



EFL
ELITE FOOTBALL LEAGUE

2016 SEASON PREVIEW

SEASON #10 IS HERE!

WHO

Russell Wilson

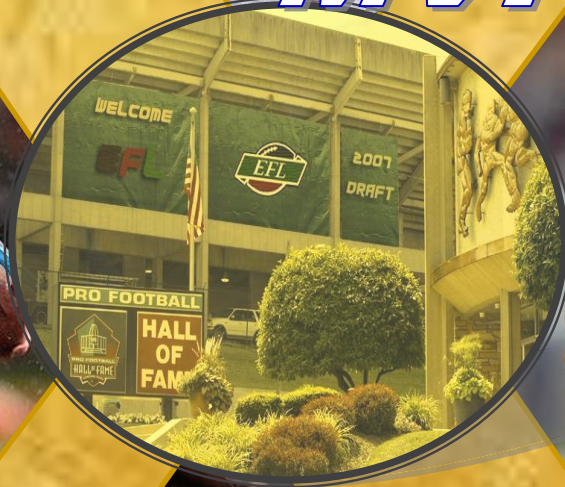
WILL



Andy Dalton



Tyrann Mathieu



NO EXCUSES

PRIMAL INSTINCTS

Chris Harris Jr.



MAKE

SECRET WEAPON

HISTORY?

IN THE SHADOW OF HISTORY



CANTON (AP) – It is hard to believe that the EFL is entering its 10th season. Looking back at the Spring of 2007 – that truly chaotic time in pro football history – few would have predicted that a stable and thriving league could have emerged so quickly from the ruins of the defunct and disgraced National Football League. But 9 years later the EFL enters its 10th season much stronger and more popular than its steadily sinking rivals.

The once-powerful SFL is teetering on the brink of collapse as its increasingly deranged Commissioner openly talks of kicking out 10 of the league's 12 remaining franchises to form the Tiny Football League – a two-team association likely to be billed as “the most intense rivalry in sports.”

The Tex-Mex League, its grab bag of rule-change gimmicks exhausted and its ratings steadily declining since its 2010 heyday, has announced that it will introduce a new ‘Game Show’ format in 2017 in partnership with the former producers of American Gladiators.

To the north, the CFL is holding steady and showing modest growth with the addition of a team in Windsor. But, as usual, nobody south of the 49th parallel seems to notice or care – the league remains the passion of several thousand Canadian Football purists and the entire Province of Saskatchewan.

By contrast, the EFL has now doubled in size to 24 franchises, with the addition of four expansion teams just in time for the league's 10th campaign. The league has defied the

EFL DISTRIBUTION DRAFT ORDER 2007

1. CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS
2. ANCHORAGE BUCCANEERS
3. MOHAVE HELLFIRE
4. GWINNETT GLADIATORS
5. LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS
6. FLORIDA DRAGONS
7. IOWA CITY CUBS
8. DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS
9. CHINO CONVICTS
10. KUTZTOWN GOLDEN BEARS
11. COWTOWN CORN KINGS
12. MEADOWLANDS SWAMP DOGS

critics, who once claimed the strict salary cap would dilute the talent pool to mostly journeymen. Through strong capital investment and adept cap management by its core franchises, EFL teams have gradually come to dominate the College Draft, while the best of the rest eventually find their way to the EFL through free agency. This has produced a clearly superior on-field product.

But there have been challenges. In coming to dominate football TV ratings and attendance across the continent, the league has had to overcome a handful of erratic, fly-by-night owners; an attempted coup by a shark in dragon's clothing; two demonic possessions; a nuclear strike on one team's training facility; a failed experiment in Asia; and its own shadowy league directorate that appears part Secret Society, part Politburo in its business practices. As a result, the EFL has not reached "pre-fall" NFL stature yet, but it is rapidly heading in that direction.

To celebrate the official beginning of its 10th season, the EFL Committee presided over a Season Opening Ceremony at Canton to mark the anniversary of the inaugural EFL Draft in 2007. Despite the ominous appearance of the 'Committee of 13' seated in front of the stage, the atmosphere in Canton was charged with bullishness at the league's future prospects. Sentimentality prevailed during the official opening of the EFL Wing of the Pro Football Hall of Fame as 12 former players – one each from the league's Charter Teams – were inducted. Excitement was palpable as the owners of four brand new expansion franchises were officially introduced to the assembled Media and welcomed into the EFL fold. There was even controversial humour as Master of Ceremonies **Dave Chappelle** performed an imitation of an overweight **Colin Kaepernick** attempting to stand for the National Anthem but failing miserably. Yes, it was a night to remember and an auspicious start to what sports analysts believe will be a frantically competitive 2016 season.

"It is fitting that the league begins its tenth season with the final outcome as unpredictable as it was before that very first season in 2007," remarks **Peter Prince** of North America Today, one of the guest speakers at Canton for the 2016 opening ceremony. "Of course there are certain teams with certain star players that will finish the season near the top, but you aren't likely to see one or two teams emerge from the regular season as the clear favourites to play in the Gale Sayers game, as we've seen the past few years."

Indeed, pre-season Power Rankings from the major sports news outlets all differ significantly from each other after the upheaval of another expansion draft and inflated bidding in free agency kept high impact players away from many of the contending teams. Add divisional realignment into the mix, along with a new inter-conference scheduling format that randomly pits one division against another and the variables increase.

"One of the very few things football analysts can bank on this coming season is the continued dominance of the Aurora defence," declared **Kris Hortenson** during a round table debate on ESPN's Sports Central. "But will it be enough to get them to a third straight Gale Sayers Game? I don't think it will. They lost some key players on offence. Like all the

THE COMMITTEE OF 13

"THE COMMITTEE"

- No. 1 Co-Chair Yorrigo Kaldis
- No.2 Co-Chair Cogswell Cogs II (Spokesman)
- No.3 Clauneck (Treasurer)
- No.4 'Member Number Four' (Discipline)
- No.5 Titivillus (Secretary)
- No.6 Agares (East Zone)
- No.7 Prince Gäap (West Zone)
- No.8 Glenn Beck (Public Relations)
- No.9 Gustavus Konstant (Controller)
- No.10 President Botis (North Zone)
- No.11 Astaroth (South Zone)
- No.12 Jones (Travel Secretary)
- No.13 'The Dark Entity'



The Committee of 13, also known simply as 'The Committee,' occupies the front row at the auditorium of the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton during official opening ceremonies in celebration of the League's upcoming 10th season.

2016 EXPANSION NOTEBOOK



ST. CHARLES CHARGERS

PACIFIC CONFERENCE / EAST DIVISION

OWNER: John Clingan

HOME PARK: St. Charles Stadium (46,560 capacity)

TOP EXP PICK: Reggie Nelson, S (Mohave)

TOP ROOKIE: Carson Wentz, QB (ND State)

TOP FREE AGENT: Travis Benjamin, WR

COACH: John Clingan



ERIEAU CADILLAC

PACIFIC CONFERENCE / CENTRAL DIVISION

OWNER: Jamie Rilett

HOME PARK: Kelly-Burke Field (28,740 capacity)

TOP EXP PICK: Justin Houston, LB (Mohave)

TOP ROOKIE: Joey Bosa, DE (Ohio State)

TOP FREE AGENT: Brian Robison, DE

COACH: (A Game Time Decision)



NEW JERSEY WRECKING BALLS

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE / ATLANTIC DIVISION

OWNER: Jeff Cohen & Bruce Springsteen

HOME PARK: Stone Pony Shore (38,824 capacity)

TOP EXP PICK: Andrew Norwell, G (LA)

TOP ROOKIE: Jared Goff, QB (California)

TOP FREE AGENT: Kendall Langford, DE

COACH: Bill Parcells



TORONTO WOLVERINES

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE / SOUTH DIVISION

OWNER: Ryan Rich

HOME PARK: Wolverines Den (32,335 capacity)

TOP EXP PICK: Shawn Williams, S (Twin Cities)

TOP ROOKIE: Jalen Ramsey, CB (Florida State)

TOP FREE AGENT: Danny Trevathan, ILB

COACH: Ryan Preston

top teams of the past several years, the Mustangs head into 2016 with some potential fatal flaws.”

Football Outriders.Org, the stats-based analysis firm that correctly predicted a Charleswood-Aurora final in 2015 and an Aurora championship in 2014, admits it is at a loss to crown an EFL champ in advance this year: “*We are entering a season where random elements such as injuries, weather and, literally, bounces of the ball could directly determine which teams in the top half of the league finish in playoff spots,*” writes **Harry Schultz** in his foreword of the Outriders 2016 Football Almanac. “*Those random factors have always influenced games, but this year they will influence seasons; that is how close some of these teams are in the statistical probability of success or failure, based on their personnel.*”

Whether or not this is overstating the effect of the arbitrary path of a prolate spheroid, Schultz’s core point that few will argue with is that the room for error on the path to the Championship is much smaller this year. A similar view is expressed by **Lazor Ponk** of *Scouts Ltd.* in his article, ‘*Is the EFL Watering Down the Wine?*’

“*The prevailing view of the EFL Committee is that expansion will increase the league’s footprint and therefore increase TV and merchandise revenues. They seek to capitalize on a wave of increasing popularity while squeezing their rivals out of existence, or significantly marginalizing them. This makes sense if the on-field product continues to attract more viewers. But with the addition of four new teams, the question becomes whether the current player talent pool can sustain the quality of play that has pushed the EFL above its rivals. A tour of EFL training camps reveals the almost universal challenges faced by coaching staffs in shaping up the bottom half of their rosters. Many of these players would*

never have seen a snap on any decent team last year. This year, even on the good teams, they are one injury away from starting. On the bad teams, they are already starting."

So, while more journeymen are finding more full time jobs than ever before, the play and health of the league's big stars should be more important to their team's success than ever before. The big names carrying the big salaries will have to step up.

In the newly named Atlantic Conference (replacing the former Can-Am Conference) one team with a lot of big stars is aiming to make it three straight appearances in an EFL Championship game. The Aurora Mustangs have but one goal every year: to win it all. Last year they fell short – losing in the Final to **Peyton Manning** and the Patriots – and it did not sit well with the organization.

One week following that loss, the Mustangs' previously imperturbable coach, **Rich Liotta** announced a "voluntary" off-season workout program beginning in mid-March, less than 3 weeks after the final gun sounded on Gale Sayers Game IX. But when a battered and bruised **Arian Foster** decided



Josh Norman (left) and **Patrick Peterson** ham it up with reporters at their Muskoka training camp facility. The best shutdown corner tandem in the league must stay healthy, because there is nobody behind them.

to give it a pass and instead rest up after racking 1,820 all-purpose yards in 2015, Liotta let it be known that he was not happy. Two months later, Foster was packaged off to Carthage, along with fellow non-volunteer **Andre Holmes**, for guard **Matt Slautson**. The message was clear: nobody – not even an MVP candidate – was safe. Well, maybe not *nobody*....

The core of the indomitable Aurora defence was kept intact despite less than perfect attendance at off-season activities. Rising star, cornerback **Josh Norman**, opted to go on a boat cruise with Swordfish wide receiver, **Odell Beckham Jr.** instead of participating in OTAs. But with Norman on the verge of stardom while playing for peanuts (the \$350,000 league minimum) Aurora management made the wise decision to turn a blind eye. Absent as well was the heart of the defence, **JJ Watt**. This was approved by the team in advance, ostensibly so that JJ could perform vital work for his charity – the foundation that bears his name. But 'Deathspun' columnist, **Tarkin Smith-Abdullah** – who broke a story last year about the suspected bio-engineering activities of *Project Adam*, a company with connections to Mustangs' owner **Haus Beauregard** – claims that JJ was "*de-activated and sent to the shop for maintenance and upgrades.*"

If the Mustangs are to enjoy the kind of success they have become accustomed under Liotta, the defence will have to make its mark again this year. The return of **NaVorro Bowman** to the middle of the line-backing corps should improve the run defence, an area of weakness in 2015; and the virtuoso quartet of Norman, **Patrick Peterson**, **Earl Thomas** and **Eric Weddle** promises to again turn the Mustangs' secondary into a 'no-fly zone.' Backing up Watt in the trenches is the unsung but always dangerous **Cliff Avril** as well as emerging defensive tackle **Malik Jackson**, who looks to be entering his prime.

While the defence is shaping up to be a better no.1 than it was last year, the league's no.2 ranked offence from 2015 will struggle to put away opponents early and often in 2016. The loss of Foster in the backfield is big and unlikely to be offset by the signing of running back free agent, **Rashad Jennings** and late 4th round rookie pick, **Kenyan Drake**. Reliable safety valve **Heath Miller** is gone – the Mustangs declined to match the Cubs' \$5 million offer sheet to the 33-year old tight end – and favourite target **Anquan Boldin** is not getting any faster. The addition of speedy rookie **Corey Coleman** at wide receiver is nice, but how much of a role he will play remains to be seen. **Matt Ryan**, an MVP candidate in 2015, will be

counted on again to bring it all together, but some have doubts that he will be as effective as he was last year:

“The league saw the pounding Matt Ryan took from the Patriots in the final last year and made notes,” observes **Severin Handfottner Jr** of Coaches Call. *“Expect teams to game-plan the Mustangs accordingly, without the fear of Foster breaking a run or a screen for a big gain. Ryan is too good a quarterback not to have success; but don’t expect him to post the gaudy numbers we are used to seeing from him; and don’t expect the Mustangs to run away with many games.”*

Most sportswriters agree that Aurora will be in the mix when the post-season arrives. But there is a wide divergence of opinions about who will be the Mustangs’ main competition in the Atlantic Conference. **Caleb Cogger**, of *EFL Magazine*, is on the record as the most outspoken advocate for a dramatic Markham turnaround in 2016 à la 2012:

“Markham was very active again in the off-season, but this year there appeared to be purpose behind the moves,” writes Cogger. *“Shipping off Alex Smith to Beaufort County for Darrelle Revis and Eli Manning to Mission Viejo for Cameron Jordan were very bold moves designed to raise the defence a few notches in the pecking order. Snatching rookie Myles Jack in the first round was an astute pick that will also help in that area. Shipping off 3 draft picks for Demaryius Thomas was a clear signal that Darrin Jones was not playing the long game in his rebuild. Of course, the value of these moves is predicated on the boldest move of all: installing unknown Tyrod Taylor at starting quarterback. I think that Jones knows what he is doing and Markham will shock the league this year.”*

With **Brandon Marshall** on the opposite side of Thomas and **Jordan Reed** working the seam, Taylor has three elite options in the passing game. Dynamic second-year back **David Johnson** leads the usual Markham running-back-by-committee and, with the constant threat of Taylor’s elusiveness and speed on every play, opponents will have to respect the running game. But while all analysts agree that Markham will likely improve significantly over last year’s gloomy 3-13 record, most are nervous about anointing them as masters of the Atlantic Division before the season even starts. Taylor – a former Tex-Mex League refugee – is untested as a starter; if he doesn’t deliver the goods, none of the upgrades matter.

In the Atlantic Conference’s restructured North Division, a team from Florida promises to not only defy geography, but to also break free from its traditional position in the league’s basement. The Sebastian Swordfish are poised to shift from prey to predator in 2016 thanks to a maturing offence that will severely test each level of opponents’ defences. Swordfish GM, **Eron ‘Ozdoltorps’ Osman**, his job rumoured to be on the line, shifted into high gear this off-season with a flurry of deals that stock-piled ammunition for the ‘Red Rifle,’ **Andy Dalton** to fire at his opponents. His first task was to find cover for budding superstar receiver **Odell Beckham Jr** by acquiring deep threat **Doug Baldwin** and veteran **Danny Amendola** from Carthage. He then smartly added the ancient **Benjamin Watson** at tight end to serve as a reliable safety



Tyrod Taylor (left) chats with Coach **Darrin Jones** during training camp drills. Taylor, who spent 2015 on the North Stars’ practice squad, is being entrusted with the starting job at QB following the surprise trades of both **Alex Smith** and **Eli Manning** during the off-season.

valve in case the pressure in the pocket got too great. For a finale, he shored up protection for Dalton by prying All Pro guard **Marshall Yanda** from Spartans in exchange for draft picks and intriguing young lineman **Derek Wolfe**. This last deal showed that there would be no more waiting to be a contender in Sebastian.

On the defense side, Osman paid out big money to former SFL Buggsville Bunnies corner, **Delvin Breaux** and opened his wallet for Saskatchewan Roughriders safety **Walter Thurmond** to firm up a deep, if unspectacular, secondary. Neither player is an eye-popping addition, but in the context of a Swordfish defence that already boasts a trio of dangerous edge rushers in **Chandler Jones**, **Carlos Dunlap** and **Jerry Attaochu**, both could create synergy leading to big plays on the backside of the ball.

If nothing else, the Swordfish are sure to attract a nation-wide following from

Fantasy Football players, according to **Arpin Plunderflunder** in his blog, 'Fantasy Freakz:'

"The high risk/high reward plays at QB this year are Carson Palmer in Twin Cities and Andy Dalton in Sebastian," writes Plunderflunder. *"On the cautionary side, Palmer is old and he has been out of the EFL for a few years; while a lot of fantasy GMs just can't get past Sebastian's history as a bottom dweller to even consider Dalton as a top tier pick. I have these guys as one-two on my board at QB and their top targets, Antonio Brown and Odell Beckham, as one-two on my board at WR. I expect a year-long offensive barrage from the Swordfish that will push them into contention for the Division crown and fuel the teams of astute fantasy owners."*

So, where does this leave the traditional power in the north, Durham? **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* attempts to rein in the Swordfish hype and bring fans back to a more conservative view of the North Division:

"Fans are eager to see a shake-up in the historical hierarchy of teams. Sebastian winning the North Division would be a seismic shift in the power structure. The idea of it is very attractive, not only to long-suffering Swordfish fans, but to fans of underdogs everywhere," opines Prince in his article titled, 'Re-alignment Creates New Rivalries.' *"But the strange sight of a rising power in Sebastian is deflecting attention away from a long time power in Durham, a team that was very quiet on the free agent market, but consolidated its strengths through contract negotiations while adding talent in the draft. Don't forget about Drew Brees – he will not concede the division without a fight."*

Indeed, the Thunder Lizards do not appear to have gotten any weaker since their 13-3 campaign of one year ago. In fact, they may be stronger. With a healthy **Darren McFadden** reporting to camp in reportedly the best shape of his career and an equally revitalized **Tyrann Mathieu** making fans forget about a prematurely ageing **Kam Chancellor** at safety, the Lizards now have a credible running game (something they lacked last year) and no drop-off in the defensive secondary (the core of their defence). With Brees at quarterback and **Calvin Johnson** leading a strong trio of wide receiver targets, the offence will continue to be a Durham strong suit. But at least one reputable analyst urges caution when predicting Durham's fortunes in 2016:

"Durham totally neglected a small, but key area when building its offence," writes **Skope Boylezz** on ESPN.com. *"Last year they went into the season without a real threat at running back; this year they have decided to go without a legitimate threat at tight end. Who is Austin Hooper? He's a 4th round rookie pick and that's all you need to know about him. Not only is he no threat, he is the only tight end on the roster. I expect Durham wide receivers to attract plenty of*

double teams this season. Against the Auroras and the Markhams of the Conference it will make a big difference and will mean they get stopped in the preliminary playoff rounds yet again."

The consensus is that Durham and Sebastian will duke it out all year for the division title and that the consolation prize for the loser will be a wildcard berth. But there are strong dissenting opinions – not only on the outcome of the North Division title fight, but on the Conference wildcard picture as a whole.

Sperl Sponefritter of *Sperl's World of Sports* recently revealed his special perspective on the Atlantic Conference playoff picture in a feature article titled, 'Dialogues with the Sports Devil.'

"Expansion and realignment will exert a greater and more unpredictable influence on competition. Anything can happen this year. This is not just in the math but also in the stars, with Pluto transiting the 7th house in Cancer, the EFL's birth sign, and the withdrawal of Belphegor from France to sit in the 6th Province of the Netherworld. This clearly points to a York ascendancy and an existential struggle between Cowtown and Scarborough. Curiously, Gwinnett will be unaffected by the corrupted



Travis Benjamin snares one of 68 passes he caught with the SFL's Doe County Sheriffs in 2015. The expansion Chargers shelled out \$16 million to lure the promising receiver to a developing team and away from an established contender.



Toronto made **Jalen Ramsey** of Florida State the no.1 pick of the 2016 EFL Draft. The corner turned in a strong training camp and pre-season; he already looks like the best defender on a young team that will struggle to win a game this year.

Chi radiating from the conflicts around it and can pursue its own destiny without interference. That does not necessarily mean they make the playoffs, however. But two Heroes will most definitely rise in York and thwart the manifest destiny of the North Stars – a team that will suffer the ill-effects of having fallen out of favour with Ziminiair.”

At least one commentator agrees with Sponefritter on the potential of York to be a force in the Atlantic Division, but not for the same reasons.

“No disrespect to Darrin Jones, but anyone who expects **Tyrod Taylor** to lead the North Stars past **Tom Brady** and the Excaliburs is living with Lucy-in-the-sky-with-diamonds!” declares outspoken ESPN sports commentator, **Will Simons**. “**Tom Brady** gets no respect anymore, especially now that **Kelvin Benjamin** is out for the season. York is written off by a lot of people. Those people will look silly at the end of the season. Keep an eye on those two tight ends, **Zach Ertz** and **Delanie Walker**! Brady loves using tight ends down the seam. He will use them to move the chains and set up deep strikes down the sideline to his wide receivers.”

Local writer, **Merlin the Magician** of the *Round Table Chronicle*, believes the strength of the Excaliburs is in their defence. To be exact, two players on that defence: “*Verily the combined efforts of the Leviathan Atkins and the Behemoth Miller shall defy the strongest attempts to breach the castle walls of York,*” he writes.

However, the computer algorithm suggests a different outcome, according to **Harry Schultz**, of [Football Outriders.org](http://FootballOutriders.org): “*York boasts two of the most impactful defensive players in the game in **Geno Atkins** and **Von Miller**. But those two have very little support around them. The Excaliburs’ secondary will be a chronic problem for this defence. The front seven will have to exert consistent pressure and the safeties will have to gamble for the interception. This means that, as good as the York defence will likely be against the run, the pass defence will be bad, or worse.*”

The consolidated wisdom of the most respected football analysts in sports agree that Aurora, Markham, Durham, Sebastian and possibly York are all serious contenders for division titles and that one of those five teams will emerge to represent the Atlantic Conference in the final. However, the senior analyst at *Pro Football Focal-Point* (PFFP), **Mumbar Thakar**, adds a controversial appendix to that Book of the 2016 Season that his esteemed colleagues have written:

“*The effect of expansion and the new scheduling format will create imbalances that – according to our analysis – will favour Cowtown and Scarborough in the standings and suppress comparable teams, such as South Carolina or Gwinnett,*” writes Thakar in his feature piece, ‘*The Little Big Things.*’ “*The North Division is matched up against the East Division and the South Division is matched up against the West Division in inter-conference play. The East is by far the weakest division in the league and the West is one of the strongest divisions from top to bottom. The Corn Kings and Blue Eagles have some very good players who can mask their weaknesses against mediocre opposition. I would not be surprised if one of those two teams finished with 10 or 11 wins and stole a wildcard spot – maybe even steal the North Division.*”

If Cowtown (a team so desperate for offensive line help that they auditioned **Hroniss Grasu** to be the starting center) or Scarborough (a team coached by **Chris Dickinson** via **Rex Ryan**), were to somehow manage to make the post-season, it would likely cement the growing reputation of PFFP as the *go-to* football ratings agency. And, if so, hopeful Glads fans, the long suffering fans of the Regulators, and the increasingly frustrated fans of the Spartans will all have little reason to cheer in 2016, according to Thakar, writing in the same article:

“*South Carolina is staring into the unknown this year. **Kirk Cousins**, as a full time starter, is an unknown, but nobody believes he will rival **Tony Romo** at his peak. Other than **Keenan Allen** and an ageing **Andre Johnson**, their receiving corps is unknown. The defensive line and secondary did not play well in the pre-season – we do know that (he he). At best this is a 9-win team, but most probably it is a 7 or 8-win team. Nor will the Gladiators challenge Aurora’s*

hegemony. The defence has regressed to its 2014 form after a noticeable rebound last year. Ben Roethlisberger is one of the best, but it is too much to ask of him and LeSean McCoy to keep up against the better teams when their defence cannot stop anybody.”

As for the expansion teams – New Jersey and Toronto in the Atlantic and St. Charles and Erieau in the Pacific – syndicated talk show host, **Cowan Bullherd** of *Morning Bull*, unleashed this harangue after a hapless caller argued that the expansion teams could surprise the experts and be competitive:

“Hey, look! I am an expert, you see. *I get paid* to be an expert! So when I tell say that you are out to lunch, that you’re delusional, that you’re whistling up the ass of an elephant if you think that the expansion teams are going to be anything other than horrible – *that* is my expert opinion! Look, I understand the whole diluted talent pool pseudo-theory thing. But the most diluted of them all are the expansion teams. *LOOK AT THEIR ROSTERS* if you aren’t willing to take my word for it! LOOK! Or maybe you can’t read! I’m sorry if you can’t, I really am, but it would make sense if you can’t. I pity the first established team that loses to one of these bums! The poor saps will be laughing stocks – and rightfully so! The expansion teams will be competitive? Give...me...a...break! And now it’s time for a commercial break.....”

On the other side of the league in the Pacific Conference the picture is much clearer, according to the experts. **Peter Prince** of *North America Today* sums up the conventional view succinctly:

“Power in the Pacific Conference is concentrated in three teams: Iowa City, Twin Cities and Brooklin, in that order. Charleswood without Peyton Manning is going to take a step back this year, but if Blake Bortles can live up to his draft pedigree, they will battle for a wildcard berth. The interesting struggle will be in the West Division. The Cubs are clearly the favourite there, but Chino remains dangerous while the Monarchs and Knights both made significant moves to improve their teams. This means the Cubs will have the most difficult ride out of all the divisional front-runners. A battle of attrition in the West could allow a team like Virden, or even Mohave, to sneak through into the post-season as a wildcard.”

Despite the common view expressed by Prince, the Patriots enter the season as defending Champions and, as such, have been accorded plenty of respect by some pundits, especially those who view **Blake Bortles** as an upgrade over

‘The Legend,’ **Peyton Manning**. **Lazor Ponk**, of *Scouts Ltd.*, champions this view:

“Much has been made of the supposed downgrade from Peyton to Blake Bortles. I would say too much. People forget that Bortles is no longer a rookie – he played a full season in 2014 on a terrible team and showed flashes of that 1st round pedigree despite no support. Last year he got to sit and watch the Master at work. Unfortunately, he rarely got to see the Master throw more than 20 yards down field. Bortles gives the offensive coordinator better deep options; I expect him to be a lot more effective with a better supporting cast than in 2014.”

Local experts tend to be a little more skeptical, but it is hard to know if it is the result of objectivity, or the unease around the sight of **Peyton Manning** riding the pine this year. In a sharp business move that nevertheless drew controversy, **Jason Findlay** actually released Manning into the waiver pool before signing him back to the Pats for significantly less money when no other team would claim him. Although necessary, this had a humiliating effect on the proud future Hall-of-Famer.



Triumph back-up quarterback, **Jay Cutler** has been tight lipped with the media after losing the starting job to **Carson Palmer**. But he still manages to get his message across to one of the local paparazzi.



Blake Bortles will attempt to lead the defending champion Patriots to a second consecutive title this year. Helping him out on the sideline will be **Peyton Manning**.

*"It is gut-wrenching to see Peyton wearing a headset on the sideline, yet refusing to take off his helmet; as if at any moment he would be required to spring into action," writes **Charlie Wood** of the Charleswood Banner. "But it was devastatingly clear, from limited pre-season play, that the word 'spring,' as a verb to describe Peyton doing anything on the football field, would never be used again, except in irony. Mentally he is still playing. Physically he is done. Patriots' fans are left to hope that his store of accumulated wisdom will transfer to young Bortles and limit the number of mistakes he is bound to make over the course of the season."*

The main beneficiary of a Patriots team in flux is Twin Cities. The best team in the East Division over the past two years was relegated to second place in those two seasons by consecutive one-year surges of the Cannibals

and Patriots. This year the Triumph are clearly the best team in the newly formed Central Division, just in time to celebrate the opening of their new mega-park, Wilhalla Stadium. Only a failure of **Carson Palmer** to transition back to the EFL, after a 6-year hiatus spent traveling through the SFL and CFL, will hold them back from finishing ahead of the Pats, Violators and Cadillac.

Fed up with the erratic play of **Jay Cutler**, Triumph owner **Guy Williams** shelled out a total of \$20 million, including an \$8 million signing bonus, for one year of the 36-year old veteran Palmer. It was the boldest and most significant off-season acquisition by a Pacific Conference team and it will undoubtedly make or break the Triumph season. As an insurance policy, Williams kept Cutler under contract, despite the vociferous demands of Cutler's agent, **Bus Cook**, to trade him. While some see it as a wise move, the decision to keep Cutler has some local commentators nervous.

*"While no Triumph diehard will claim to have full confidence in Cutler, at least he came with the potential to take over any game with that golden arm of his," writes **Lars Odegard** of the Valhalla Press. "Even his bitter detractors, who blamed him exclusively for post-season failures, would often qualify their criticism by pointing out his vast potential while making the argument that he cannot win the big game. But whatever Cutler is, he is nobody's back-up. Better, in his mind, to be the starter on an expansion team than the back-up on a winner. His presence on the sideline will be a distraction."*

Distraction or not, the Triumph will be hard-pressed to not be in the running for the Conference Title if Palmer proves to be as efficient as he was with the Toronto Boatmen of the CFL last year. He has the weapons in the best wide receiver in football, **Antonio Brown**, to throw to and a fully healthy **Doug Martin** exploding out of the backfield behind him. And even if he misfires occasionally, he will get plenty of opportunities to make amends thanks to a Top-5 defence that features a pair of shutdown corners in **Darius Slay** and **Chris Harris Jr.**, in addition to the sideline-to-sideline speed and toughness of inside linebacker, **Bobby Wagner**.

Harry Schultz of Football Outriders.Org, a Triumph backer to win the Conference, makes some insightful points: *"So much attention is focused on the Triumph offence and how it will perform under Carson Palmer that many analysts are overlooking their secret weapon – its defence. Darius Slay is totally underrated and Chris Harris is a top-four cornerback in this league. These two will make it difficult to pass against the Triumph at any point in the game. Once they have a lead, expect them to hold onto it."*

While the Triumph look poised to finally win a Division title this year, another team aims to repeat last year's success under yet *another* different name. The Brooklin Hawks are the latest version of the team that began its existence, 9 years ago, as the Meadowlands Swamp Dogs – the worst, by far, of the original 12 teams. It is the league's 'unwanted team,' having changed ownership five times in league history, an average of once every two years.

After the Pentagon unexpectedly pulled the plug on funding for 'America's Team' in Beaufort County, the EFL found itself in an expansion year needing another new owner at the 11th hour. The Committee could hardly believe their good fortune when an application for a franchise came in from what they believed to be Brooklyn, NY. With New Jersey entering the league through expansion, that would put two EFL teams in the biggest TV market in the country. The

application was fast-tracked and approved without a strict review. Too late the league discovered that they had awarded a team to Brooklin, Ontario – a small, idyllic rural community situated in the northeast corner of the GTA, known more for lacrosse and slo-pitch than football. The last thing the EFL needed was yet another “community team.”

“Why do so many people want their teams to be like the Packers?” whined ESPN commentator, **Will Simons**, referencing the legendary small town that defied the mega-market economics of the defunct NFL. “It’s nice and quaint if there is one of them, but the EFL has more than its share. And from what I hear, this new Brooklin team doesn’t even have a stadium!”

The Optimist Club of Brooklin would disagree. When they heard that their little town had been awarded a professional football franchise, they mobilized the community and had rows and rows of bench seating built and arranged in a square around the local rep soccer field. The Lions Club, not to be outdone, donated a giant manual scoreboard freshly painted in the Hawks colours of green-blue and grey. The Brooklin Downtown Business Association is busy organizing concessions and financing upgrades to local hotels. All 20,000 or so citizens of Brooklin are abuzz with excitement.

But is there a reason to be so excited; one that does not involve civic pride at receiving national exposure every Sunday? From a football standpoint, the Hawks look ready to soar to the



DeAndre Hopkins of the Brooklin Hawks snares a pass in the Hall of Fame Game. Hopkins will be a key feature of a deceptively dangerous Hawks attack.

top of the Pacific Conference’s East Division. At least, that is the opinion of **Arpin Plunderflunder**, who writes in his blog, *Fantasy Freakz*:

*“I don’t have **Alex Smith** near the top of my QB fantasy list because typically he doesn’t throw enough touchdown passes. But what TD passes he throws this year are going to **DeAndre Hopkins** who, in my opinion, is the wide receiver with the biggest upside in the game today. I also like **Jonathan Stewart** as a starting running back and, if I can, I want **Ryan Mathews** on my roster as a back-up. That offensive line in Brooklin is pretty good and I expect to see big numbers from their backs as a result. I would avoid their defence – not that it’s bad, but it definitely took a hit during the off-season. Still, it will perform better than its talent because of weak opposition in the East Division. The team will coast to 13 wins.”*

While the small town Brooklin Hawks look to subdue Mohave, Carthage and expansion St. Charles in the East, out west the Iowa City Cubs will have to wrestle with some tough competition in order finish on top of their bracket. They will have to do so while dealing with the distractions of a team and local media divided over the issue of back-up quarterback **Colin Kaepernick’s** controversial protest against racial injustice in the United States. It appears that Kaepernick is more than just unhappy about his lack of opportunity to be a starting quarterback. He is angry at the state of his country and is taking it out on one of the symbols of that country – the National Anthem.

His stance has proven to be divisive, locally and nationally. While freelance Cubs’ beat reporter **Sparky McGillcuddy** calls Kaepernick’s protest: “*an act of courage and conscience in the noblest African-American tradition of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King*,” his abrasive counterpart at the *Des Moines Register*, **Archibald Thacker**, calls it: “*the shameful, petulant act of a spoiled child acting out his rage at not getting his way in life.*”

Across the land people are either strongly supportive or ardently condemning of Kaepernick’s act of defiance. Rarely, if ever, are they indifferent. Raucous scenes are now common wherever the Cubs go, prompting an anguished **Deron Redding** to plead recently to a reporter in Chino: “Why can’t we all just get along?”

The Anthem tempest threatens to overshadow what could end up being the Cubs’ year. They currently stand third, at 8-1 odds to win the Championship. It is a bet that **Jimmy the Geek** believes is a bargain:

“If you want action on the Cubs to win the whole kit-and-caboodle then you’d better take it now. That line is not getting any larger once the season starts and fans see how fired up Russell Wilson is. That team is strongest in the areas

most fans and writers don't pay much attention to: both lines! Especially that defensive line, with those twin killers Wilkerson and Cox grinning and salivating at the thought of burying quarterbacks. When you have strong trenches and an MVP-calibre quarterback, you don't need much more to win a championship."

Despite the optimism of Jimmy and other prominent sports commentators that the Cubs will appear in the 10th Gale Sayers Game, there are reasons to be concerned that the Cubs' train to Canton could become easily derailed. The main obstacle is, of course, their nemesis, Chino. The Convicts rid themselves of a potential QB controversy by dealing **Kirk Cousins** to South Carolina for stud receiver **AJ Green**. This transaction by itself virtually guaranteed that **Cam Newton** will have the type of year to rival that of his divisional foe, **Russell Wilson**. They also added quality depth to their defensive line through the rookie draft and shored up the strong safety position by trading for hard-hitting **Barry Church**. They made no big splashes in any stage of free agency, but retained their assets while filling in holes with signings of quality back-ups.

But at the end of the day, will the Convicts be in a better position than they were last year? The shrewd and demanding local media do not appear to be overly optimistic. '**Left Coast Larry**' **Lummo** of JAIL-870 radio in Chino delivered his verdict on his show, 'Yakking Yard-birds,' on the eve of the league's Thursday night opener: "**AJ Green** is a big addition – no doubt about it. **Adrian Peterson** is pumped up to make up for a lost season in 2015, so he will be an upgrade over that disappointing slob, Murray. But really, where else have they gone forward, people? They've gone backwards on defence, I am sorry to tell you. It'll be like almost every friggin' other year – it is going to come down to Cam. He is The Man yet again. It's Groundhog Day, folks!"

The Convicts are what **Mumbar Thakar** of *Pro Football Focal-Point* calls, "a wide spectrum team;" meaning: "a team that can finish just as easily with double-digit wins or double-digit losses." Thakar goes further:

"The Chino conundrum is partly due to the way the team is constructed and partly due to the division they are in. The Cubs, as we know, are the most talented team overall, but they have vulnerabilities. Less talented, but stronger than expected, are the Monarchs and the Knights. Either of those two can beat Chino and don't be surprised if one of them beats the Cubs at some point this season. The point is, field goals will matter for the three teams chasing the Cubs. Chino will have to get a little lucky in close games to pull away from the pack and make the wildcard."

The brakes on the ambitions of Iowa and Chino will be the LA Knights and the Mission Viejo Monarchs. Either one of these pushovers of recent years would be in a strong playoff position if they played in another division. But because they have to play each other as well as the Cubs and Convicts, they look doomed to knock each other out of the post-season.

Jeff Dohrn has patiently rebuilt the 'Blue Shield' to a knockoff-grade replica of its former glory; in fact the Knights boast one of the best defences in the league, led by the immortal **Charles Woodson** – 30-years old when the EFL was born and still going strong – and anchored by a nasty front four featuring **Kawann Short** and **Michael Bennett**. The presence of **Teddy Bridgewater** at QB gives LA fans reason to hope that their defensive prowess will not be completely wasted this year.



39-year old **Charles Woodson** (left) enters his 10th EFL season, each as a member of the Knights, as the undisputed leader of a re-born 'Blue Shield' defence. **Khalil Mack** (right) of the Mission Viejo Monarchs enters his 3rd EFL season as the undisputed leader of a talented young Monarchs' D as well as one of the league's high impact defenders.

Chris Ferraro has steadily built up the core of his defensive front seven so that it now rivals the league's best. **Khalil Mack** appears ready to establish himself as an impact player in the mold of a JJ Watt or a Von Miller and defensive end **Olivier Vernon** is a virtually unknown, but highly potent force against both the run and the pass. An unexceptional defensive backfield is the only thing holding them back from elite status. On the other side, Mission packaged off a disappointing **Ryan Tannehill** to Toronto and acquired **Eli Manning** from the North Stars. Peyton's younger brother, a former Gale Sayers champ, will bring both increased reward and increased risk due to his attacking, free-throwing style.

The remaining teams in the Conference are not expected to make an impact – except on the 'Win' columns of their opponents. Depressed fans in Virden and Mohave might as well start taking their meds now according to sports satirist, **Jack Maximillian Ginsberg**: *"By the final week of 2015, inside and outside of **TERRODOME** looked like a scene from the movie Trainspotting. The week before, in Mohave, half empty stands gleamed and sizzled under the scorching sun as rival gangs of illegal Mexican fans-for-hire prowled the tunnels and halls beneath, looking to rob each other of the plunder they had robbed from the stripped concession stands. Scenes of the Apocalypse played out in the barren lands that Football forgot. Virden fan; Mohave fan: if you remember those days with suicidal dread, stock up on the pain killers and the whiskey now, because more of the same is about to come in 2016."*

The slate is clean as fans and media eagerly await the 10th Season Opener on Thursday Night Football between the Charleswood Patriots and the Twin Cities Triumph. But when the games start for real, surprises are in store. We conclude this preview with words of wisdom from that Don of Prognostication, **Jimmy the Geek**: "I have my hunches of course, but I haven't put my money down on a champ yet because I am confident of just one thing: *anything can happen.*"



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**

Hello EFL Fans. Welcome to the Football Oracle App. This interactive platform allows you to keep up with my visions and ask questions. Just tap on the '?' icon to ask about your favourite team or player. The spirits know all, but sometimes they like to play tricks. So I cannot guarantee that everything I see will actually happen. But I'm pretty good at sniffing out a capricious spirit. Access is by subscription as I have to pay to have somebody mind my corporeal form. One of the finalists in 2016 will be Aurora. For the Pacific Conference finalist, access the blue 'P' on my app. - 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. And now, due to advances in digital technology she can communicate with anybody with an I-Phone and the Football Oracle App. It makes things a lot easier. Read on....

PACIFIC CONFERENCE

EAST DIVISION



10-6

BROOKLIN HAWKS

COACH: **Tom Jones**

OFFENCE: **A** DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-TOT: B+**

The perfect offence for **Alex Smith** features a strong line, a powerful running back in **Jonathan Stewart** and playmakers in WR, **DeAndre Hopkins** and TE, **Rob Gronkowski**. An ageing **Clay Matthews** takes over as leader of a defence that boasts no star players but no glaring weaknesses. Fumble problems in the return game could be a concern.



7-9

MOHAVE HELLFIRE

COACH: **Bobby Elder**

OFFENCE: **C** DEFENCE: **B-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B TOT: C+**

The offence will rely on **Ryan Fitzpatrick** to **Julio Jones** and **Allen Robinson** to inflict real damage but turnovers will sting. **Tevin Coleman** is an intriguing change-of-pace back. **Aaron Donald** is the star of a serviceable front seven but lack of secondary depth will cause problems. The kicking game is good but still looking for a decent PR.



6-10

CARTHAGE CANNIBALS

COACH: **Ken Main**

OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **D+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A TOT: C**

Marcus Mariota will look to **Travis Kelce** and **Emmanuel Sanders** to avoid the dreaded sophomore jinx. **Eddie Lacy** is slowing down and there is nobody behind him. A pair of good corners and safety **Harrison Smith** will struggle to compensate for a Swiss cheese front seven. **Chandler Cantanzaro** and **Cyrus Jones** lead a strong special teams unit.



5-11

ST. CHARLES CHARGERS

COACH: **John Clingan**

OFFENCE: **C** DEFENCE: **C-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A- TOT: C-**

Josh McCown will provide insurance against a **Caron Wentz** meltdown. Injury to **Jamaal Charles** will hurt the running game. **Travis Benjamin** is a nice addition at WR. Defence will not be able to stop the run but playmaking safety, **Reggie Nelson** will make games interesting. **Darren Sproles** adds zip to ST and kicking is solid as it comes.

CENTRAL DIVISION



12-4

TWIN CITIES TRIUMPH

COACH: **Guy Williams**

OFFENCE: **A** DEFENCE: **A**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+ TOT: A**

Carson Palmer is a major upgrade at QB and **Antonio Brown** is the best overall WR in the game, but RB **Doug Martin** may end up carrying this offence. A star CB-tandem in **Darius Slay** and **Chris Harris Jr** will give **Ziggy Ansah** more time to sack QBs as **Bobby Wagner** stuffs the run. PR and kicking very solid but expect many touchbacks on KR.



8-8

CHARLESWOOD PATRIOTS

COACH: **Jason Findlay**

OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **A-**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **D+ TOT: B-**

Blake Bortles is no Manning and, with no depth at WR behind a banged up **Sammy Watkins**, he won't have a chance to be. **Lamar Miller** will fall short of pre-season hype. They will hang in games thanks to **Desmond Trufant**-led secondary and a strong line-backing corps, led by **Jamie Collins**. The punch-less return game will cause problems.



8-8

VIRDEN VIOLATORS

COACH: **Lance Barrate**

OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **B**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **B- TOT: B-**

The interior of the offensive line is both banged up and bad and this will hold back **Derek Carr** and rookie RB, **Ezekiel Elliott**. The defensive line will struggle to stay healthy but the back seven, featuring LB **Melvin Ingram** and S, **Eric Berry**, are dangerous and will force turnovers. Place-kicking is the weak spot on a serviceable ST.



2-14

ERIEAU CADILLAC

COACH: **Jamie Rilett**

OFFENCE: **D** DEFENCE: **C+**

SPECIAL TEAMS: **A TOT: B+**

The health of **Tony Romo** will make or break the offence; a recurrence of his injury will mean very few TD celebrations in Erieau. **Justin Houston** is the centerpiece of a not-so-terrible defence. The return game is effective, with **Jalin Marshall** returning both punts and kicks, while **Stephen Gostkowski** is a long-range weapon in the kicking game.

WEST DIVISION



13-3

IOWA CITY CUBS

COACH: **Deron Redding**
OFFENCE: **A** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **A-** TOT: **A**

Russell Wilson is poised for an MVP season working behind a bullish offensive line led by tackle **Tyron Smith**. The offence will grind out long and punishing drives. The front four, led by **Muhammad Wilkerson**, remains the strength of a 'D' that lacks only an impact linebacker. Kicking is solid and **Tyler Lockett** is a weapon in the return game.



9-7

CHINO CONVICTS

COACH: **Rob Nazar**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B**

Cam Newton is still the key to the offence but he has two star skill players to lean on in RB, **Adrian Peterson** and WR, **AJ Green**. The ageing defence will not be as fast or strong off the edge but the interior of the front seven remains potent. **Jonathan Joseph** is all by himself in coverage. **Dan Bailey** is an asset in the kicking game but KRers are weak.



8-8

LOS ANGELES KNIGHTS

COACH: **Jeff Dohrn**
OFFENCE: **C+** DEFENCE: **A**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **D** TOT: **B-**

The Knights will go as far as the 'Blue Shield' will take them. The defensive front four is dominant, with **Michael Bennett** leading the way, while the secondary, led by **Charles Woodson**, and the LBs are solid throughout. **Teddy Bridgewater** is a promising young QB but is not yet fully developed. Punter **Sam Martin** is the star of a ragged ST unit.



8-8

MISSION VIEJO

COACH: **Chris Ferraro**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **B-**

There is a lot of potential on offence with **Eli Manning** at QB behind an unknown, but very solid offensive line. Keeping the INTs down will be key. With **Khalil Mack** and **Olivier Vernon**, the defence borders on elite, but a mediocre secondary fails to push it into the 'A' category. Kicking game is merely serviceable and return game mediocre.

ATLANTIC CONFERENCE

NORTH DIVISION



11-5

SEBASTIAN SWORDFISH

COACH: **Russ Lemmon**
OFFENCE: **A** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B-** TOT: **B+**

With **Odell Beckham Jr** and **Doug Baldwin** at WR and **CJ Anderson** at RB, **Andy Dalton** is in a must-deliver position this year. Overall, he will, but with the occasional annoying misfire. The defence is much-improved with **Chandler Jones** and **Carlos Dunlap** spearheading a dangerous pass rush. No viable option at KR mars a capable ST unit.



10-6

DURHAM THUNDER LIZARDS

COACH: **George Kaldis**
OFFENCE: **A-** DEFENCE: **B+**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B+** TOT: **B**

Drew Brees is back as leader of dangerous offence that is confident enough in its main skill position players that it did not address its need at TE. The secondary, led by **Richard Sherman** and **Tyrann Mathieu** is the strength of the defence, with star ILB **Thomas Davis** directing the front seven. **Quan Bray** is a nice surprise returning kicks.



8-8

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

COACH: **Jim Coghlin**
OFFENCE: **B-** DEFENCE: **B-**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **B** TOT: **B-**

Joe Flacco has three top grade options at WR and a dynamic young RB in **Todd Gurley**, but a patchwork offensive line will hold them back. The defence lacks a true star this year, with **Marcell Dareus** taking a step back, but there are key contributors at each level to provide synergy. **Johnny Hekker** leads a functional and very average ST unit.



8-8

SCARBOROUGH BLUE EAGLES

COACH: **Chris Dickinson**
OFFENCE: **B** DEFENCE: **B**
SPECIAL TEAMS: **C+** TOT: **B-**

Aaron Rodgers will attempt to create a top tier offence with **Pierre Garcon** as his no.1 WR and **TJ Yeldon** as his workhorse at RB. If anyone else was attempting this there would be no hope. Ball-hawking CB, **Marcus Peter** and cruel **Ndamukong Suh** will demand respect for the 'D.' **Jamison Crowder** does not inspire confidence as a PR.

ATLANTIC DIVISION



13-3

MARKHAM NORTH STARS

COACH: Darrin Jones

OFFENCE: B+ DEFENCE: B+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B+ TOT: B+

Tyrod Taylor is the one unknown on an offence with established stars *Demaryius Thomas* and *Brandon Marshall* at WR, and *Jordan Reed* at TE. The D-line, led by *Cameron Jordan*, will maul the divisional competition and challenge the best of the rest. The kicking game is as solid as it gets. *Tyler Ervin* was a training camp find at PR.



10-6

YORK EXCALIBURS

COACH: Jay Hammond

OFFENCE: B DEFENCE: B+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B- TOT: B

The good news for *Tom Brady* is that he has two excellent TEs; the bad news is that he will have to rely on *James Jones* as his no.1 WR. The offence will be on-again, off-again as a result. *Von Miller* and *Geno Atkins* will be called on to carry an otherwise mediocre defence corps. *Blair Walsh* is no longer very reliable and KR/PR is so-so.



6-10

PICKERING SPARTANS

COACH: Gus Konstantakos

OFFENCE: C DEFENCE: C+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B+ TOT: C+

Philip Rivers will be asked to move an offence that is in no hurry to score. Rookie WR *Sterling Shepard* is the only deep threat, period. The defensive line is not bad thanks to an emerging talent named *Derek Wolfe*, but after him the leader of the 'D,' by default, is *Adam Jones*. The kicking game is top notch and the returners serviceable.



3-13

NEW JERSEY WRECKING BALLS

COACH: Jeff Cohen

OFFENCE: C- DEFENCE: C

SPECIAL TEAMS: B- TOT: C

Brian Hoyer is a good damage control choice to lead an expansion team. His no.1 WR target is rookie *Will Fuller* and the rest are geriatrics passed on by their former teams. The 'D' features vintage speed and power on the edges with *Cameron Wake* and *James Harrison* but not much else. Yes, that's *Eric Weems* on the roster listed as a PR!

SOUTH DIVISION



11-5

AURORA MUSTANGS

COACH: Rich Liotta

OFFENCE: B DEFENCE: A+

SPECIAL TEAMS: B+ TOT: A-

Matt Ryan will have fewer opportunities for deep TD strikes as his top 2 WRs get brittle with age and defences decline to sell out to stop *Rashad Jennings*. The defence remains the league's best, with *JJ Watt* and the superb CB-tandem of *Josh Norman* & *Patrick Peterson*, stars among stars. A solid ST unit rounds out a sure division winner.



8-8

SOUTH CAROLINA REGULATORS

COACH: Hal Corson

OFFENCE: B- DEFENCE: B

SPECIAL TEAMS: A+ TOT: B

Kirk Cousins finally gets his chance but takes over a Regs' offence in semi re-build mode. The pressure is on *Alfred Morris* and *Keenan Allen* to deliver now that Green and Gore are gone. The defence will rely on a first-rate line-backing corps led by *Luke Kuechly*, but the D-line is suspect. The ST unit is first-class and will steal a game or two.



6-10

GWINNETT GLADIATORS

COACH: Dave Birdsall

OFFENCE: B DEFENCE: C+

SPECIAL TEAMS: A TOT: C+

The top skill players on offence, *Big Ben*, *LeSean McCoy* and *Jeremy Maclin* are proven stars but a critical lack of depth at RB could hamstring this unit anyway. The defence regressed from last year; DT, *Mike Daniels* (who?) is probably their best defender now. The ST unit, led by *Andy Lee* and PR, *Jarvis Landry* is a typically strong Gwinnett outfit.



2-14

TORONTO WOLVERINES

COACH: Ryan Preston

OFFENCE: C- DEFENCE: C-

SPECIAL TEAMS: B- TOT: C-

Ryan Tannehill becomes the first EFL QB to start the first game for two expansion teams. He is good enough to pilot Toronto to a win or two, but don't ask me who will be the first victim. Top pick *Jalen Ramsey* is already the leader of a very young and inexperienced defence. Dynamic returner *Dwayne Harris* might figure in team's 1st

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JIMMY'S WEEK ONE PICKS

BROOKLIN @ CARTHAGE (line – HAWKS by 3)

The arrival of game-manager Alex Smith in Brooklin has muted excitement over the talented Hawks offence. It's as if Smith's reputation for mistake-free, conservative play in Markham has tranquilized fans, pundits and the Vegas bookmakers. Being the second part of a QB platoon in Markham will damage a reputation that way, I guess. But I haven't forgotten how Smith piloted a creaky Markham offence to 8-8 in 2014. If one assumes that Smith can get the ball to his playmakers, DeAndre Hopkins and Rob Gronkowski; and that Jonathan Stewart will run over that patchwork Carthage defensive line; it's not hard to imagine the Hawks administering a solid ass-kicking, unless Marcus Mariota can conjure up some of that rookie season magic. **PICK: BROOKLIN**

MOHAVE @ ST. CHARLES (line – HELLFIRE by 1)

Mohave is a slim favourite heading into Week One against expansion St. Charles. One gets the feeling that bookies and bettors are giving the Hellfire the benefit of the doubt against an expansion team playing its first game but don't really feel confident about it. I know I don't. Erratic Mohave boasts some dangerous weapons but not as many as they had last year – and we all know how that campaign went. The Chargers are not a typical expansion team – they built a squad with meagre resources that looks like it could win more than one game in the relatively weak East Division. One reason the division is weak is because of teams like Mohave. It looks like Ryan Fitzpatrick will get the start for the Hellfire. If so, they squeak by and avoid embarrassment. **PICK: MOHAVE**

TWIN CITIES @ CHARLESWOOD (line – PATRIOTS by 1)

Now we're talking! Two giants of the Pacific Conference meet for the first time in a game already considered critical to both teams' playoff fortunes. But how giant is Charleswood this year with Blake Bortles taking over the reins at QB? – not very. Cutting through the predictable hype around the EFL champions defending their title against the dangerous yet frustrated Triumph, it is plain to see that the Patriots are in semi-rebuilding mode. Sammy Watkins is the only proven game-breaker left in the passing game, which will allow the capable Triumph defence to focus its unkind attention on Lamar Miller. If the pre-season is any indication, Carson Palmer will be fine getting the ball to Antonio Brown, while Doug Martin darts and weaves through the Pats' D. **PICK: TWIN CITIES**

ERIEAU @ VIRDEN (line – VIOLATORS by 6)

The Violators received a gift to open the season: the optimal match-up to score a quick victory and throw the monkey of last year's winless season off its back. The expansion Cadillac has an expensive hood ornament in Tony Romo but under the hood the engine is ready to seize up. Marshawn Lynch is finally breaking down and Kenny Britt is high octane but too temperamental for a no.1 option at WR. Justin Houston heads a respectable front seven but the secondary is third-rate. This is good news for the emerging tandem of David Carr to Amari Cooper, as well as for rookie running back Ezekiel Elliott, who will reap the benefits of a defence that will have to over-commit to stop the pass. On paper it looks like a lock for Virden, but games aren't played on paper. **PICK: ERIEAU**

IOWA CITY @ CHINO (line – CUBS by 4)

The Convicts have had all off-season to stew about a 42-0 trouncing they suffered at the paws of these Cubs in Week 16. Russell Wilson was literally passing up until the final play in a rare nose rubbing of their traditional rivals. It was never clear what the

Convicts had done – apart from being the Convicts – to incur the wrath of the usually sportsmanlike Cubbies. But, one year later, the Convicts are determined to get revenge and assert their claim to the West Division crown at Iowa's expense. It won't be easy. The Cubs are rightfully favoured to win the division in convincing fashion thanks to a strong defence and Wilson's ability to make opponents look silly. But Cam Newton can do that too; and he has the home court this week. **PICK: CHINO**

DURHAM @ COWTOWN (line – THUNDER LIZARDS by 2)

The Thunder Lizards have been making a mockery of their long-standing rivalry with Cowtown by beating them repeatedly over the years. The Lizards have won the last 7 regular season match-ups between these teams and both of their playoff games. The last time the Corn Kings got the better of Durham was in Week Two of the 2012 season. This trend looks set to continue this week in Cowtown's home opener. The Corn Kings have some intriguing weapons in the passing game and a young stud at running back. But a patchwork offensive line and a defence that does not match-up well against Drew Brees and Darren McFadden promises to silence them. Durham is capable and ready to put the Corn Kings in their place. **PICK: DURHAM**

SCARBOROUGH @ SEBASTIAN (line – SWORDFISH by 7)

Throughout the lean years of Sebastian football (all 4 of them so far) the Swordfish have always given the Blue Eagles a hard time. Now that people are taking the Swordfish seriously, it is the Eagles' turn to play spoiler. Scarborough has its own aspirations of course, but to realize them will require execution on the field – a historical failing under Chris Dickinson's guiding hand. The Sebastian offence has top-three potential while the defence is good enough to slow down Aaron Rodgers and Co., if not stop them. Still, the 7-point line seems a touch distended for a team coming off a one-win campaign in 2015. Andy Dalton is as capable of misfiring as always; with Marcus Peters laying in wait, it could be interesting. **PICK: SCARBOROUGH**

PICKERING @ YORK (line – EXCALIBURS by 8)

The Spartans showed little interest in surrounding Philip Rivers with weapons during the off-season – a clear signal that they expect him to pilot the team to a soft crash landing in 2016. The Excaliburs showed a similar lack of urgency on behalf of Tom Brady, but did add guard Mike Harris and spare parts on defence to patch up the roster. The strength of York lies, of course, in Brady and in the presence of Von Miller and Geno Atkins to shore up the back side of the ball. Expect the Spartans to move the ball adequately against the Swords until they reach the red zone, where the threat of a turnover or big play will increase exponentially. Expect a steady hand from Brady and flashes from Giovanni Bernard to carry the day. **PICK: YORK**

NEW JERSEY @ MARKHAM (line – NORTH STARS by 10)

Everything is in place for the debut of Tyrod Taylor, including an expansion "straw man" opponent to ensure a successful initiation into the role of starting QB. Darrin Jones went "all in" with Taylor, showing his trust by unburdening his team of the contracts of two proven starters, one of them a former EFL champion. The only question heading into this game is how Taylor will react to being "the guy" in live action. He has plenty of support: two elite wide receivers, an unsung talent in tight end Jordan Reed and a committee of backs led by second-year phenom David Johnson. That should be enough. But if not the defence, led by Cameron Jordan and Darrelle Revis, should handle the Brian Hoyer-led New Jersey offence with ease. **PICK: MARKHAM**

AURORA @ GWINNETT (line – MUSTANGS by 9)

The Vegas bookmakers are showing no respect for Big Ben and Glads in this one, even with the team playing at home. This is probably because Ben has no great third option at wide receiver and this week he faces the top cornerback tandem in the league of Josh Norman and Patrick Peterson. The Mustangs can leave both on an island and focus on stopping LeSean McCoy. Without a true running threat, the Glads' will be reduced to hoping for a lucky strike on offence and a couple of turnovers on defence to stay in the game. Count me in among those analysts predicting difficulties for the Aurora offence this year, but only in relation to the output of the previous two years. There will be fewer bombs and big runs but enough movement to keep the Mustangs a length ahead of the Glads in Week One. **PICK: AURORA**

SOUTH CAROLINA @ TORONTO (line – REGULATORS by 3)

What does Vegas know that I don't know that would cause this line to shrink by half in favour of the Wolverines over the course of the week? Sure, the Regulators are about to enter the Kirk Cousins era and there is uncertainty around the offence with so many new faces. Hal Corson kept 8 wide receivers and 5 tight ends on the active roster, likely the result of not being to decide who should make up the next three in line after Keenan Allen and Ted Ginn Jr at no.1 and no.2 respectively. Yes, it might take time for synergy to develop between the QB and receiving corps, but they are facing expansion Toronto, for Gods sake! The Wolverines are this year's top candidate to pull a Virden – Luke Keuchly should be able to keep Ryan Tannehill and DeMarco Murray in check all by himself. I don't get it, but I don't care. Take the Regs and run. **PICK: SOUTH CAROLINA**

MISSION VIEJO @ LOS ANGELES (line – KNIGHTS by 3)

If the outcome of this game was not likely to be ultimately meaningless to the playoff picture I would prop it up as the Game of the Week. The 'Blue Shield' is re-emerging in LA and with it the probability that the Knights will win at least as many games as they lose. The offence is also improved, with two real wide receivers and a reliable tight end to serve as targets for developing Teddy Bridgewater, as well as Frank Gore to provide a credible ground threat. The Knights will be pushovers no more. Coincidentally, neither will the Monarchs be a guaranteed stepping stone to the playoffs for the better half of the league. Eli Manning now sparks the aerial assault while Chris Ivory and Matt Forte combine for a versatile running attack. Defeating the Knights' front four will be a challenge, but the Monarchs' front five are capable. Expect this to be a close contest through 3 quarters with the home team shutting down the visitors in the 4th and scoring late to cover. **PICK: LOS ANGELES**

