

The Homecoming



Dynasty?



INSIDE

Will 2015 be the
Most Dramatic
Season Yet!

*FOOTBALL
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EFL

ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

**PREVIEW
2015**

9th Season

*Games of Our Lives
Something to Prove!*

*AND MUCH
MORE!*



Is Cam Still The Man?



A Dramatic Reunion

Another Choice in Chino

More Drama in Store!

An Angry Coach

Inflategate

An Angry Player

A Forgotten QB Returns

CANTON (AP) – Prepare yourselves for a season of uncertainty. 2015 will be nothing like 2014 except, perhaps, for the last team standing. Brace yourselves as well for dramatics, both on and off the field. The gridiron will be the battlefield and testing ground for more than competing squads of players; it will be a stage on which tales of triumph, redemption and vendetta will be told. It will be a season fraught with controversy as accusations fly about player tampering, media conspiracy, and allegations of “over-inflated” players. Yes, Inflategate, thought to be a crank initially, is beginning to dominate discussion and will certainly push the league out of its comfort zone in the weeks ahead. Will *love* and *jealousy* enter into the mix and make 2015 a true soap opera of a season? Probably not, unless the Mustangs win another championship and **JJ Watt** and **Matt Ryan** end up vying for the affection of an adoring Aurora fan base. That could very well happen.

But first, let’s turn our attention to the story that pushed aside all others in the off-season: the return of **Peyton Manning** to Charleswood.

It was a reunion as dramatic as the previous year’s separation had been traumatic. And it was as welcome as it was completely unexpected. The cunning coach, GM and owner of the Spartans, **Gus Konstantakos**, had calculated that the ageing veteran would not command big money in free agency, but he still preferred to keep Manning a Spartan and avoid the risk of free agency if possible. So he slapped the “protected” tag on Peyton and, sporting a beguiling grin and proffering a double shot of his finest ouzo, slid Peyton’s agent a 5-year contract worth slightly more than \$9.5 million per season. For a championship-winning QB and a future Hall of Famer this was an insult, but an insult the venerable Manning would have to bear if no other EFL team was willing to invest 5 years in a 38-year old.

Manning did not sit on the wire for long. After summarily discarding his championship-winning QB last year for what one journalist had called, “a handful of magic

beans,” Charleswood owner **Jason Findlay** snatched up Manning up without hesitation.

Was it atonement, or – as Findlay himself had once characterized his infamous trade – a “good football move?” Judging from the analysis, it was probably a little of both.

“Pretty much from Day One after ‘The Trade’ Findlay has been looking for a way to reverse the negative publicity and the unpleasant effects on the football field that trading Manning caused,” wrote **Charlie Wood** of the Charleswood Banner. *“Charleswood is a tight-knit community and Peyton was like family. Findlay was not going to miss this golden opportunity to reclaim one of Charleswood’s own.”*

Lazor Ponk of *Scouts Ltd.*, one of the few analysts who had defended the trade last year, offered a more sober view: *“This is a shrewd move that immediately makes the Patriots a division title favourite. Many good drafts and a favourable cap position compared with their competition have allowed them to make key acquisitions and rebuild quickly. Manning is the archetypal franchise player who can*



Peyton Manning is swarmed by Charleswood media as he announces his decision to donate his entire \$12 million 2014 salary as a Spartan to the Charleswood Children’s Hospital.

unite the young talent on this team and make a run at the conference title and maybe more. Kudos to Findlay!"

Proving that his rejection of the Spartans' offer was not all about money, Manning made his Charleswood homecoming extra special by donating his 2014 salary of almost \$12 million to the Charleswood Children's Hospital. "That money was intended to pay for a championship. Well, it did – a championship for the children of Charleswood," Manning proclaimed from the podium within a week of coming home. In response, the Charleswood City Council immediately named a street, a circle, a boulevard and a crescent in his honour to go along with the avenue, parkway and square already named after him for winning the championship in 2013.

While attention swirls around Peyton's return, the experts remain focused on the budding team around him. While the future of the franchise, **Blake Bortles** is clearly not ready yet, many of Findlay's other draft prodigies are emerging ahead of schedule. After a solid rookie season, inside linebacker **CJ Mosley** is showing the poise and intelligence of a seasoned veteran; he was the players' choice as captain of the defence coming out of training camp, surprisingly beating out newly arrived 2014 co-MVP, **Lavonte David**. Cornerback, **Desmond Trufant**, a first round pick in 2013, is certainly playing like one entering his third EFL campaign while 3rd round pick, **Jonathan Hankins** is proving to be a pleasant surprise as the anchor of the defensive line. 2013 first round pick **Lane Johnson** is a solid blindside protector while first-round picks **Mark Barron** and **Ha Ha Clinton-Dix** provide stability at safety now and for years to come.

With Peyton back and several core players already in place, Findlay turned to his cross town rival in Virden on draft day and parlayed a mixed bag of draft prospects into three players who can help the Pats immediately: corner **Aqib Talib**, defensive end **Cameron Heyward** and wide receiver **Dez Bryant**. Bryant joins waiver refugee **Andre Johnson** and 2014 rookie sensation **Sammy Watkins** to form a trio of wide-outs potentially more dangerous than the group Peyton threw to in his 2014 MVP campaign. And while nobody is going to replace **Adrian Peterson** in his prime at running back, 3rd round pick **Lamar Miller** appears ready to bring his game to the next level with a little help from rookie workhorse and change-of-pace back, **Duke Johnson**.



C.J. Mosley sacks Gwinnett quarterback, **Ben Roethlisberger** in a 2014 match-up between struggling former EFL powerhouses. Mosley is emerging as the leader of a vastly improved Charleswood defence while Big Ben should spend less time on his back with an improved offensive line. Both teams look to improve in 2015.



In is **Arian Foster** (above), awarded the starting job at running back after spending most of 2014 on the bench. Out is **Matt Forte**, a key player in Aurora's perfect season.

The off-season brought a dramatic turnaround for the Patriots but the true magnitude of the changes may be greater than people think. According to FootballOutriders.Org stats guru, **Harry Schultz**: *"A lot of the talk is centering on the intangibles involved in bringing Peyton home to Charleswood, and not enough on the tangibles. This is a fundamentally strong team, with few weaknesses and plenty of strengths. In a season where all the top teams of 2014 will drop-off to varying degrees, this 2015 edition of the Patriots can be expect to post 13 to 14 wins. In our power rankings they are neck-and-neck with Aurora, a team we expect them to face in the final."*

Across the conference in the northern outpost of the South Division, the unblemished coach of the Aurora Mustangs, **Rich Liotta**, is 5 wins away from breaking an EFL coach's record for consecutive wins in the regular season. The standing record of 20, set by **Jim Heaton** as head coach of the Florida Dragons during the 2009 and 2010 seasons, is one of those records that almost nobody expected to be broken, but Liotta has a legitimate shot at it if he can raise his team above the controversy spinning around their Texan owner, **Haus Beauregard** and the secretive activities of *Project Adam*.

As the amazing Mustangs galloped through the 2014 season without stumbling even once, 'Deathspun' columnist **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah**, intrigued by rumours going back to the 2014 pre-season, was following events in

Aurora very closely. While everyone was watching this amazing team blow away opponents, he focused his attention on what was happening *around* the team. His observations are detailed in a bombshell article entitled, *'These Guys Aren't Human....Really!'* released mid-summer after Aurora's victory in the 8th Gale Sayers Game. The contents were so explosive that the league had no choice but to reluctantly launch an investigation. From the start, however, it was unclear exactly what they were investigating and what they could do with what, if anything, they found.

The article is compelling reading – sourced in detail and, if true, utterly amazing. The central allegation of Smith-Abdullah's piece is that **JJ Watt** is actually a biologically engineered 10-year old boy-clone cryogenically frozen between games to preserve the potent but fragile bionanotechnological enhancements that inflate the resilient and supple 10-year old frame to several times its natural size and endow it with superhuman strength and endurance. That artificial creation is the **JJ Watt** we see in the actual games. The *real JJ Watt*, the one who played college at Wisconsin and who we see practising at half speed during the week, is allegedly a slave of a sophisticated mind control program that brings him under the near total control of scientists from *Project Adam*, a Texas-based research firm that has built a sprawling complex in nearby Vivian.

The real **JJ Watt** is held captive in a lab on game day where he is strapped to a bed and dozens of electrodes are affixed to his shaved head. Through these he receives radio signals from the electronic sensors wired into the body of "Super Boy" (the scientists' nickname for the enhanced version of Watt) that recreate the feelings of the game and, more importantly, the memories – nearly as vivid as if he had been on the field himself. During practice and in the classroom, this process is reversed, with the cryogenically frozen JJ receiving signals in his sleep through electronic pulses from sensors embedded in the real JJ, enabling the frozen JJ to know the plays and to "practice" them in his sleep as well.

The baffling move by the Mustangs to aggressively acquire over 30 free agents in the off-season, including nearly all of the serviceable kick and punt return specialists, makes more sense when the possibility of genetic and/or biological experiments, perhaps to engineer the perfect returner, is factored into the equation. Indeed, many of these players remain on the team, with little or no prospect of real game action ahead of them. One has to ask why.

The incredible behind-the-scenes details come entirely from an unnamed “source” inside the team who, judging from the dearth of recent insider information, one is led to assume is either no longer inside the team, currently fearing for his life, or entirely a figment of a cold-footed Smith-Abdullah’s imagination. However, there is circumstantial evidence supporting some of these as well as other allegations in Smith-Abdullah’s feature article. Accidental public tweets and text messages from a discarded phone purportedly belonging to a former Mustangs’ locker room attendant can be interpreted in a sinister context, or written off as inane banter, depending on your notion. ‘*Thaw that boy out and get him dressed*’ was one such message that has not been satisfactorily explained. ‘*Hey dummy, you forgot to put the catheter in. He wet the table*’ was another one.

When truth is that much stranger than fiction, people tend to disbelieve. That is the case with Aurora fans in general, who defensively deride the story as ridiculous or laugh it off as a clever lampoon. Of course, the team denies everything and has refused to cooperate with the EFL’s nascent investigation. This has many people crying foul. Media in rival cities such as Scarborough and Gwinnett are running daily stories on ‘Inflategate’ while others in the national media are split between fanning the flames of scandal and calling for the whole matter to be put to rest.

“People are jealous. It’s that simple!” ranted **Cowan Bullherd** recently on his syndicated radio show, *Morning Bull*. “But even if JJ didn’t get so strong by chopping wood all day, who cares? If the Mustangs have an edge because their scientists are smarter than the other team’s scientists, all the more power to them! And why is the EFL even investigating this malarkey? If it’s true, there’s no rule against it. There has to be a rule to break, and there’s no rule!”

Equally outspoken ESPN sports commentator, **Will Simons**, has a different take: “If the league is ready to suspend a player for taking Adderall, they had better be prepared to punish a team for inflating a 10-year old clone boy and turning one of their top draft picks into a mind slave. It’s deranged and creepy. Make a rule against it and enforce it retroactively. It’s the only way to shut it down before a human player gets seriously hurt or killed by one of these Frankensteins.”

Seemingly above the fray is the even keel **Rich Liotta**. The Mustangs’ coach has managed to deftly deflect questions about ‘Inflategate,’ remaining focused on football in his media encounters. He has addressed the issue directly only once, completely dismissing the allegations as fiction.

“JJ is one of the most dedicated athletes I have ever been associated with and he is strong as an ox,” Liotta stated frankly on the first day of training camp. “He’s also a kid at heart, so I get how that columnist came up with that spoof – very clever. But I’m sure you’ll understand that as a coach I have to keep my head in the real world. So if you have a real football question for me I’ll be happy to give you an answer.”

Setting aside ‘Inflategate,’ it is clear that the Mustangs’ opponents will have real problems handling them when the real games start. If their sole loss in the pre-season (a 27-7 game four loss to York) told us anything about them it is that they lack quality depth behind most of their starters. That could pose a problem if injuries hit them hard, but if they stay reasonably healthy it could be a while before Liotta loses his first game. On the down side, the loss of **Navorro Bowman** to an off-season golfing injury will likely force a change to a 4-3 base defence from their preferred 3-4 scheme. The signing of inside linebacker **Mike Mohamed** from the SFL’s Big Pond Pandas was a simple depth move coming on the heels of a trade with Sebastian that brought in veteran defensive tackle **Randy Starks**; he joins **Malik Jackson** to shore up the interior of the four-man line. **Karlos Dansby** will anchor a depleted line-backing corps somewhat bolstered by the acquisition of ageing **Trent Cole** from Markham in exchange for a full practice squad of fringe players. The secondary will again be one of the strongest in the EFL with super safeties, **Earl Thomas** and **Eric Weddle**, freelancing in support of three solid corners. All this would make for a strong defence in itself, but add in a wrecking ball like **JJ Watt** and a sledgehammer like **Cliff Avril** and opposing offensive lines will take a pounding again this year.

OFFENCE 2014

Matt Ryan

43 TDs (1), 4,627 YDS (2)

Matt Forte

1,894 Total Yards (3), 19 TDs (4)

Anquan Boldin

1,622 Rec YDS (2), 17 TDs (T2)

2014 MUSTANGS By the Numbers

Best EFL Team of All Time?

RECORD

19-0 (1)

PTS FOR

545 (2)

PTS AGAINST

170 (1)

AVERAGE MARGIN OF VICTORY

23.4 (1)

DEFENCE 2014

Patrick Peterson

5 INTs (2), 2 TDs (T1)

JJ Watt

11 Sacks (T4), 18 QBP (T7)

17 Stuffs (T1)

Eric Weddle

18 Deflections (1), 4 INTs (T3)

While the defence projects to be dominant, the offence is forecast by most analysts to be merely very good following the departure of First Team All Pro running back, **Matt Forte**. With **Arian Foster** under contract and Forte's agent demanding "all pro" cash, it was a simple business decision to cut the popular and versatile running back. But was it a good football decision? Foster might actually be an upgrade on the ground, but critics claim nobody can replace Forte as a safety valve or first-read option catching passes out of the backfield.

"*Matt Forte had a very nice fantasy year in 2014 but he can be replaced in the Mustangs' system,*" disagrees **Arpin Plunderflunder** of FootballOutriders.Org, writing in his blog 'Fantasy Freakz.' "*Most people forget that in 2012 and 2013 when he was healthy Arian Foster shared the backfield with Forte and generally outperformed him. Expect more pop in the run game with Foster and not a very steep drop-off in the passing game. I like him as a solid no. 1 back in fantasy leagues.*"

Not in dispute in any analysis of the Aurora offence is the view of **Matt Ryan** as an emerging elite quarterback. In 2014 he finished 5th in passer rating (106.1), 2nd in total yards passing (4,627), and 1st in TD passes (43) while the offence he piloted hung 545 points on their opponents, the second most points scored in EFL history. With a championship ring on his



It was a rocky road for **Drew Brees** in 2014 but after an off-season of intense training he claims to feels better than ever in 2015.

finger and all of his main targets in the vertical passing game returning, there is no reason to expect him to revert to his underachieving Garland days.

"It's not a Flontism to say that Matt Ryan is an elite quarterback in this league," joked **Kris Hortenson** of ESPN's Sports Central recently, taking a jab at his hyperbolic colleague, **Russ Flont**.

As for Flont, he exhausted his superlatives on **Peyton Manning** in the same segment and was left with little to say about the Mustangs' quarterback except, "he's a damn fine quarterback, for sure!"

The case for a Charleswood-Aurora final is looking very strong before a single game has even been played. While they remain the pre-season favourites to reach the Gale Sayers Game, both will have to face several tough challengers to get there.

In the Can-Am Conference, the most likely candidate to thwart Aurora's bid for a repeat is another team caught up peripherally in the 'Inflategate' scandal. The Durham Thunder Lizards drew unwanted attention when grounds crew at Jurassic Park reported seeing two players flying – literally flying – across the playing field after practice during OTAs. Rumour has it that **Kam Chancellor** and **Calvin 'Megatron' Johnson** were the players involved, but their denial that they even reported for OTAs cannot be disproven at this time. Of course, if they *were* at Jurassic Park to test the latest genetically-engineered enhancements of Swiss scientist, **Dr. Upz Lukvativdun**, neither player would want to publicize the visit.

In-game footage of Chancellor flying

over the line of scrimmage in an attempt to block a Pickering field goal attempt in the Can-Am quarter-final game last year raised some eyebrows at the time. Now some are calling for the EFL to widen its 'Inflategate' investigation to include Durham and, in the words of **Will Simons**, "other teams with freaks on their rosters."

This is not the first time the Durham franchise has been suspected of physically tampering with their athletes, given that the entire Jurassic Park theme is built around the science fiction-grade technology of Dr. Lukvativdun and his crack team of xenobiologists. Past allegations have never been substantiated, which may be one reason why the story has not gained traction in the local media. The other reason is due to the surprising announcement by Coach **George Kaldis** at the start



Joe Thomas will have his hands full against tougher competition in the South Division, but hope that the Gladiators will rise again and be in contention in 2015 will provide some extra inspiration.

of training camp that **Drew Brees** would return to full-time starting duties in Durham, a dramatic development that pushed aside all other stories. Citing a "need for stability" at the position as his reason, Kaldis denied that he had made a mistake in platooning Brees and **Nick Foles** last year.

The failure of Foles to sustain his regular season success in the post-season is the real cause of the switch, according to **Peter Prince** of North America Today. *"The EFL playoffs are a whole different game,"* he writes. *"Nick Foles looked overwhelmed against the Mustangs in the conference final. He wasn't ready to challenge that elite defence. He looked tentative, held on to the ball too long and dug a hole for his team. Drew Brees returns as the undisputed no. 1 guy with something to prove. He'll play with a chip on his shoulder this year."*

Brees will have to play with attitude if the Thunder Lizards are to return to the conference final for another shot at that elusive billing in the Gale Sayers Game. In a substantially weakened North Division, with a very good defence and premier weapons in the passing game, they remain the Vegas favourite to face Aurora in the conference final. However, there are notable skeptics willing to speak to the contrary.

"The Thunder Lizards were victims of the Mustangs' year of destiny in 2014. This year they will be victims of themselves," writes **Skopec Boylezz** on ESPN.com. *"The secondary is great, Mangold is great, Megatron is great and Brees is a hall of fame quarterback who got stiffed last year. Elvis Dumervil is a dangerous pass rusher, so he is an asset. On the down side, they won't be able to run and they won't be able to stop the run. That will kill them against the real competition in the league, and there's more of that this year. Brees has no protection on the edges when he drops back to pass and the good teams will take advantage of that in passing situations. I give them their division because there is not much there to stop them, but outside of the north they are just another good team with a shot at getting lucky."*

Boylezz is on the extreme end of the Durham doubters, but the basic point he makes about the strengthening of Can-Am competition is echoed by the forensic analysis of *Pro Football Focal-Point*. In a feature article on the conference, they summarized a polar shift in power away from the North and to the South.

"Aurora remains a significant powerhouse but the Mustangs will not have eight free passes in their division this year. South Carolina, Gwinnett and Scarborough have each improved and will be much tougher to beat, not only for Aurora but for the recently dominant north. The three quarterbacks on those teams will ensure they are not just competitive, but wildcard favourites. The teams in the north are showing signs of exhaustion after years of intense competition with each other. The weakening of both of Durham's lines will be offset in their own division by a huge drop-off in the Pickering defence and the semi-rebuild in Markham. The Corn Kings and Excaliburs will be unpredictable from week-to-week, but neither team is good enough to steal the division away from the Thunder Lizards."

The loss of **Peyton Manning** has forced what Pickering GM and coach, **Gus Konstantakos** refers to as a "restructuring" of the Spartans. He refuses to use the "other R-word" to describe what looks to all like a re-building year in Pickering. Certainly there are mixed signals in the some of the moves that have been made. By acquiring **Philip Rivers** from the Cannibals, snatching up **Matt Forte** on waivers and picking left tackle **Andrus Peat** and wide receiver **Breshad Perriman**

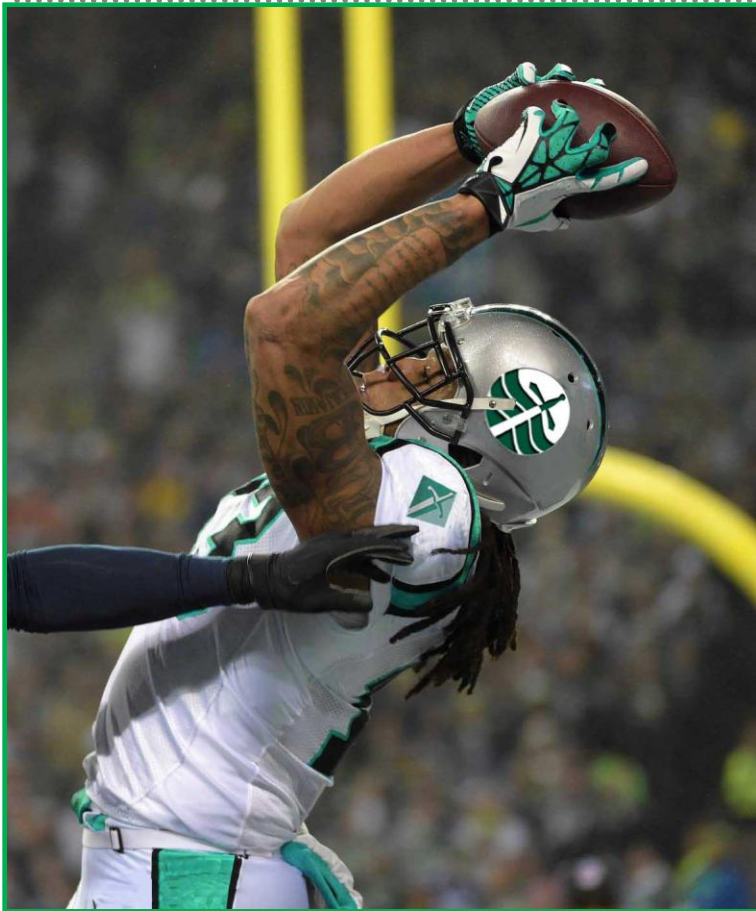
in the first two rounds of the rookie draft, the Spartans appear intent on fielding a dangerous and dynamic offence again this year; whether or not it will be dangerous enough to compensate for a defence that lost its two stars from 2014, **Joe Haden** and **Dontari Poe**, and was a late trade for **Sen'Derrick Marks** away from having almost no pass rush, remains to be seen.

"The Spartans cannot be counted out, but they cannot be counted in either," opines **Schrell Partesian** in discussing his *Bleacher Feature* article, *'Market Forces – Team Stocks in the Salary Cap Era.'* "The same goes for other cap-challenged north division teams like Cowtown and York, both of which were limited in what they could accomplish in free agency because of salary and bonus money burdens, but which also boast a core of talent that has to be respected by opponents on game day. They are examples of teams that can make the post-season if they run into a streak of good luck."

Cowtown struck with precision in the rookie draft, compensating for a lack of strategic cash reserves by landing three potential rookie starters in running back **Todd Gurley**, corner **Ronald Darby** and right tackle **Rob Havenstein**. They also managed to entice wide receiver **Steve Smith Sr.** away from parsimonious Iowa City in free agency, solidifying their receiving corps while gambling that the feisty veteran has a few good years left in him. But the loss of **Ryan Clady**, who drew All Pro-grade attention from free agent suitors, created a gaping hole in the offensive line that forced them to trade their number one pick in 2016 and **Trumaine Johnson** in a deal for Virden left tackle, **Anthony Castonzo**. It was a deal that drew criticism in the local press, but was vigorously defended recently in *EFL Round-Up* by ESPN's **Russ Flont**:

"The Corn Kings had no choice," blared the excitable Flont. "It boiled down to a decision to keep Joe Flacco alive. That line has suffered in recent years and after the Clady trade Flacco was about to go on death row with a rookie protecting his blindside. Flacco is their franchise, one of the best quarterbacks in the league, perhaps of all time, and a certain hall-of-famer! Castonzo won't solve all of their problems, but he'll keep the franchise alive!"

In York, another certain hall-of-fame quarterback has Excalibur hopefuls once again talking playoffs. The emergence of 2nd-year wide receiver **Kelvin Benjamin** gives **Tom Brady** a top no. 1 outside target while **Delanie Walker** and **Zach Ertz** make two-tight end sets an option for the passing attack. **James Jones** is a reliable, if unspectacular second



Kelvin Benjamin was a real find for the Excaliburs in the 2014 rookie draft. Now **Tom Brady** must find him in double coverage as opponents look to limit the budding star.

option at wide receiver, and with **Marhsawn Lynch** pounding opponents behind All Pro left tackle **Jason Peters**, the Swords have the makings of a premier ball control offence. However, it is an offence that will have to strike early to be effective, according to **Severin Handfottner Jr.** of *Coaches Call*.

"The Excaliburs will not be able to stretch the field in those comeback situations where open space is essential," writes Handfottner Jr. "They have no true third option at slot receiver and they can forget four or five wide receiver sets entirely. Who is Paul Richardson anyway? To win they are going to have to consistently get out in front early, control the time of possession, and use their great linebackers expertly."

With **Von Miller** back in top form, **DeAndre Levy** on the rise, and **Lawrence Timmons** in the finest shape of his career, York boasts the best starting line-backers in the league. It may not be enough though to make-up for a chronically depleted secondary, led by a 34-year old corner, and a defensive line that has fallen off with the conversion of **Geno Atkins** to veganism. Atkins claims he feels better than ever with his new diet and, coincidentally, so do opposing offensive linemen.

At the bottom of most north division projections, but not all, is Markham. The North Stars are a bit of a puzzle as commentators struggle to make sense of a flurry of off-season moves that seem to have landed them in the

DURHAM FRUSTRATION

In 8 seasons the Thunder Lizards have made the post-season in 7 of them. They are the best EFL team never to have made an appearance in the championship.

YEAR	W – L	PCT	PLAYOFF	PCT
2007	9 – 7	.562	0 – 1	.000
2008	8 – 8	.500	N/A	
2009	14 – 2	.875	1 – 1	.500
2010	10 – 6	.625	0 – 1	.000
2011	9 – 7	.562	1 – 1	.500
2012	14 – 2	.875	1 – 1	.500
2013	12 – 4	.750	0 – 1	.000
2014	12 – 4	.750	1 – 1	.500
TOT	88 – 40	.687	4 – 7	.364

optimum position to surprise an opponent on game day but not actually compete for a playoff spot. A *Bleacher Feature* article by self-styled post-generational beatnik turned “sports satirist,” **Jack Maximillian Ginsberg** describes Markham as “the anti-team.”

“Markham GM, Darrin Jones got around this off-season,” writes Ginsberg. “There was no team he wouldn’t deal with, even Cowtown. A long line of players filed through the Markham locker room like cowboys through a Nevada whorehouse. You weren’t a true journeyman if you hadn’t been on the Markham roster at some point this off-season. What was the point of it all? To get a little rebuilding done while constructing the perfect pain-in-the-ass team; the kind of team capable of ambushing a sleeping opponent but not capable of winning anything meaningful. This is a typical Jones team, the anti-team – a collection of variously talented vagabonds, discounted in the pre-season polls, united in their anonymity and sense of grievance against those who see them for what they are.”

Not everyone is so harsh on Markham. **Sperl Sponefritter** of *Sperl’s World of Sports* sees a well-disguised champion playing out of the Dawg Pound this year: “When Darin Jones cannot raise the talent level of

his team he works to lower outside expectations to bring his opponents’ guard down. All the while he is building the internal expectations. By the time the season starts he will have his players believing they can win a championship, even if nobody else believes it. He is the Sun Myung Moon of football – unifying and brainwashing his players to build a force stronger than its component parts. With no true superpower, enough successful ambushes could end up winning the war.”

In the reconstructed south, laid back **Hal Corson** was stirred to action in the off-season by harsh criticism of his team’s late season slide in 2014 and a surplus of talented guards. **Keleche Osemele** and **Kevin Zeitler** were traded for **Joe Staley** and **Riley Reiff**, bringing unprecedented stability to the tackle position. They join guards **Orlando Franklin** and **Brandon Brooks** and center **Jason Kelce** to give the Regulators one of the best offensive lines in football.

“Tony Romo has never enjoyed great pass protection but this year will be different,” raved **Benny Clamp** in his weekly TV magazine ‘*Crush*.’ “Coach Corson, or somebody in that organization, recognized that they had to address one of the basic fundamentals of football, blocking, if they were going to have success against that Mustangs’ defence. Joe Staley may come with huge price tag, but it will be worth it when the Regulators surprise everybody, even their own coach, and win the south division.”

With a solid line protecting him, there will be no excuses if **Tony Romo** fails to deliver some eye-popping numbers this year. **AJ Green** and **Keenan Allen** star for an extremely deep wide-receiver corps while workhorse running back **Frank Gore** will get much-needed rest throughout the season as the coaching staff works spirited rookie **Ameer Abdullah** into the game plan. There is no game-changing tight end on the line, but with all those other weapons they might not need one.

Strides to improve the offensive line were matched by a pair of trades to bolster the defensive secondary, a traditional weakness. **TJ Ward** brings a hard-hitting edge to the safety position and **Joe Haden**, acquired from the Spartans for 1st round draft pick, gives the Regulators their first shutdown corner. **Luke Kuechly** remains the rock in the middle of the defence while his flanks are guarded by a pair of solid outside linebackers in **Brandon Graham** and **Tamba Hali**. The defensive line, however, remains a concern as it is neither strong nor deep. This fact prompted Regulators correspondent **Johnny Rebb** to lament: “the defence is better but it’s still all on Tony Romo to bring this team to the post-season; he will have to score the Regs out of trouble when their defence gets run over in the 4th quarter.”

A touch further south, in Gwinnett, **Dave Birdsall** took note of what **Ben Roethlisberger** and **LeSean McCoy**

accomplished in 2014 with only **Joe Thomas** to support them and determined that just a few strategic improvements were needed to make his team relevant again. First, he acquired physical corner **Sean Smith** from the Thunder Lizards. Smith is not well-known to fans, having played in the shadow of **Richard Sherman**, but his play is well known and respected by opponents and coaches around the league. Next he turned to the rival professional leagues to land all star free agent defensive tackle, **Kyle Williams** from the Big Pond Pandas of the SFL and corner **Tim Jennings** from the San Antonio Armadillos of the Tex-Mex League. He kept his focus on defence in the rookie draft, picking up Clemson edge rusher **Vic Beasley** with the 6th overall pick and Texas defensive tackle **Malcolm Brown** in the 2nd round. Beasley had an impressive camp and is expected to contribute immediately.

The upgrades on defence were not matched on offence. Apart from a trade for tackle **Ryan Clady**, the Glads made no bold moves to shore up the offence, even if shunting the promising **Stedman Bailey** off to Markham for **Owen Daniels** raised some eyebrows in the local press. They will rely on a homegrown receiving corps, topped by **Jeremy Maclin** and (of course) **Big Ben** to do most of the damage on the scoreboard.

In Scarborough, surly fans twisted by four torturous years of Blue Eagles brand football are in no mood to have their hopes raised by the pundits' praise of **Chris Dickinson's** off-season acquisitions. Season tickets sales are down and some former holders are so sour that their names can be found on a petition being circulated by a small group of civic leaders, still appalled over the 2013 season-ending riot at Bluffs Stadium, calling on Scarborough Council to return the team to Florida "for the good of the community."

Ironically, at a time when the grassroots movement to "Dump Dickie" is gathering steam, Dickinson is getting well-deserved good press outside the Scarborough city limits for having a great draft and making sound moves to improve his team's competitiveness in 2015. Despite losing no. 3 overall pick, **Dante Fowler** to a flying brick intended for Dickinson at a pre-camp media day introducing the team's rookies, early indicators suggest the Scarborough draft class is one of the best. Linebacker **Randy Gregory**, safety **Landon Collins**, corner **Marcus Peters** and running back **TJ Yeldon** are all ready to start and contribute. Acquiring **Pierre Garcon** for futures and **Jordy Nelson** for **Brandon Marshall** were purposeful deals that give **Aaron Rodgers** a reliable hands target and a prolific deep threat to complement game-breaker **DeSean Jackson**. With the offensive line still one of the team's strengths, the Blue Eagles should fly much higher on offence in 2015.

The Scarborough defence features two of the league's biggest impact defenders in **Ndamukong Suh** and linebacker **Terrell Suggs**. **Dont'a Hightower** and newly acquired **Brandon Spikes** round out a superior line-backing corps. Questions arise, however, when turning to the secondary, where **Brandon Carr** and **Tarell Brown** both appear to have lost a step and the rookie Peters is still learning his craft. Still, the Blue Eagles are a lock to improve on their poor 2014 finish and stand a decent shot of making the playoffs if new head coach **Rex Ryan** can inspire some effort.

All together it's a muddled picture in the south division heading into Week One, with only Sebastian out of contention before the season opening coin flip. One budding dynasty and three very good, but slightly defective, teams should make for an intense four-way competition all year long.

Across the conference divide in the smile-inducing state of Iowa there is one prominent figure who is struggling to keep his frown upside down. Iconic Cubs coach **Deron Redding** is fed up and won't take it anymore. Bristling at recent criticisms, Redding has imposed a partial boycott on the local and national media, refusing to answer questions posed by some journalists, but



Outraged Blue Eagles' fans battle Toronto Police at Bluffs Stadium at the end of the 2013 season. Disappointment is an understatement when describing the feelings of football fans in Scarborough.



Russell Wilson takes a break during OTAs at the Cubs' training facility at Regina High while Coach **Deron Redding** hisses the inspirational words, "we'll show them, Russell!"

granting interviews to others. High on Redding's 'Out' list is the irascible **Archibald Thacker** of the *Des Moines Register*, who rose to notoriety as the principal promoter of the "Ditch Deron" campaign in wake of the Cubs' disastrous 1-15 season in 2012. Despite subsequent improvements in the Cubs' fortunes, Thacker's barbs have been unrelenting; his recent satirical piece detailing the escapades of the fictitious 'Save Kaepernick' charity appeared to be the final straw for the usually upbeat Redding.

"I don't appreciate his criticism," Redding recently informed Cubs' favoured beat reporter, **Sparky McGillicuddy**. "It's not constructive criticism, its destructive criticism. I discuss the difference in my latest book, *Why Media Sucks*, which I encourage every journalist to read."

Thacker, for his part, has stopped referring to Redding by name, substituting "the coach" instead. In response to criticism from several media peers (who happen to be on Redding's 'In' list) that he was allowing a personal vendetta to cloud his professional judgement, Thacker replied: "I can be as stubborn and every inch as petulant as the coach. If he thinks he can out-baby me, he is in for a surprise. I may be in my fifties, but my inner child is out!"

Redding may end up having the last laugh. The early indications are that the youth movement he started back in 2011 may be ready to pay off. His team is built around a solid core of home grown talent that he has managed to keep intact through deft management of the salary cap that features the uncanny ability to dump his salary problems onto other teams.

Peter Prince of *North America Today* discussed it recently in an article on the rookie draft, in which he praised Redding for his eye for talent while providing an insight into how he has kept his stable of studs on the Iowa farm: "*Coach Redding has a history of handing out big contracts that would hamstring most teams. But somehow he manages to escape most of these contracts when they lose their value. His best trade in the off-season was not the one he made to bring in Chris Borland or the one he made to acquire Brandon LaFell, but the one in which he dumped nearly \$14 million in bad contracts on Markham for basically nothing. That is nothing less than free money in this league and it allowed him to hang on to Mario Williams in free agency, a player who will play a big role in the Cubs' playoff run to come.*"

Mario Williams is the centerpiece of what most analysts believe is the best defensive line in football. He mans the right side while **Muhammad Wilkerson** sets the edge on the left. Clogging the middle are run-stuffer **Fletcher Cox** and interior pass rusher **Sheldon Richardson**. On this team **Jason Pierre-Paul** is a back-up, a real luxury. It is an impressive array, but with **Al Woods** the only other back-up, the line's conditioning will be tested deep into games. Fortunately, the 4th quarter is owned by Cubs' quarterback **Russell Wilson**, whose performance in the clutch last year earned him the moniker "Money Ball" in the Cubs' locker room. Wilson is protected by the finest front five in the league and supported by the breakaway running of **Jeremy Hill** and a first-rate squadron of targets at wide receiver. If they don't get open, heady **Coby Fleener** is the security blanket. When all else fails, Russell has his slippery mobility to jet him to first downs and safety.

"Charleswood is grabbing most of the headlines again," Prince continues, "but we can expect the Cubs to be stealing the spotlight from the Patriots by the second half of the season. This team is too good to not be considered one of the

front-runners for the PAC championship. They showed flashes last year; this year they will sustain it."

If the Cubs are on the rise, last year's two dominant forces in the west appear on the edge of decline. In Chino, all-star running back **Adrian Peterson** is under investigation for allegedly abusing his 4-year old son. While authorities wrestle with the legal grey area between abuse and a "good healthy whuppin" designed to build character and shape model citizens (the kind Peterson himself was subject to as a boy) Chino GM and Coach, **Rob Nazar** is betting on charges. He mailed off a care package of players and picks to third world Mission Viejo for dynamic runner **DeMarco Murray**. Apart from that, the Convicts failed to make any significant moves. They were active but not very successful in free agency and the draft yielded nothing of immediate value apart from wide receiver **Nelson Agholor**.

That does not necessarily mean that **Cam Newton** will be asked to carry the team by himself again. 4th year back-up quarterback **Kirk Cousins** had a great camp and the coaching Staff is reportedly looking for ways to use him. This is met with approval by **Severin Handfottner Jr.** of *Coach's Call*:

"By now all of Chino's opponents know how to defend Cam – set the edges, put a spy on him and force him to look downfield by tightening the coverage. Kirk is a traditional pocket passer who has absorbed the Chino system. He showed the ability to make quick reads in the pre-season. Put him in the game in the middle of a drive and teams will have to adjust immediately. If they don't, that will open up an opportunity for a play down field to Malcom Floyd."

But those who remember the "bad old days" when **Jay Cutler** and **Donovan McNabb** competed for snaps don't want any part of a quarterback shuffle in Chino. "Let's not go there, people!" ranted 'Left Coast Larry' **Lummox** of JAIL-870 radio in Chino. "No disrespect to Kirk, but this is Cam's team. The defence is crumbling, the offensive line is standing still; if Cam's leadership comes into doubt this team will fall apart."

In Beaufort County, the remnants of a powerhouse will ensure that teams cannot take the Ravens lightly on any given Sunday, but questions concerning the ability of **RGIII** to keep what remains of Death Valley and Santa Clara's glory days moving forward are being asked more frequently in wake of his strange behaviour in training camp. Frequent temper tantrums, running laps around the field in the nude, refusing to shower after practice and stopping a scrimmage to declare himself a god, have friends and teammates concerned. Ravens owner **Neil Shannon** has reportedly hired personal security after his starting quarterback started showing up at his home asking to "hang out."

Publicly, the team refuses to comment on these antics but in an off-season in which the Ravens made few moves it is telling that the first two involved quarterbacks. They moved their 6th round pick for Markham cast-off **Shaun Hill** and picked Colorado State quarterback **Garrett Grayson** with their first pick of the draft at no. 84 overall. Neither of these players is ready to take over the starting duties just yet, but Hill provides security in case RGIII

goes off the deep end, while Grayson develops behind the scenes.

Meanwhile, what is left of a star-studded defence is attempting to take a leadership role on a team traditionally associated with offensive fireworks. **Darrelle Revis** and **Gerald McCoy** can still lay claim to being among the best in the business at their positions and a healthy **Clay Matthews** has his motor up and running again; but a glaring weakness at safety and holes on the edges of the front seven have most analysts doubting that the Ravens' defence can compensate for the expected erratic play at quarterback.

"The Ravens are hanging by a thread psychologically," writes **Caleb Cogger** of 'EFL Magazine.' "A bad start in the division in the first five weeks could easily cause a collapse."

In the East Division, the anticipated coronation of the Patriots could be derailed by the Twin Cities Triumph, a team that spared no expense to ensure that they will not go unnoticed in 2015.



Darrelle Revis is on an island in Beaufort County trying to hold together a Ravens team that is crumbling almost as quickly as its volatile starting QB.

Rare room under the cap enabled GM **Guy Williams** to dole out almost \$23 million in bonuses to acquire two players: SFL all-pro corner, **Chris Harris Jr** and CFL star tight end, **Charles Clay**. Both will be crucial to the team's success.

The acquisition of Harris will be a key to keeping the Patriots' and other strong passing attacks in check, giving needed breathing room for talented but turbulent **Jay Cutler**.

Arpin Plunderflunder of Football Outriders.Org focused on the role of Cutler in his 'Fantasy Freakz' QB evaluation: "*Jay Cutler is going to make mistakes, lots of them. But he is also going to post big TD numbers and lots of yards passing. He has fantastic targets, an explosive running game to slow down the pass rush, and a pretty good defence to get him the ball back quickly. I like him as a first round no. 1 QB in standard leagues.*"

The fantasy view of Cutler is one thing, but conventional analysts are quick to point out that Cutler's dominance last year was streaky and his lapses were fatal.

"Cutler choked in the big games, it's that simple," **Will Simons** stated flatly in a pre-season episode of *EFL Central*. "After torching most of the league, he could not get it done against an average Carthage secondary in the games that mattered most. How likely is it that he will maintain his nerve against Peyton Manning or Russell Wilson on the big stage this year? Twin Cities will hang in contention because they have too much talent not to, but don't expect Cutler to push them up and over the hill."



Chris Harris Jr., pictured above with the Driftwood Bullies of the SFL, cashed in a \$16 million bonus to jump leagues and join the Triumph.

If one is willing to believe in Cutler, the Triumph are an attractive dark horse bet to steal the east division and maybe more. Harris joins a secondary that already looked strong with **Darius Slay** and **Byron Maxwell** at corner and gambling ball hawks **Da'Norris Searcy** and **Nate Allen** at safety. **Bobby Wagner** is a pro bowl linebacker and a leader on the field. Although not as dominant as last year, the defensive line is steady and able to generate pressure without much blitz help.

The offensive line is similarly solid and should shine in the running game. With elusive and electric rookie **Melvin Gordon** in the back field, the line will not need to create gaping holes to gain success on the ground. In the air, **Antonio Brown** may be the best all-around wide receiver in the game, which makes the prospects of a big year for deep threat **Vincent Jackson** very strong. **Kendall Wright** and **Markus Wheaton** square off a top-notch quartet of wide-outs that should open plenty of room down the seams for tight end **Charles Clay**.

Jimmy the Geek is certainly a believer this year, if his comments on his weekly Nevada Cable TV show, *Odds 'n Suds* can be taken at face value. "Twin Cities is the ultimate gambler's gamble," he said last week. "The odds, at 25-1 to win it all, are long enough for a big pay day but the team seems so much better than those odds. You think it's a trap so you second-guess yourself and go with a much safer bet like the Pats at 3-1 or the Mustangs at 2-1. But man, that Triumph gamble eats away at the back of your mind all year long while the odds shorten because they're kicking butt on the field. Okay, Cutler is scary, but he's scary to both teams – you have to remember that."

In a year certain to be full of drama and uncertainty at the competitive center, there are some teams you can count on *not* to be among them. Most are those are familiar, but one is a new arrival to the league's junk heap and another landed there after a precipitous fall. Virden Violators GM, **Lance Barrate**, finally gave up trying to compete and jettisoned most of his players of value to begin the rebuilding process in 2016. He also punted the hated **Matt Stafford** at the last minute just for the satisfaction. Star corner **Vontae Davis** and running back **Jamaal Charles** survived the purge and will undoubtedly wish they had not, as some analysts have pegged the Violators to be the next team to have a perfectly *imperfect* season.

After a season in the sun, the Cannibals have returned, willingly it would appear, to the EFL's ground floor. It did not take long for Cannibals' GM **Ken Main** to tip his hand; he quickly moved co-MVP **Lavonte David** to Charleswood for draft picks that he later parlayed into the no. 5 overall pick. With that pick he grabbed Oregon quarterback, **Marcus Mariota**. Soon after, **Philip Rivers** was sent packing to Pickering as Peyton's replacement, meaning that Main is wasting no time making Mariota his "main" man. With **Eddie Lacy** in the backfield and **Emmanuel Sanders** split wide, Mariota should win a few games in his rookie season, but expectations remain low.

Some late moves by Mohave GM **Bobby Elder** to build up the Hellfire offence combined with a trio of budding superstars on defence – linebacker **Justin Houston**, end **Cameron Wake** and defensive tackle **Aaron Donald** – should earn his squad a couple of extra wins and the occasional upset, but a chronically bad offensive line and suspect running game will once again prevent **Andrew Luck** from being all that he can be.

At the very bottom of the league, the long rebuild continues in Los Angeles but the good news is that the Knights will finally break their losing streak. They could even tack on a couple of extra wins if **Terry Bridgewater** and **Le'Veon Bell** come to play. Mission Viejo will hang in most of their games as well as lose most of them. Sebastian will continue to troll the bottom of the league's seabed in 2015, but the experience will be more disheartening than usual for the Swordfish faithful as their resurgent rivals in the south division produce more highlight moments against them each week.

For the last word before the season's opening gun, we quote from **Harry Schultz** of [Football Outriders.Org](http://FootballOutriders.Org).

"With the exception of three, maybe four teams at the very top and three, maybe four teams at the very bottom, it appears that parity has returned to the EFL. Not since season one has there been this much uncertainty about so many teams. That's what makes this season so exciting. It will come down to coaching and, in many cases, plain luck to separate the contenders from the also-rans. Pay attention, football fans, or you could miss that dramatic season-changing moment!"



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

Jimmy.....Jimmy....! see you. Quick picking your nose the spirits are giggling. It's really amazing over here on the other side. Everything is much clearer than it was when I was trying to read the signs from the material world. And my spirit is not suffering the ailments of my corporeal frame, or the "clay pot" as the spirits call the body. Anyway, it's straightforward - the Pats win the East, the Cubs the West, Durham the North and the Mustangs the South. Aurora and Charleswood face off in the final with Denton winning it all. Toodles.....! - 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 other night for that matter. The Football Oracle is gone from this place.

In fact, the Football Oracle is gone from Canton altogether. The former Green Bay Packer fan, who foretold the demise of the old NFL and was driven mad by the vision, has apparently gone over to "the other side." Not dead, but astrally-projected. She loves it there when she travels out of her body. She visited me while in her ethereal state and what follows in the ensuing four pages are the details of what she said.

PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



14-2

#1 SEED

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

COACH: Jason Findlay

MVP: Peyton Manning

OFFENCE: A

DEFENCE: A-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B+

Peyton Manning is home and looking comfortable behind center with premium deep targets, *Dez Bryant* and *Sammy Watkins* and an impressive one-two punch out of the backfield. The defence is vastly improved and will be tough against the run with linebacker *CJ Mosley* plugging the gaps. An adequate pass rush will be strengthened by the tight pass coverage of *Desmond Trufant*, *Aqib Talib* and *Tramon Williams*. *Knile Davis* can take it to the house returning kicks and kicker *Ryan Succop* is reliable from 40+ yards.



12-4

#3 SEED

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

COACH: Guy Williams

MVP: Jay Cutler

OFFENCE: A-

DEFENCE: B+

SPECIAL TEAMS: A-

This year *Jay Cutler* is supported by a dynamic running duo led by rookie *Melvin Gordon* to go along with elite wide receiver, *Antonio Brown* and big play artist, *Vincent Jackson*. Turnovers are all that could slow down this high-powered unit. Shutdown corner *Chris Harris Jr* rules a strong secondary that bolsters an otherwise average front seven headed by star linebacker *Bobby Wagner*. The long leg of *Stephen Gostkowski* adds another deep strike option and *Antonio Brown* is almost as deadly fielding punts as catching passes.



7-9

MOHAVE HELLFIRE

COACH: Bobby Elder

MVP: Justin Houston

OFFENCE: B-

DEFENCE: B

SPECIAL TEAMS: B-

Once again the franchise, *Andrew Luck* will be left to fend on his own behind a dreadful offensive line. This will decrease the impact of prime pass-catching targets *Julio Jones* and *Jimmy Graham* and turn an average rushing attack into a mediocre one. If a defence were just three guys, *Justin Houston*, *Cameron Wake* and *Aaron Donald* would make this the best squad in the league, but gaps in the secondary, especially at corner, bring down the grade. *Cordarrell Patterson* is reliable but not deadly and *Ace Sanders* has fumbling issues.



5-11

CARTHAGE CANNIBALS

COACH: Ken Main

MVP: Harrison Smith

OFFENCE: C+

DEFENCE: D+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B

Quarterback *Marcus Mariota* will experience a trial by fire in his rookie season, but having *Eddie Lacy* in the backfield, *Emmanuel Sanders* at wide-out and *Travis Kelce* at tight end will bring occasional respite. The defence is in total disarray with past-prime veterans and error-prone rookies stocking the roster at every level. *Harrison Smith* is the only star on a back-end that will sorely miss *Lavonte David*. Danny Amendola is a capable, if unspectacular, returner while *Steven Hauschka* and *Pat McAfee* hold down kicking duties.



1-15

VIRDEN VIOLATORS

COACH: Lance Barrate

MVP: Jamaal Charles

OFFENCE: D+

DEFENCE: D

SPECIAL TEAMS: A-

It was hard labour tearing down the framework of a contender but Virden management did an impressive job of jettisoning the immediate value on this roster for draft picks and future prospects. *Jamaal Charles* is the lone stud remaining on an offence that once dominated, but will struggle with *David Carr* at QB. *Vontae Davis* and *Dontari Poe* survived and will shine on a defence with too many bad linebackers. *Jordan Todman* and *Marcus Sherels* are prolific returners and the punter *Mike Scifres* is one of the best.

PACIFIC – ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

WEST DIVISION



13-3

#2 SEED

IOWA CITY CUBS

COACH: **Deron Redding**

MVP: **Russell Wilson**

OFFENCE: **A**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A**

Tyron Smith captains the best offensive line in football protecting one of its rising stars at QB, **Russell Wilson**. **Jeremy Hill** is a strong, speedy runner and the combo of **Brandon LaFell** and **Rueben Randle** provides respectability at wide receiver. **Mario Williams** is the leader of a monstrous defensive line that could tire through the season due to lack of depth. The linebackers are just okay but the secondary led by **Stephon Gilmore** is above average. **Darren Sproles** is a dangerous punt returner. **Greg Zuerlein** is a money FG kicker.



9-7

#4 SEED

BEAUFORT COUNTY RAVENS

COACH: **Neil Shannon**

MVP: **Clay Matthews**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+**

A trio of dangerous deep threats at wide receiver led by **Randall Cobb** and **DeAndre Hopkins** combined with the freight train speed of tight end **Rob Gronkowski** up the seam makes for one of the more formidable receiving corps in the division. The question is whether **RGIII** or **Shaun Hill** can make the most use of those weapons. The defence features **Darrelle Revis**, **Clay Matthews** and a few above-average starters, but is discernibly weak at safety. **Cody Parkey** is a good young kicker but the returners are questionable at best.



8-8

CHINO CONVICTS

COACH: **Rob Nazar**

MVP: **Cam Newton**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

Cam Newton will cause some to overestimate this offence but he will also keep it together with the help of flashy runner **DeMarco Murray**. The offensive line is dubious but **Greg Olsen** is "Mr. Reliable" at tight end and ageing **Roddy White** will get open when needed. **Alterraun Verner** and **Antoine Bethea** head a nice secondary but the front seven is showing its age and the durability of inside linebacker **Ryan Shazier** is a concern. **Dan Bailey** and **Shane Lechler** are as solid as they come. The returners are not special.



5-11

MISSION VIEJO MONARCHS

COACH: **Chris Ferraro**

MVP: **Ryan Tannehill**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **C+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-**

The offensive line, featuring stalwart **Josh Sitton**, will elevate the play of QB, **Ryan Tannehill** even as a middling group of wide receivers and a journeymen duo of running backs hold him back from greatness. The defence has a leader in middle linebacker **Khalil Mack** and edge-rushing prowess in ends **Cameron Jordan** and **Olivier Vernon**, but the interior is weak. **Kareem Jackson** is the best of a decent, but fragile group of DBs. **Brandon Tate** is merely serviceable as a returner but **Dan Carpenter** is reliable long-range FG kicker.



3-13

LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

COACH: **Jeff Dohrn**

MVP: **Le'Veon Bell**

OFFENCE: **C**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+**

If not for shifty running back **Le'Veon Bell** this would be 'D'-grade offence. The offensive line will struggle to create holes but it will give inexperienced **Terry Bridgewater** a bit of time to search for a no-name squad of receivers. The strength of the defence can be found in the front seven, fronted by **Michael Bennett**, but a dilapidated secondary led by senior citizen **Charles Woodson** will frustrate. The kicking game is covered with **Patrick Murray** and **Steve Weatherford** but **Andre Roberts** is a fumble risk in the return game.

CAN-AM CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



13-3

#1 SEED

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

COACH: **George Kaldis**

MVP: **Drew Brees**

OFFENCE: **A-**

DEFENCE: **A-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

Drew Brees is back in the saddle and is projected to have a nice year passing the ball to three prime targets, **TY Hilton**, **Eric Decker** and **Calvin Johnson**. All-Pro **Nick Mangold** centers an otherwise patchwork offensive line that will struggle in pass protection. The strength of the defence is concentrated in the secondary, with **Richard Sherman** and **Kam Chancellor**, but lack of depth at linebacker will put pressure on a merely average defensive line. **Devin Hester** is still doing it all in the return game and **Phil Dawson** still has life in his leg.



9-7

#4 SEED

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

COACH: **Jim Coghlin**

MVP: **Joe Flacco**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **B+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B**

It falls on **Joe Flacco** to turn this team into a contender with the help of workhorse **Alfred Morris** and rookie **Todd Gurley** in the backfield and 2nd-year game-breaker **Mike Evans** at wide receiver. A shaky offensive line could ruin his plans, however. **Marcell Dareus** stars for a defensive line that will exert a lot of pass rush pressure even without the help of high-motor linebacker **Ryan Kerrigan**. **Glover Quin** is a ball-hawk but the corners will be tested. **Jacoby Jones** is too-exciting in the return game and **Johnny Hekker** is a fine punter.



8-8

YORK EXCALIBURS

COACH: **Jay Hammond**

MVP: **Von Miller**

OFFENCE: **B**

DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A**

Tom Brady would prefer another option at WR in addition to **Kelvin Benjamin**, but at least he has the "Beast" **Marhsawn Lynch** to keep defenders honest. **Delanie Walker** is an underrated tight end who will be a secret weapon until around Week 6. **Von Miller** stars for a trio of pro-bowl calibre linebackers that will help to patch up a sketchy defensive line. **Rashean Mathis** is the best DB on the team, which does not speak well for the secondary. **DeAnthony Thomas** is an electrifying return threat. **Blair Walsh** is an iffy FG kicker.



7-9

PICKERING SPARTANS

COACH: **Gus Konstantakos**

MVP: **Matt Forte**

OFFENCE: **B-**

DEFENCE: **C**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

Pick-prone **Philip Rivers** joins his 3rd team in 3 years but continues to be lucky with his passing targets. **Demaryius Thomas** and **Golden Tate** could be the best top-two wide-outs in the league and **Matt Forte** is a threat at all levels coming out of the backfield. The offensive line can move the pile and will help their average runners move the chains. Acquiring DT, **Sen'Derrick Marks** helped save what might still be an awful defence that will give up leads. **Adam Jones** is everything one wants in a return man but the kicking is suspect.



6-10

MARKHAM NORTH STARS

COACH: **Darrin Jones**

MVP: **Calais Campbell**

OFFENCE: **C+**

DEFENCE: **C+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+**

Alex Smith will not lose his team many games but he won't win many either. The offensive line features star guards **TJ Lang** and **Kyle Long** – both will have to work overtime to make the running game effective. The receiving corps lacks game-breakers but **Percy Harvin** opens up unconventional options. **Calais Campbell** leads a defence that will struggle against the run but hold its own against the pass if the rush is able to penetrate. Rookie WR, **Phillip Dorsett** will capably fill return duties while **Josh Brown** excels as FG kicker.

CAN-AM CONFERENCE

SOUTH DIVISION



14-2

#2 SEED

AURORA MUSTANGS

COACH: Rich Liotta

MVP: JJ Watt

OFFENCE: A-

DEFENCE: A

SPECIAL TEAMS: A

Matt Ryan has arrived as an elite franchise QB. He will carry the offence despite an average offensive line and lack of breakaway speed at WR. **Arian Foster** will provide pop in the ground game. **Heath Miller** is the archetypal dual-threat tight end. The defence is still elite, but not as elite as last year. **JJ Watt** is like a line unto himself freeing up pass-rushers **Cliff Avril** and **Willie Young**. **Eric Weddle** and **Earl Thomas** form the best safety duo in history. The return game has multiple attractive options and the kickers are top notch.



9-7

#3 SEED

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

COACH: Chris Dickinson

MVP: Aaron Rodgers

OFFENCE: A-

DEFENCE: B

SPECIAL TEAMS: C+

If **Aaron Rodgers** steps up this could be a special year. The offensive line, led by **Zack Martin**, will give him plenty of time to find **Jordy Nelson** and **DeSean Jackson** deep down field and open holes for rookie runner TJ Yeldon. The defence has a pair of potential game-changers in **Ndamukong Suh** and **Terrell Suggs** and some depth at linebacker. The corners and safeties will struggle in coverage, however, bringing down the grade. **Leon Washington** is a veteran returner who has seen better days and **Mike Nugent** is not impressive.



9-7

SOUTH CAROLINA REGULATORS

COACH: Hal Corson

MVP: Tony Romo

OFFENCE: A-

DEFENCE: C+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B

On days when **Tony Romo** is on this will be a menacing offence. One of the league's best offensive lines will renew the career of **Frank Gore** and kick-start that of rookie **Ameer Abdullah**. **AJ Green** is one of the best when healthy and **Keenan Allen** is a sure-handed security blanket at WR. **Luke Kuechly** returns as captain of the defence and newly-acquired **Joe Haden** gives them a rare top corner in the secondary. The rest of the defence is unfortunately shaky. The return game is mediocre but FG kicker **Justin Tucker** is nearly automatic.



8-8

GWINNETT GLADIATORS

COACH: Dave Birdsall

MVP: Ben Roethlisberger

OFFENCE: B+

DEFENCE: C+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B

The Glads will live and die with **Ben Roethlisberger**. He is one of the best and protected by one of the best in tackle **Joe Thomas**, but he will have to be patient and allow shifty workhorse **LeSean McCoy** to work his magic on the defence to set up the deep throw to **Jeremy Maclin**. Off-season upgrades, **Sean Smith** and **Kyle Williams** make the defence respectable again but don't expect many turnovers or big stops from this group. **Bruce Ellington** and fumbly **Jarvis Landry** share return duties. The kicking game is very solid.



2-14

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

COACH: Russ Lemmon

MVP: Odell Beckham Jr

OFFENCE: C-

DEFENCE: C-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B

The Swordfish continue to swim in circles. They have a few exciting players, such as wide-outs **Odell Beckham Jr**, **Kenny Stills** as well as runner **CJ Anderson**, to provide occasional highlight reel relief from the constant losing on the scoreboard, but overall they aren't going anywhere. **Jadeveon Clowney** is hurt and **Sharif Floyd** is good, but not good enough to build around. The secondary is young, inexperienced, and bad, so expect lots of points against. Return man **Dwayne Harris** is a fumble risk but kicker **Adam Vinatieri** is a pro.

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CARTHAGE @ TWIN CITIES (line – TRIUMPH by 8)

For the Triumph this is a revenge match against a team that had their number last year. They will settle for nothing less than a clear and convincing victory here, but it will not be quite as sweet as it would be if the Cannibals were half the team they were last year. Carthage took a step back in the off-season hoping to make a big leap forward when first round pick Marcus Mariota develops into a star in a couple of years. Defensive MVP Lavonte David is gone, meaning safety Harrison Smith is the only Carthage defender worthy of appearing on the cover of a game program. The Cannibals may have the worst defence in the league and that has Jay Cutler and Melvin Gordon excited to take the field. The only thing that could stand in the way of big victory party for Twin Cities would be if an over-excited Cutler were to fall back into his habit of throwing interceptions against the Cannibals. A bad day for Cutler might not be enough to blow the win, but it could easily blow-up the spread. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

MOHAVE @ VIRDEN (line – HELLFIRE by 3)

The long and unpleasant road to the 2016 draft begins this week for the Violators. The price of picking high must be paid in full; just ask Jeff Dohrn. Unlike the Knights of 2014, however, it is hard to imagine Virden winning a game. The stars will have to be aligned perfectly and the moons had better be in place as well. Of course, people thought the same about the Patriots last year and they ended up winning their first game of the post-Manning era against, guess who – the Violators. Unfortunately, Virden cannot play itself. The line sits at a pocket-sized 3 points, which is a bit of a slight against Bobby Elder's crew, but it was probably set before he acquired Julio Jones from these same Violators at the pre-season trade deadline. Jones will be up against Vontae Davis, Virden's best player, so he will not have free rein to punish his former team, but he should make his mark nevertheless. The real mismatch to watch for, if you have sadistic tendencies, is Justin Houston and Cameron Wake chasing David Carr behind a derelict offensive line. Grab the points as well as the golden opportunity to check off Mohave in your survivor pool. **PICK: MOHAVE**

LOS ANGELES @ CHARLESWOOD (line – PATRIOTS by 12)

A double-digit line in Week One is usually a big risk but this one is pretty safe. Its size has more to do with the difficulty the Knights are expected to have scoring than it does the chances that Peyton Manning and Dez Bryant will put a torch to the LA defence. The Knights' defence is about average by league standards and it features a pretty good defensive line that could cause trouble in the one area the Patriots are not comfortable – pass protection. But even if the Blue Shield proves irritating to Peyton in his grand homecoming, the Charleswood defence should snuff out any attempted threat posed by Terry Bridgewater and his drab receiving corps. Le'Veon Bell could create problems and threaten the shutout if he gets room to manoeuvre, but don't hang your hat or your wallet on that. **PICK: CHARLESWOOD**

CHINO @ BEAUFORT COUNTY (line – RAVENS by 1)

The Ravens open in Beaufort County for the first time, their third home-opening city in three years. It is a momentous day for Neil Shannon and the people of Charleston, SC and the players will be pumped for this historic game. This is a rematch of last year's PAC quarter final that the Ravens, as the Banana Sluggs, won handily. Neither team is as strong as last year, but the debate continues about which one has deteriorated more. The Ravens retain a nucleus of defensive talent that eclipses what remains of the proud Chino 'Lockdown Crew.' On offence, the Ravens hold the edge in the trenches, but it is an advantage that means less when free-wheeling Cam Newton is the other quarterback. One could say the same about RGIII, but the Ravens have not announced their starter for this game. Chino has the secondary to limit the Beaufort passing attack, but the front seven can be gashed on the ground if caught pinning their ears back. On the other side, 'Revis Island' will ensure that Cam has one less target downfield while Gerald McCoy pushes DeMarco Murray to the outside into the arms of Clay Matthews. In this tightest of match-ups and lines, picking the home team makes sense. **PICK: BEAUFORT COUNTY**

IOWA CITY @ MISSION VIEJO (line – CUBS by 5)

The Monarchs are a better team than last year but so are the Cubbies – much better. Deron Redding and his squad are on the warpath. They toiled through three-a-days in training camp and tore up the pre-season with a full-throttle effort that left spectators aghast. They will aim to stake their claim to the west division title early with a command performance on the road against their nemesis, Mission Viejo. Few will recall that the first victory in Monarchs' franchise history, and their second, came against the Cubs. You can bet Coach Redding remembers, even if most of his current players were still in high school then. Revenge is best served cold, so expect the Cubs to make the most of their best team since 2008. The Monarchs can make a game of it, of course, if Ryan Tannehill gets red hot and Khalil Mack breaks Russell Wilson's legs. **PICK: IOWA CITY**

DURHAM @ PICKERING (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 3)

Another classic opening week match-up pitting two quarter-final playoff foes from last year is made less alluring by the off-season retreat of the Spartans into a defensive posture for 2015. This is not the same Pickering squad that threatened to steal a championship just one year ago but it is run by the same crazy coach, meaning the battle will be real even while the sides are uneven. It is always amusing to watch these extremely stubborn coaches trying to force a game plan that their opponent is taking away or that the players are struggling to execute, but what that flavour-of-the-day is for either team matters. Four consecutive longs passes to TY Hilton could spell easy victory or disaster for Durham. 6 straight screen passes to Matt Forte could keep the ball away from the Lizards and score points in the process. The Durham secondary may be the only one in the EFL capable of limiting Demaryius Thomas and Golden Tate, but Philip Rivers will try to stick it to his former team anyway. **PICK: DURHAM**

COWTOWN @ MARKHAM (line – CORN KINGS by 1)

These teams tend to play each other tough and ugly irrespective of their prospects or place in the standings. The Corn Kings have playoff aspirations, jumping on board with Joe Flacco and a premier pass rush hoping to ride that train to victory. But most observers aren't convinced Cowtown has the depth or the offensive line to break into the conference top four. It is unclear what aspirations Darrin Jones has, but this week they will center on beating the Corn Kings. This rivalry is marked by the oddity of the road team generally outperforming the home team, giving Cowtown the psychological edge. But Darrin Jones has not announced his starting quarterback yet, clearly a ploy to keep Jim Coghlin guessing and nullify that edge. The safest bet here is that anything can happen, but since I have to pick a team, I will go with the "home curse" and the better defence. **PICK: COWTOWN**

SCARBOROUGH @ YORK (line – EXCALIBURS by 1)

Two teams that never live up to their pre-season billing have a chance to start off on the right foot. But which one will it be is what you want to know from me. There is no huge disparity in quarterback play; both happen to be great. If forced to choose, the mobility and relative youth of Aaron Rodgers gives the Eagles a slight edge that grows to large one when you consider his multiple game-breaking options at wide receiver. Tom Brady has a bull at running back in Marshawn Lynch, however, opening up the play action pass to Kelvin Benjamin. Defensively, the Blue Eagles have a slight edge overall but the York linebackers are the best trio in the business and, if used properly, could disrupt both phases of the Scarborough attack. The home field will come into play in a positive way if the Yorkies get an early lead, but could work against them if they fall behind and the drunks take over. On paper, Scarborough looks more than capable of scoring an upset but the history of these paper tigers suggests otherwise. **PICK: YORK**

SOUTH CAROLINA @ AURORA (line – MUSTANGS by 8)

This makes it four-of-four for rematches of quarter-final playoff games to start the 2015 regular season, but only the second where the teams are as competitive as they were a year ago. Of course, that is not a good thing for the Regulators, who fell gloriously but surely to these Mustangs in the first round of the playoffs in 2014. That could happen again in the season-opener but with a touch more glory for the Regs and a little less sure for the 'stangs. Aurora remains the team to beat in the Can-am Conference. It is with good reason that they are favoured here by a 2-point converted TD. But the Regulators' offensive line is stronger and their offence more diversified than last year, so they should find the end zone easier than some might expect. A bolstered secondary will keep Matt Ryan honest, but a shaky defensive line could spell a big day for Arian Foster. **PICK: SOUTH CAROLINA**

GWINNETT @ SEBASTIAN (line – GLADIATORS by 3)

The franchise that boasts its most proud moment as the appearance of Jadeveon Clowney in the pre-game player montage in last year's opening edition of Thursday Night Football is not the team to test the mettle of the revamped 2015 edition of the Gladiators. However, they will be a good warm-up act to raise the expectations of Glad fans unreasonably high. It's not that the Swordfish are bad.....okay, they're bad.....but they usually have a few players on their roster who scare you if you are betting your paycheque against them. Odell Beckham Jr is one such player and, to a lesser extent, CJ Anderson. But the Fish also have no real defence to speak of and Gwinnett has Big Ben, who is much scarier than any player on Sebastian. **PICK: GWINNETT**