Painted Patriot fans are not impressed with Patty the Patriot's "Patriot Dance."

Most Fanatical Fan: Still looking for one that stands out. It's not that Pats fans don't care – Patriot Place can get very loud at the right times – it's just that they are all mostly the same. They favour the red jersey over the white or the black one by a ratio of about 7 to 1 and almost all of those are replica Peyton Manning jerseys. When I visited Charleswood there was a group of college age kids in the end zone seats with painted faces and another guy dressed as a Mountie, drinking beer through a straw from cups embedded in his wide-brimmed hat. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★

### CHINO

Official Mascot: "**The Ball Burglar.**" This blatant rip-off of the Hamburglar is only missing the hat and cape and has a Styrofoam ball and chain around his right ankle that he picks up when he moves around. The Ball Burglar's claim to fame is stealing actual practice balls from the visitor's bench and throwing them into the stands. Chino was fined by the league for allowing this and now the Ball Burglar only steals pre-planted inflatable footballs from the general area of the visitor's bench. An actual convict plays the Ball Burglar as part of a rehabilitation program, but the practice is being reviewed after one of them used the role as cover to escape during a game. **MASCOT RATING:** ★★

Most Fanatical Fan: "**Death Row Dan.**" This disturbed individual comes with a cast of assistants: a priest, a sheriff, a warden and a masked executioner. When the Convicts score, the executioner pulls a switch on the control panel of an electrical box. This sends a mild current through coiled wires to a cap fitted on Death Row Dan's head. The current ignites tiny portions of combustible material in the cap, creating smoke and sparks. Death Row Dan jiggles spasmodically for about 30 seconds while the sparks fly, making faces that are truly astounding. It is sick, but funny. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★

### COWTOWN

Official Mascot: "**Corn Cob Bob.**" Rumours that Corn Cob Bob was being played by Mickey Connolly, the town drunk, were substantiated when the mascot passed out last year near the mouth of the tunnel leading to the home team lockers. When emergency personnel revived him, Connolly started throwing punches and had to be subdued. At first fans thought it was a stunt and found it humorous watching Connolly, in his corn cob costume, flailing wildly at security personnel. When he was finally dropped by multiple TASER blasts the crowd went hysterical. When Connolly suffered a heart attack and medics had to perform CPR, the crowd waited in eager anticipation to see him get up and start the fight all over again. The only problem was that Connolly never got up again. It was only the next day that the public





**Corn Cob Bob**

learned the whole incident was no act and there would be no more Corn Cob Bob, since nobody wanted to replace the popular drunk. We are still waiting for a replacement. **MASCOT RATING:** None.

**Most Fanatical Fan:** When half the fans are wearing plastic corn cobs on their heads, it's difficult to find the weirdo in the crowd. After scouring the stands for 3 quarters I finally found three chunky middle-aged guys painted yellow, wearing only tiny Speedos and greased up with corn oil. They call themselves "The **Butterballs**" and they jiggle their bellies on the heads of fans wearing those ridiculous plastic corn cobs. There is something creepy about it but everyone in Cowtown seems to think it's hilarious. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★

## **DURHAM**

**Official Mascot:** "**Raptorius Blaster.**" The science experiment that is Jurassic Park in Durham has resulted in many successes and a few terrifying failures. The whole park itself is a marvel, but when things go wrong, people die. So nobody can fully relax when Durham's mascot, Raptorius Blaster bounds into the stands to celebrate a Philip Rivers TD pass. Durham's mascot is a one-of-a-kind 'dinosaur cyborg' – part genetically modified raptor, part robot. The robot part is there to keep it under control. Electronic signals from a remote control send

commands to computer hardware connected to a robotic endo-skeleton that overrides commands from the creature's natural brain. The robotic hardware gives the creature amazing speed and leaping power, believed to be 4 times greater than that of the original pre-historic raptor. Its feats are amazing to behold and worth the price of admission to the game. What Raptorius would do if somehow the communication from the remote control broke down is open to debate, but the threat of such a mishap takes away some of the fun of watching the creature. On the downside, little children get really frightened when the thing gets too close and adults have been known to wet themselves. **MASCOT RATING:** ★★★★★

**Most Fanatical Fan:** "**The Derby Dudes.**" This group of six guys comes out for every game. They always occupy the same set of 6<sup>th</sup> row seats at the 50-yard line but rarely sit, which must be annoying to the people behind them. Instead, they dance, drink beer, and one of them sometimes plays a saxophone while the rest of them sing. They range in age from early 20s to possibly mid-60s and wear individual



**Try spotting the weirdo when everyone has one of these.**



**Durham's mascot Raptorius Blaster scares little children and adults alike.**

variants of an outfit that consists of multi-coloured grass skirts, hob-nailed shoes with high black socks, white collar button shirts with tie, fur or plaid sleeveless vests and identical brown derby hats. Some of them can dance, some can sing and all can drink. They wave placards with inane slogans like 'CO-ENZYME Q-10 MADE CHESTER THIS WAY' and 'WE DON'T DO WEDDINGS.' They don't sport any of the home team's paraphernalia but high-five each other when the Thunder Lizards score. My guess is they all belong to the same law firm. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★

## **FLORIDA**

**Official Mascot:** "**Puff.**" Dominating the standings for two seasons does not guarantee success in the creation of mascots. The Dragons clearly have other priorities ahead of finding novel ways to entertain their fans. You guessed it – "Puff" is short for Puff the

Magic Dragon. Puff appears in a standard foam muppet-style costume that looks suspiciously like a refitted Barney outfit with an alligator head sewn on top and fins stapled along the length of the back. Big feet with four human-like toes and a purple-green-silver-beige colour scheme suggest the designer patched this together with spare bits from a costume rejects warehouse. (You'd think they'd at least get the colours right!) Puff draws prizes and jumps up and down while fans participate in contests on the field during half time. He can be seen posing for photographs with children and bouncing annoyingly through the stands during the game. He is almost as lame as 'Patty the Patriot' except that once in a while he will "puff" out smoke from his fake alligator head. **MASCOT RATING:** ★ ½

**Most Fanatical Fan:** "**Pin Head.**" In a throng of uptight, serious fans, Pin Head stands out like a boil on a baby's bottom. He is horrifying to look at but you can't help staring at him. His voice is harsh and piercing and he never, ever shuts up. He was escorted from the stadium almost every game in the team's first season but was left alone after a local radio station started promoting him as the best thing about going to Dragonmount that season. Dragon's fans in general are great front-runners – saving their lustiest cheers for when their team is piling on. But they can be very quiet when the game is close and undecided. Pin Head goes against all the grains by bellowing constantly throughout the game, regardless of the score. His best attributes are his mask and his sheer vocal endurance. He is not particularly clever, but sometimes hits on a funny line that gets a chuckle from the fans in his section. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★

## **GARLAND**

**Official Mascot:** "**Mustang Sally.**" This is a real person, not an actor in a foam suit. An accomplished rider and former cow girl, Mustang Sally rides (you guessed it) a real *mustang* around the perimeter of the field whenever the Mustangs score, waving her lasso over her head as she goes. When not riding, Sally is teasing the visitor's bench or flirting with Matt Ryan. She will face the stands and encourage the crowd to scream loudly in key situations when the visitors have the ball but she never ventures into the stands. She's cougar-aged but still

attractive in a country sort of way. She is jealous of the “Girlands,” the Garland cheerleaders, and will let her horse poop near them. I give her points for being real and having an actual skill to go along with her enthusiasm, but rodeos aren’t really my thing. **MASCOT RATING:** ★★½

**Most Fanatical Fan:** Garland fans are all fanatical in the sense that they really, really love their team. And I mean *love*. They are forgiving of errors and give nothing but positive reinforcement to the players when things aren’t going their way. They are glum after a loss, but not angry or vindictive. They are as giddy with excitement as kids at Christmas after a win. Watching a game in Garland is like watching a tyke game at your local park – after Matt Ryan was intercepted in a loss against Virden last year the fans clapped politely as Ryan left the field, yelling out “good try, Matt.” And they were *not* being sarcastic! None of them wear weird clothes (unless you count those string ties as weird) and almost none of them swear (unless you count “daw gone”). It’s so nice and normal, it’s bizarre! **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★

### GWINNETT

**Official Mascot:** “**Gladiella.**” Take a look at her picture and tell me if she needs to do anything other than stand in that pose to get people’s attention. She doesn’t need to, and she doesn’t. What you see is what you (want to) get. Gladiella is new. She took over for ‘Gary the Gladiator’ in 2009. Gary was the usual guy-in-the-foam-muppet-style-suit who jumped around a lot but did nothing



**Mustang Sally – she just looovves Matt Rvan!**



**Gladiella. Glad to see va!**

to raise the temperature in the Coliseum. With Matt Cassel at QB in 2009, the Gladiators needed to do something to make visiting the Coliseum an exciting experience for fans. Gladiella definitely raised the temperature. You go girl!

**MASCOT RATING:** ★★★★★

**Most Fanatical Fan:** “**Julius Caesar.**” This guy first appeared in 2007 dressed in a toga at the first home game following a long Gladiator road trip. All he did was stand up after every play and turn his thumb up or down depending on how the outcome affected the Gladiators. This little act has since grown into a full blown re-enactment of ancient Roman history. Julius now has an escort of about 3 dozen other fans dressed as soldiers, gladiators, advisors, Empresses, concubines and slaves – all occupying the same section. The numbers seem to grow little by little each week. They drink wine and act like idiots but it’s impressive to look at and truly fanatical. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★

### IOWA CITY

**Official Mascot:** “**Cubby.**” That handle is the winner of a year-long fan contest and city poll to name the Cubs’ mascot. Yes, it took a full year for the collective wisdom of the fans of the Iowa City Cubs to come up with that name. While that was going on, City Council released a request for proposal for the design of the mascot’s costume. Over 100 submissions were weeded down to 6 by a team of costume consultants hired by the Mayor. These 6 finalists were presented to voters for selection during the 2007 municipal elections. The winning costume design was a furry young brown bear with exceptionally big eyes, wearing a white football jersey sporting the Cubs logo. Another contest was launched to come up with an official Cubs fight song for the mascot and, well, you get the idea. Once Democracy had run its course, “Cubby” was mandated by law to stand on the sidelines and repeatedly lead the crowd in the chant, “give me a ‘C’, give me a ‘U’, give me a ‘B’,” etc. Fortunately, the guy playing “Cubby” eventually got sick of his routine and started ad-libbing with rap rhymes and gymnastics. I have to give the guy credit for having the courage to express himself, but grabbing his own crotch did not go over well in God’s Country. **MASCOT RATING:** ★★

**Most Fanatical Fan:** “**Iowa Joe.**” “I’m just an average Joe from Iowa,” Joe pronounced recently in an interview for Cubs TV. “I just love the Cubs. I’d say the Cubs are my life. Everything I do is for the Cubs, man.” Set aside the pathetic aspect of this public human tragedy and look at Iowa Joe on game day. You will see a real fanatical football fan with just the right amount of craziness in his eyes to infect everyone around him with excitement. Joe is really just a guy – a wild and crazy guy (to use a familiar term) wearing a teddy bear knitted onto his toque and a white replica Cubs jersey with JOE sewn on the back. He has a few common props to help him out; a long plastic red horn, a set of bongos, and a huge rattle. He never seems to tire and only pauses to look glum when the game is over and the Cubs have lost. He recently acquired field privileges and roams everywhere on game day bringing energy and intensity to the crowd.

**FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★½

### KUTZTOWN

**Official Mascot:** “**Goldie Bear.**” What if Goldilocks had been a bear instead of a wayward child? She could have looked exactly like Goldie Bear, Kutztown’s adorable team mascot. Goldie Bear (pictured right) is gentle, kind, cute and cuddly. He roams the stands looking for lost children and helping the elderly to their seats. He pats people on the head a lot and puts on bouts of simulated laughter whenever anything remotely funny, or intended to be funny, happens. He raises his arms to the crowd to generate noise when the football team needs a boost. I find the whole shtick predictable and a touch nauseating but everyone in Kutztown *loves* Goldie Bear, especially the kids. He is a staple at birthday parties and you can buy stuffed versions of Goldie Bear everywhere toys are sold in the area. I am sure some kind of franchise or syndicated show is in the planning stage. I’m not impressed, but who am I to argue with the will of the masses? **MASCOT RATING:** ★★★★★½



**Goldie Bear**



Most Fanatical Fan: **“Pot-bellied Pete.”** He is the “King of Blowhards,” according to the Kutztown Standard, “an irascible rogue and unrepentant gadfly who *demands* excellence from his team.” What this means in English is that Pete is an a\_\_-hole. The Kutztown media is proud of the ‘Philly-like’ image of their sports fans and likes to spotlight guys like Pot-bellied Pete, and rivals “Thin-nosed Fred” and “Big-eared Al,” in special interest pieces. Pete and his following come out during the bad times for the home team and fade away when the Bears are winning, as if having nothing to complain about is a good reason to keep quiet. If these guys went to a bar where nobody knew them to watch the game they’d be punched out and shown the door before the first commercial break. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★

## LOS ANGELES

Official Mascot: **“The Blue Knight.”** This is a guy wearing a suit of dark blue armour with elevator shoes, a giant police badge stuck on the breastplate and a flat-top police hat perched on his helmet. This spoof on the Hollywood cop image is an imposing presence at first but fans quickly lose interest in the Blue Knight when they realize he does nothing. He just stands there, in the general area of where the action is, and looks around. On rare occasions when the Knight’s opponents are moving the ball, he will take a step forward in the direction of the other team’s offence and raise his gauntleted hand as if issuing a command to stop. If they get stopped he nods his head; if not he just looks around and might do it again, but might not. Come to think of it, he does a pretty good imitation of a cop. **MASCOT RATING:** ★ ½

Most Fanatical Fan: **“Sir Dancelot.”** The “dancelot” trend started with one guy in purple tights, slippers and a short black cape dancing up a storm in the aisles. The original “Dancelot” is now a professional dancer in New York City after being discovered at Knight’s games. Since then there have been a succession of Dancelots with each one trying to outdo the one before. At last count there were 7 freelance dancers claiming the Dancelot mantle but only one can be called “Sir Dancelot” at any given time. That honour is bestowed on the top dancer by LA socialite and Knight’s correspondent, Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven by the awarding of the Purple Scarf. The dancing is really impressive, with acrobatic tumbles, break-dancing spins, and lots of gyrating hips. But are these dancers really fans? With so much publicity and attention paid to the dancing and with so few dancers caring a wit about sports, I strongly doubt it. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★

## MARKHAM

Official Mascot: **“Bowser.”** This is an anthropomorphic brown bulldog wearing a North Stars jersey and an orange construction hat. So what is the connection between north stars and dogs? It’s beyond me. The Dawg Pound has dog paraphernalia everywhere and the only star to be seen is above the ‘N’ on the Markham helmet. I was hoping that Bowser’s antics would help me understand, but nothing Bowser did made any sense at all. He spent some time on all fours sniffing the grass near the visitor’s bench. He pretended to bark at opposing wide receivers coming close to the sideline. He grabbed and held on to the leg of an official during a television timeout, something the crowd found amusing. Otherwise he did the usual mascot routine: meandering through the crowd with no greater purpose than to shake hands and pose for photos. **MASCOT RATING:** ★ ½

Most Fanatical Fan: **“The Fat Lady.”** What can I write about the Fat Lady that hasn’t already been covered in the national sports press? The world’s largest football fanatic (possibly the world’s largest person) gained national attention when she infamously tried to munch on the leg of a security guard who was trying to “subdue” her. You have to see her in person to understand how futile it would be to try and take control of ‘The Fat Lady’ – sort of like trying to handcuff an elephant. What’s the point anyway when she occupies an entire *row* of seats and can’t move on her own? Security guards can be so stupid. She is the ultimate fanatic. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★

## MOHAVE

Official Mascot: What do you get when you cross a giant bee with the devil? You get **“Beezabub,”** the official mascot of the Mohave Hellfire. Beezabub is a guy in a red and yellow bee suit with a pair of horns sticking out of his head, four extra legs, and a pitchfork stinger protruding from his rear end. Aside from that, the thing that sets Beezabub apart from other mascots is the gas propeller pack that gives him a rudimentary flying ability. By rudimentary, I mean that the skill is not fully developed and sometimes things go wrong – like the time he lost control and buzzed Kurt Warner in the middle of the game, causing him to dodge into the rush of Karlos Dansby for a sack. There have been other mishaps involving fans and players but Beezabub persists in taking to the air at least once a game. When grounded, the giant bee “buzzes” around the field, sticking his butt out at players in a simulated stinging motion. **MASCOT RATING:** ★★½

Most Fanatical Fan: **“Mo Have.”** He used to be named Clive Burton but now he is Mo Have. He legally changed his name to prove his devotion to the team after a Justice of the Peace declined to preside over his proposed marriage to the Mohave Hellfire Football Club Ltd. It goes without saying that Mo is missing a chromosome or two but, like Iowa Joe, his enthusiasm is infectious. Watching him is kind of like watching a silent movie with a crowd noise soundtrack playing in the background. Like a mime, he is all gestures and expressions and occasional grunts that are barely audible. He comes to the park decked out in red, yellow and black face paint, a frizzy red wig, and red track suit with a golf shirt pulled over the top. People nearby will watch him more than the game and bellow cheers when he gives the signal. He performs easy magic tricks for children and eats fire at half time. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★

## PICKERING

Official Mascot: **“Spartacus.”** The Pickering Spartans mascot has undergone



Mo Have. He “have mo” team spirit than most.



**Spartacus on campus at Pickering Polytechnic. The Spartans went on a public relations blitz to raise season ticket sales in 2010.**

the same growing pains as the team. Entering its third season, this is the third version of Spartacus and the Spartans hope they have it right this time. Public reaction has been encouraging and young people don't cower or run away from the newest version: a cartoonish hoplite featuring a big square-jawed, grinning, heroic foam head crowned with a blue and yellow foam helmet. In Pickering's first season, 'Spartacus' was an actual Greek guy, of Spartan descent, dressed in authentic replica costume from the era of the famous Battle of Thermopylae. He was impressive and grim and very, very proud. When a drunken Greek fan called him an Athenian fairy, he threw his spear through the fan's chest, killing him instantly. That was the end of that Spartacus's career. The next year, Spartans management tried to lighten things up by dressing up a middle-aged clown in a powder blue hoplite suit, equipping him with a plastic shield and foam bat to avoid any deadly "accidents." But this guy had to be pulled out of action early too due to his penchant for grinning dumbly, not paying attention to the game, and repeatedly hitting fans with the foam bat. The current Spartacus is an actual proper mascot – a big improvement over the previous two disasters – but that does not necessarily mean he will be entertaining. I look forward to seeing him in game action when I visit Pickering this year in Week 11 when they host Kutztown. **MASCOT RATING:** No basis for rating.

**Most Fanatical Fan:** **"The 300 Spartans."** They occupy an entire section in the north end zone called – you guessed it – section 300. Three hundred guys in black leather underwear, red capes, black boots and no shirts. They act and sound like a giant gang of rugby players after a weekend tournament but few of them are in playing shape. They are mostly a gaggle of drunks but they reserve moments during the game for group ceremony, and this can be impressive to watch from a distance. Before the

Official National Anthem they stand, remove their helmets, raise their plastic spears, and sing "Ode to the Spartan" – *"Oh Spartan great, oh Spartan brave, you put those bastards in the grave, raise your spear and drink your beer, drink Spartan, drink, pause ye not to think, your heart belongs to victory, oh Spartan oh, oh Spartan oh!"* They take this song very seriously and all of them participate – all three hundred of them – or at least all who show up. When I counted there were between 160 and 170. I actually went down to the section and met George Sotiriou, self-proclaimed Spartan #1. He says there are exactly 300 members of his Pickering Spartans Fan Club. "We are not 300 Spartans if we are any less or any more, are we?" he asks rhetorically. When pressed, he admits that not all 300 show up every game but he insists that there are exactly 300 dues-paying members. "We don't accept any more than 300. There are over one thousand on our waiting list," he declares proudly. The dues pay for the costume, the season ticket package and a "social fee" that goes toward the purchase of alcohol and food for the pre-game tailgate. By the second half, Section 300 is a disaster zone but the imprint on the atmosphere in Thermopylae Stadium is indelible. **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★



**Members of the 300 Spartans tail-gating before a game. Are there really 300 of these guys?**



**Bubbles was brought in to compete with Gwinnett's Gladiella and ruined Big Ben's season.**

### RINGGOLD

**Official Mascot:** **"Bubbles."** The only hawk-like thing about her is the wing design on her top, but you can't easily make that out because of what's pushing up beneath her top. Crimson Hawks management liked what they saw in Gwinnett when Gladiella took the field at the Coliseum and decided to try the same in Ringgold, hoping to boost

lagging ticket sales. So they clipped "Henry the Hawk's" wings and brought in "Hawk Girl," also known as "Bubbles." On the upside for the team, tickets sales shot up immediately. On the downside, Ben Roethlisberger took immediate notice and began to spend a lot of time following Bubbles around. Or at least that's the rumour. What's not rumour was Big Ben's 80.5 QB rating in 2009, good for 11<sup>th</sup> in the league. Not exactly the numbers you expect when your wide-outs are Andre Johnson and Robert Royal, but the kind of numbers you get when your QB is spending all his time trying to get blown by Bubbles.

**MASCOT RATING:** ★★★★★

**Most Fanatical Fan:** When I was in Ringgold the crowd was in an edgy mood. The Hawks were 2-8 and about to go 2-9. Nobody was really celebrating or even trying to celebrate. Pot-bellied Pete would have loved it, but he wasn't there to take advantage of the misery. Then I noticed this young kid wearing a winged cap and a Roethlisberger jersey who was jumping up on every play as his hero, Big Ben, tried to overcome a 10-point deficit late in a lost game. I thought about innocence and hope and never giving up



and it suddenly became apparent to me that this kid was the only real fan in view – a true fan, in the Garland mould. Of course, this young guy was totally unaware of what he was doing and he wasn't trying to make an impression – he was just acting in a naturally good way. I gave him the name “**Little Hawk.**” Until somebody else steps forward, I'm calling him Ringgold's most fanatical fan.

**FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★

## VIRDEN

Official Mascot: “**The Hooded Hangman.**” Down the road from Charleswood, in Virden, the atmosphere is completely different. “Patty the Patriot” wouldn't last long in the **TERRORDOME**. The official *team* mascot in Virden behaves as undisciplined as the worst fanatical fan in other stadiums. He hangs opposing players in effigy, chops the heads off dolls, locks up fans at random, oversees a mock torture chamber on field level, and throws balloons filled with vinegar into the crowd. True to the hangman's creed, he remains anonymous, but claims that he is a “regular guy” away from the stadium. He is always active and menacing throughout the course of the game but will pause on rare occasions to pose for photos with contest winners and hand cheques to charities. **MASCOT RATING:** ★★★★★ ½



Virden's Hooded Hangman poses in front of his “Naughty Fan” jail cell.

Most Fanatical Fan: “**Psycho Sam.**” This guy is really psycho. He wears a Freddy Krueger mask and a black leather body suit with a variety of “instruments” attached to a belt around his waist. He has an “assistant,” a younger male who he whips with a lash in anger when a play goes against the Violators or in excitement when the Violators make a big play. The young guy is getting whipped one way or the other. The assistant grimaces and cries for effect – or is it *really* for effect? It's hard to tell. I worry that somebody dangerous is behind that mask, sitting under the public's nose and using the **TERRORDOME** as a safe haven to set up dangerous and sadistic exploits. As it is, I don't see any redeeming qualities in “Psycho Sam.” **FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★

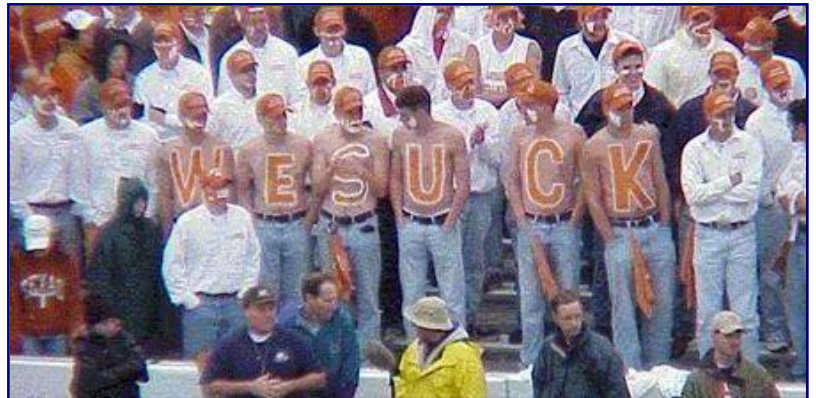
## YORK / WINNEMUCCA

Official Mascot: “**Lady of the Lake.**” I haven't been to the home of the new York franchise yet, but I *have* been to their old digs in Winnemucca. The Outlaw's “**Jesse James**” was the standard gun-slinging mascot with a theatrically villainous personality. I liked him even though he was predictable – he had a good and bad side that balanced out. Although I haven't seen her in action yet, the “Lady of the Lake” is reportedly one of those “goody-two-shoes” mascots. She will appear on the field to give magical swords to people and such. In my experience, nobody is unhappy to receive a magical sword from a pretty young lady; so I view her job as being a pretty sweet gig. I'll cut this short since there is no point in evaluating a defunct mascot, or one I've never seen in action. **MASCOT RATING:** None.

Most Fanatical Fan: The “**We Suck**” guys. Consecutive 1-15 seasons do not create the conditions for a

strong fan base. When a team reaches that point, any effort by the fans in addition to actual attendance at the park is considered above and beyond the call of duty. When I attended the ‘Hole in the Wall’ there was a group of young men in the 200 level who had gone to the trouble of painting orange letters on their chests. When they stood side-by-side in a certain order the letters revealed a fitting slogan; ‘WE SUCK.’ Hilarious! Yes, the Outlaws of 2009 (and 2008) sucked. Don't expect the York Excaliburs, with a healthy Tom Brady, to suck as much. Nobody outside of the York knows for sure what the new fans will be like. Opening Day is a sell-out – something Winnemucca achieved but once in its sorry history.

**FANATICAL FAN RATING:** ★★★★★



Winnemucca fans knew where they stood even with Tom Brady on the team.

**Well, that's all for this year! I hope you enjoyed my tour and get a chance to see, for yourself, some more.....**

**Sparky Matcheson, Continental Traveller**





# It is written

*The fate of your team is written. Look, if you dare, at the future...*

BROUGHT TO YOU FROM THE OTHER SIDE BY *Jimmy the Geek*

*The partisans shall alone defend the eastern gates. The noble Order of 'Chevalier en Bleu' will succumb to the perfidious malefactors and hardship will beset the Western Kingdom. Antediluvian beasts of the air, land and sea shall ravage the corn fields under the northern star yet men at arms will be unbowed. In the South, the wyvern's tail shall sweep aside the mercenaries and their riding beasts and the buffeting of its wings will drive its diminutive brethren from the air. The vicious men of the West shall overcome the Noble Sentinels of the East while The Fiery Monsters of Myth perish upon an army of spears and shields. The Fate of Man shall be made in a Great Battle between Light and Dark. – The Football Oracle*

CANTON, OH – On the western outskirts of Canton there is a wooded hill overlooking a small creek that runs through a farmer's field. On a windless night the ceaseless burbling of the water over the rocks and the chirring of crickets is occasionally punctuated by a raspy moan or a shrill howl emanating from a dark burrow at the top of the hill where a solitary soul wrestles with the torment and rapture of her transcendent visions. She is known as the Football Oracle – a former Green Bay Packers fan who foretold of the demise of the old NFL and was driven mad, some say, by the vision.

Every year I make the trip to her lonely lair, wondering if she will still be there and whether she will receive me. I am fortunate that she has always taken me in. It is said that for every one permitted to enter the hallowed cave, one hundred are turned away. The traffic is thinning out these days. Not worth the trip, some say. Others cite disappointment at her record of predictions, although they all concede that she is pretty much bang on with the big calls. Some think she has finally gone off the deep end.

I admit I thought the latter may be true when I first saw her this year, about one week before the start of the 2010 EFL campaign. She looked disheveled, gaunt, spoke more incoherently than usual, and flitted in and out of spells where she thought I was some kind of fish god, or the planet Saturn. It made this reading the most difficult one yet in my experience with the Oracle. But it turns out there is a perfectly "reasonable" explanation for her erratic behaviour.

The Earth is apparently entering a new psychic energy field as we approach the end of the galactic cycle in 2012. The vibratory layers that separate the dimensions of our "multi-verse" (as she called it) are shifting frequencies and realigning the physical and spiritual hierarchies. The properties of our reality are undergoing accelerated change and extra-dimensional influences echo through our collective sub-conscious. Change is upon the world. Who knew?! What does this mean for football, you ask?

At one point, while I strained to make sense of her murmuring trance state, she suddenly opened her eyes and gazed into mine. "Whatever you do, do not bet on New York!" she said clearly and emphatically, "I see it sinking into the Atlantic." When I informed her that there is no New York team in the EFL, she paused and considered for a moment. "The psychic maelstrom is creating disturbances in the channels....I tuned into 2012 without realizing. Never mind, let me refocus."

As shocked as I was at the fate of New York, I was more dumbfounded by what she said next. "Ringgold is sitting at the nexus of a reality vortex," she stated flatly. "There are multiple dimensional realities trying to occupy one point in time and space. I see tremendous good fortune and abject failure struggling for realization." Statements like this, as you can imagine, made my job more difficult than usual. But here it goes!

## PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

### EAST DIVISION



#### CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

Jason Findlay

Predicted Finish: 13-3

**OFFENSE:** The Pats addressed last year's imbalance in the passing game by dumping one of their Pro Bowl tight ends for wide receiver Sidney Rice. With Marques Colston fully healed, Bernard Berrian moves to #3 on the WR depth chart where he belongs. Remaining Pro Bowl tight end, Jason Witten could have a career season. Adrian Peterson is a Clydesdale with mustang speed in the backfield running behind a line that lacks a star but can get the job done as a unit. With Peyton Manning running the show, the offence will inflict serious damage. **Rating: A**

**DEFENSE:** A move to the 4-3 this year signals a changing defensive outlook in Charleswood. A solid front seven will slow down the run and put adequate pressure on opposing quarterbacks. The price for overall improvement up front is a weakening of the secondary, where the loss of shut down corner Asante Samuel leaves Ed Reed as the lone remaining star. The corner position is deep however, making nickel and dime packages highly effective. As a unit they will guard their goal line tenaciously and give up yards grudgingly. **Rating: A-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Stephen Gostkowski is perfect kicking extra points and that's what the Patriots will need him for the most. Sav Rocca rakes over punting duties but won't be called on often to earn his paycheck. Jacoby Jones is solid returning kick and punts and should get a lot of opportunities to pad his statistics. **Rating: B**

**SUMMARY:** The North Division will not pose a challenge for Charleswood – a Divisional sweep is not out of the question. The Pats will face some difficult opposition in the West but will get a pass on two of the top contenders in the Can-Am conference due to their schedule. Peyton Manning and Adrian Peterson will both take a good run at League MVP. The true test for Charleswood in 2010 will, once again, come in the post-season.



#### MOHAVE HELLFIRE

Bobby Elder

Predicted Finish: 9-7

**OFFENSE:** The Matt Schaub era begins in Mohave. The young signal-caller will have some banner games but he will be tested against the league's better defences standing behind an offensive line that has regressed from last season's unsteady group. Blindside protector Travelle Wharton is decent but no major force in this league and he is the best of the lot. Rashard Mendenhall will have to make some plays on his own to keep his average up. Donald Driver and Terrell Owens are great receivers who have lost a step and Braylon Edwards drops too many balls. This group will be hot and cold all year. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** The Hellfire are another team making the move to the 4-3 to shore up their run stopping ability, but this squad is a mere shadow of its former glory. Trent Cole and Champ Bailey are the leaders, Leon Hall is the potential game-changer, and London Fletcher is steady at inside linebacker. After that the starters range from good to average with established stars, Marcus Stroud and Julian Peterson starting to show their age. As a group they are better than most but fall well short of elite. **Rating: B+**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Place-kicker, Rob Bironas has distance and accuracy in his leg. Ben Graham is an upgrade at punter. The kick return game could drag the team down over the long haul – TJ Rushing is the no. 1 punt returner by default and Andre' Davis is, at best, an average kickoff returner who no longer has the legs to take it to the house. **Rating: C+**

**SUMMARY:** The Division belongs to Charleswood, but if Mohave is going to compete for a wild card berth, they will need their defence to play above their heads against the top teams and get big games from Matt Schaub. It's all possible, but it will take excellent game day preparation and a little luck to pull it off. Regardless, the Hellfire could easily give the top teams a run for their money on any given day and play a key spoiler roll down the stretch.



## KUTZTOWN GOLDEN BEARS    Pete Katsafanas

**Predicted Finish: 6-10**

**OFFENSE:** The left side of the offensive line is outstanding but right tackle is a glaring weakness and there is no depth backing up any of the positions. A prolonged injury to any of the starters on the line would be a disaster. Tony Romo will be asked to do it all once again this year and he will look for Greg Jennings when he needs a big play. The running game is an after-thought in Kutztown, but when the thought comes to mind, Felix Jones has the breakaway speed to score in a flash. This unit has 4 or 5 big games in them but expect a few meltdowns as well.

**Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** The '3-4' alignment will allow inside linebacker, Ray Lewis to make plays but Tambi Hali alone cannot generate enough pressure on the blitz from the outside to support a three-man front, even one with Richard Seymour anchoring one of the ends. The defensive line sports some established names approaching the down side of their careers and young potential stars just beginning to develop. Expect them to have lapses defending the run against the mid to upper tier teams. Darren Sharper is looking in the best game shape of his life but he would have to have an MVP season to make an impact on the standings. Antoine Winfield and Tracy Porter are no slouches at starting corner, but there are durability concerns – if back-ups, Ike Taylor and Fred Smoot have to start then the whole outlook changes from cautious optimism to “forget it.” **Rating: B**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Nick Kaeding is as reliable as any kicker in the league due to his accuracy and range. Brian Moorman boasts the same attributes punting the ball. Felix Jones is no more than serviceable as a kick returner, but Patrick Crayton is a smart punt returner with enough speed to take it all the way to pay dirt. **Rating: A-**

**SUMMARY:** The Golden Bears have a good corps of starters at most positions but lack depth at corner and at offensive line. Kutztown is like a wounded bear – dangerous but limited. They will beat up on the weak teams and fall to the good ones. Still, there is faint hope for a playoff berth if Tony Romo turns out to be superhuman.



## VIRDEN VIOLATORS

**Lance Barrate**

**Predicted Finish: 3-13**

**OFFENSE:** The Violators should be capable of violating many opposing defences. In Drew Brees they have arguably the best quarterback in the league, and he is not without support weapons. Ricky Williams is sturdy in the backfield and accustomed to carrying a big load. Although none of the wide receivers are elite, there are five good ones for 5-wideout set Brees likes to run when he's flexing. The offensive line is anchored in the middle by Brandon Moore and Olin Kreutz, but questionable at the tackle position. **Rating: B+**

**DEFENSE:** The defense continues to be a glaring weakness for this franchise. A couple of decent veterans on the defensive line would make a big difference, but the Violators have chosen to go with two youngsters who are still learning their positions in Andre Fluellen and Carlos Dunlap. The linebackers will not lose them any games but they won't win them any either. The secondary is improved over last year with rookie Eric Berry starting at Free Safety and LaRon Landry at Strong Safety. Brandon Flowers brings a “player” to the corner position for the first time since Year One. But with no viable pass rush the newcomers will be sternly tested. **Rating: C**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** The transition to wide receiver has apparently made Devin Hester forget how to return punts. Dez Bryant is a marginal upgrade returning both kicks and punts and Derrick Williams is too tentative to be a threat. Don't expect to see any of these special teamers on the ESPN highlight reel this year. Lawrence Tynes has the range but has a tendency to spray the ball wide. Chris Hanson is just another guy collecting a pay cheque.

**Rating: C+**

**SUMMARY:** Virden is still rebuilding. Since their inception as the Anchorage Buccaneers they have gone from underachievers to simply non-achievers. But at least now they are non-achievers with a plan. This year will be another test run to see who will go and who will remain on the team for the glory that awaits them on the horizon if Drew Brees' arm doesn't fall off by then.



## WEST DIVISION



### CHINO CONVICTS

**Rob Nazar**

**Predicted Finish: 11-5**

**OFFENSE:** The Cutler Era is over in Chino, replaced by the “Second Coming” of Donovan McNabb. L.T. is also gone, replaced by Steven Jackson. They will not miss L.T., who slowed down last year and was a non-factor in the offence. Cutler has talent but never gelled in two years at the helm. McNabb is a good fit with this team, having won a Championship already. Hines Ward and Randy Moss give him two talented and complimentary threats at wide receiver and Greg Olsen has sure hands at tight end. Keep an eye on second-year wide receiver, Mohammed Massaquoi – if he doesn’t drop the ball he can take it a long way. Jahri Evans has blossomed into a force at guard and Bryant McKinnie is a respectable left tackle. The rest of the line is just average. **Rating: B+**

**DEFENSE:** Haloti Ngata occupies a big chunk in the center of Chino’s 3-4 defence and will need to be double-teamed on virtually every play. Julius Peppers and James Harrison are two of the best pass rushers at their positions but there is nobody else helping them out, which will reduce their impact. The secondary is very cunning and aggressive - they play for the “Pick 6” – but after the starting 4 they are critically thin and will experience turmoil if the injury bug hits. **Rating: A-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Jeff Reed, “Mr. Reliable” returns for another season as “Mr. Slightly Less Reliable.” Shane Lechler is the best punter in the league. Joshua Cribbs is a dangerous returner who can strike for the big score at any time, but usually when it counts. **Rating: A+**

**SUMMARY:** The Convicts are poised to return to dominance in the West Division if they can find a way to score on the Knights’ defence and stay healthy. If they do, they stand a good chance of making it back to the championship as they match up well against the other Conference rival, Charleswood. Florida is watching over its shoulder at its nemesis and hoping for a Chino breakdown.



### LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

**Jeff Dohrn**

**Predicted Finish: 10-6**

**OFFENSE:** If quarterback is the most important position in the game, then Los Angeles is entering the campaign with the most important deficiency of all the top tier teams. They have many of the necessary pieces to move the ball: an All Pro calibre left tackle in Joe Thomas, a workhorse running back in Cedric Benson, game-breakers on the ground and thru the air in Jamaal Charles and Steve Smith, a well-rounded #1 wide receiver in Roddy White, and a sure-handed safety valve in tight end, Todd Heap. Jason Campbell performed better than expected in last year’s Championship but when the Dragons needed to hold him down, they did it easily. Until Jason Campbell makes a strong statement against a strong team, the Knights’ offence will always lack a true leader. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** Whether playing a 4-3 or a 3-4, the Knights’ defence returns this year as unyielding as ever and will vie with Florida for the top defence in the EFL. The acquisition of Pat Williams from Chino creates a “Williams Wall” with Kevin Williams in the middle of the defensive line. Andre Carter brings pressure from one end but the heart of the vaunted LA pass rush comes from linebackers Brian Orapko and Joey Porter. This pass rush will amplify the strength of the best cornerback tandem in football. Charles Woodson and Nnamdi Asomugha can shut down a passing game on their own, but they don’t need to with Antoine Bethea and Chris Hope behind them to pick the leftovers. **Rating: A+**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Two place kickers is a luxury but Kris Brown will make sure opposing offences face the league’s top defence from a little deeper in their own territory while Dan Carpenter has the range and the accuracy to rack up triples. Eric Weems is a steady punt returner and Jamaal Charles is capable of breaking one for the distance in as kick returner. **Rating: A-**

**SUMMARY:** The Knights’ fate will be determined by how well Jeff Dohrn can manage Jason Campbell without a Tarvaris Jackson there to bail him out. Rookie Jimmy Clausen takes over as Campbell’s back-up but, by all accounts, he is not ready to take a leadership role on the team. The Knights will go as far as their defence can take them.



## IOWA CITY CUBS

**Deron Redding**

**Predicted Finish: 8-8**

**OFFENSE:** Brandon Jacobs may be breaking down before his time as nagging injuries hampered his pre-season performance. This means Ronnie Brown will see more time on the field on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> downs and Reggie Bush on 3<sup>rd</sup> down. Larry Fitzgerald leads a deep but under-achieving talent pool at wide receiver and Kellen Winslow commands respect at tight end. The young offensive line is growing up together and looking more cohesive than ever. The keys to this neat offensive machine are being handed over to a raw rookie after the Cubs dispensed with Trent Edwards. Sam Bradford is loaded with talent and smarts but, with no experience, can he handle the heat in the West facing Chino and LA? With only Brodie Croyle to back him up, he'll have no choice. **Rating: C+**

**DEFENSE:** The defensive line will make it difficult for opponents to run the ball *if* it can stay healthy. Patrick Willis is the best middle linebacker in football, sharing the center of the 3-4 with the most expensive linebacker in football, Demeco Ryans. There is too much talent at safety and not enough at corner, making it possible that with injuries, Ashton Youboty could be on the field while Tyvon Branch and Donte Whitner sit on the bench. Jairus Byrd is no mere "Byrd," he's a *hawk* – a *ball hawk* that is! **Rating: A-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Roscoe Parrish and Reggie Bush are trying too hard and running sideways more than forward on punt returns. Ellis Hobbs has one route he runs on kick returns but it's usually good for about 24 yards. Neil Rackers and Adam Podlesh get the job done in the kicking game but not much more. **Rating: C+**

**SUMMARY:** The Cubs are a good team but there is no doubt they will suffer setbacks while Sam Bradford experiences his growing pains. This places them firmly in the middle class of teams, battling it out with Kutztown and Mohave for the final wildcard berth in the Pacific-Atlantic Conference. Injuries could be the deciding factor.



## YORK EXCALIBURS

**Jay Hammond**

**Predicted Finish: 3-13**

**OFFENSE:** The Tom Brady Era finally begins in York after being suspended by injury in 2009. Exactly how much fortune he will bring the league's worst franchise for the past two seasons is a subject of speculation. A close look at his supporting cast shows potential but no proven threats. The offensive line has improved over last year, having reached the point where it can take the field without jeers and laughter from the stands, but it is still not capable of moving a good defence off the line. Brady will have more to work with than David Garrard did last year and he *is* Tom Brady, so expect more; but the Brady mystique only goes so far. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** Ryan Clark and Cullen Jenkins are the leaders of the defence. "Who," you ask? Never mind – they're guys who could start on most teams, but not necessarily on every team. Brian Urlacher, the ceremonial head of the defence, is nursing a total body injury and will dress for Week One taped completely from head to toe. York is loaded with good young defensive prospects and one stud, Antwan Odom, who are being held back in their development by one of the worst conditioning coaches in football. More time was spent by some of these guys in the pre-season lying on the field than running on it. **Rating: C-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker, Shane Graham has the leg to reach the uprights from 50+ yards but he is streaky and inconsistent. Jason Baker is expected to punt less this year but still more than most of his colleagues. Danieal Manning is a flashy kick returner who can put his team in good field position consistently while Chris Carr in unspectacular but reliable on punt returns. **Rating: B**

**SUMMARY:** The Excaliburs can expect this year to at least match the total number of wins over the previous two seasons and will be aiming to score a third for a 200% increase over 2009. Their stock is slowly on the rise although it is still little more than a penny stock. The season will be a showcase for the new talent to emerge and another low finish will mean more draft talent coming in.

# CAN-AM CONFERENCE

## NORTH DIVISION



### DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

George Kaldis

Predicted Finish: 12-4

**OFFENSE:** Philip Rivers is one of the league's elite quarterbacks and he has a fine supporting cast. The interior three linemen, Nick Mangold, Steve Hutchinson and Leonard Davis, are the best starting trio in football this year at those positions and may prove to be the best group ever assembled. Michael Oher is a fine left tackle, but Eugene Monroe will occasionally need help on the right side. Michael Turner is a rare grinder with breakaway speed and fullback Tony Richardson will pave the way for him. The double tight end threat of Antonio Gates and Vernon Davis gives the Lizards a very flexible attack and helps make up for a diminishing threat from wide receivers Calvin Johnson and Steve Breaston. **Rating: A**

**DEFENSE:** The Lizards have quietly upgraded their defence to one of the league's best by bolstering the line-backing corps with Jonathan Vilma and Elvis Dumervil. Their pass rush is now among the most feared with Jared Allen applying pressure up front. The secondary boasts two stars in shutdown corner, Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and unmanned attack drone, Adrian Wilson at strong safety. Durability on the defensive line may be the only concern for this unit. **Rating: A**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** The talented Mason Crosby is maddeningly inconsistent as a place-kicker. Jon Ryan has a strong leg and good placement punting. Little known Danny Amendola is a solid kick returner and a slippery punt returner. **Rating: B**

**SUMMARY:** The Lizards remain the class of the North Division but they will face a tough challenge from the upstart Pickering Spartans. All the tools are in the Durham tool box – it boils down to execution on the field and avoiding the big turnover at the wrong time. Philip Rivers has something to prove and this is the year he asserts himself as one of the best.



### PICKERING SPARTANS

Gus Konstantakos

Predicted Finish: 10-6

**OFFENSE:** The Spartans will be going on the offensive in 2010. Veteran, Brett Favre appears for the first time in the EFL to lead, potentially, the deadliest attack in the EFL. The line is strong with Jake Long watching Favre's blind side and Kris Dielman at guard. They make holes for the most explosive running back in football, Chris Johnson. Try to stop the running game and Favre has Anquan Boldin, deep threat Vincent Jackson, and All Star tight end Tony Gonzalez to make you pay the price. It will be tough for anyone to stop the Spartans. **Rating: A+**

**DEFENSE:** In one year the Spartans have upgraded this unit from the league's worst ranked defence to a defence that cannot be trifled with. The biggest improvements are in the secondary, where Asante Samuel joins Jonathan Joseph to form one of the better 1-2 corner combos in the league. Veteran safety Brian Dawkins, rescued from York, supports the run and contributes in pass coverage to bring valued leadership. David Harris is a rock at middle linebacker but he must carry the load himself as the rest of the linebackers are merely average. The defensive line welcomes newcomer Max Starks from Virden to boost a soft pass rush. **Rating: B+**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Two kickers provide a long leg on kickoffs, Josh Scobee and a more precise one on field goals, Jon Kasay. Percy Harvin is a dangerous kick returner who can bring it to the house. Dennis Northcutt and Andre Roberts share punt return duties. **Rating: B+**

**SUMMARY:** The most dramatically altered team in the off-season is, surprisingly, a real contender to emerge as the Conference representative in the Championship game. Their offence is *that* good and their defence is good enough. Upsetting Durham, and even Florida, is within the realm of the reasonably possible but, make no mistake, if it were to occur it would be an upset. With all of the improvements, Pickering still has weaknesses on defence that the other top teams do not have. It will take good coaching and a few breaks to be Cinderella.





## MARKHAM NORTH STARS

Darrin Jones

Predicted Finish: 5-11

**OFFENSE:** After watching Mark Sanchez guide the offence all through the pre-season the North Stars got cold feet and signed veteran QB, Kurt Warner at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. Warner is the difference between a miserable season and a lacklustre one. He puts them in a position to emerge from the North Division basement and into a lower draft slot. DeAngelo Williams will help that cause as well. Last year's Offensive MVP will look for holes created by Michael Roos and Shaun O'Hara to run to pay dirt about one-third as often as he did in 2009. Chad Ochocinco should grab his share of TD passes as will twin deep threats Devery Henderson and Kenny Britt. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** They have some competitors among their front seven that give them the ability to make the odd defensive stand against good competition. Jason Taylor is still a pass rush threat, Shaun Ellis can still get it done, Gary Brackett and Barrett Ruud are intense leaders on the field, and Takeo Spikes is sharp enough to contribute a big play in the clutch. The defence drops off considerably in pass coverage. Safeties Jeremiah Bell and Louis Delmas are stronger in run support and are little help in deep coverage, while the corners are few in number and not very good. **Rating: C**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Donnie Jones is a great punter and Rian Lindell a proven commodity in the kicking game. Chad Simpson has game-breaking ability as a kick returner but is little more than average overall. Darren Sproles is a small but shifty punt returner. **Rating: B+**

**SUMMARY:** Markham is determined to lift itself out of last place and earn some bragging rights in the North Division. They are very close to Cowtown in terms of overall talent but their offence gets the nod over the Corn Kings because of the veteran Warner and stud running back, DeAngelo Williams. All things being equal, they should edge out the Cowtown for third place in the North Division.



## COWTOWN CORN KINGS

Jim Coghlin

Predicted Finish: 4-12

**OFFENSE:** Chad Pennington is gone only one year after signing a multi-year contract. He is replaced by fan favourite Joe Flacco, the strong-armed, even-tempered kid from the draft two years ago. Expect "Joe Cool" to be sorely tested in his first season as a starter. The line is banged up and there are questions about Marion Barber's ability to carry the load himself in the running game. Serviceable wide receivers, but no game breakers in the bunch, leaves tight end Zach Miller as Flacco's go-to guy. Don't expect any passing records to be set. **Rating: C**

**DEFENSE:** Injuries and inertia have taken the teeth out of the once highly respected Corn Kings defence. In a desperate bid to upgrade the line-backing unit the Kings have moved Aaron Kampman from end to outside linebacker, a move he is not happy with. Meanwhile, Kirk Morrison and Stephen Tulloch battle for playing time at middle linebacker and both want to be traded. Kris Jenkins and Rahsean Mathis are reportedly nursing leg injuries, reducing the effectiveness of two key members of the defence. On the upside, Tully Banta-Cain brings strength to the pass rush and the Corn Kings are talent deep at corner and safety. Unfortunately for this season, it is still talent in the developing stages. **Rating: C**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** The Corn Kings can argue that they have the best punter and one of the more accurate place kickers in the league. Unfortunately the special teams bragging rights end there. Golden Tate, Sherrick McManis and Tramon Williams make up a no-name group of returners. **Rating: B-**

**SUMMARY:** Cowtown is finally admitting it is in a "rebuilding phase" after putting the inevitable off last year in a misguided bid to compete. They are not a good team, but they are not horrible either. They are not likely to play the spoiler but should be able to knock off the weaker teams. They are evenly matched with Division rival Markham and will battle them for third place in the North Division.

## SOUTH DIVISION



### FLORIDA DRAGONS

Jim Heaton

Predicted Finish: 14-2

**OFFENSE:** This unit is dangerous and will score a lot of points. There are no weaknesses at the skill positions – Aaron Rodgers is solid, maybe even spectacular; Ray Rice is a threat running and catching the ball, Jonathan Stewart is a banger with speed, Brandon Marshall is a freak; DeSean Jackson is a speed burner and Heath Miller seems to always get open for the dump-off pass when his QB is in trouble. If there is a weakness at all it is on the line, which is not really weak, but less durable and deep than last year and when compared with rivals. Russell Okung, a rookie, will start at right tackle. **Rating: A+**

**DEFENSE:** The “Firewall” returns in 2010 as strong as ever and quite possibly the strongest of all. There is an impact player at each level – Dwight Freeney on the line, LaMarr Woodley at linebacker, and Darrelle Revis the ultimate shutdown corner. Ndamukong Suh steps out of college and into the pros, anchoring the Florida run defence. The secondary is aggressive, like Chino, and will make game-changing plays on the ball. The Florida ‘dime’ defence is a turnover machine. **Rating: A+**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Kicker Ryan Longwell is long and accurate. Matt Turk doesn’t need to be good but he is no slouch punting the ball. As if the Dragons needed any help on offence, Courtney Roby is a top notch kick returner who should provide consistently good field position while CJ Spiller dazzles on punt returns. **Rating: A**

**SUMMARY:** With so much going in their favour it is hard to see two losses on the Dragons’ schedule. But while the Dragons are imposing to contemplate, they face stiffer competition this year from rivals. They face all of the league’s contenders at least once and among them a couple will find a way to win or catch a few lucky breaks. They are still the “Team to Beat,” the World Champions, but they will have to bear down hard to three-peat!



### RINGGOLD CRIMSON HAWKS

Tim Molinaro

Predicted Finish: 9-7

**OFFENSE:** Out of the blue, last year’s most frustrating and mystifyingly bad offence appears to be coming out of its three-year funk. What is the difference? The offensive line, turnstiles from the Swamp Dawg days, has developed into a wall-of-meat the Dragons would be happy to have. Ryan Clady has arrived earlier than expected as an All Pro force at tackle while Chris Snee, acquired from Markham, brings stability and leadership to the interior. Big Ben won’t fall under a pile of blitzing linebackers as often as in the past. Maurice Jones-Drew and Ryan Matthews will take turns running the ball to take attention away from wide-outs Andre Johnson and Santonio Holmes, the most dangerous one-two punch at WR in the league. So where’s the tight end? Forget where, *who*? Sadly, it appears the Hawks can’t have everything. **Rating: A**

**DEFENSE:** The linebackers are the strength of the defence, led by DeMarcus Ware and supported by second-year standout Clay Matthews and veteran middle man, Nick Barnett. The interior of the defensive line is solid with Domata Peko stuffing the run and Gerald McCoy applying pass rush pressure, but the edges are dangerously weak. Teams will be able to run on Ringgold. Michael Jenkins and Corey Webster form a decent pair of corners, but the Hawks could use an upgrade and increased depth at safety. **Rating: B-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** The Hawks are carrying four kickers, two punter and two place-kickers, and it is not clear why. Dustin Colquitt will mentor rookie punter, Zoltan Mesko while Garrett Hartley will stare at Shaun Suisham. Robert Royal provides big score capability returning kicks and punts. **Rating: B+**

**SUMMARY:** The Hawks have fooled the Oracle before but this year the joke will be on the team that takes Ringgold lightly. With a last place schedule, this team is in a good position for a wild card berth and, with a lot of luck and help from elsewhere, there is an outside chance they could actually take the South Division. But enough pipe dreams! The problem with Ringgold this year will be their defence – which will have tremendous difficulty stopping the running game. It’s got some impact players, but it’s just not ready for the Big Boys.



## GWINNETT GLADIATORS

Dave Birdsall

Predicted Finish: 7-9

**OFFENSE:** With Matt Cassel riding the pine once more and Eli Manning at the controls, the Glads' offence should gain more yards if not score more points. Eli can connect for the big strike better than Cassel, as his five 300+ yards passing days with Pickering in 2009 showed. Cassel, by comparison, threw for over 200 yards just twice and never reached the 300-yard plateau. With a passing game to finally talk about at the water cooler, Gwinnett fans will find the team more exciting to watch, but not as successful in the standings. The offensive line lacks a leader but boasts some young talent in guard, Mike Iupati and tackle Levi Brown. Thomas Jones doesn't really scare anybody. This unit is better than last year, but not enough to make a difference. **Rating: B**

**DEFENSE:** Last year the Gladiators had one of the better defences in the EFL. They return in 2010 with a lot of strength but this year it is distributed in an unbalanced way that makes it more vulnerable than it looks at first glance. The front seven are impressive. Darnell Dockett and Robert Mathis are the best end combo in the league and have lots of freedom because Casey Hampton sits between them occupying the space of two men. The linebackers, led by Lance Briggs, are stout run defenders and capable of exerting pressure on the QB. Their run defence may be among the strongest, but their secondary is fragile and riddled with holes. Terrence McGee, their best corner, is not 100%, nor is their best safety, Troy Polamalu. Good teams will find this weakness. **Rating: B-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Andy Lee joins Mike Scifres and Donnie Jones among the ranks of elite punters. Josh Brown will give Coach Birdsall fits with his erratic aim in the kicking game. Stefan Logan adequately takes over return chores for the banged up Leon Washington. **Rating: B**

**SUMMARY:** With so many teams built to win (or almost win) the Glads will find themselves on the outside of the inner ring of competitive teams in 2010. They could get off to a fast start, but over the course of an entire season their inability to defend the pass will catch up to them and they will drop out of the race.



## GARLAND MUSTANGS

Doug Shirley

Predicted Finish: 4-12

**OFFENSE:** The Darling of the Press and the "Pride of Garland," Matt Ryan, will find the going a little tougher this year. Last year he and the offence led the Mustangs to a Cinderella-like 8-8 record and finished barely out of the playoffs. This year he will have trouble leading the Mustangs to water, let alone making them drink it. There are plenty of tools for him to use: Frank Gore and Willis McGahee bring power to the inside running game and Matt Forte remains a threat through the air. Possession receiver, Wes Welker gets open in double coverage and Chris Chambers is a viable deep threat. The problem might be Ryan himself. Teams have been watching film non-stop since last year and he did not look good in the pre-season. The line is not getting enough push and everyone seems out of synch. He might turn it around when the games are for real, but don't bet on it. **Rating: C**

**DEFENSE:** The Mustangs' 3-4 features a top-flight group of linebackers led by Brian Cushing. They support a so-so defensive front three that may be a little undersized for the task of trying to occupy the space of four. The secondary features a pair of good young safeties, but the starting corners are merely average in coverage and do not take the ball away often. This group should be able to corral the occasional bucking bronco but just as many are going to roam free across the Garland plains. **Rating: B-**

**SPECIAL TEAMS:** Robbie Gould is a good kicker and Sam Koch joins Mike Scifres, Donnie Jones, and Andy Lee among the ever-growing ranks of the league's elite punters. Tedd Ginn Jr is a dangerous speedster returning kicks and Wes Welker is one of the league's unsung heroes returning punts. **Rating: A**

**SUMMARY:** Last year's Cinderella has a big wart on her nose in 2010. That wart's name is Matt. It is perhaps unfair to say so before the season even begins, but the sophomore slump is due to happen and the Mustangs just don't have the horses (pardon the pun) to carry a misfiring QB.



# BUG THE BOOKIE!

## JIMMY THE GEEK GIVES YOU HIS PICKS FOR WEEK ONE EFL ACTION

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### JIMMY'S Week one picks

#### **GWINNETT @ FLORIDA (line – DRAGONS by 7)**

For the third straight year, Florida and Gwinnett face each other in the season opener, but this is the first time the Dragons have ever opened at home. Expect a noisy crowd fuelled by a pre-game awards ceremony to charge up the Dragons' batteries even before the coin toss takes place. As if they needed charging up. The Florida players are tired of hearing trash talk coming out of Gwinnett that they are an opportunistic team and not equipped to slug it out in the trenches. Aaron Rodgers will put the Gladiators back on their heels and, in typical Florida fashion the ground game will finish them off. Eli Manning will think he never left Pickering when this one's over. **PICK: FLORIDA**

#### **RINGGOLD @ GARLAND (line –CRIMSON HAWKS by 1)**

The Corral will be decked out in ribbons and garlands (pun intended) and the local Chamber of Commerce will be sponsoring a large community picnic before the game starts. Matt Ryan and *his* team are the toast of city going into their home opener and the local fans expect a blowout for the home team. I am glad I won't be there because I like the fans at the Corral. It will be an eye-opener for everybody when Ringgold's Ben Roethlisberger dissects the Mustangs 'D' and their defence shuts down Matt Ryan – making the Mustangs look like everyone expected them to look *last* year. **Pick: RINGGOLD**

#### **CHARLESWOOD @ MOHAVE (line – PATRIOTS by 2)**

The Patriots' regular season sweep of the East Division starts in Mohave, where the home team will find it very difficult to move the ball on the ground against the Pats' front seven. This will force Matt Schaub to throw when the Pats are looking for the pass and when that happens, Ed Reed has been known to strike. Peyton Manning will have time to throw but he may not choose to do it often, preferring to let Adrian Peterson wear the Hellfire down in the Mohave heat. **Pick: CHARLESWOOD**

#### **VIRDEN @ KUTZTOWN (line – GOLDEN BEARS by 9)**

Last season's 4-12 debacle brought all fans of Virden (Anchorage) down to Earth. Everyone finally understands the Violators, even with Drew Brees at quarterback, have nowhere to go but up. Brees looked *really, really* good in pre-season and so it is tempting to fall back into old patterns of thinking that he can carry a team, even one as ramshackle as Virden, all by himself. I, for one, will not be fooled. Brees may keep the score somewhat respectable, but Kutztown's Tony Romo will own the Virden secondary and LeSean McCoy will rush for over 100 yards in less than 20 carries. Darren Sharper will pick off Brees late in the game as he tries in vain to lead a comeback and the Bears will cover. **Pick: KUTZTOWN**

### **LOS ANGELES @ CHINO (line – CONVICTS by 2)**

And so the battle for the west starts. The Convicts are celebrating the return of Donovan McNabb by retiring his jersey and then reinstating it before the game – a small and curious recognition of his contribution to Chino football's finest hour. The Knights, the emotional loss to Florida in last year's final still preying on their team's psyche, has come out openly and declared they will humiliate and "unman" the Convicts in their own penitentiary. I'm giddy with excitement at that thought of watching this one. As for where my money is going, it's betting on an emotional McNabb to make Charles Woodson look human and lead his new/old team to victory. **Pick: CHINO**

### **IOWA CITY @ YORK (line – CUBS by 5)**

There will be a lot of national attention on this game for the sole reason that two quarterbacks of interest are making their debuts. Tom Brady, the subject of a controversial player swap between Winnemucca and Florida two years ago, will make his first appearance as the starter for his new franchise (he made two brief cameos in Outlaws games last year). Greatness is expected of him in his new York home. The other is Sam Bradford, the rookie drafted by the Cubs in the first round. Bradford was named the starter midway through training camp when the Cubs simultaneously announced the controversial move of cutting Trent Edwards. This contest features 'Youth' leading a good team (Cubs) versus the 'Vet' leading a mediocre team (Excaliburs). New start, new City, new veteran QB, big spread, and the fact that Iowa City was the only team to fall to Winnemucca (York) last season leads me to one conclusion. **PICK: YORK**

### **DURHAM @ MARKHAM (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 6)**

This one-sided rivalry plays out this way: Markham desperately wants to beat the Thunder Lizards and the Thunder Lizards are indifferent to the North Stars. This is because the North Stars register about a 2 out of 10 on the Durham Fear scale. Last year, Markham took the Lizards off guard in Week Three and carried a 3-point lead deep into the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter before Kevin Faulk pushed Durham over the hump with a late TD run. When the teams met again, Durham punished Markham for their impertinence, white-washing them 35-0. Bitter and humiliated, Markham coach Darrin Jones marked this date on his calendar when the schedule was released. He has vowed revenge. How cute. It will be entertaining to see the North Stars throw themselves at Durham early in the game and pathetic to watch later when they realize how badly they are overmatched. **Pick: DURHAM**

### **PICKERING @ COWTOWN (line – SPARTANS by 4)**

Brett Favre could probably not have picked a better situation for his historic first EFL start. He is on the road, which means a little less pressure, and he will be able to pick apart the shaky Cowtown defence pretty much at will once Chris Johnson has run rampant over them. Morale in the Corn Kings' camp is reportedly low after a difficult pre-season and no clear sign from management on where the team is heading in the long run. The Spartans don't care. They are eager to show the Old Guard that there is a new pecking order in the North Division. It is certainly possible that Joe Flacco might put up a fight in this, his starting debut. If he does, it might be an entertaining game. But the stars are not aligned for a Cowtown victory or even a covering of the spread. **Pick: PICKERING**