

2011



2011

CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

February 19, 2012



FREE HOLE GRAIL!



24

KNIGHTS



20

GLADS

L.A. quarterback **Josh Freeman** looks downfield for an open receiver in 2nd quarter action in the fifth EFL Championship Game. Freeman performed well in the big game, as he had all season, winning MVP honours in leading his team past the Gwinnett Gladiators, 24-20. (Story inside)



CHAMPIONSHIP GAME



KNIGHTS WIN FIRST EFL TITLE!

FREEMAN SCORES TWICE TO EARN M.V.P.



**GWINNETT
GLADIATORS**

20

24

**LOS ANGELES
KNIGHTS**



GLADIATOR OF THE GAME

Vince Young

18 of 31, 229 yards, 1 TD

Team	1	2	3	4	OT	Total
GWINNETT (13-6)	7	3	7	3	-	20
LOS ANGELES (16-3)	7	7	0	10	-	24

KNIGHT OF THE GAME

Josh Freeman

274 total yards, 2 TDs



THE FANS LOVED

Down to the wire!

THE FANS HATED

Vanishing Glads' run 'D'



"Words can't express how I feel right now. I feel like my whole team should get this award. I couldn't do it without Joe and Jamaal and Coach Dohrn," – **Josh Freeman**

JOSH FREEMAN STAT LINE

ATT	COMP	YDS	INT	TD	RATE	CAR	YDS	TD	AVG
33	18	185	0	1	81.0	13	89	1	6.8



FAN RATING

CHARLESWOOD (AP) – This year's battle for the Gale Sayers Trophy would pit the Pacific-Atlantic Conference champion **Los Angeles Knights** against the Can-Am Conference champion **Gwinnett Gladiators** under the dome in Charleswood's Patriot Place. The Knights had been on the league's biggest stage once before, losing in the 2009 season finale to the **Florida Dragons**. Heavy underdogs in that game, the Knights had played like heavyweights, but eventually fell to the over-whelming power of the Florida running game. In this, their second trip to the Championship, the Knights were favoured, albeit by a slim two-point margin.

For the Gladiators, a franchise with a history of competitiveness without a title of any kind until this year's Conference Final victory over Durham, this was their first trip to the final. In spite of their status as the underdog, **Dave Birdsall's** team arrived in Charleswood with a swagger in their step and some challenging words for their opponent. Defensive MVP candidate, **Robert Mathis** had suggested during Media Day that Knights' running back **Jamaal Charles** would meet his match against the Gwinnett defence when he said, "he's good but he hasn't faced us yet."

Many outside of the team shared the sentiments behind that view. The Knights had started the week as 3.5-point favourites but had watched the betting line gradually narrow as bettors considered the fact that the Glads had emerged from the stronger Conference and had pushed aside powerful Scarborough to take the South Division. Not only that, but their defence was completely healthy for the first time in a long time, and that defence featured not just Mathis, but a secondary with two of the most dangerous playmakers in the game; **Asante Samuel** and **Troy Polamalu**. Although the adept play of LA quarterback **Josh Freeman** had been one of the prominent stories of the regular season, the fact that he had not been tested yet by Gwinnett raised many questions, and some doubts, about his ability to continue his remarkable leadership of the Knights' offence in the season's biggest game.

On the other side, another young quarterback was facing similar doubts in addition to outright questions about whether or not he should even be starting. **Vince Young**, whose relief performance against Scarborough in the final week of the season won him the starting job in the playoffs, had earned the right to start the game – nobody initially questioned that. But as game day drew closer and the reality of the challenge set in, many in the mainstream media were looking for a quick hook at the first sign of trouble and a fall back to the player almost everybody perceived to be the natural starter, **Ben Roethlisberger**. Big Ben's penchant for game-changing errors had earned him a trip to Coach Birdsall's doghouse and his subsequent reaction to the demotion was apparently keeping him there. Roethlisberger had gone

on the record in the national media with the statement, "I just want to help the team win and I can't do that on the bench. We've come this far, we deserve our best shot." This comment had not played well in the Gwinnett locker room and added fuel to the controversy. The 'Benching of Big Ben' had become the biggest story leading up to the game and it caused one very prominent and influential voice to weigh in with an opinion on National TV in the moments leading up to kickoff.

"Phil, I like this kid, Vince Young. You know he's really a kid and he plays like a kid, with a lot of enthusiasm," remarked network colour analyst, **Bill Badden** to booth colleague, **Phil Winterall**. "But he's a kid who will have to grow up fast against that Knight defence."

"Young has a 117 quarterback-rating and 3 touchdown passes in two playoff-wins, Bill," replied play-by-play man, Winterall. "He's Dave Birdsall's choice to lead his team in the Gale Sayers Game."

"And you know Phil; he hasn't thrown an interception either. That's what they like about the kid. He's careful with the ball," replied Badden. "But that Knight defence is going to come after you anyway. They are a tough defence, they are a blood-and-guts defence, and they will gamble on you. You need a man with a gambler's instincts to beat them and the Gladiators have a guy like that on the sidelines waiting for his shot."

"Dave Birdsall says that Young will play the whole game unless injury comes into play, Bill," commented Winterall.

"Well he says that, Phil, and he did say that. I say that Big Ben will get his shot," Badden countered. "He's not afraid to throw an interception and you need that fearless quality in a quarterback. He's tough to take down and he'll throw at anybody. He'll throw an interception then he'll throw a touchdown. He has no memory and that's what you need against a team that's trying to make you remember the last hit they gave you. You know he'll be standing with the blood, the bruises, the missing teeth and the broken leg at the end of the day. That's the kind of man he is – tough and dumb – the kind of man that can bang up against that Blue Shield over there."

With that, the team captains strode onto the field and, as the captain of the visiting team, **Vince Young** got to call coin toss. He called tails and when it came up heads, giving the Knights the ball first, the TV camera panned over to the Gwinnett sideline, for the first of many shots to come over the course of the game, trying to capture a reaction from Big Ben.

"Not a good start for the kid," commented Badden. "You could tell he thought about heads and switched to tails at the last moment. He's going to have to be more decisive if the Gladiators are going to win this game."



THE GAME



1st QUARTER (Los Angeles 7, Gwinnett 7) – Any question about the ability of **Josh Freeman** to forge a path through the Gladiators' defence was answered on the opening possession of the game. A 27-yard kick return by **Eric Weems** gave the Knights decent starting field position at their 25 yard line. Freeman scrambled for 22 yards, swept around right end for 13 more, and completed a 29-yard pass to **Tony Gonzalez** to almost single-handedly lead his team to the Gwinnett 1 yard line. Fittingly, he ended the 75-yard drive with a 1-yard scramble around left end for a touchdown and an early 7-0 lead.

Then it was **Vince Young's** turn; but the young Gwinnett signal-caller would not have to do very much on his team's first possession. Dynamic return man, **Leon Washington** returned **Dan Carpenter's** line-drive kickoff 70 yards to the Los Angeles 29. Young dropped back on the first snap and dumped off a short pass to **Reggie Wayne**, who scampered 10 yards to the 19 for a first down. From there, it took an offside penalty on the Knights and three handoffs to **LeSean McCoy** to get the Gladiators into the end zone. McCoy darted around the right side behind a lead block by right tackle **Kareem McKenzie** to score from 5 yards out to tie the game at the 8:10 mark. The game that had been billed by the networks as a battle between two elite defences had already seen two touchdowns in two possessions after just 6 minutes of playing time.

The offensive pace settled down immediately after that as both defences learned quickly from the pair of early assaults on their lines. Going back to the play that had worked so well on the opening drive, Freeman tried twice to sweep around right end, but the Gladiators had placed **Robert Mathis** and **Darnell Dockett** wide and the Knights' quarterback was stuffed for a 2-yard loss then held to a 3-yard gain on third down to force a three-and-out. The Gladiators fared no better on their next attempt. With the 'Blue Shield' playing tight and swarming to the line of scrimmage, McCoy was stopped for a 1-yard gain and Young twice threw incomplete to give the ball right back to the Knights.

The game of "punt-pong" continued for another round with the Knights gradually winning the battle for field position by backing the Glads up against their own 2 yard line with 2:22 left to play in the opening quarter. With the Knights' defence loaded to stop the run, Young found Wayne for 12 yards and **Bo Scaife** on a short slant for 11 yards to give the Gladiators some breathing room at their 25 yard line. After **Mike lupati** was called for a false start; a 4-yard run by **Ahmad Bradshaw** and an 11-yard scramble by Young appeared to give the Glads another first down; but a measurement, as time expired in the first quarter, revealed they were a couple of inches short.

2nd QUARTER (Los Angeles 14, Gwinnett 10) – The break in the action gave the Knights time to regroup and blunted the Gladiators' momentum. With two tight ends in the game for Gwinnett, Young tried to sneak across the line of gain against a five-man LA front and was met and stuffed for a one-yard loss by linebacker, **Brian Orakpo**. Facing 4th and 1 at their own 34, Gwinnett was not about to gamble this early against the 'Blue Shield' and once again called out punter **Andy Lee**, who booted a 51-yarder that Weems returned 11 yards to the LA 26 yard line. The Knights' offence got a boost when **Jamaal Charles** turned the corner on a pitch to the left for 12 yards and Mathis was called for offside on the next play for a 5-yard penalty. Freeman found **Shonn Greene** for 12 yards over the middle, Gonzalez for 9 yards on a short cross then dodged a determined Gwinnett blitz to scramble 10 yards for a first down at the Glads' 36 yard line. However, a false start penalty on **Steve Smith** was enough to knock them off their pace and Charles was stopped for no gain on 3rd down at the Gwinnett 20. Carpenter's kick went wide left and a promising LA drive ended was suddenly over with no points to show for it.

Bill Badden weighed in at that point, "if the kicker, in that situation, kicks the ball and it carries between the uprights and over the crossbar, that's a field goal, Phil, and the Knights would feel a whole lot better about that drive!"

A slightly longer than usual pause ensued, then Winterall said, "The Gladiators will get the ball back at their 27 yard line."

The Gladiators' offence responded timidly to the stand by their defence. On the first play, **Dallas Clark** was flagged for a false start. On the second, Scaife caught a short pass over the middle and was stripped by **Bradie James**, but caught a break when Wayne recovered at the 29. On the third, McCoy was stuffed for a 4-yard loss on an ill-conceived delayed draw that the Knights sniffed out before the snap. Soon, Lee was punting deep again and Weems was making another neat return to the LA 30. Despite a nice 13-yard pass to Greene to convert 3rd down and 11, the budding Knights' drive stalled when Freeman mishandled a snap for a 1-yard loss, forcing **Steve Weatherford** to come out and box in the Gladiators with another punt out-of-bounds at their 2 yard line. Smelling blood, the Knights charged at the Gwinnett line, smothering McCoy and rushing Young to force another three-and-out. Lee barely got off the punt from the back of his end zone while facing an all-out LA rush and did well to push the Knights back to the 48 yard line.

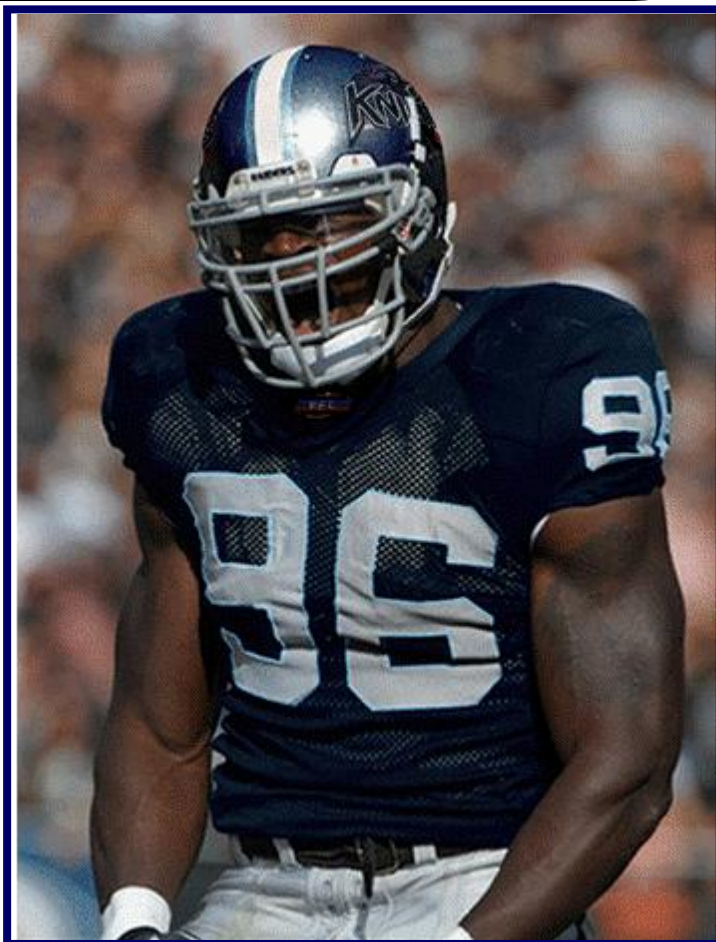
The charged-up Knights' offence moved with force and confidence this time. Charles took another pitch to the left 12 yards behind

left tackle **Joe Thomas** then Greene took consecutive pitches to the right for 5 and 18 yards to breach the Gwinnett red zone. Two plays later, with the Gwinnett defence playing the run, Freeman found **Steve Smith** open in the middle of the field and the fiery wide-out carried it the rest of the way for a 13-yard TD pass, giving the Knights a 14-7 lead with 1 minute remaining in the first half.

A bobble by Washington on the kickoff held him to just 12 yards on the return and it looked as if the Gladiators would be content to run out the clock and take the ball to start the 2nd half. But a missed tackle on 3rd down led to a 34-yard pass play to Scaife to give the Glads unexpected life on the other side of mid-field with 33 seconds left. A 12-yard completion to **Jeremy Macclin** and a 6-yard run by McCoy put them in position for kicker, **Josh Brown**; who made no mistake in drilling it 49 yards through the uprights for a field goal as time expired in the half. Although trailing 14-10, the Gladiators had to feel a measure of satisfaction as they headed into the locker room – the Knights had got the better of them on both sides of the ball but had only a 4-point lead to show for it. They remained within striking distance and the second half would be a whole new ball game.

3rd QUARTER (Gwinnett 17, Los Angeles 14) – **Bill Badden** offered some sagely words in the moments immediately prior to the start of the 2nd half: "Gwinnett needs to score first this half, but more importantly they just need to score. If they don't put any more points on the board, I can't see them winning this game, Phil."

"The team that has led at half time is 2-2 in the previous four Championships, Bill," replied **Phil Winterall**.



L.A. linebacker, **Kamerion Wimbley** howls out the Knights' challenge after sacking Glads' QB, **Vince Young** in the 4th quarter. Wimbley was a familiar presence in the Gwinnet backfield all day.

"And the team that's been behind at half time is 2-2 in those games as well, Phil. One of them is going to win this one today!" Badden pronounced.

After another nervous bobble and 6-yard return by Washington, the Glads took over at their 18 yard line to start the second half. It was the fourth time they had started from inside their 20 yard line it looked likely that they were not going to be getting any more 70-yard gifts from their kick returner. The offence and **Vince Young** needed to step up and that is exactly what they did. Young connected on his first three passes, moving the ball 25 yards to their 43 yard line. Two plays later, Maclin got a jump on **Nnamdi Asomugha**, who was playing tight and missed his bump. He caught a perfectly thrown medium slant from Young on the fly in the area vacated by a blitzing Orakpo and there would be no catching him. Maclin went the full 57 yards for a dazzling touchdown that brought the Gwinnett fans in the crowd to their feet for the first time since the first quarter. Suddenly the Gladiators were in the lead, 17-14, and the momentum swayed to their side.

Starting at their 32, the Knights charged back with a couple of sharply-executed 3rd down conversions to reach the Gwinnett 39, where they faced 4th and 11 after the Gladiator 'D' put a sudden stop to the running game. Rather than call on Weatherford to try and put the Glads in jail again inside their 20, they elected to keep the offence on the field for a daring 4th and long gamble. This prompted an astounded **Bill Badden** to observe, "It's 4th and 11 and they're going to go for it! They need a good play here, Phil."

"The Knights were successful 77% of the time on 4th down this year, Bill, but I'm sure most of them were shorter than this," replied Winterall.

With the Gladiators doubling Gonzalez and White, Freeman spotted Smith free and connected with him; but a great tackle by **Dunta Robinson** stopped him 1-yard short of the first and the Glads took over on downs at their 29. This was an opportunity for Gwinnett to take control of the game and this fact was not lost on the network analyst.

"That was a big play by Robinson, Phil. Now the Gladiators have a chance to increase their lead. If they can do that, it'll be harder for the Knights to catch up," Badden intoned gravely.

"The Gladiators have scored 36% of the time after stopping an opponent on 4th down, Bill," commented Winterall.

There would be no opportunistic counter-strike by Gwinnett. Instead, the 'Blue Shield' went on the attack, stopping the Glads on three plays from scrimmage, then forcing 2 penalties on two aborted punt attempts to back the Glads to their own 20 yard line.



Gwinnett safety, **Troy Polamalu**, looks on helplessly as the offence makes a last, desperate push.

Taking over at their own 44 yard line, after a 10-yard return by Weems, the Knights were put back on their heels when McKenzie, the right tackle, was flagged for holding. But 15 yards on two carries by Charles and a 10-yard pass to Smith got them out of that hole and started them on a little roll. A pair of scrambles by Freeman was good for 20 yards and another 10-yard pass to Smith gave them 1st and goal at the Gwinnett 5 yard line. This time the Gladiators' defence came up big when they needed it; stopping Charles for no gain on a sweep to the left and forcing two incomplete passes as time expired in the 3rd quarter. With one gamble under their belt, and one missed field goal by Carpenter already, the question was: who would be on the field at the start of the 4th quarter – Freeman and the regular offence, or Dan Carpenter and the field goal unit?

4th QUARTER (Los Angeles 24, Gwinnett 20) – Jeff Dohn's confidence in his team turned out to not be a foolhardy one. When the network returned from its commercial break, there was Carpenter and the field goal unit on the field for Los Angeles. It was an easy 3 points from 23 yards away and one quick play into the final period, the Knights and Gladiators were tied at 17.

On the Gladiators' ensuing possession, McCoy broke through the LA line for a 12-yard gain on the first play from scrimmage – his first big run of the day. Young followed that up with a 14-yard pass to Clark then **Osi Umenyiora** was flagged for being offside and it looked like the Gwinnett offence had some life. But Orakpo, who had quieted down after a strong first quarter, suddenly broke through the Gwinnett line and hit Young from the blind side on a three-step drop and knocked the ball loose. It was recovered by LA's **Kameron Wimbley**, who fell on it at his

own 45 yard line. It had taken over three quarters for the game's first turnover and it had come at an opportune moment for Los Angeles. However, like Gwinnett, the Knights' failed to capitalize on the big play by their defence and wound up handing the ball back to the Gladiators at the 37 yard line after another failed 4th down conversion attempt.

This time, the Gladiators would make the Knights pay for their gamble – with a little help from the zebras. After a quick first down, McCoy came up big with a 10-yard run on 3rd and 9 to carry the ball into Knights' territory at the 49. However, on 2nd down it looked for a moment like the 'Blue Shield' had dealt the Glads a stunning blow when Wimbley sacked Young for an 8-yard loss and forced a fumble that Young recovered at the 47. Facing a desperate 3rd and 18, Young let it loose with a long throw to **Nate Burleson** that appeared broken up by **Stanford Routt**. But the referee ruled that Routt got to Burleson a little early, resulting in a 23-yard pass interference penalty that placed the ball at the LA 24 yard line. An 11-yard run by McCoy on the next play penetrated the red zone and appeared to put the Knights' defence on the ropes. But alternating blitzes by Wimbley and Orakpo put enough to pressure on Young to cause three consecutive incomplete pass attempts. That brought on Brown for the go-ahead 31-yard field goal to make it 20-17 for Gwinnett at the 4:58 mark of the 4th quarter.

At that point the camera turned to a strange scene at the Knights' sideline. A shot of Asomugha and **Charles Woodson** in animated conversation with running back **Jamaal Charles** brought speculation from the announcer's booth. "What do you think Woodson is saying to Jamaal Charles, Bill?" asked Phil Winterall.

"He's telling him, 'this is it! You've got to score,'" Badden replied. "When you're a defensive player, you can't score when your offence is on the field, so he has to *tell* him to score! That's all a defender can do in that situation, tell his offence to score."

The Glads kicked short and it was returned 19 yards by the up-man, **Vincent Brown** to the Knights' 30 yard line; setting up what in LA is already being called, simply, "*The Drive*." It started with a 9-yard pass to Charles and, two plays later, a gutsy 3-yard run by Charles against a determined run defence to convert 3rd and 1. Two plays later, it took off with a 15-yard sweep by Freeman and a 15-yard facemask penalty against Gwinnett star, **Troy Polamalu** for a 30-yard play that brought the ball to the Gwinnett 28 yard line. An 11-yard pitch to Charles behind a block by Thomas yielded another first down, but a 2-yard run by Charles and an incomplete pass intended for **Roddy White** brought up 3rd and 8 at the Glads' 15 yard line. Gwinnett deployed 5 defensive backs, anticipating a pass; but the Knights turned to Charles once more, and the league's most explosive runner followed a path carved for him by the league's most dominant offensive lineman to carry the ball 15 yards into the end zone and give the Knights a 24-20 lead with 1:40 left in the game. Patriot Place erupted with the sound of jubilant Knights' fans. There was a sense that the game had been won on that play and the body language on the Gwinnett sideline did nothing to suggest otherwise. Young would give it a valiant effort, but there would be no miraculous comeback. The 'Blue Shield' blitzed on the final drive, opting to maintain the pressure instead of flooding the secondary with bodies, and the fifth EFL Championship ended with **Vince Young** running for his life and throwing deep and off target to, according to every camera angle, an open Maclin.

POST GAME

When chroniclers look back at the history of professional football's biggest game they will consider the fifth EFL Championship, between the **Los Angeles Knights** and the **Gwinnett Gladiators**, to be one of the classics. It was a game that featured two imposing defensive units and two quarterbacks with similar styles facing off against those defences. It was no surprise, therefore, that the game would end up turning on the performance of those two quarterbacks. Gwinnett's **Vince Young** played well, refusing to wilt under the pressure of the moment as many had predicted he would. However, his task – to crack the Knights' vaunted Blue Shield – was a daunting one and, in the end, too Herculean a challenge for a talented but inexperienced quarterback. On the other side, Los Angeles's **Josh Freeman** showed exactly why he was the Knights' most valuable player in 2011. His passing numbers were respectable; but his 89 rushing yards and 6.8 yard average completely vexed the league's number two-rated defence. Add in the clutch performance of running back **Jamaal Charles**, the blocking of **Joe Thomas**, and a six-minute advantage in time-of-possession, and the Knights' offence clearly carried the day. Historically the Achilles Heel of **Jeff Dohrn's** franchise, the LA offence rose to the occasion and provided inspiration to a defence accustomed to setting the tone. The Blue Shield responded by showing its best qualities in the fourth quarter when they were needed the most. For **Dave Birdsall** and the Gladiators, they overcame a rocky first half and were in a position to win late in the game, but never wrested control of the game long enough to put down their opponent. They will look back at this game as a lost opportunity.



Who was slick in the Championship?

"BRYLCREEM" THE EFL'S FIRST SPONSOR



Jamaal Charles
RB
Los Angeles
Knights

21 carries, 101 yards, 1 TD to keep the chains moving for LA attack.



Kamerion Wimbley
OLB
Los Angeles
Knights

4 tackles, 1 sacks, 1 deflection, 3 QB pressures and 1 FF for Blue Shield.

SCORING RE-CAP

* **Championship** * 02-18-2012 Patriot Place Temp: 75 Wind: MVP: Josh Freeman

1 10:32	Los Angeles	TD Freeman 1 run (Carpente,D) (7-75-4:20)	0-7
1 8:10	Gwinnett	TD McCoy 5 run (Brown,J) (4-29-2:16)	7-7
2 1:03	Los Angeles	TD Freeman 13 pass to Smith (Carpente,D) (5-48-1:04)	7-14
2 0:00	Gwinnett	FG Brown 49 (7-57-0:52)	10-14
3 12:26	Gwinnett	TD Young 57 pass to Maclin (Brown,J) (5-82-2:28)	17-14
4 14:56	Los Angeles	FG Carpenter 23 (11-61-5:31)	17-17
4 4:58	Gwinnett	FG Brown 31 (13-50-5:31)	20-17
4 1:40	Los Angeles	TD Charles 15 run (Carpente,D) (11-70-3:09)	20-24

	GWG	LAK
First Downs	18	26
Rushes	22-74	38-224
Passes	31-18-229	33-18-185
Sacked	2-15	0-0
Fumble	3	1
Penalties	7-51	6-53
Turnovers	1	0
Time	24:07	35:53
Third Down	3-11	7-14
Fourth Down	0-1	0-2
Red Att/Td/Fg	2/1/1	5/3/1
Net Offense	288	409

GWINNETT

Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate		
Young	31	18	229	2	2	0	1	92.0		
Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD			
	McCoy	14	44	3.1	3	2	12	1		
	Young	7	26	3.7	0	1	11	0		
	Bradshaw	1	4	4	0	0	4	0		
Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD	
	McCoy	4	0	6	19	4.8	2	0	10	0
	Clark	4	0	7	46	11.5	3	0	15	0
	Wayne	4	0	5	34	8.5	3	0	12	0
	Scaife	3	1	4	52	17.3	2	1	34	0
	Maclin	2	1	7	69	34.5	2	1	57	1
	Burleson	1	0	2	9	9.0	1	0	9	0

LOS ANGELES

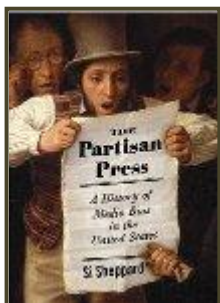
Passing	Att	Cmp	Yds	Sk	25	In	Td	Rate	
Freeman	33	18	185	0	1	0	1	81.0	
Rushing	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	10	Lg	TD		
Charles	21	101	4.8	6	6	15	1		
Freeman	13	89	6.8	5	5	22	1		
Greene	4	34	8.5	2	2	18	0		
Receiving	No	Dp	Att	Yds	Ave	FD	25	Lg	TD
Gonzalez	6	0	10	64	10.7	3	1	29	0
Smith	6	0	10	61	10.2	4	0	14	1
Greene	3	0	3	34	11.3	3	0	13	0
White	2	0	5	17	8.5	2	0	11	0
Charles	1	0	5	9	9.0	0	0	9	0

AFTER THE GAME

"I feel I let down Coach Birdsall. All he asked me for was a Championship. He gave me the keys to his car. He gave me his team. The team put its faith in me. I didn't bring home the trophy and I feel bad about that." – Gwinnett quarterback, Vince Young.

AFTER THE GAME

"This is Knights' football! This is Blue Shield football! This team dug deep! It dug *real* deep! That is a *great* team we beat today! I'm so proud of Josh and Jamaal! What a performance! The whole team, everyone was great! What a total team effort this was!" – Los Angeles coach, Jeff Dohn.



The Partisan Press - Reaction in the News

"The Gladiators fought hard and had the game in their grasp more than once. The question of how Ben would have performed will be unanswered for eternity." – Marcus Aurelius, Gwinnett Tribune.

"I was quite in favour of the switch to dark blue for the playoffs. Dark colours are serious and it was time to be serious! The white was nice, but by playoff time we were no longer innocent." – Gabriele Laurent-Vainluven, LA Daily News.



AROUND THE



With Spats McChad

CHARLESWOOD – The Community of Charleswood, my friends, is actually an incredibly boring part of Winnipeg; which is a boring city in Canada. I'll give Winnipeg this – it's not an *incredibly* boring city, like Winnemucca or a municipality of any size in Idaho – it is just a *regular* boring city. It claims all of the amenities of a big and intriguing city like New York, including a symphony orchestra, a ballet, the Manitoba Children's Museum, a really good steak restaurant and, of course, a summer jazz festival. But Winnipeg is flat and, in the winter, cold and windy and has no Statue of Liberty to enhance its skyline. When visited during the cold and windy season, the summer jazz festival doesn't impress; and when your sole purpose is to attend a football game, there is no time for the symphony and the ballet. That leaves the steak restaurant; which was so crowded that reservations were being taken for two days *after* the game one week *before* the game. So off I went to the popular Foody Goody Chinese Buffet, where I vomited 30 minutes after sampling the 'Pu Pu Pork Noodle.'

PATRIOT PLACE

The dome in Charleswood is a sleek, modern facility built in a tasteful but conservative 21st century style. It has a partially retractable roof that appears from the air like a pair of shutters or a farm house basement door. It is only open for tourists and minor league baseball during the summer. It is closed for Patriots games.

Although not the technological marvel of Jurassic Park, Patriot Place features a state-of-the-art "green" HVAC system with geo-thermal heating and cooling. It is also packed with photo-electronics – almost everything is activated by motion sensors. If you have to open a door or turn on a tap at Patriot Place then something is wrong. Even the washroom stall doors are automated; but you must be careful to lock the door once inside or it will fly open as soon as the next person passes in front of it and expose you at a humiliating moment.

This was my first trip to the stadium and I was struck by how orderly everything was. The home town fans were identifiable by their red **Peyton Manning** and **Ed Reed** jerseys and they proceeded quietly to their seats after purchasing standard stadium fare at the well-staffed concessions: soft drinks, hot dogs, pizza slices, over-sized pretzels and beer in 12 oz paper cups. I looked around for something interesting to eat – for it is the fashion these days to include upscale choices at upscale prices for the business elite at modern sporting events – but I could find nothing except a 'Haagen Dazs' and cotton candy stand. I asked around and was told that there was a restaurant in the mezzanine called 'Chucky's,' but that it was expensive for what you got. I didn't mind in the least. One other thing about Winnipeg and Winnipeggers....they're *cheap*!

CHUCKY'S

This was more my speed! A standard, mid-budget eatery in the "Montana's" category, 'Chucky's' was packed with journalists and businessmen who were taking in the game courtesy of their companies or business contacts. An entire wing of the restaurant with a view of the field from about the 35 yard line was reserved for "media." I showed my Media Pass and I was in. I was immediately greeted by a host of familiar faces, and some not so familiar.

"Spats! Daaaawling! I was *so* looking all over for you. You're late, my dear!" With martini in hand, **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven** of the *LA Daily News* glided toward me. She was wearing a white knit wool sweater with an over-sized neck, dark blue slacks and a purple beret. As she pecked me on the cheek, she whispered, "This place is simply *ghastly* to look at, and the service is appalling....and you *must* stay next to me for a bit and hopefully that little creep will go away." She tilted her head slightly back, indicating where she had come from.

I glanced briefly in that direction and saw **Charlie Wood**, the Patriots' beat writer, who I had met at a sports writer's convention in Las Vegas three years ago. Charlie was known to be a bit of a drinker and he liked to wear blazers and open-necked dress shirts with at least two buttons undone. He was a rarity in beat reporting in that he wrote for two competing papers at the same time – the *Charleswood Sun*, owned by Rebecca Findlay, half-sister of Patriots' owner **Jason Findlay**; and the *Charleswood Banner*, owned by her twin sister, Cheryl. The Findlay twins hated each other for reasons both private, and embarrassingly public. As twins, they tended to have the same taste in men and fought bitterly over them. According to Charlie, he had dated both of them at different times and they were both hopelessly in love with him. He had been hired and fired many times over by editors at both newspapers, until finally both decided it was just easier to keep him

on the payroll, albeit at a part time rate during the times when Charlie was out of favour with one of the sisters.

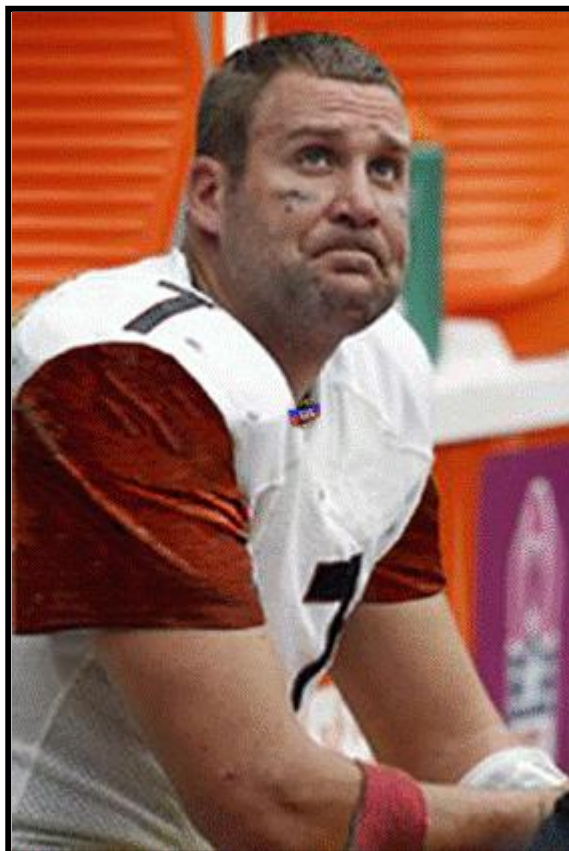
The Findlays have more money than they know what to do with and own nearly all of Charleswood, as well as large swathes of undeveloped land to the north and west. The Findlay sisters, who waste money on poorly-conceived business ventures and spend frivolously on expensive shopping trips to Chicago and LA, are mildly embarrassing for the staid and thrifty Jason, who runs his various businesses with acumen, gives generously back to local charities, and goes to church on Sundays. The *Banner* and *Sun* thrive, partly because of writers like Wood, but more directly because **Jason Findlay** pulls strings behind the scenes to keep the reading content relevant and dynamic. His twin half-sisters, meanwhile, consider themselves savvy “Media Baronettes” and are both looking, individually, to expand their respective empires to electronic media with such concepts as ‘The Spending Channel’ and ‘Shoe TV.’

Charlie recognized me and sauntered over. “Spats! Long time no see, my arrogant New Yorker friend!” He smiled as he extended his hand.

It was hard to imagine that Charlie, the object of the attention of two rich and powerful women in a small community like Charleswood, would so brazenly hit on a woman in a public bar, like Gabby suggested he had been doing to her. But I soon found out that Rebecca and Cheryl despised football and had left town for the week of the EFL Championship. That left **Charlie Wood** free to do as he pleased.

“Who are you writing for today?” I asked him.

“Nobody, actually! Both my bosses are on holiday, and when the bosses are away, Charlie will *play*!” He chuckled as if he had made a fine and original joke. I sized him up, based on my memory of our Vegas experience, and decided he was about 5 drinks into the afternoon already.



Ben Roethlisberger looks at the scoreboard after a 4th-quarter TD by Jamaal Charles put the Knights on top 24-20. Big Ben sat on the bench and watched as the Gladiators’ season ticked away.

“Who you betting on, Spats?” Charlie, a gambler in his secret life, asked.

“You know I don’t bet, Charlie. Or maybe you forget that I wouldn’t play the slots with you at *Circus Circus* in 2009!” I replied.

“Oh yes! That was pretty gay,” he chuckled and shot a leering glance at Gabby. He looked back at me, “I know you like the Knights, I read your column last week,” he added in an effort to get back to football – a subject he realized Gabby was uncomfortable with, despite her job as the principal Knights’ sports columnist; and he wanted to impress her with his knowledge.

“Spats has taste, that’s why!” Gabby jabbed, playfully.

“I would agree with you, except I think we’re going to see Big Ben no later than the start of the third quarter,” Charlie declared. “The Young kid has played well, but he won’t be able to stand up to the Knights ‘D’. Birdsall will make the switch. My sources tell me he ran three secret practices last week with Ben on the first team. Wait and see,” he winked, “I’ve got my money on the Gladiators.”

“I better get my round from you now, while you still have money,” I joked. Charlie laughed, caught the attention of a cute server named Gina, and ordered me a beer.

I looked around the room. It looked like the entire Affiliated Press was here, and a few others from Goyeuters News Agency and the various sports networks that are popping up like weeds on cable TV everywhere. **Marcus Aurelius** of the *Gwinnett Tribune* occupied the biggest table – he chiselled his column and needed the space for his tablets. The electric sensors on the back of the tablets were able to interpret the markings and sent the information over his Blackberry to a home computer.

There were a lot of other writers in the room but the next thing I really noted was who was *not* there.

Iowa City’s **Sparky McGillicuddy**, the only intelligent man in the State of Iowa, and his famous Smith-Corona ribbon-fed typewriter, were nowhere in sight. A mainstay of the EFL beat, McGillicuddy is everywhere the Cubs are during the regular season, and he always makes the big playoff games, even when the Cubs are out of the race. But I couldn’t see him anywhere and I was looking very hard.

Wood was droning on, trying to get Gabby’s attention, and I was not really listening to him. I interrupted whatever it was he was saying and asked, “Where’s Sparky?”

Wood stopped speaking, turned to me with a look of surprise, and asked, “You didn’t read his Internet column?”

“Ah, no, I was busy writing *my* column,” I answered defensively. I had been caught at not having read a colleague’s



Knights' comeback, *Nnamdi Asomugha* explains to the Press his sideline discussion with *Charles Woodson* and *Jamaal Charles* prior to the Knights' winning TD drive. "Me and Woody guaranteed they (Glads) wouldn't score a touchdown. We told Jamaal he had to score so we could win."

column prior to attending an event at which the colleague would likely be there and expect some discussion about his/her column.

"He's boycotted the Knights games," said Wood. "He's protesting Dohrn running up the score on the Cubs in the quarter finals."

Of course, I thought. The last second, long pass to **Roddy White** for a TD to increase the LA lead to 27-7 had been more than controversial. It had been considered by the Iowa City faithful to be a Declaration of War, and that group included the ever-so-loyal and honourable **Sparky McGillicuddy**.

I was going to miss his simple observations and benign, lemonade-sipping disposition, but there were others in the room to soon make me forget about poor, aggrieved Sparky.

Off in the corner two solitary figures dressed in all black sat at individual tables and stared like statues at the field of play. There was about a 15-foot radius between them and anybody else.

"Did somebody die over there? It looks like a death zone." I asked Charlie, nodding toward the corner. As soon as I uttered the word "death," both figures raised their black-hooded heads and looked in my direction.

"Ah, sh%&! Did you *have* to say that word?" Charlie whined exasperatedly.

The two figures in black in the corner – one with a hint of bone visible through the hood of his cowl and the other without a discernible face – were journalists covering the Death Valley Undertakers. "That's *Grim Reaper*, on the right," Gabby quickly explained, "He writes for the *Death Valley Obituary*; and on the far left is *Death*, he writes for the *Death Valley Epitaph*."

Although it was noisy, and I was some distance away from them, both figures in black had turned immediately in my direction when I said the word "death."

"YES?" the one without the face replied in an unearthly voice that seemed to resonate inside my head as much as it registered on my ear drums.

I was stunned. What do you say to that? I felt, however, that my life depended on giving him an answer. "I, ah, thought maybe somebody had died over there it is so quiet. Figure of speech, you know!" I laughed nervously.

"NOT NOW, CAN'T YOU SEE I'M BUSY OVER HERE?" Death uttered, sounding slightly peeved. "PEOPLE CAN LIVE A FEW HOURS LONGER WHILE I WORK ON THIS PIECE FOR THE PAPER! I HAVE A DEADLINE TO MEET!" He stopped abruptly and let out a humourless laugh. "DEAD-LINE, GET IT?"

"HA HA, THAT ONE'S AS OLD AS ETERNITY," chided the Grim Reaper, entering the conversation. "YOU ALWAYS TELL THE SAME STUPID JOKE! IT'S KILLING ME!" He then stopped abruptly and let loose with a bone-chilling chuckle, "GET IT? ~~KILLING~~ ME? HA HA HA!"

The self-preservation instinct in us took over and Gabby, Charlie, and I laughed uproariously. It was a forced and unnaturally loud laugh, but it served as cover to withdraw a little farther from the pair and find a table where we would be able to concentrate on the game. Yes, the game – that was why we were all here and it was about to start.

THE CONTESTANTS

This year's pairing in the final featured a lot of talent on both sides. As I watched the players being introduced, I felt that these two teams had been destined to face each other on the basis of their talent alone. Only Scarborough was as solid, through-and-through, as the Knights and the Gladiators. The cause of the demise of the Blue Eagles' playoff hopes in 2011 will probably form the subject of a never-ending, futile debate in Scarborough and in Florida, their former home, for a long time. Had they been here, I might have had that same feeling of pre-destiny – a fore-ordained rematch of the Knights-Dragons battle in 2009 – or maybe not. It was not mere hindsight that I viewed Gwinnett's conference title and Gale Sayers match-up against LA as the natural outcome – if you turn back to Week One and refer to *'The Great Spatskin'* you will see that I had predicted this final from the start.

Last week when I made my prediction on this outcome I had made it on the basis of a strong hunch after watching dozens of hours of video of these two teams. Now that I saw them taking the field, nervously warming up and focusing their energies, I felt even more strongly that my hunch was dead on. The Knights looked like a team that really *wanted* it. The body language of

the Gladiators and their recently appointed starting quarterback conveyed the message of a team that was really *hoping* for it, but was not so sure of itself. The quarterback sets the tone – even for defensive-minded teams like LA and Gwinnett. The Gladiators’ quarterback looked nervous, while his back-up, arms folded on the sidelines, looked angry. It was a toxic mix.

THE GAME

Once the game started, my strong feelings about the outcome suddenly vanished – even after **Josh Freeman** self-assuredly moved the Knights up the field with ease to score the game’s opening touchdown on a 1-yard scramble. Once the players start hitting each other, anything can happen; and



Patriot Place in Charlswood – the scene of the fifth EFL Championship Game.

Lady Luck, much like **Gabrielle Laurent-Vainluven**, hates to be ignored and invariably makes her presence felt; often in perverse ways.

Gwinnett’s **Leon Washington** electrified the crowd with a 70-yard kick return on the ensuing kickoff and, in the process, took a huge weight off the back of **Vince Young**, who would now not have to match Freeman’s opening drive yard-for-yard. **Dave Birdsall** smartly eased his quarterback into the game with a short pass on first down – that he completed to the veteran **Reggie Wayne** for 10 yards – then placed the burden of Gwinnett’s scoring hopes on **LeSean McCoy**, who was up to the challenge of running it in the rest of the way to tie the game. Young and his team had passed the first test; and their prompt reply to Freeman’s opening TD-drive slowed down the Knights’ early charge.

The Knights’ offence started to re-assert itself in the second quarter, putting together two strong drives that netted only 7 points because **Dan Carpenter** missed a very makeable 38-yard field goal attempt. On the other hand, since their opening touchdown and heading into the final two-minutes of the first half, Young’s Gladiators had gained only two first downs. As a group they looked out of synch. Young did not look comfortable in the pocket and when he tried to leave it, there was **Bradie James** spying on him. True to the form that had earned him the starting job, Young would throw the ball away rather than risk an interception. It seemed like every time he did that, the network camera would zero-in on Big Ben on the sidelines. It captured a variety of poses: arms folded standing; arms folded sitting; open-mouthed with arms at side; lips pursed with hands on hips; adjusting his jock; joking with teammates; looking over the offensive coordinator’s shoulder at the play book with feigned interest; eating a hot dog; picking his nose, etc. He appeared highly agitated despite his attempts to look relaxed and focused on the game as he undoubtedly was straining to hold back a smile or a yip every time Young failed to convert third down. **Andy Lee** had punted on four consecutive Gwinnett possessions, and with each appearance, it appeared Big Ben was one step closer to putting on a helmet and going on the field.

After Freeman connected with **Steve Smith** for a 13-yard TD pass to give LA a 14-7 lead with one minute left in the first half, the writing appeared to be on the wall. “We’re going to see Roethlisberger in the second half,” Charlie declared loudly. Those in earshot nodded in agreement and jumped on the Big Ben Band Wagon.

“He should already be in there,” sneered the **Marquis de Sade**, sports editor of the *Viriden Eviscerator*.

“Yes, Young looks to be struggling out there,” agreed **Granny Gee** of the *Garland Gazette*, “Poor boy!”

I wasn’t so sure of a voluntary switch. **Dave Birdsall’s** public declarations about his quarterbacks had left me with the distinct impression that not only was **Big Ben** out of the picture for the rest of the playoffs, but he might be out of it for good. Young had essentially been credited with saving the season that Ben had put in jeopardy with his risky and fatheaded play. I was pretty certain there would be no turning back from that decision unless injuries forced a change. But, in the spirit of the moment I didn’t voice my opinion, and instead blurted, “I agree 100%.”

Young’s tenure as quarterback seemed assured, however, after the Gladiators’ final possession of the half. With just 44 seconds left and the Knights’ defence insolently calling timeouts to get another shot at the ball, tight end **Bo Scaife**, (of all players!) turned a short sideline pass into a 34-yard gain after **Antoine Bethea** whiffed on the tackle trying to strip the ball. Since Scaife had fumbled earlier, it was a calculated risk; but the failure of the attempt left the entire sideline vacant. If Scaife was a little faster, it might have been a touchdown. Instead, the Gladiators had the ball in Knights’ territory and, after a pass to **Jeremy Maclin** and a 6-yard scramble by Young, turned it into 3 points with a 49-yard **Josh Brown** field goal as time expired.

The Manitoba rock band, *Quarter-back*, and Ottawa singer, **Alanis Morissette** performed a tribute to Madonna and *Bachman-Turner Overdrive* at half time that left some people scratching their heads wondering why Madonna and BTO were not invited to perform in the first place. While ‘Roll on Down the Highway’ morphed uncomfortably into a piercing rock version of ‘Material Girl’ in the background, I discussed the game with a group of writers who had gathered around our little table.

“Doesn’t Josh look splendid in navy blue?” Gabby said.

She was ignored and soon lost in the discussion that centered around two main points: LA had clearly dominated the first half but had just a 4-point lead to show for it, which might come back to haunt them later; and the late field goal by Gwinnett would give Young confidence in the second half.

“Where’s Polamalu? He’s almost invisible out there,” complained **Randy the Desert Rat** of the *Mohave Torch*, who had written a pre-game piece predicting that Polamalu would be the difference-maker in a comfortable Gwinnett victory.

“He’s blow-drying his hair,” **Johnny Rebb** of *The State* replied derisively. Johnny had predicted that **Charles Woodson** would be the difference-maker in a comfortable LA victory over the Glads and their “greenhorn QB,” Young.

“Need I remind you that there is still a half to play, gentlemen – anything can happen still!” protested **Merlin the Magician** of the *York Sword and Stone*, who had written the day before that the game could go either way.

“I thought that crystal ball of yours was supposed to tell the future,” a slightly belligerent **Charlie Wood** challenged Merlin. He and the York magician/columnist had engaged in a bit of a war of words during the stretch run when the Excaliburs were chasing the Patriots for the East Division title.

“Alas! It is fogged up these days due to the fluctuations in the weather,” Merlin replied, shaking his head sadly.

ACT II

The point about **Vince Young** gaining confidence in the second half turned out to be prophetic. He looked sharp while directing his team to a touchdown on the opening possession. He made a perfect throw to Maclin, who was able to catch the ball in stride and sprint through the ‘Blue Shield’ for a 57-yard TD to give the Gladiators a 17-14 lead.

For the next 10 minutes or so I actually thought I might be witnessing a permanent shift of momentum in favour of the Gladiators. The Knights continued to move the ball but appeared to be pressing. The Glads’ defence had taken the outside run and the short pass away, and when a sputtering drive that had been sustained almost solely by the running of **Jamaal Charles** came to a halt with 4th and 11 at the Gwinnett 39 yard line, it looked like a natural time for **Steve Weatherford** to come in and put the Gwinnett offence up against their own goal line, as he had done twice already. Instead, **Jeff Dohrn** kept his offence in the field for an improbable 4th-and-long conversion attempt. It was an aggressive and impatient move that suggested Dohrn was either supremely confident in his defence, or unwilling to give the ball back to Gwinnett without a score because he was *not* so confident in his defence and did not want to fall behind by any more. Either way, the Knights came up short by a yard and turned the ball over on downs.

That set up, in my view, the drive of the game. It didn’t go far and it lasted less than one minute – and that was the problem. With an opportunity to take control of the game, the Gwinnett offence stalled again, netting just one yard and forcing a punt without giving their defence a breather. Los Angeles bounced back, using the short passing game and the run to chip away at the Gladiators until they reached the Gwinnett 5 yard line, where the defence finally stiffened and denied the Knights the major score. But kicker **Dan Carpenter** would not be denied a second time and kicked an easy 23-yard field goal to tie the game on the first play of the fourth quarter.

With the pressure mounting, Young was sacked and stripped of the ball by linebacker, **Brian Orakpo** at the LA 45 yard line. It was the first turnover of the game and it looked like it might be a turning point; but the failure to convert a 4th down attempt at the Gwinnett 37 yard line kept the Knights from exploiting the opportunity and handed the ball back to Gwinnett. The Glads snapped the deadlock thanks to a big break from the officials. A 23-yard pass interference penalty called on **Stanford Routt** on 3rd and 18 had the hallmark of a game-changer. The Glads had looked bogged down on offence while the Blue Shield aggressively challenged them with a string of blitzes. On the replay, it looked like Routt may have had his hand on the waist of **Nate Burleson** before the arrival of the ball, but it was close enough that it would have drawn little criticism if it had *not* been called. The penalty gave the Gladiators the ball at the Knights’ 24 yard line and enabled them to eventually take a 20-17 lead on Brown’s 31-yard field goal.

“If they end up winning the game on that there is going to be a riot in LA that’ll make Rodney King look like a picnic,” slurred a rosy-cheeked **Charlie Wood**. He then turned to Gabby and said, “Eh, honey? You can stay in Charleswood a few extra days while they put out the fires in the City of Angels. I’ll protect you!”

There would be no riot in LA – at least not one fuelled by rage. On their next possession, the tag team of **Josh Freeman** and **Jamaal Charles** went to work on the Gladiators’ defence. The value of Freeman to the Knights is not reflected as much in the statistics as it is when you actually watch him play. That is why so many West Coast fans are strong advocates for him as MVP. The whole country finally got to see what those fans saw every week, one week too late to make a difference in the MVP voting. With Gwinnett focusing on Charles, Freeman swept around the left side behind cattle car **Joe Thomas** on a designed play that gained 15 yards. It was a play the Knights had run to the other side for 13 yards in the first quarter and the frustration of having to defend that *and* watch out for the league’s most explosive running back at the same time finally boiled over. **Troy Polamalu**, one of the best defenders in the game, yanked Freeman down by the facemask, earning a 15-yard penalty. There was a moment of apprehension on the LA sideline as Freeman was slow to get back on his feet, but when he did he made his way back into the huddle at a dead run, clearly pumped up.

“*Beast!*” cried Gabby. “Did you see what that hairy beast did to my Josh? There should be a penalty for that!”

When I pointed out that there had been a penalty for it and it had cost Gwinnett 15 yards, she looked un-mollified and hissed, “He should be kicked out of the game and Josh should be given a touchdown!”

The pressure was building again. The Knights were at the Gwinnett 28 and, theoretically, already in field goal range. But nobody in the Knights’ corner wanted to trust Carpenter’s leg to put them into a potential overtime situation. His first try had not been close and the short one he had made had looked pretty dodgy. The Gwinnett defence, however, was dialled in to the Knights’ strategy, playing the next pass attempt from Freeman to White perfectly for an incompletion then setting up to stop the outside run for the next play. Sure enough, the Knights pitched left to Charles and it looked like he would be stopped dead in his tracks; but the elusive running back cut back suddenly to avoid getting swarmed. The Glads had over-pursued and Charles was able to cover 11



A stone-faced **Marcus Aurelius** does not look happy after his Gladiators lost to the Knights.

yards before he was finally brought down at the 17. He gained another 2 yards to bring the ball to the 15 at the two-minute warning.

During the break, **Marcus Aurelius** chiselled furiously on his tablets, trying to capture his thoughts in the heat of the moment. Others spoke into digital recorders or wrote in notebooks. Charlie ordered another round when **Lanny McDonald** of the *Markham Economist and Sun*, red nose flashing like Rudolph, stumbled into our table, pulled up a chair, and made himself comfortable. He tried to speak but all I could make out was, “Izagoonameizntitboyz.” Gabby looked like she was on the verge of hyper-ventilating. I had never seen her so genuinely excited. “Josh has to get a touchdown to show that Malumalu person!” she kept saying.

The networks returned, the ref signalled to the time-keeper, and the players lined up. On the second play, Freeman got his touchdown; or rather Charles did, when Thomas levelled linebacker **Daryl Smith**, opening a big hole around the end that Charles charged through for a 15-yard scoring run. It was an exciting and climactic moment. The noise from Knights fans filled the stadium while Gladiator supporters quietly slumped or cursed under their breath.

There was 1:40 left in the game and Gwinnett was trailing by 4 points. Carpenter kicked away from Washington and **Dion Lewis** returned it 19 yards to the Gwinnett 34. The clock showed 1:33 and there were 66 yards separating the nose of the ball from the Knights’ goal line. Young trotted onto the field, about to face the biggest test of his fledgling EFL career in a dramatic showdown against the fearsome ‘Blue Shield.’

It was dramatic, of course, because anything could happen at that moment; but it was not as dramatic as it would have been if say, **Drew Brees**, **Joe Flacco**, or even **Ben Roethlisberger** had been walking onto the field in that same situation. Sorry, but I can’t pretend. If I were a play-by-play announcer or a colour commentator I would have put forth my best effort to make Young seem as threatening as possible in that moment. However, I am a journalist, and I am focused on finding truth in the moment. The truth is that Young had never really looked dangerous all day – why would he begin now? Especially when the Knights defence was fired up like a blast furnace.

The Gwinnett quarterback was able to generate a couple of first downs throwing underneath against a Blue Shield that was not giving up any cushion. The Knights’ secondary brazenly crowded the line, daring Young to stretch it out – something he didn’t do until there were 14 seconds left in the game and he had no choice. The final three throws were all off target and, as time expired on the Gladiators and their hopes for a Championship, Young’s head dropped low and he sunk to his knees. At the same time, on the Gwinnett sideline, Big Ben was smiling and joking around with **Levi Brown**, Gwinnett’s practice squad quarterback.

After lingering a little too long on Roethlisberger, the cameras finally turned to the Knights’ sideline, where **Kameron Wimbley** and **Osi Umenyiora** received the honour of dousing Coach **Jeff Dorhn** with a cooler filled with blue Gatorade. Gabby threw her arms around me and planted a big kiss on my cheek. A disgusted **Charlie Wood** turned to nobody in particular and said, “Can you f&%*ing believe that? No Roethlisberger!” **Lanny McDonald** slurred, “I haveta gotaka piss.”

THE LAST WORD

I hung around the stadium for a long time. *Chucky’s* remained open into the night and few were eager to leave. It had been a really good game and there was a lot to talk about. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind which player deserved the MVP honour. **Josh Freeman** had won-over a lot of people in that room with his versatility, opportunism and poise. He had overseen a 409-yard offensive performance, gaining a combined 274 yards passing and running the ball, and scored two touchdowns against the second-highest ranked defence in the league. More importantly, he had *won* the game. His 15-yard carry on the Knights’ final scoring drive had snapped the temper of the one of the most self-controlled and astute defenders in the game,

drawing a personal foul penalty that had knocked the Glads back on their heels. The Knights' offence, but for a short lapse in the first quarter and a couple of over-reaching 4th down-and-long attempts in the second half, had dictated the pace of play to the Gladiators.

On the other side, the 'Blue Shield,' the crown jewel and heart of the LA Knights, had been, for the most part, unyielding and in control – holding the Glads to drives of 7 plays or fewer for the entire game until the fourth quarter when a 13-play, penalty-aided possession led to Gwinnett's temporary go-ahead field goal. The Knights' defence did most things well most of the time and, with their elite talent, that was more than the quarterback on the other team could handle.

Poor, **Vince Young** – he had the most difficult job of anyone on the field. Asked to step in and start in place of one of the biggest egos in sports, he had to deal with locker room tension and second-guessing from his team's own fans in addition to dealing with the vaunted LA defence. He played *respectably*, but in the end he didn't play to win. He played exactly as he had been trained by his coach to play – *safe*. That may have worked against the metaphorical "straw man" in Pickering and the star-crossed Durham Thunder Lizards, but it was not going to work against a bold and brazen defence more than capable of backing up its self-assured insolence.

It's easy for me to say I would have started **Ben Roethlisberger**, or at least inserted him into the game when it was clear that **Vince Young** was in over his head. From my vantage point, it looked obvious that, while Young may have done a yeoman's job in getting the Gladiators to the final, the team needed Big Ben to *win* this particular game. But had I been in **Dave Birdsall's** shoes, I might have done the same as he did. It's hard to justify yanking a quarterback who has just won two playoff games and who you credited with saving the season finale that won a Division Title, in favour of the guy who had made all of the blunders in the first place. In the end, Young and his team were victims of his own success.

I am going to miss this season. It was interesting from start to finish and ended well with the well-tested triumph of the team that had "destiny" written all over it from the start. The LA Knights, and their determined coach, deserve the Gale Sayers Trophy. Until next year, I wish you, my dear readers, the best of golf games this summer!

EFL ANNOUNCES MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS



OFFENSIVE M.V.P.



JOE FLACCO

COWTOWN CORN KINGS

Joe Flacco was the top-rated quarterback, in the league with a passer rating of 102.4. He finished 20 yards behind the record-setting leader in regular season passing yards with 4,049 and was also second in TD passes with 31 to just 8 interceptions. He led his team to a league-best 14-2 record and a North Division title.



DEFENSIVE M.V.P.



CLAY MATTHEWS

DEATH VALLEY
UNDERTAKERS

Clay Matthews was a dominant force on a bad defence. He was a complete performer at the linebacker position, recording 8 sacks, 8 passes defended, 2 stuffs, and 2 interceptions. He drew double and triple-teams on almost every play and his mere presence on the field distracted opponents and forced new game plans.