

2013



EFL

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

2013

# PREVIEW

## DARK HORSE NO MORE!



The pressure is on **Matt Ryan** (right) to lead the favoured Mustangs to an EFL Championship, but **Eli Manning** (above) is ready to prove that 2012 was no fluke. Meanwhile, in the PAC, Patriots fans hope the return of **Peyton Manning** (below) will bring a return to the playoffs.



### INSIDE THIS ISSUE!

- HORSE RACE – WILL IT BE A PHOTO FINISH?
- RIVAL LEAGUE RAIDS
- THE FOOTBALL ORACLE – KNOW THE END IN ADVANCE
- IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS IF EVERY EFL TEAM!
- JIMMY THE GEEK'S WEEK ONE PREDICTIONS

# OFF TO THE RACES!



CANTON (AP) – And they’re off! The race for the Gale Sayers Trophy begins this Thursday night on EFL Network, with the defending Champion Markham North Stars first out of the gate against their division rival, the Durham Thunder Lizards. These two dark brown thoroughbreds are good bets to place when the winner crosses the finish line at the end of year, but the odds are that they, and a half dozen other prize horses, will be at least a nose behind the winner. Charging out of the gate with them at 2/1 and looking strong enough to overtake them all is the stud of the EFL stable, the Garland Mustangs.

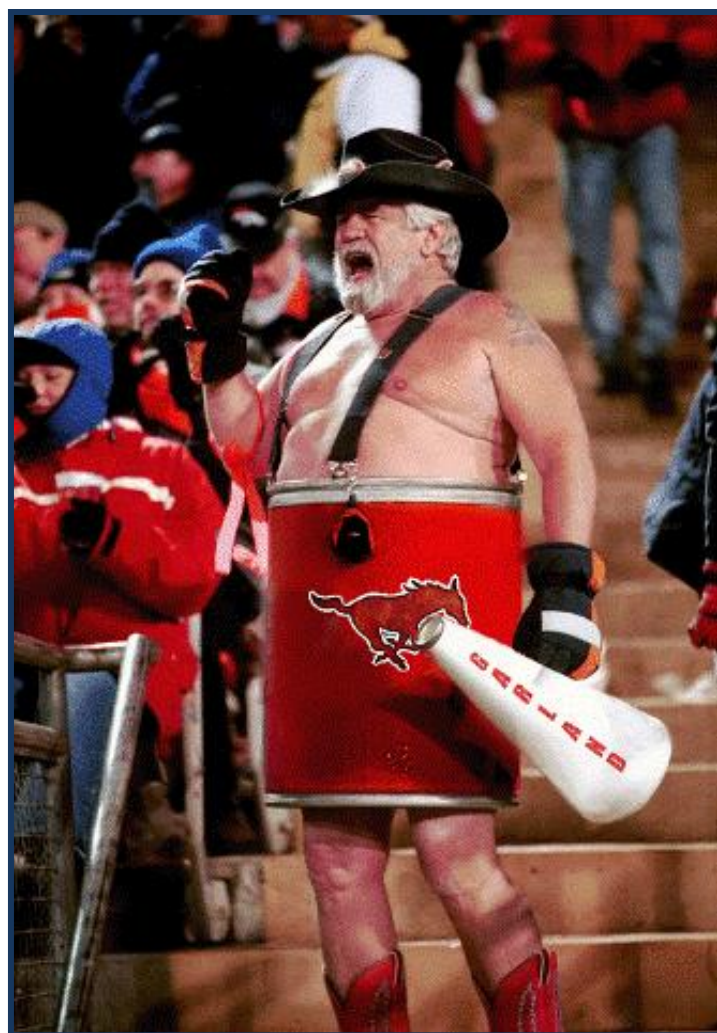
After a disappointing 2011 campaign, the Mustangs rebounded and were considered a dark horse to win it all in 2012. In the end they failed to make the playoffs. Their performance was both heart-breaking and maddening to the Mustang Faithful – partly because their head coach, **Doug Shirley**, bore the team’s successes and more numerous failures with a stoicism and serenity that was sometimes mistaken for aloofness or incompetence. His patience and cautious approach seemed out of step with the fans’ demand for instant gratification. But was it out of step with eventual success?

As disappointing as 2012 was for the Mustangs, the big picture is promising. Every year Shirley’s Mustangs have gotten a little better and this year they appear nearly certain to break through into the post-season. How deep they go will depend on their leadership, both on the field and on the sidelines, but there are some doubters who feel that the Garland coach is out of touch with the game.

Getting to the bottom of Doug Shirley’s coaching philosophy is a bit like assembling the pieces of a puzzle without a picture. He is a man of few words and long pauses; what he says is important, but what he doesn’t say is even more important. For example, his confidence in quarterback **Matt Ryan** is most evidenced by the fact that he has never said publicly that he has “confidence” in **Matt Ryan**. He doesn’t feel it is an issue, so he doesn’t discuss it. A reporter could easily draw the wrong conclusion and one did. Following a 32-0 loss

at home to Durham last year – the absolute low point of the Mustangs’ 2012 season – Shirley was asked if he still had confidence in Ryan.

“The team did not perform to my expectations today, but my expectations haven’t changed for tomorrow,” Shirley answered. When pressed to explain



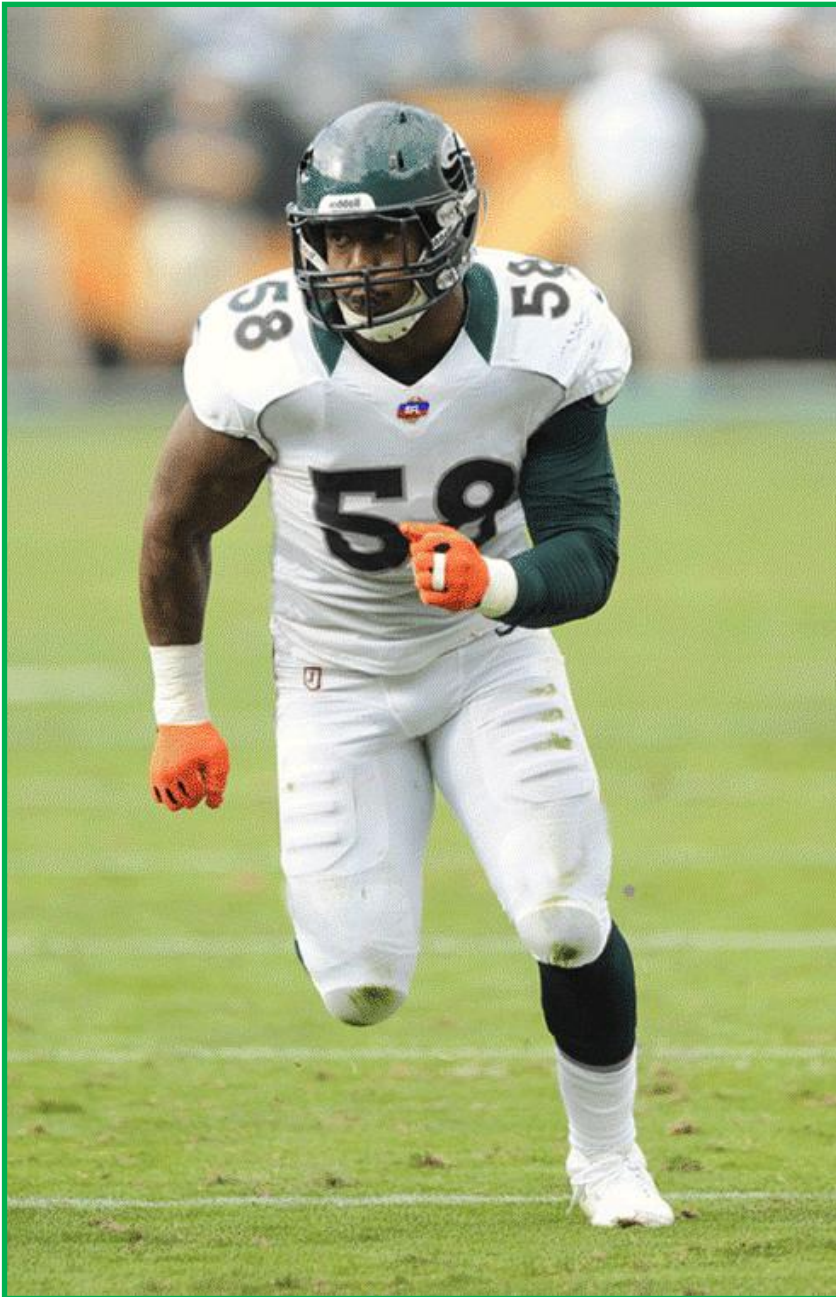
Retired rodeo clown, **Barrelin’ Buddy Buck**, is one Garland super fan who hopes to bring his act to national television in the playoffs this year.



if this meant he had or did not have confidence in Ryan, Shirley calmly replied, “Confidence is a quality of a player, not a coach.” When asked if he was avoiding the issue, Shirley pointedly answered, “I think it’s your issue, not mine.” Later, the reporter’s headline read, *‘NO VOTE OF CONFIDENCE FOR RYAN AFTER BLOW OUT.’*

Exchanges like the one above create a lot of tension in Garland press gallery, but it is all one-sided. Shirley seems completely unperturbed by the questions, while reporters seem extremely frustrated by the answers. It appears like a game but in reality the Garland coach is just being straight in his own fashion. Looking back, in fact, he set the ground rules from the start:

“I’m happy to answer all questions you reporters put to me,” he said in his first season in the league, “but I only answer a question once and I’m not inclined to explain it, so hopefully ya’ll will get it the first time.” He pronounced this with such equanimity that its non-compromising nature was completely overlooked at the time. Now the sports world knows better – **Doug Shirley** is a quiet, affable hard-nose.



Linebacker **Von Miller** is ready to hunt quarterbacks and stuff running backs in the EFL’s East Division. Will an MVP performance from the league’s most feared defender be enough to push the Excaliburs past the Violators and Patriots in 2013?

He is also very patient. His is largely a home-grown team built slowly through the draft, astute free agent acquisitions and the occasional key trade – such as the one with York that brought receivers **Anquan Boldin** and **Jeremy Kerley** in to help re-stock a depleted wide receiver corps. He followed that up with a bundle of trades designed to free cap space in order to pursue unrestricted free agents. He then showed that he wasn’t afraid to spend money in the market, landing some important pieces in wide receiver **Brandon Lloyd** and guard **John Greco**, but missed out on running back **Alfred Morris** by the price of a cart of groceries.

The attempt to sign Morris was a puzzler for some; the Mustangs already had two of the game’s best running back talents in **Matt Forte** and **Arian Foster**. But, in fact, it made a lot of sense when you looked at the numbers. Shirley wouldn’t comment on his strategy, leaving analysts to guess that one, or both, of last year’s running tandem would have been on the trade block within minutes of Morris’ signing. Was it an indication that Shirley had little confidence in the pair? Probably not, since confidence is a quality of a player, not a coach. But does he still have high expectations? Based on last year’s unimpressive numbers – Forte and Foster combined for 974 yards rushing and a 3.5 average – probably not. One thing is certain; if the two backs with the big reputations don’t produce big numbers on the ground this year, the Mustangs could find the road bumpy in the playoffs.

Smoothing out that road will be an offensive line that, according to *Pro Football Focal-Point*, ranks among the top three in the

league. The tackles are set with **Duane Brown** on the left and 2<sup>nd</sup> year man **Trent Williams** on the right, while one of the best in the game, **Max Unger**, solidifies the center. Greco will shore up the left side at guard, leaving right guard the only question mark, with **Kory Lichtensteiger** likely to be named the Day 1 starter.

The Garland offence is ready to improve on their 12<sup>th</sup> ranked standing of 2012, but that is not the reason the Mustangs are finally ready to break away from the pack. What will spur them down the home stretch is a defensive unit with more stars on it than a Markham playoff ticket stub. Ready to go super-nova is defensive lineman **J.J. Watt**, a far-ranging titan with limitless energy who can do it all at the line and knock down passes like a cornerback. Taking Watt out of the game will be a test all of its own for the best offensive lines and coordinators but that is only the first part – there is a lot more to worry about after JJ. Right behind him is pass-rushing terror **Anthony Spencer** while beside him is the unmovable behemoth **Vince Wilfork**. The combination of Wilfork in the center and Watt on the left will force ball carriers to the right, where left inside linebacker **NaVorro Bowman** will be waiting to lay down the hammer. The front seven will be more than average quarterbacks can handle, but even the best will find the challenge of finding the open man in a secondary patrolled by ball hawks **Patrick Peterson**, **DeAngelo Hall**, **Earl Thomas** and **Eric Weddle**, daunting. The Garland defence is projected by most analysts to be the league's best in 2013 and by ESPN's **Russ Flont** to



This excited Undertakers fan is hoping that **Chris Worthley** can recreate last year's black magic with **Robert Griffin III** at quarterback. Griffin has a tough act to follow replacing **Drew Brees** in Death Valley.

be, "the most dominant defence in the history of football." Last Sunday on *EFL Round-Up* Flont's eyes appeared about to pop out of his head when the subject turned to the Mustangs' D. He compared a defence that hasn't played a regular season down with the great defences of football history.

"This Mustangs' D could be better than Mike Ditka's Bears in 85, better than the Steelers of 76, and will make the Dragons of 2009 look like an itsy-bitsy swarm of...mosquitoes...without stingers!" he said.

But *Scouts Ltd.* analyst **Lazor Ponk** takes a slightly contrarian view of the defence formerly called the *Thoroughheads*: "this unit looks awesome on paper, but we've seen good paper Mustangs teams before and they haven't delivered. A lot will depend on the schemes of the defensive coordinator. Last year they hardly blitzed at all and stayed in base defence a lot. There wasn't much pressure on the quarterback. They ranked 7<sup>th</sup> overall in defence with basically the same group of players they have now. I don't see them getting much better if they don't try new looks on D."

The national swoon over Garland has at least one man griping about respect; he isn't getting enough, he says. **Darrin Jones** is making the most of the media snubs at North Stars' training camp. The bulletin boards at The Kennel, the Markham training facility in nearby Smeltville, are plastered with every news clipping that sheds any doubt that the reigning champions can repeat in 2013. Jones is smoldering with resentment but his veterans are taking it in stride.

"We've been here before," says cornerback **Charles Tillman**. "We prefer to be here. We're the champs and nobody can take that away from us. If they want to say we can't do it again, that's okay, because we'll prove them wrong again. They won't know what hit 'em!"

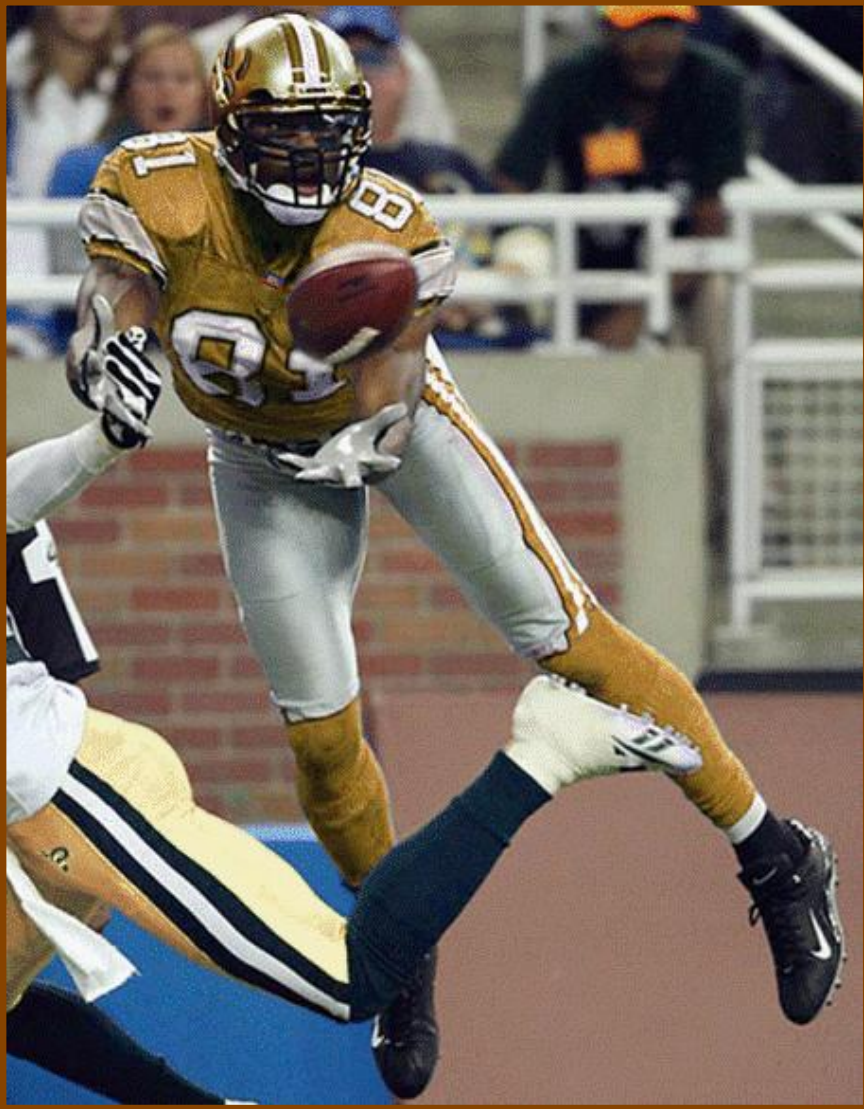
The truth is that nobody in the mainstream media, or in Vegas (4/1) is discounting the North Stars as a playoff contender and possible finalist, but debate over their off-season manoeuvres, combined with the arrival of Garland and some dramatic changes in rival Durham, have raised doubts that they are in a strong position to hold onto the Gale Sayers Trophy.

Strapped for cash, Markham did not pursue any high priced free agents, opting to focus on the rookie draft and the trade market. Jones saved his big moves until the end of camp, shocking the EFL by jettisoning the best wide receiver the Stars have ever had, **Wes Welker**, in a 13-player deal with Scarborough that patched some holes and shored up the defence. The loss of Welker, a fan favourite, prompted an outcry in Markham that Jones tried to address by acquiring **Percy Harvin** from LA. Harvin is a game-changer but is also injury-prone. No doubt they will miss Welker, but the Stars' fortunes will end up depending on their quarterback **Eli Manning** and the defence's ability to generate a lot of turnovers again this year. Jones is so confident in Manning that he opted to enter the season with just one quarterback on the roster. One late hit away from disaster, Jones and Eli will be walking a tightrope this season in quest of another ring.



In neighbouring Durham Region, the Thunder Lizards and **George Kaldis** are hoping that the “brees” from high-flying pigskins will be strong enough to knock Manning and Jones off the high wire. The Thunder Lizards focused on the passing game in the off-season – strengthening theirs and shutting down their opponent’s. They fired the first shot of the trading season by snatching a discontented **Drew Brees** from the Undertakers in exchange for game-manager **Matt Schaub** and a litter of draft picks. Brees is coming off a record-setting year in Death Valley where he had an arsenal of weapons in the passing game. With **Calvin Johnson** and **Dwayne Bowe** on the flanks, **Antonio Gates** and **Vernon Davis** off the line, and **Danny Amendola** and **Eric Decker** in the slot, the argument can be made that he has even more in Durham.

**Harry Schultz** of [Football Outriders.Org](http://FootballOutriders.Org) argues precisely that: “Brees had a great pair of tight ends in Death Valley, but when you factor in the effect of multiple injuries to **Andre Johnson**, the net effect was that he had only



Durham wide receiver **Calvin Johnson** is coming off a career year in 2012. With **Drew Brees** throwing him the ball, ‘Megatron’ is aiming for a 100-catch season and a possible offensive MVP honour.

one top-tier wide receiver at his disposal, **Marques Colston**. According to our projections, **Calvin Johnson**, at 27 and in his 7<sup>th</sup> season, should be peaking at this point in his career and could easily top 100 catches with Brees throwing him the ball. Teams can’t double him on every play because **Dwayne Bowe** and **Antonio Gates** will kill you as well. I think Brees is in a better position than he was last year. Will that translate into a 74-plus TD pass season and a new record? I doubt it, because Durham has some issues with their running game, but he will get a lot done even against pass-oriented defences. A 40+ TD season is certainly in the cards, I think.”

The Thunder Lizards also shored up their secondary by signing veteran **Champ Bailey** from the Hellfire to a 5-year, \$40 million contract. Bailey joins one of the top young cornerbacks in the game in **Richard Sherman** to form the top starting CB tandem in the league. Rookie **Tyrann Mathieu** had a great camp and looks like he will make a nice complement to **Devin McCourty** to round out the Durham starting secondary.

As impressive as this looks, Vegas still has the Dinosaurs pegged at just 8/1 to win it all. Doubts that **Reggie Bush** can carry the load at running back, concerns about the offensive line, and a linebacker corps that lacks a true pass rusher, are among the reasons some bettors have steered away from the early trend

that saw Durham pegged at 4/1 immediately after the Brees trade. But Durham’s falling odds have as much to do with the increasing level of competition around them as they do with marginal weaknesses. There are plenty of teams in the Can-Am Conference with the talent to knock Durham off course long before the final.

Although pundits have been avoiding making a big deal about Scarborough after two disappointing seasons, the Blue Eagles remain a team capable of beating anybody on any given day. Questions about the performance of their defence during the pre-season have caused some to overlook improvements to their offence that may be enough to compensate.

“No question, they don’t look to be as dominant on defence as they were last year,” explains **Caleb Cogger** of *EFL*



*Magazine*. “Signing **Jerrell Freeman** as a free agent and trading for **Tarell Brown** in the last week of camp will help, but that unit won’t win games for them this year. But stealing **Wes Welker** from the North Stars to join **Brandon Marshall** raised their passing attack to another level. People sometimes forget that **Aaron Rodgers** is one of the best quarterbacks in the game; high expectations make people critical when you don’t win Championships. Giving Rodgers those types of targets with **Ray Rice** and **CJ Spiller** in the backfield is a recipe for a 400-point season on offence.”

All the same, the Scarborough horse is rated only 15/1 to win it all and will likely be neck-and-neck with division rival Gwinnett and cross-conference foes like Pickering and Cowtown for a wildcard berth. Any of those last three teams are as capable of making a late push to place in the Can-Am Conference playoff race as they are to fall to the back of the pack. The difficulty in predicting the playoff race in the Can-Am Conference is explained by Outriders’ guru, Schultz:

“After Garland, Markham and Durham, you have a real horse race in the CAC for that last playoff spot,” Schultz said in an appearance on EFL Network’s *On the Record*. “Scarborough has an elite quarterback, which factors high in our projection formula, but their defence has taken two steps backwards. The Gladiators have a quarterback, in **Ben Roethlisberger**, who has shown flashes of elite skill in his career and has a much improved offensive line to protect him this year. Their defence is on shaky ground with that ageing defensive line and **Troy Polamalu** banged up in pre-season, but if Ben performs they could surprise some people. Cowtown and Pickering are in the same category but for different reasons. The Corn Kings are pretty solid throughout but their quarterback, **Joe Flacco**, has yet to prove that he belongs in the ranks of the Elite or even the Very Good. He was pulled out of the game twice last year for **Matt Moore** – that shouldn’t happen to a great quarterback. The Spartans will be better than last year, no question, because they have a veteran quarterback and a pair of game-breaking receivers in **Vincent Jackson** and **Demaryius Thomas**, but that defence has holes. They look like they will be relying on **Steven Jackson** to carry the entire load in the running game as well, and he has a lot of miles on him. The ‘variable rating,’ which is the factor that determines the margin of error in our simulation, is high for all of these teams. The bottom line is I’m guessing as much as anybody else is when I say that the Blue Eagles will round off the playoff teams in the CAC.

While more teams are in the race than out of it in the Can-am Conference, the field in the Pacific-Atlantic Conference features only a few thoroughbreds and a lot of also-rans. However, that doesn’t mean that the divisional races will be any less exciting.

On the Atlantic side of the conference, one of the safest bets in football this year is that the Patriots will win more games than they did in 2012. The storied Charleswood franchise has awakened from a nightmare and appears to be playoff-bound in 2013. The return of **Peyton Manning** is a big part of the renewed optimism, but he is not the only good news story coming out of Patriot Place. **Adrian Peterson** is fully healthy now after disclosing that he played the entire 2012 season with chronic body cramps caused by a strict low-sodium, shrimp burrito and Corona diet recommended by the owner of *Buro’s Burrito Bar and Health Centre*, a former endorsement of Peterson’s. With that relationship now severed, Peterson looks to be back in old form and ready to gallop to a 1,000 yard season. Rounding out the skill position tri-fecta is wide receiver **Michael Crabtree**, lured away from York for the #2 overall pick in the draft. He joins **Brian Hartline** and pro bowl tight end **Jason Witten** to give Peyton three premium options in the passing game.

The Patriots’ skill players should be enough to push them to the top of the East Division, but their playoff fortunes could be determined by their defence and line play. The Pats defence in 2012 was the worst in the league by far, surrendering 550 points. With their prospects not much better this year, Findlay made strategic trades to acquire defensive tackle **Kevin Williams**, linebacker **David Harris**, and cornerback **Kareem Jackson** to buttress it at all three levels. While not championship calibre, it will perform better than advertised due to the offence keeping it off the field.

Hot on the Pats’ tail will be **Tom Brady** and the Excaliburs, a squad that will struggle to keep pace with the Pats offensively, but has the kind of defence that can turn a game around. Linebacker, **Von Miller** is extraordinary, while defensive tackle **Geno Atkins** is a fierce interior pass rusher and a stout run defender. **Jason Babin** and **Michael Johnson** will bring pressure to bear from the edges and if that is not enough, linebackers **Lawrence Timmons** and **Wesley Woodyard** are effective blitzers who can join Miller in the quarterback hunt and make life hell in the pocket. This top grade pass rush will take some heat off an ageing secondary that will likely struggle to keep up with the league’s new breed of fast and physical wide receivers.

The York offence will of course feature Brady and his go-to guy, **Victor Cruz**. After those two, the Swords



**The Evolution of a Helmet** – One of these things is not like the other. The Cubs introduced a new helmet for 2013, their 5<sup>th</sup> design in 7 years. Coincidentally, they sported their darkest helmet during their darkest year. Can you spot it?

are pedestrian at best. **Davone Bess** can get the job done at wide receiver but he does not intimidate anybody. **Michael Turner** may be on his last legs as a feature running back, and the offensive line will start rookie **Luke Joeckel** at left tackle. The weight will all be on ‘Tom Terrific’ to direct this team into the post-season.

Joining the mix for the playoff hunt is the team that surprises everybody every year, until this year. The performance of **Matt Stafford** in 2012 has some analysts predicting a Conference win for Virden in 2013. It’s easy to see why; Stafford stands in the pocket and annihilates secondaries with close to Brees-like precision. He has two game-changers starting at wide receiver, **Antonio Bryant** and **Julio**

**Jones**, with deep threats **Justin Blackmon** and **Torrey Smith** backing them up. When Stafford rests his arm he has one of the most dynamic running backs in football, **Jamaal Charles**, to exhaust defences. With so many toys in his trunk it was not surprising that Virden GM, **Lance Barrate** got busy in the off-season fixing holes in his offensive line.

On the other side of the ball, Virden has the equivalent of a nuclear missile in linebacker, **Aldon Smith**. In the mold of a Von Miller, but able to line up at end, Smith is a ferocious pass-rusher and a capable run defender who will create severe match-up problems for opposing offences. It’s Smith’s vast potential that freed up Barrate to deal last year’s Defensive MVP, **DeMarcus Ware** to Mohave for guard **Rob Sims**. Even without Ware, the Violators’ front seven will bring pressure to bear on opposing quarterbacks and help out a secondary that got younger and more talented, but a little more brittle during the off-season. With so much in their favour, why would Virden not be the favourite to win the East Division and battle for the Conference Championship?

“It boils down to schedule,” writes Outriders.Org analyst **Arpin Plunderflunder**. “The Violators don’t have many easy games outside of their division and the Patriots do. People tend to overlook the effect of the schedule, but it is very much part of Outriders’ analysis. With the same schedule, Virden takes the division 83% of the time.”

On the Pacific side of the conference, the reviled Undertakers and their villainous coach and GM, **Chris Worthley** have undergone their yearly transformation, executing a total of 19 trades involving the exchange of 71 players and draft picks, bringing in 5 new rookies, and being active in free agency. The net result is that only 26 players from last year’s Conference Championship team remain on the roster and last year’s Offensive MVP isn’t one of them. Why make wholesale changes to a team that went 15-1 and re-wrote the offensive record books last year?

“Change is life, baby,” commented Worthley on local MORT-666 radio. “Nothing changes in Hell – the fiery Hell, I mean – and trust me, I know ‘cause I’ve been there. The moment you stop changing is the day you start to die. I look at my team that way. We’re always rebuilding and always competing – that’s what keeps us from having to rebuild.”

Replacing Hall-of-famer Brees with a rookie who struggled mightily in his first season is strange. But **Robert Griffin III** brings rare speed and elusiveness outside of the pocket and above average arm strength. Worthley was careful to run a vanilla offence during the pre-season, but one can expect some brand new looks when the real games start this week. With new offensive coordinator Cookie Kellie, formerly of Beaver State University, designing the plays, fans can expect to see an option-style offence, with plenty of deception, creating space for shifty speedsters like hybrid runner-receiver **Randall Cobb** and running backs **Bryce Brown** and **Stevan Ridley**, not to mention Griffin himself. The tight end combo of **Rob “Gronk” Gronkowski** and **Aaron “Gang-banger” Hernandez** is back, as is elite wide receiver **Andre Johnson**, to keep the passing game a threat.

On defence, the front seven are solid, with **Gerald McCoy** featured in the middle of the line and **Jerod Mayo** and **Clay Matthews** backing him up; but the secondary is as questionable as ever. CFL free agent **Brandon Carr** will be asked to hold down the #1 corner position, which is too much to expect of him against the better passing attacks in the EFL. But will the defence matter much? Not according to a ranting **Cowan Bullherd** of *Morning Bull* radio:



“Who cares about *defence*? Not Chris Worthley! And why should he? He makes offences that can’t be stopped. *That’s* defence! Offences that can’t be stopped *are* defence. Now don’t get me wrong – I’m not saying that all defences are irrelevant. I’m saying that defence is next to irrelevant in Death Valley, where all they do is score, score and score again! So don’t talk to me about the Undertakers’ weak D holding them back from another trip to the dance.”

While Death Valley was changing players, their bitter rival in Iowa was changing colours. **Deron Redding** announced before the pre-season that his Cubs would be returning to their original red, white and blue colour scheme and unveiled a new helmet design, the team’s fifth in 7 years. The Cubs are coming off their worst season, so changing colours can’t hurt. But the real hope for the Cubs lies in the ability of second-year QB, **Russell Wilson** to develop into the type of player that Redding thinks he is.

“Russell will surprise a lot of people this year. He’s not the same player. He’s matured,” says Redding. “We gave him a year to learn and now he’s ready to step up and stomp on those lamo Death Dudes. It’s going to be spiffy!”

The Cubs added a pair of veterans, tight end **Tony Gonzalez** and wide receiver **Steve Smith**, to steady the boat on offence, but they are still the youngest team in the league. They are also one of the most talented, especially on defence. There is a line-up of talent at the defensive end position that will deprive some great players of snaps from scrimmage. On the line, **Mario Williams** and **Derrick Morgan** will play behind **Jason Pierre-Paul** and **Muhammad Wilkerson**, while **Fletcher Cox** and **Corey Liuget** hold down full time jobs in the center. All-Pro linebacker **Patrick Willis** centers a pair of promising rookies in **Alec Ogletree** and **Barkevious Mingo**, while free agent acquisition **Reshad Jones** commands the secondary. It’s a good looking team on paper, but the proof will come on the field.

Rounding out the field of contenders in the PAC is **Cam Newton** and the Convicts. Last year Cam did it alone on offence and it wasn’t enough. This year, **Rob Nazar** got Cam much needed help by dealing for running back, **Chris Johnson** (League Offensive MVP in 2010) and wide receiver, **Roddy White** (top receiver in 2011). He also acquired tackle **Dave Stewart** and guard **Brandon Moore** to solidify an offensive line that **Jahri Evans** had run by himself last year. The defence cannot boast the same improvement, however. The traditional strength of the Convicts is ageing and they can no longer sustain the level of play they displayed over the past 3 seasons. But with the immortal **Julius Peppers**, the powerful **Haloti Ngata**, and the brutal **James Harrison** still showing signs of life, this unit cannot be taken lightly either. The Convicts will go as far as Newton and his new supporting cast can take them, provided the defence can come up the stops when they need them.

So what about the also-rans? Could there be a really dark horse waiting to make its move from the back of the pack in the final stretch? **Harry Schultz** of Outriders dismisses it as “highly improbable”:

“It’s not impossible, but in the world of math it’s next to that. Call it *highly improbable*. Mohave has a quarterback but no receivers; Carthage has no defence and they play their home games 4,700 miles from the closest EFL city; the Monarchs will get scored on by everybody; Twin Cities has a good team but they play in the North Division; Sebastian has



Triumph linebacker **Bobby Wagner** is an underrated force on defence, much like his team. If the Twin Cities defeats the odds it will be because of players like him.



serious problems on the offensive line; South Carolina hasn't changed in 3 years – they still have no secondary; and LA is simply a wreck. If I had to pick one of these teams, I would have to take the Triumph because they have some underrated players on D, like **Bobby Wagner**, and on the attack they have a seasoned QB in **Jay Cutler** and an emerging talent running the ball in **Doug Martin**.”

Of course, anything can happen once the season kicks off. What looks like a sure-thing before play begins can suddenly appear ridiculous once the players start hitting each other; and inevitably there will be a few pleasant surprises that will change the equation. **Sperl Sponefritter**, of *Sperl's World of Sports*, wrote about prediction and analytics in a recent article:

“People tend to put a lie to the math. Not that math is wrong, but people's math is wrong, or incomplete (which is actually wrong under a strict interpretation). The inability to predict the performance of **Tony Romo**, for example, on any given day or at any given moment, is a problem for the analytics crowd. Sure, the pattern can be read over time, but what happens when Tony threads the needle at the *exact* right moment for a game-winning touchdown; or fumbles a snap on an extra point; or throws an interception that nobody can explain? Those are the moments that determine destiny. Who can predict them? I defy anyone to predict the magic and that's what Romo has – magic. It would not surprise me if the great cosmic plan included a surprise playoff berth for the Regulators.”

Over the next 16 weeks the picture will become clearer to the football world and we will know if Sponefritter's 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive annual prediction of a Regulators' playoff appearance comes true. For now, Vegas has done the math that will determine the fate of your money, if you choose to put it on the line. In two days the gun will finally sound the start of the EFL Horse Race. *Ladies and gentlemen, place your bets!*

### **From Las Vegas**

Odds to win the EFL Championship

**Garland 2-1**  
**Markham 4-1**  
**Durham 8-1**  
**Death Valley 17-2**  
**Charleswood 10-1**  
**Scarborough 15-1**  
**York 18-1**  
**Virden 18-1**  
**Chino 20-1**  
**Cowtown 24-1**  
**Pickering 25-1**  
**Iowa City 30-1**  
**Gwinnett 40-1**  
**Twin Cities 50-1**  
**Mohave 66-1**  
**South Carolina 110-1**  
**Carthage 125-1**  
**Mission Viejo 150-1**  
**Sebastian 250-1**  
**Los Angeles 300-1**

# SHOW 'EM THE MONEY!

## CASH BONANZA THE COST OF COMPETITION

**CANTON (AP)** – The players love it. The owners hate it. The agents live off it. Raiding rival professional football leagues has become an off-season sport for EFL owners, but it is a high-stakes game. There are no restrictions when plundering the top talent of the Superior Football League, the Canadian Football League, or the Tex-Mex Football League. To land a premium player one needs deep pockets and a lot of luck.

Raising the stakes in 2013, for the second straight year, were the big bank balances of the expansion franchises. The money pool remained deep and the teams with dried up cash reserves were forced to watch on the sidelines as the high-rollers hit the jackpot. Over \$217 million was shelled out in guaranteed bonus money to 112 players by 19 of the 20 EFL franchises. Mission Viejo and Twin Cities combined for nearly 40% of all bonus money awarded, setting an impossibly high bar for most of their competition. Virden owner **Lance Barrate** was shut out of the market – aversion to playing home games at **TERRODOME** and the tendency of putting a gun to players' heads during negotiations cited among the reasons that top free agents were reluctant to sign with the Violators. But for the second consecutive off-season it was the Cubs' **Deron Redding** who set the benchmark for excess.



## 'RICH-AD' JONES

The **Iowa City Cubs** made former Miami Monsoon's safety **Reshad Jones** (pictured left) the richest free agent in this year's unrestricted free agent draft. The deep pockets of the fastest growing professional football league on the continent turned over 40 lesser known league's stars into instant millionaires.

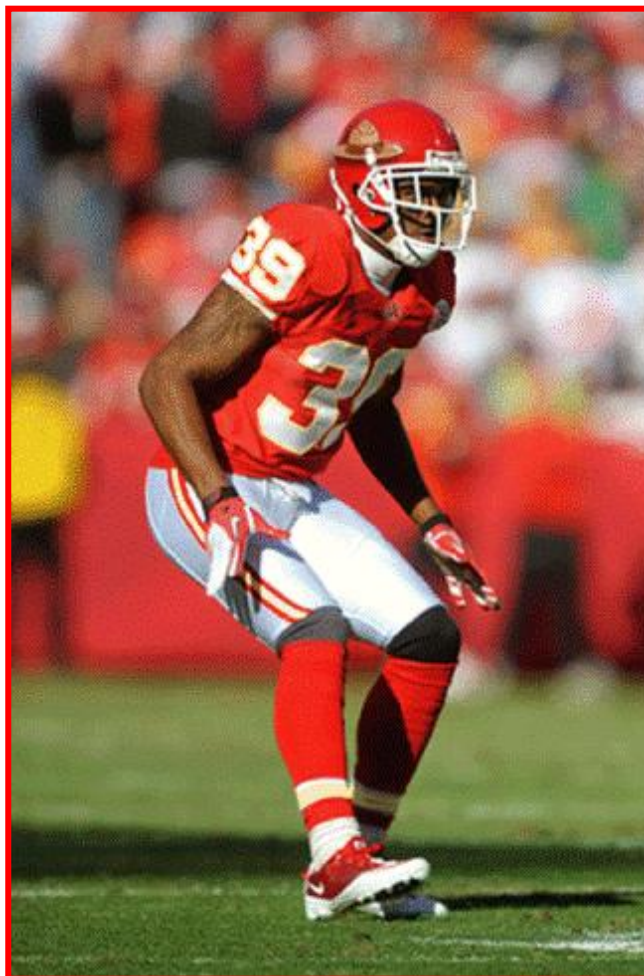
### TOP TEN BONUSES

<b>Reshad Jones (ICC)</b>	<b>\$17,000,000</b>
<b>Josh Sitton (MVM)</b>	<b>\$16,111,000</b>
<b>Matt Flynn (MVM)</b>	<b>\$13,000,505</b>
<b>Pierre Garcon (TCT)</b>	<b>\$12,502,000</b>
<b>Brandon Carr (DVU)</b>	<b>\$12,000,000</b>
<b>Zane Beadles (SBE)</b>	<b>\$10,100,125</b>
<b>Brandon Browner (MVM)</b>	<b>\$9,112,000</b>
<b>Alfred Morris (COW)</b>	<b>\$9,000,500</b>
<b>Henry Melton (TCT)</b>	<b>\$8,433,000</b>
<b>Jerrell Freeman (SBE)</b>	<b>\$6,725,000</b>



With rookies dominating the Iowa City payroll, Redding could afford to make former Miami Monsoons' safety **Reshad Jones** this year's top unrestricted free agent. On a Monsoons team mired at the bottom of the SFL standings in 2012, his play stood out. A ball hawk and a terror in run-support, Jones brings stability to the back end of the Cubs' secondary, but many question the high price. A report in *Total EFL*, from a source familiar with the negotiations, claimed that the Cubs were at the bottom of a list of seven teams that had made offers to Jones' agent; he did not want to go to a rookie-dominated team that had been 1-15 the year before. He was apparently ready to sign with South Carolina or LA until Redding, sensing he was losing the battle, asked Jones' agent: "what will it take?" A one-year contract worth over \$6 million and a \$17 million dollar guaranteed signing bonus was apparently the answer. And so, a reluctant **Reshad Jones** heads to the corn fields of Iowa with a small fortune to help a struggling franchise turn around its fortunes.

The guard market continued to be sizzling hot, with two of the top ten signing bonuses going to players at that position. Monarchs' owner **Chris Ferraro** believes that **Josh Sitton**, formerly of the SFL's Driftwood Bullies, is worth every penny of a \$16 million signing bonus and 4-year contract that pays him more than \$5.75 million per season. Sitton was an All Pro performer with the championship-winning Bullies. Most scouts believe his game will continue to be effective at the higher level of competition in the EFL, but the steep price still has some people scratching their heads. A bidding war was at the root of it, forcing the loser, Scarborough, to turn to **Zane Beadles** in an effort to bolster protection for their franchise QB, **Aaron Rodgers**. Blue Eagles' owner **Chris Dickinson** shelled out a shocking \$10 million signing bonus for a 4-year deal that steals Beadles away from the Montreal Alouettes of the CFL. Beadles was a steady performer on the Montreal line, but few scouts believe he will have the same impact in the EFL.



**Brandon Carr** of the CFL's Moose Jaw Mounties attracted offers from a record 13 EFL teams. **Death Valley** finally landed the talented corner with a \$12 million signing bonus and a 5-year deal. Good cornerbacks are in high demand for teams hoping to compete for a playoff spot in 2013.

### FUN FREE AGENT FACTS

**DID YOU KNOW** that the **highest free agent bonus** ever paid to a football player was **\$30,062,610?**

**Evan Mathis**, a guard, received that record sum to sign with the Iowa City Cubs in 2012, but never played a down for them. Mathis was shipped off to Markham for a young prospect. The woeful Cubs went 1-15 while Markham went on to win the Championship. The controversial transaction prompted a rule change in 2013.

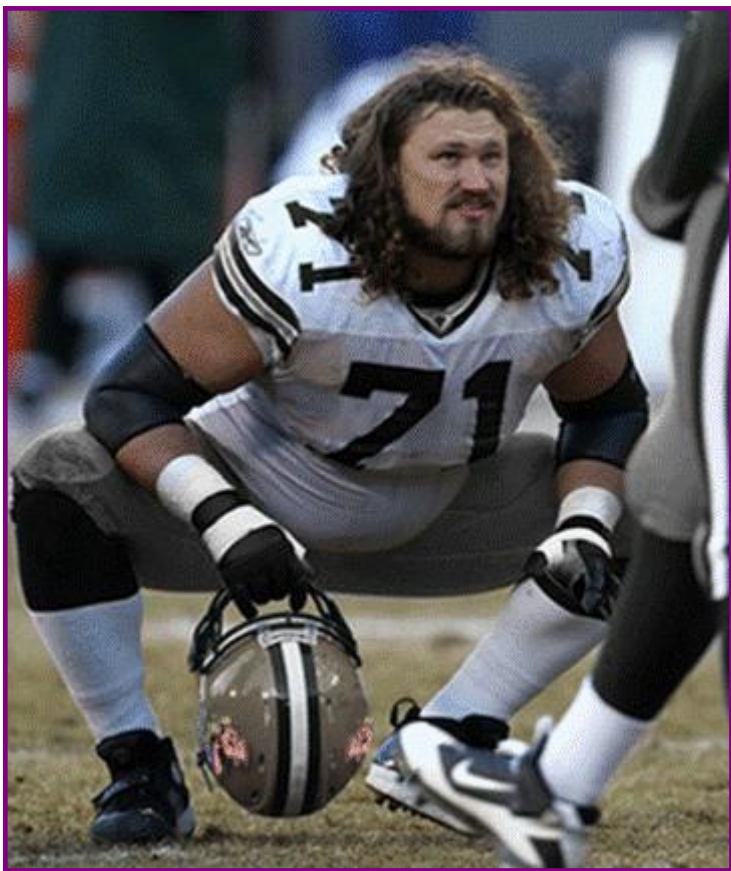
A volatile mix of cash and high demand led to hyper-inflation in the cornerback market. **Brandon Carr**, an all-star performer with the CFL's Moose Jaw Mounties, was aggressively courted by 13 teams. He landed a 5-year contract and a stunning \$12 million signing bonus from the Death Valley Undertakers, although many wonder if he can be any better than an average EFL corner. In the same category as Carr is former Calgary Stampeders corner, **Brandon Browner**, signed by the Monarchs to a 5-year deal plus a \$9 million signing bonus. Some believe that Browner's highly physical play will result in higher production in the EFL, but his age, 28, means that his peak production seasons will likely be behind him by the time Mission Viejo becomes competitive.

Twin Cities' owner **Guy Williams** has hard work ahead to dig his team out of the North Division basement. His competition has loads of talent, but he

has loads of cash and he was not afraid to leverage that resource in pursuing free agents this year. At the cost of \$12.5 million he landed one of the top talents at wide receiver in any league, former Bugsville Bunnies star **Pierre Garçon**, signing him to a 2-year contract at a relatively modest \$1.6 million per year. Garçon had clearly outgrown the SFL, leading the league in receptions as a rookie and setting an SFL record with 22 receptions in a single game last year. But he is also coming off an injury and finished the 2012 season on injured-reserve. If he can return to previous form, his signing will be a bargain. Williams also doled out an \$8.4 million bonus on a 1-year contract to defensive tackle **Henry Melton**, formerly of the Big Pond Pandas of the SFL. Melton had a breakout season in 2012, stuffing the run and bringing interior pressure on opposing quarterbacks to help his team finish first in the SFL in total defence. His accomplishments went relatively unnoticed by the media outside of Big Pond but not by the scouts of the 7 EFL teams that bid aggressively for his services. Melton joins **Jurrell Casey** to give the Triumph the top defensive tackle tandem in the league.

In Cowtown, Coach **Jim Coghlin**, panicking over an off-season foot injury to **Maurice Jones-Drew**, bent the ear of his team's owner, the notoriously frugal Farmer Brown, and convinced him to dip into his savings account and make former San Antonio Armadillo, **Alfred Morris**, the top running back free agent this year. Morris grabbed national attention when he carried the ball 6 consecutive times without being tackled, stepping out of bounds once in the middle of 5 TD runs to highlight a record 314-yard rushing performance against the Las Vegas Gamblers. The accomplishment came in the pass-happy Tex-Mex League, where teams have 2 first downs to gain 5 yards and field only 10 players a side. All the same, Morris was marked from that point on by the Corn Kings as well as by Garland, Mohave and Commonwealth. It is reported that Cowtown and Garland both came in with \$9 million signing bonus offers, but the Corn Kings' additional gesture to rent a limousine to transport Morris and his agent back and forth from the airport, over **Doug Shirley's** offer to pick them up in his Buick, reportedly made the difference.

With SFL All-Pro linebacker **Ahmad Brooks** still locked into his long-term deal with the Driftwood Bullies and rookie sensation **KJ Wright** electing to sign with Toronto of the CFL, there were few impact players available at the linebacker position. As a result, Scarborough's **Chris Dickinson** felt justified in paying former Mississippi Rebels standout **Jerrell Freeman** more



The Monarchs made former Driftwood Bullies, **Josh Sitton** this year's top multi-million dollar guard. His contract is worth \$39 million over 4 years – the kind of money most premium left tackles can only dream of.

than he is probably worth to shore up the second level of the Blue Eagle's defence. Freeman is a tackling machine who can cover receivers and blitz effectively when needed. Scarborough will pay him \$6.7 million up front and \$3.3 million per season for the next 5 years – not a bad deal for an undrafted rookie who quietly toiled for spare change in Canada before finally earning some recognition with the Rebels.

In all, more than 40 players became instant millionaires by jumping ship from their former teams to the EFL. The glut of EFL cash on the free agent market helped to make rich men out of virtual nobodies such as fullback **Rhett Ellison** and defensive tackle **Karl Klug**, or resurrected the fortunes of forgotten stars like cornerback **Adam "Pacman" Jones** and wide receiver **Brandon Lloyd**. But no free agent signing created as much stir or controversy as the signing of Tijuana Tacos back-up QB, **Matt Flynn** to a long term deal with Mission Viejo.

The signing of Flynn to a 4-year deal, worth the league minimum \$350,000 per season, appeared at first like a raw deal for Flynn, even if it was more than he was making in Tijuana. But the \$13 million signing bonus, fully guaranteed, changed the picture entirely. Even the Mission Viejo media, buzzing with excitement over so much free-spending by the owner, questioned Monarchs' owner **Chris Ferraro** judgement. Everyone agreed that the Monarchs needed to sign another



quarterback, but why **Matt Flynn**? And why so much?

“Sometimes you just have to go with your gut,” Ferraro replied soon after the signing. “You see a guy play and you get a feeling that he might be great, not just good, but actually *great!* I have that feeling about Matt. I wasn’t about to let him go to someone else and kick myself later when he threw 6 TD passes against my Monarchs!”

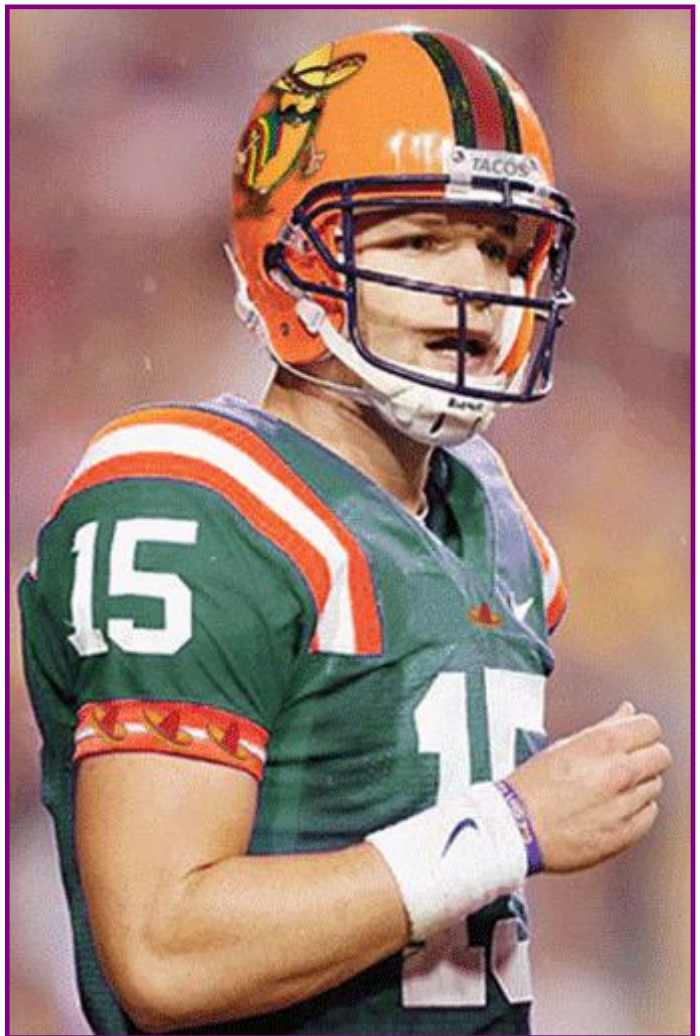
6 TD passes was the number Flynn threw when he came into Tex-Mex wildcard game between the Tacos and the Monterrey Jacks last year. Tacos’ starter, **Ricky Stanzi** went down in the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter with a severe buttock strain and in came Flynn, who had played only a couple of dozen downs all year to that point. He proceeded to pass for 480 yards and 6 TDs in a 52-44 win over the Jacks. It was a lucky day for Flynn in more ways than one; Chris Ferraro was at that game with his brother, Cesar, part-owner of the Monterrey Jacks franchise.

Flynn’s big day earned him a feature in *Pro Football Focal Point* and a 5-second clip on ESPN – big coverage for the Tex-Mex League, but few scouts took note, or cared much if they did. Flynn’s name came up in discussions with several teams, but Virden’s **Lance Barrate** was the only other owner to make a serious pitch for his services.

While the signing of **Matt Flynn** garnered the most national attention and controversy, there were plenty of other free agent contracts that brought amazement or wild applause - sometimes involving the same team. **Marcel Reece**, an accomplished fullback who led the way for SFL rushing leader **Marshawn Lynch** of the Doe County Sheriffs, became set for life when the Regulators’ **Hal Corson** ponied him up \$6.6 million in bonuses to pave a path for **Frank Gore**. Reece could turn out to be the greatest fullback in the EFL, but he is still a fullback. Reece’s bonus outstripped Corson’s offer to veteran center **Will Montgomery**, an every down player, by more than \$1 million. At 30 years of age, Montgomery is approaching the back end of his career but he will prove a vital boost to the struggling South Carolina offensive line.

Other players who received big bonuses and are expected to make immediate impacts are center **Chris Myers** (\$6.3 million to Twin Cities), safety **Tavon Wilson** (\$5.7 million to Mission Viejo), running back **Bryce Brown** (\$5 million to Death Valley), and linebacker **Wesley Woodyard** (\$3 million to York).

As for the rest of this year’s free agent class, only time will tell if they were worth the money, cost too much, or came at a bargain. The opportunity to raid the rival leagues comes once a year and timing is everything. The average player who looks great at the right moment could strike it rich while a potentially great player flying under the radar may never get the big pay day. It may not seem fair, but it is true Free Market in action.



Monarchs’ owner **Chris Ferraro** opened the vault for unproven Tijuana Taco QB, **Matt Flynn**, shelling out more than \$14 million over 4 years, but with a whopping \$13 million of that guaranteed. With 2<sup>nd</sup>-year pivot, **Ryan Tannehill** impressing in the pre-season, Flynn could become the EFL’s richest clipboard-holder.

## THE GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF MATT FLYNN

1. Came off the bench to throw 6 TD passes as a Tijuana Taco in the 2012 Tex-Mex wildcard game.
2. Signed to a \$14 million contract by the Mission Viejo Monarchs soon after.
3. Earned the life-saving badge to become an Eagle Scout.



# 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*

*A great melee...a cataclysm, a mighty battle, will melt the northern ice caps, bringing a great flood beneath the starry night, a bountiful golden harvest, extinction of the great beasts and death to the men of war. (I need to take my pills now) A winged horse will take flight above the silent earth. Death will reign from sea to sea and lawlessness will be the god of the living. (I'm hungry, when's lunch?) The glorious faithful will rise but fall to a calamitous scourge that subdues all but soaring Equus, supreme, blotting out the light of night. (Excuse me, I need to pee) - 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. At the top of the hill is a tiny burrow from where, on windless nights, a raspy moan or a shrill howl once emanated, punctuating the steady sound of the burbling brook and the chirring of crickets. It was the sound of a soul simultaneously wracked by torment and illuminated with the transcendence of her visions. But this sound is no longer heard on a still night, or any night for that matter. The Football Oracle is gone from this place. This former fan of the Green Bay Packers, who famously foretold of the demise of the old NFL (and, some say, was driven mad by the vision), has been taken and imprisoned in an institution. The frenzied woman, through whom the Football Gods speak, apparently got a little out of control one night and went for a jog through Canton wearing nothing but a tin foil hat.

I guess it was inevitable that the authorities would catch up with her. Rumours about the "Hermit Woman of the Tuscarawas" had spread throughout the county. She had become the local "Big Foot" - with numerous documented sightings and some shaky video phone footage keeping the stories alive; but no hard evidence to confirm her existence or her identity. But I knew who she was and exactly where to find her. The Football Oracle allowed me to visit her once a year at the start of the football season while shutting out the rest of the world. I never knew why I was so favoured and I didn't want to risk upsetting her by asking. But evidence of her existence and clues to her location were in this very feature article every year. I guess the people who hunt "Big Foot" and other legendary beings don't have time to follow football.

I arrived at the Football Oracle's lair and found it deserted. A collection of shopping carts, broken down appliances and old furniture - the stuff of garage sales - was crammed inside, but there was no sign of life or recent habitation. I sorted through the mess, looking for clues to indicate where she might have gone, but found none. I did find her stash of tin foil, about 500 rolls or so, possibly stolen from the back of a truck, along with a collection of foil hats with arcane symbols pasted onto them.

I finally tracked her down at the Crisis Intervention and Recovery Centre in Canton. The search for her put me behind schedule. Adding to my stress, I found the staff at the hospital to be uncooperative in allowing us the uninterrupted privacy required for the Football Oracle to delve into her future-reading trance. The doctor eventually intervened, claiming that I was contributing to her delusional behaviour and cut short my visit.

The medication they were administering to her had had a calming effect on her - reducing her violent outbursts. But it also kept her from seeing her visions with the same clarity. A lot of "there is a cloud" or "there is a fog" or "I need to go to the bathroom now" disrupted the narrative. (She used to go to the bathroom right where she was sitting in the old days). The following is the best I can do, with the limited information available.



# PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

## EAST DIVISION



11-5

#1 SEED

### CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

COACH: Jason Findlay

MVP: Adrian Peterson

OFFENCE: A+

DEFENCE: C-

SPECIAL TEAMS: A

The Pats will be able to dominate the pace of play when they have the ball in spite of a questionable offensive line. The late addition of HB **Rhett Ellison** will help pave the way for a possible record season by **Adrian Peterson**. The passing game is in good hands with **Peyton Manning**. The defence boasts no stars but **Kareem Jackson** gives them hope in pass coverage while the linebackers can bring pressure. DT, **Kevin Williams** saves the line from being a pushover. **Jacoby Jones** is one of the best all round returners in the league.



10-6

#3 SEED

### YORK EXCALIBURS

COACH: Jay Hammond

MVP: Von Miller

OFFENCE: B

DEFENCE: A-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B-

**Tom Brady** will get another opportunity to show how great he is because he won't have much support. The receiving corps lacks a deep threat after **Victor Cruz** and the running game is on shaky ground. The line is serviceable but rookie **Luke Joeckel** will have to step up at left tackle. The defence is the strength of the team – the pass rush is dangerous while **Geno Atkins**, **Von Miller** and **Assante Samuel** are each capable of changing games. **Blair Walsh** can split the uprights from a distance but the return game is questionable.



9-7

### VIRDEN VIOLATORS

COACH: Lance Barrate

MVP: Matt Stafford

OFFENCE: A

DEFENCE: B

SPECIAL TEAMS: A-

Assuming that **Matt Stafford** can approach last year's form the offence will score a lot of points thanks to a deep receiving corps and the elusive **Jamaal Charles** at running back. The line that had fans worried should hold up fine in pass protection. **Aldon Smith** is the star of the defence and they will need him to wreak havoc in the backfield because the secondary is unlikely to hold up on its own. **Lawrence Tynes** is one of the better place-kickers. The return game, featuring veteran **Leon Washington**, will help out in close games.



6-10

### MOHAVE HELLFIRE

COACH: Bobby Elder

MVP: Jimmy Graham

OFFENCE: C+

DEFENCE: C+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B-

**Andrew Luck** is still the quarterback of the future in Mohave as the outlook for this year is not promising. **Jimmy Graham** will get a workout in the passing game due to young, inconsistent wide receivers and a weak running game. The line is better than usual for the Hellfire but right guard could be a problem. **Cameron Wake**, **Justin Houston** and **DeMarcus Ware** elevate the pass rush to an elite level but the unit as a whole is vulnerable to the conventional running game. **Jonathan Banks'** fumble issues are a concern.



4-12

### CARTHAGE CANNIBALS

COACH: Ken Main

MVP: Philip Rivers

OFFENCE: C

DEFENCE: C

SPECIAL TEAMS: C+

The acquisition of **Philip Rivers** may add a win or two to the Cannibals' total but it won't change a near-certain basement finish. **Andre Smith** adds muscle to an anemic line that will prevent rookie **Eddie Lacy** from realizing his potential in the running game. **Greg Hardy** looks like he'll be a star one day but this year he'll be just good. The safeties, **Donte Whitner** and **Harrison Smith**, are the strength of the defence and that's not saying much. Six punt returners vied for the duty in camp and none of them looked promising.

# PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

## WEST DIVISION



**11-5**

#2 SEED

### DEATH VALLEY UNDERTAKERS

COACH: **Chris Worthley**

MVP: **Robert Griffin III**

OFFENCE: **A**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

A healthy **Andre Johnson** is good news for the Undertakers, but their fortunes hinge on **RGIII** and his ability to execute the new game plan. If he does, expect 450+ points on offence and a possible MVP nomination if Death Valley goes all the way. If not, don't expect the defence to bail out the team; despite the return of linebacker **Clay Matthews**, and the emergence of defensive tackle **Gerald McCoy**, they are just an average unit. The kicking game isn't special but the return game has some charge to it with **Randall Cobb** getting the nod.



**9-7**

#4 SEED

### CHINO CONVICTS

COACH: **Rob Nazar**

MVP: **Cam Newton**

OFFENCE: **A-**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A+**

The Convicts are a contender again but with a slightly different look. **Cam Newton** got the weapons he needed with the addition of receiver **Roddy White**, running back **Chris Johnson** and an offensive line upgrade. Their defence is still respectable but it has lost half a step as their stars age. **Julius Peppers** and **James Harrison** keep the pass rush dangerous, but support for **Haloti Ngata** in the run game is lacking. The kicking game is strong in both facets while **Trindon Holliday** offers game-breaking ability in the return game.



**9-7**

### IOWA CITY CUBS

COACH: **Deron Redding**

MVP: **Russell Wilson**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **A**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

The Cubs are hoping **Russell Wilson** shows improvement in his second season to move the offence. He has a pair of new targets in **Steve Smith** and **Tony Gonzalez** to join deep threat **Mike Wallace**, but doubts that **Trent Richardson** can carry the load downgrade overall expectations. The talent on defence approaches elite level with **Patrick Willis** commanding a platoon of hungry young defenders but will the rookies hold up? **Greg Zuerlein** has a big but inaccurate leg while a committee of speed-guys will manage the return duties.



**3-13**

### MISSION VIEJO MONARCHS

COACH: **Chris Ferraro**

MVP: **Dennis Pitta**

OFFENCE: **C**

DEFENCE: **D+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-**

Pro Bowler **Russell Okung** at left tackle and free agent star **Josh Sitton** solidify an already talented offensive line. The strength of the line will ensure that **Ryan Tannehill** physically survives the regular season. The running game is in shambles and **Mike Williams** is by himself at wide receiver making **Dennis Pitta** the go-to guy on offence. The defence has some talent, particularly at corner and with **Cameron Jordan** on the line, but it is raw and certain to implode at times. Special teams are an afterthought on a team like this.



**2-14**

### LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

COACH: **Jeff Dohrn**

MVP: **Michael Bennett**

OFFENCE: **D+**

DEFENCE: **C**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

The salary cap finally caught up to the Knights and forced wholesale changes. It will not be a good year for the 2011 Champs as **Jeff Dohrn** attempts to develop younger talent. Game manager, **Alex Smith**, will be asked to carry the offence alone and the results could be ugly and possibly get him injured. The defence still has **Osi Umenyiora** and **Charles Woodson** to remind them of the 'Blue Shield' days, but the secondary is a mess with a converted safety, **TJ McDonald** starting at CB. The special teams are decent, but does it matter?



# CAN-AM CONFERENCE

## NORTH DIVISION



12-4

#2 SEED

### MARKHAM NORTH STARS

COACH: **Darrin Jones**

MVP: **Charles Tillman**

OFFENCE: **A-**

DEFENCE: **A-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

It is a tough challenge to repeat as football champions but the North Stars have the talent to do it. There will be more pressure on **Eli Manning** as the running game will be less of a factor this year despite **Evan Mathis** paving the way, but **Percy Harvin**, **Marques Colston** and **Heath Miller** make up a good trio of targets. The defense will steal the ball with **Charles Tillman** and **Jairus Byrd** forcing fumbles and making interceptions. Kick returners **Harvin** and **Joe McKnight** will give a boost to the offence, but **Roscoe Parrish** has lost a step.



11-5

#3 SEED

### DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

COACH: **George Kaldis**

MVP: **Calvin Johnson**

OFFENCE: **A**

DEFENCE: **A-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A**

On paper, the Lizards look like the class of the division. 2012 MVP **Drew Brees** gains more weapons at wide receiver with **Calvin Johnson** and **Dwayne Bowe** as principle targets, but concerns about **Reggie Bush** as the feature back downgrade the offence slightly. The defence boasts the best CB tandem in football with **Richard Sherman** and **Champ Bailey** shutting down both sides, but after **Jared Allen** the front seven is lacklustre. The returners are dangerous and will add points to the scoreboard while the kickers are top notch.



9-7

### COWTOWN CORN KINGS

COACH: **Jim Coghlin**

MVP: **Alfred Morris**

OFFENCE: **B+**

DEFENCE: **A-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+**

The pieces are in place around **Joe Flacco** and now he must deliver in a contract year. All Pro tackle **Ryan Clady** will protect his blindside while running back **Alfred Morris** keeps linebackers honest. There is no shortage of options in the passing game meaning that Cowtown will score a lot if Flacco is sharp. The defence is solid throughout but the lack of a top tier pass rusher brings down their grade. The Corn Kings upgraded their punter with **Johnny Hekker**, but punt returner remains a question mark heading into the season.



8-8

### PICKERING SPARTANS

COACH: **Gus Konstantakos**

MVP: **Vincent Jackson**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-**

The arrival of **Matt Schaub** signals a return to a traditional offensive game plan. Whether or not **Steven Jackson** has enough gas left in his tank to carry the running portion of that plan is in question, but the big strike is in play with **Vincent Jackson** and **Demaryius Thomas** stretching the field. The defence features **Daryl Washington** calling the shots at inside linebacker and **Kevin Hatcher** clogging the middle, but shutdown corner **Joe Haden** has been battling injuries. **Adam "Pacman" Jones** will help offensively returning punts.



6-10

### TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

COACH: **Guy Williams**

MVP: **Doug Martin**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-**

In another division the much improved Triumph might prosper, but here they are looking at another basement finish. They have the build of a spoiler, with running back **Doug Martin** expected to have a big year, and a defence that will take offences by surprise. Defensive tackles **Henry Melton**, a key signing, and **Jurrell Casey** clog the middle better than most, while ILB **Bobby Wagner** continues to improve. Rookie **Eric Reid** figures to contribute immediately at safety. Returner, **Tedd Ginn Jr** was plagued by fumbles during the pre-season.

# CAN-AM CONFERENCE

## SOUTH DIVISION



14-2

#1 SEED

### GARLAND MIUSTANGS

COACH: Doug Shirley

MVP: J.J. Watt

OFFENCE: A

DEFENCE: A+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B-

This looks like the Mustangs' year. They have the best offensive line in football, with two All Pros, and a premiere QB in **Matt Ryan** working behind it. **Arian Foster** is a former rushing title winner and **Matt Forte** is a dual run/receiving threat. The offence is better than it needs to be in view of the defence. **J.J. Watt**, **Vince Wilfork** and **Eric Weddle** are only half the stars on a squad that rivals the best of the old Dragons teams. Depth is a concern, but a minor one, and the inability to return kickoffs will become annoying later on.



9-7

#4 SEED

### SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

COACH: Chris Dickinson

MVP: Aaron Rodgers

OFFENCE: A-

DEFENCE: B+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B-

QB **Aaron Rodgers** has some top talent to work with at the skill positions with **Brandon Marshall** and **Wes Welker** at receiver and **Ray Rice** and **CJ Spiller** at running back. A banged up offensive line is the one thing that might hold the offence back down the stretch. The Scarborough defence still has some players but it is fading, especially the pass rush. **Darrelle Revis** can't stay healthy and **Ndamukong Suh** is already showing signs of wear at the age of 26. The kicking game is one of the best but the return game is in trouble.



8-8

### GWINNETT GLADIATORS

COACH: Dave Birdsall

MVP: Ben Roethlisberger

OFFENCE: B

DEFENCE: B

SPECIAL TEAMS: A+

The Gladiators are looking for **Big Ben** to step up and carry them into the playoffs. He has the benefit of a strong offensive line, anchored by All Pro guard **Mike Iupati** and left tackle **Joe Thomas**, and a pair of complementary running backs. But after **Reggie Wayne**, there are scare targets in the passing game. On defence, **Lance Briggs** is looking to lead a battered crew that is not ageing very well. Fortunately, the Glads have a great punter in **Andy Lee** and a dangerous returner in **Leodis McKelvin** to help them win the chess matches.



7-9

### SOUTH CAROLINA REGULATORS

COACH: Hal Corson

MVP: Tony Romo

OFFENCE: B+

DEFENCE: C-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B+

The fortunes of the offence will depend on **Tony Romo** and his ability to find **AJ Green** between handoffs to Frank Gore. Fullback, **Marcel Reece** was a nice pick-up in the off-season as was center **Will Montgomery**, which will help the running game and give the Regulators' offence some staying power. There is some talent on the defence in the form of ILB **Luke Kuechly** and rookie DT **Star Lotulelei**, but the secondary is crowded with mediocrity again. **Jacquizz Rodgers** brings spark to kick returns but **Javier Arenas** is below average.



2-14

### SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

COACH: Russ Lemmon

MVP: Brandon Myers

OFFENCE: C-

DEFENCE: C-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B-

It is going to be a long year for the Swordfish fans and an even longer one for **Andy Dalton**. It is hard to find the positives on an offence that is forced to play **Jermon Bushrod** on the QB's blindside. **Nate Washington** joins **Kenny Britt** to form the starting tandem at WR, which will lead to more passes to tight end **Brandon Myers**. The defence is only marginally better thanks to **Ronde Barber** and some young talent in the secondary. All-purpose returner **Stefan Logan** hopes to revive his career in Florida but will fumble away the opportunity.



# BUG THE BOOKIE!

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

*Your source for fantasy and on-line betting solutions*



### JIMMY'S WEEK ONE PICKS

#### **VIRDEN @ YORK (line – EXCALIBURS by 3)**

The Excaliburs ruined Matt Stafford's Cinderella season with a 41-21 shellacking of the Violators in the quarter finals last year. But revenge is only half of what is on Lance Barrate's mind this opening weekend at Camelot. The other half is looking forward to tie-breakers at the end of what promises to be a close three-way battle for the East Division title in 2013. This is an important game for both teams as they position themselves to take on a revived Charleswood. For York, at home, it is almost a must-win. These two teams are closely matched making home field a tangible advantage. The Swords are favoured, but should they be? There are too many doubts about their running game to cause Virden to put eight in the box. If the Violators sit on the pass and let Aldon Smith tee-off on rookie Luke Joeckel, it could be a long day for Tom Brady. On the other side, Von Miller needs to keep the pressure on Matt Stafford and hope that he throws wildly in the direction of his premium wide receivers. But Miller can't get too aggressive, or the explosive Jamaal Charles will make him pay for it. It's shaping up to be a Week One upset in York. **PICK: VIRDEN**

#### **MOHAVE @ CARTHAGE (line – Pick'Em)**

The former Commonwealth franchise takes up fresh residence on a small island so far west of the continental United States that it is almost east. At least that's the argument the EFL Committee raises when dealing with complaints from other East division squads that have to travel half way around the world to get to the Killing Field in Carthage, American Samoa. The Hellfire will be feeling the effects of a long trip and that will slow them down at the start. Once they get into a rhythm it should turn into a hotly contested game with neither team running the ball very often or very well. This contest will come down to Andrew Luck versus Philip Rivers – a match-up made less exciting due to the lack of quality wide receivers on either side. Take Jimmy Graham over Kyle Rudolph in the battle of the dump-offs and Cameron Wake over Greg Hardy in the race to the quarterback. **PICK: MOHAVE**

#### **IOWA CITY @ CHARLESWOOD (line – PATRIOTS by 6)**

As fate (or the schedule maker) would have it, last year's Patsies of the PAC get to ease into the new season with a chance to face each other before taking on the real teams. For one of the two, the losing culture will continue in 2013 for at least one more week; while the other will get off on the right foot. Neither of these teams, however, is as bad as last year. The Pats are favoured to win their division while the Cubs are expected to challenge for theirs. The return of Peyton Manning will make it an emotional day in Charleswood – perhaps emotional enough to prompt real cheering from the normally docile Patriots fans. Adrian Peterson is dying to erase the embarrassment of a 2.7 yard per carry average in 2012 and will be looking to bust loose, while the most maligned defence in the league last year just wants to prove it can stop somebody occasionally. For Russell Wilson, who looked great in the pre-season, opening against a hungry Patriots team on the road is just bad timing. **PICK: CHARLESWOOD**

#### **LOS ANGELES @ DEATH VALLEY (line – UNDERTAKERS by 12)**

Last year's epic opener in LA between these teams set the tone for an unbelievable offensive season from Drew Brees. Don't expect anything close to the same fireworks this year, at least not from the Knights' side. LA is in forced rebuilding mode after hitting the salary cap wall in the off-season while the Undertakers have rebuilt by choice and remained healthy, even if they look different. This will be the first glimpse of the new offence installed by Chris Worthley and Cookie Kellie in the off-season, making it difficult to predict its effectiveness. But one thing that is predictable is the lack of talent on the LA sideline and its likely effect on the outcome. The spread is unusually high for a Week One match-up but probably not high enough. **PICK: DEATH VALLEY**

### **CHINO @ MISSION VIEJO (line – CONVICTS by 7)**

The Monarchs dropped two games to the Convicts last year but kept the last one surprisingly close. That was when Cam Newton had no supporting cast and the Monarchs were flush with the pride of having just beaten the Cubs for the second time and holding the Undertakers to just 34 points the week before. This year, Newton has help on offence while the Lockdown Crew is still capable of shutting the door on quarterbacks like Ryan Tannehill. Chino will win; the question boils down to the spread, and whether or not the home field will play a role in keeping this game close. With the crowd at HMK Royal Coliseum charged up for the opener, expect an early TD from the Monarchs; then expect the Convicts to take control – full control.

**PICK: CHINO**

### **DURHAM @ MARKHAM (line – NORTH STARS by 1)**

It doesn't get any better than this for an opening day match-up. With the two toughest teams in the toughest division facing each other there will be an early playoff atmosphere at the Dawg Pound. It is a difficult spot for even an MVP quarterback like Drew Brees to be in. The last time Brees faced the North Stars they ended his record-setting season on a sour note, reining him in taking away *his* trophy in the 2012 Championship Game. This time, Brees leads the Thunder Lizards and there are great expectations. The North Stars have had the Lizards' number of late, winning their last match-up of the 2012 regular season and knocking them out of the post-season in the semi-finals. Although Brees did not play on those teams, Markham showed they can handle him in the Final. On the field, Durham will have to show they can run the ball or Markham's ball-hawking secondary will sit on the pass. As good as Durham's passing attack is touted to be, it will be just a matter of time before something goes wrong against an aggressive defence like Markham's. When the Stars have the ball, expect them to pound the ground against a wavering Durham line and pick their opportunities through the air. **PICK: MARKHAM**

### **PICKERING @ COWTOWN (line – CORN KINGS by 3)**

These teams are probably the most closely matched teams in any division but both are half a step behind Markham and Durham. That makes this game critical to both team's playoff fortunes. The Spartans want a fast start while Cowtown will be content to keep a slow pace from the outset. Expect Matt Schaub to take his shots down field in hopes of lighting up the Corn Kings' secondary with the blazing speed of Vincent Jackson and Demaryius Thomas; while the Corn Kings counter with an Alfred Morris ground assault designed to grind down the Spartans' defence. Of course, both coaches will have something unfamiliar up their sleeves if their respective Plan A's fail to achieve results. Expect a close game that, like last year's opener, comes down to the wire and a differential of a field goal or less. **PICK: PICKERING**

### **SEBASTIAN @ TWIN CITIES (line – TRIUMPH by 6)**

This game will mean something in Minnesota, where fans are serious when they claim that the Triumph will shock the football world in 2013. In Sebastian, only the delusional think the Swordfish have a cod fish's hope in hell of making the playoffs, but the few who care about victories more than draft picks will see this as an opportunity for a win. Don't bet on it. The Triumph have progressed much farther than the Swordfish since both joined the league last year. Last year's Expansion Bowl was a cakewalk for Twin Cities. Expect this year's version to be even more so. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

### **GWINNETT @ SCARBOROUGH (line – BLUE EAGLES by 4)**

Both of these teams are in gradual decline but their leader's aspirations haven't caught on to that fact yet. Chris Dickinson is predicting a Championship for the Eagles and Ben Roethlisberger is guaranteeing an undefeated season for the Glads. Oh well, it should be a good game anyway. Scarborough has the edge in talent and the home field, but history has shown that, on a day when Big Ben is on his game and Aaron Rodgers freezes, anything can happen. All that means is that the Glads have a chance to keep it close and possibly steal a win. Is it likely to happen? Unless Rodgers puts a blindfold on, he can't miss Brandon Marshall or Wes Welker standing wide open in the Gwinnett secondary. **PICK: SCARBOROUGH**

### **GARLAND @ SOUTH CAROLINA (line – MUSTANGS by 7)**

Garland's Year begins with a trip to Carolina Slammer. This traditionally meaningless match-up is actually important this year as the Mustangs look ahead to piling up wins for the Number One seed. For South Carolina, victory will be theirs if they can keep the Mustangs under the spread. In order to do this, Tony Romo will have to bring his 'A' game and avoid the kind of meltdown he often experiences against the better defences. With expectations so high, you can expect the Horses to experience a few jitters at the outset, but they will settle in quickly and open 2013 with a "regular" beat down. **PICK: GARLAND**