



MFL Rocks!

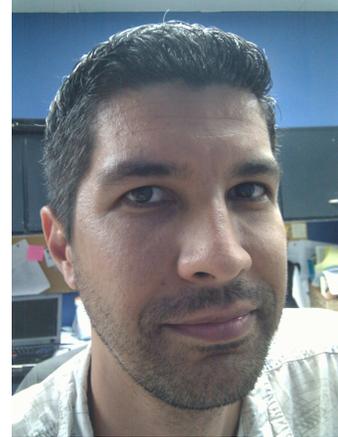
*The MFL Experience & a chronology of the
2011 season in Guam's elite football league*

by Jason Salas, KUAM Sports

<http://jasonsalas.com/mflocks/>

About the author (your yeoman purser)

Jason Salas, a native of Dededo, Guam, is a broadcaster, software developer, sportswriter, author and entrepreneur. Since 1999 he has worked at KUAM, Guam's largest diversified media company, where he leads the company's Interactive Media Group and co-anchors the nightly news. He has an extensive background in product development, telecommunications and creative writing.



In his time at KUAM, Jason has won numerous local and national accolades, including four Edward R. Murrow Awards for Broadcasting Excellence for his work with KUAM.com.

He holds a Bachelor's in Marketing from the University of Guam and an MBA in Technology Management from the University of Phoenix. His interests include film, music theory, history, philosophy and anything having to do with the 80's.

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Foreword

Since the moment my grandfather sat me on his knee in 1982 and taught me about a curious sport on television by saying simply, "*See that guy wearing number 34? That's Walter Payton. Watch him.*", I've been hooked on football. The game fascinates me both in its complexity and simplicity, forcing athletes with the agility of gazelles to occupy the same compressed space as those possessing the brute strength of rhinos. The strategy behind moving an oblong piece of leather filled with air across a field (and conversely, preventing such intent) amazes me as much today as it did then.

So with great passion I approached covering the 2011 Miller Football League season. Our goal at KUAM Sports was to create a complete media product, delivering every nuance of The MFL Experience to the reader, listener, viewer and online user, beyond the mere boxscore or play-by-play quip.

Thus was born *MFL Rocks!*, my Monday column that (hopefully) brought unique perspective to the league. I worked tirelessly to get to know those players that were simultaneously my customers and my commodity. I set out each week to capture the raw emotion, intensity and aggression of football, coupled with island sensitivity.

And, God forbid, a bit of humor.

The MFL again featured four teams - the DOCOMO Chargers, the Cars Plus Rams, the Pepsi Warriors, and the defending champion Shell Hal's Angels. Such an economy of scale allowed me to really understand countless subplots behind the cog that drives the MFL's great success: its players.

There's a strong human angle to the MFL that merits attention. From the solemn pregame prayer after the shocking death of Warriors wideout Steve Alcantara to the midfield melee in the championship game between the Angels and Rams, this was a season like no other.

It made for great theatre: a captivating script brilliantly performed by a talented cast set against the backdrop of the gridiron - without doubt the most intriguing stage in all of sport.

With the season now behind us and the Angels having defended their title in dramatic fashion, beating the Rams in the Miller Bowl, I'm all out of all out of similes, metaphors, analogies, anecdotes, allusions, allegories and all other literary devices. I now just reflect. And I realize I'm damn lucky.

I had a season pass for games I'd gladly pay to attend; I had the best seat in the house when I'd happily sit anywhere; and I was able to talk football to a massive audience with an insatiable appetite when I'd be perfectly content yakking with the person sitting next to me. I got to share some amazing real-life stories, entertain people with insight perhaps not used before and capture incredible competition in realtime.

I was just happy to be part of it.

Jason Salas
KUAM Sports
March 22, 2011

*For Mom, without whom (in addition to the obvious),
none of this would have been possible.*

WEEK 1

Just another day at the office in the MFL

It's as if the Guam football gods have perpetually blessed each and every contest featuring the MFL's most heated rivals. There were numerous compelling subplots to the season opener for the 2011 Miller Football League season featuring the Cars Plus Rams and Shell Hal's Angels - a veritable cornucopia of gridiron things to think about, to watch, to consider, of which to stand in total awe.

There couldn't have been a more perfect way to start a new season of island football.

There's the obvious "rematch/vengeance" theme in play dating back to last year's championship game. How would Angel pride bear the heavy crown of being defending champions of the Edward M. Calvo Cup? How many new stars would emerge from the void created by those athletes unable to return this season? Would the defenses be at mid-season form? Would the bad weather we've been dealt of late play a major factor into how the game was played? How would the fiery crop of new MFL players from the military and high school graduates add to the drama of the game?

All of these, and more, proved to be major factors.

Too often the phrase "instant classic" is uttered, but Saturday's contest was precisely that. The Rams outlasted the Angels 12-6 in a triple-overtime thriller, with second-year fullback Anthony Viemanu plunging in for the game's walkoff touchdown from a yard out.

While the game was a defensive struggle from the onset, the teams also had to battle Mother Nature, who saw fit to lend a healthy dose of swirling winds, raindrops that appeared to come straight out of a Forrest Gump narrative, and...fog. Yes, fog. On Guam. In late-January. At 4 in the afternoon.

Several new names paid immediate dividends and became fan favorites on both sidelines, and any off-season rust never showed up. Each team exhibited bone-crushing hits and infectious enthusiasm that got the crowd of several hundred fans roaring.

The wind was murder on each team's kicking games, as All-MFL kicker Matt Cruz went 0-for-3 for the Rams, and the Angels Mike James had his only PAT partially blocked by stellar Rams' free safety Chris "Dancing Machine" Santos, who also had 3 interceptions, the first of which setup the Rams first TD.

The Angels debuted a new wishbone formation straight out of the '70s Oklahoma Sooners playbook (last season's DOCOMO Chargers had great success with the same scheme), but the Rams' massive defensive front was stout, with Ashton Adams and Leonard Kaae limiting any major production

from Shell's stud tailbacks Joshric Fenwick and Joaquin Pangelinan. The Angels found their greatest success in the aerial game, as Steve Phillips thrilled the hundreds in attendance on long passes to fellow FD Friar Jared Ada and James, a new addition at wideout.

Case in point: late in the 4th quarter, down 6-0 facing 4th-and-14 from his own 32, Angels head coach Ivan Shiroma went for it. It proved genius. Phillips dropped back, had time and threw a perfect strike in double-coverage to a streaking Ada who laid out for a 37-yard gain over the middle. The crowd went completely ballistic, with the Angels riding the momentum to an eventual game-tying 2-yard QB keeper by Phillips.

Reigning Offensive MVP Brant McCreadie found his rhythm with his receiving corps, liberally distributing the pigskin to Eddie Ko, Danny Cepeda and Nate Baza. But it was diminutive rookie tailback Jess Manglona who proved to be the workhorse for the Cars Plus backfield, repeatedly coming up with big yardage plays, including taking a 12-yard swing pass on 3rd-and-long during the game's final drive in the third overtime period to setup Viemanu.

And in the end, that's all it took. One play, done. Viemanu went in standing up. The fans, on their feet the entire time, went crazy. Every player, coach, official and fan was absolutely spent. Both teams immediately embraced at midfield with the trademark sportsmanship that's indicative of the entire MFL, but for this rivalry in particular - an open and mutual display of respect after nearly four hours of brutally punishing competition.

It was only the first game in this new season, and in a four-team league where everybody makes the playoffs, it's mathematically inevitable these two titans of the island's gridiron will meet again.

Think both rosters haven't circled that next date on their calendars? Think again.

WEEK 2

2nd QB could be x-factor in Angels' title defense

A curious epiphany slapped me upside the head while at the UOG Field today. I was hanging out at my alma mater's Mangilao campus on my off-day to watch the Shell Hal's Angels play the DOCOMO Chargers in the second of two weekend games in the Miller Football League. Since I didn't have to work this game I joined other fans, chatting it up and enjoying the atmosphere - the sunshine, the camaraderie, the music, the hotdogs - the whole nine yards, if you will.

And in witnessing the complete and uncomfortable dismantling of the DOCOMO squad (Shell won handily 68-0), I looked out at the field and noticed a familiar face scurrying about in Angel blue - someone I covered throughout his stellar high school career under center at Father Duenas Memorial School: Will Williams. Easily one of the best quarterbacks in the elite Friar signal-calling fraternity.

And instantly in that moment, it hit me - head coach Ivan Shiroma's playbook just got a heck of a lot deeper.

In the previous week, I noticed Williams' listing on the Angel roster and thought he might make a huge difference against their archrival Cars Plus Rams, but he didn't play. Didn't even dress. The Rams prevailed in triple-overtime, 12-6. Naturally, issues about Shell mounting a proper title defense have bubbled up.

But now the Angels' attack, at times criticized for being too one-dimensional, has broad potential. Williams brings to the table a multitude of options: a speedy, triple-threat wingman. Taking direct snaps in the wildcat. Running the spread option. Lining up in the slot or split wide. Halfback passes. Or just the dynamic improvisation that made him so dangerous for the maroon and gold. The Angels have the potential to muster an offense with enough trick plays to make David Blaine gasp and be more confusing to opposing defenses than trying to explain Inception's plot to a 5th grader.

And keep in mind that Shiroma's already not wasted any time thinking outside the box - his team's already debuted a wishbone offense that proved highly efficient, if not thoroughly dominant.

But reckless abandon isn't something managed lightly, a fact of which Shiroma is well aware. Ever-stoic and cautiously optimistic, the coach told me he has to constantly remind his "complementary QB" that he simply can't run around like he did against prep players when he was clearly the most talented player and rely on sheer athleticism alone.

But he still sees the potential of having such a gamebreaker on his sideline.

And so late in the ballgame against the Chargers, his team already firmly up 40-0, Williams was allowed to get creative. He turned a broken rollout defended perfectly by the Chargers into a 58-yard scamper with his speed and instinct, followed up by a perfect touchdown strike to tight end Travis Meno. It was a high-octane drive engineered flawlessly. He's that type of x-factor.

In case you're wondering at this point about a quarterback controversy - stop. Steve Phillips' role as his team's leader is secure. But could we possibly see a two-QB system like John Cooper's Ohio State teams of the mid-1990s? I doubt it. Such bigamy, while highly entertaining, wouldn't likely work long-term.

Williams wears jersey #7, ostensibly in tribute to or inspired by John Elway and Michael Vick, both legendary running quarterbacks. So keep an eye on this subplot as you follow our coverage of the 2011 season, pigskin fans. Providing the Angels can rein-in their talented second quarterback, they may have something here.

WEEK 3

Relentless pursuit: Charger 'D' is DOCOMO's calling card

They say numbers don't lie, but in the Miller Football League they also don't tell the whole truth. Such is certainly the case for this season's DOCOMO Chargers, who despite being outscored 149-6 en route to an 0-3 record (extending their losing streak from the 2010 season to 10 straight games), have a defense you have to see live in order to properly appreciate.

Sure, football's success is ultimately measured by a team's ability to win. But for the Chargers it goes deeper than that.

I've seen the squad play twice this year - each time resulting in a blowout. But in both contests the entire team outwardly exhibited pride, joy, laughter and sportsmanship, with all players keeping their heads up throughout, seeking the unique glory that one can only feel in a team sports victory. So if anything, know this: the Chargers can **really** play defense.

With so much of DOCOMO's roster coming from the U.S. military (Navy and Air Force predominantly), these are people just happy to get a few hours away from the tense nature of their duty and take part in high-caliber competition playing the game they love. The experience gives them a temporary reprieve from being leaders of men to just...guys.

And it's this spirit that's made them so fun to watch. While other teams in similar situations might not have the fan support, the Chargers bring scores of spouses, friends, kids and supporters to each game. It makes for quite the fervent gallery.

In this week's game against the first place Cars Plus Rams, the Chargers demonstrated the energy that's made them such a dangerous opponent - all without their best player, the electrifying do-everything utility back Alan "Acme" Hamilton, out for the season with a broken ankle. With defense being their admitted strong suit, DOCOMO came into the game hungry, optimistic and ready to hit.

Standout linebacker Andrew Staats had a monster 1st half in constantly pressuring reigning league Offensive MVP quarterback Brant McCreadie, helping to force 3 turnovers in the game's first two quarters and recovering a fumble. Defensive end Emonte Means, lineman Al Spivey and strong safety Elizah Mitchell also brought the crowd to its feet with bone-jarring tackles. And across the way, linebacker T.C. Mix thrilled the crowd after juggling a broken-up pass (tipped by Staats), then returning the pigskin 60 yards for the team's first touchdown of the season.

Mix was our KUAM Sports Player of the Game for DOCOMO, adding 6 solo tackles, a fumble recovery and a sack.

The Chargers from that point on played inspired ball, but fell victim to just too many Rams big plays, as rookie tailback Jess "Pompy" Manglona dashed for 114 yards on 10 carries and 3 TDs; and McCreadie went deep to wideout Nate Baza twice in the end zone. The Rams won 48-6 to stay perfect, leaving the Chargers empty-handed yet again. But even as the margin began to grow to insurmountable proportions, the Chargers played on, coming out full-force on every series on offense, defense and special teams. No tears, no shame, no infighting, no whining. Just football.

So while "winless" is an unfortunate cross no athlete wants to bear, the Chargers play on with passion and with pride. They continue to pursue what's eluded them for the last season and a half, knowing someday they'll wind up in the 'W' column.

With the team playing with this much enthusiasm now, can you imagine the party when they do get a win?

WEEK 4

The wishbone lives on in the MFL

I'm going to go out on a limb and guesstimate that most Guam gridiron fans haven't mourned the passing of Emory Bellard. Even the most ardent football aficionados probably didn't take a moment and honor the man who led Texas A&M to three straight bowl game appearances and also enjoyed success at Mississippi State as head coach after his passing almost two full weeks ago.

It's no knock on the acumen of the local pigskin practitioner - at first glance, Coach Bellard's name admittedly isn't among the first that come up when discussing the greatest sideline generals in history. But his credentials, one of them in particular, lives on at all levels of football, especially here on the island in the Miller Football League.

In the late-1960s, an ambitious young offensive coordinator at Texas devised an innovative triple-option backfield that gets the fullback involved in a team's attack by lining him up as a lead man in a traditional pro set between two tailbacks. Such choice essentially keeps a defense guessing for who exactly gets the handoff and seals off the edges by paralyzing linebackers and defensive ends. The formation resulted became known throughout football as the wishbone, and it revolutionized offense.

And Bellard is properly attributed as being its architect.

I mention this with all due respect to the departed coach because of the impact his invention has had on the MFL. The DOCOMO Chargers ran a wishbone-based set as their bread-and-butter last season and continue to successfully leverage it this year. The Shell Hal's Angels, already stacked on offense, have begun running the wishbone this year, maximizing the speed and power effects it promotes. The Pepsi Warriors have used variations of it the past couple of years.

Offensive units love its simplicity and the madness it creates for the opposition. Hunkering tight ends get their jollies on being able to line up in the backfield and for once, get a running start before plowing into defensive linemen. Teams enjoy running the wishbone four, five or six plays in a row in a series, then quickly switching into a pro set or spread option and letting loose downfield.

For those who master it, the wishbone is fun to watch, produces results and moves the ball.

So look for the wishbone in all its glory the next time you attend an MFL game, watch a broadcast or stream a webcast. Its presence is firmly rooted in football on Guam, to the enjoyment of those who make use of it and for those of us who

watch it. While the formation's inventor is no longer with us, his masterpiece is preserved. And everywhere football is played, Guam and abroad, the sport is better because Emory Bellard created it.

Thank you, Coach.

WEEK 4

Don't rush: Rams d-line is second to none

Good things often happen in fours. You've probably heard about The Beatles. Millions flock each year to stare at Mount Rushmore in utter amazement. The Gang of Four was a powerful Chinese political faction in the mid-1960's. Notre Dame affectionately had the Four Horsemen. Metallica - a Fab Four in their own right - even wrote a song about them (the Biblical ones, not the Fighting Irish). And so on.

In the microcosm of the sports universe that is the Miller Football League, we've got a similar quad that demands ultimate attention and respect. If not, the Cars Plus Rams starting defensive line doesn't care - they're taking your will whether you like it or not.

And fewer dominating statements can be made.

As we plunge deeper into the 2011 MFL season and inch towards the playoffs, numerous subplots have begun to escalate. Teams are playing with razor sharp precision. Injuries begin to matter more. Statistics are piling up. Pride, for better or worse, is a major motivational factor for many who suit up each weekend.

As I write this on the morning of the Rams' biggest game of the season - the rematch against their most-hated rivals, the Shell Hal's Angels - the Cars Plus d-line as a unit has allowed a measly 42 yards rushing per game. (Not per tailback, mind you - *in the aggregate*.) That's completely insane. And, that's against top-notch talent with impressive speed, of considerable strength and following monstrous linemen. The Rams simply remove the opposition's running game from the equation. 42 yards.

(Comparatively, I walk approximately 67 yards from KUAM's broadcast booth at the UOG Field to the Big Dogs stand for a footlong and a bottle of water at halftime.)

Simply stated (and with apologies to Shawne Merriman), the Ram 4-3 scheme is truly lights-out. Multisport star "Baby Joe" Taimanglo, despite being a diminutive 5'4", currently leads the league in sacks with 6 as the starting left defensive end. Drawing from the year-round training he undertakes for his mixed martial arts career, he blows by opposing tackles and whips right into quarterbacks. Former Guam High School two-way star Ashton Adams is having a stellar season as a run-stopper, with all of his tackles being solo jobs. Roque Martinez, the heavyweight champion for Pacific eXtreme Combat, is deceptively quick in the interior, eliminating any holes runners might want to exploit and blowing anyone up who dares to try. And bookending the quartet, right defensive end Leonard Kaae functions as a human danger sign, alerting would-be rushers "Enter here at your own risk".

No tailback's even come close to approaching 100 yards against the Rams all season. The biggest rushing play they've given up went for 19 yards, and that's when a tight end lined up as a fullback for added oomph (*hint hint, opposing coaches*). And it's not been uncommon to see so much penetration from the Rams frontline that three or even all four defensive linemen wind up meeting in the backfield in a mountain of humanity, with some poor soul from the other team mercilessly at the base.

In the big picture, the strength of their line naturally creates opportunities throughout the Rams' defense, with the other Cars Plus defenders being the beneficiaries of their frontline's absolute dominance. The linebacking corps led by Chris Sgro and Frank Arriola can freely roam, drop back into zone coverage or join the party up front and blitz the gaps created so liberally by Messrs. Martinez and Adams. Free safety Chris "Dancing Machine" Santos is having his best year, leading the MFL with an eye-popping 7 interceptions in three games, many off passes thrown in haste by QBs under intense pressure.

Even the Ram cornerbacks, which defensive coordinator Joey Calvo said were the team's largest concern coming into the season, are capitalizing, being able to play their assignments tougher at the line or baiting them into taking midrange routes, knowing that waiting in the wings is Santos coming over the top.

So while their accomplishments at midseason have been second to none, it'll be interesting to see if such a pace can be maintained as the season goes longer. The d-line is the league's successful because they've played together. The quartet has been just that - inseparably tight-knit, always talking, always focused. The group's been blessed with athleticism, health, and a little bit of luck.

But the big story of today's game is that it pits the strength of the Rams against the sheer size and determination of the intimidating frontline of the Angels. And having lost the season opener in triple-overtime, Shell has a definite chip on its shoulder and looks to disprove the theory about the Rams defensive front being the best there is.

In just a few hours, we may have a new Fab Four (or Five) to gush about at the final whistle. Game on.

WEEK 5

For Steve: Warriors hope, pray, play for missing teammate

For the second time in three days, KUAM's newsroom was alerted about an emergency. For the second time in three days, the island's sports community was shocked to learn of an incident involving a beloved athlete. For the second time in three days, my heart sank. For the second time in three days, someone I know was in dire trouble.

To say I'm Steve Alcantara's friend would be somewhat of a stretch. But I'd like to think I am. I first met Steve in, of all places, the emergency room.

Sometime in 2004 my father, a diabetic, was having a particularly bad bout with the flu and was running a high fever. At 8:30 on a Saturday night my mom and I took him to the Guam Memorial Hospital where Dad was given a bed and examined. During my wait at the nurse's processing station I sat beside a man younger than myself wearing muddy cleats with a football uniform freshly soiled with grass and dirt and sweat and blood, favoring a badly separated shoulder he suffered in a Miller Football League game about an hour earlier.

We got to briefly talking, and despite his obvious discomfort he shared a couple of thoughts - the perfunctorily icebreaking "*So what are you in for?*", the hit that caused him to seek urgent medical care, that he was dating a girl who I learned was a cousin of mine, where he went to high school, and some general tidbits to pass the time. When I was finally allowed to join my father in his room, I said goodbye to my new acquaintance - who remarkably looked past his own excruciating pain to smile and say, "I hope your dad gets better".

I've always remembered that night. And that kindness. That smile.

Since then Steve and I bumped into each other sporadically. As I cover the MFL, he nodded when he saw me, a gesture I've always appreciated and returned. I'm not certain if he remembers our brief chat or that we previously met at all. But there was always that same reassuring smile.

Saturday evening, I got word after broadcasting our Game of the Week that rescue teams were looking for a man barely in his 30s who had fallen off a jetski while out on the water at Umatac Bay and were searching late at night in an area that even when artificially lit is still pitch-black. From Facebook and from Guam Fire Department officials (the former much faster than the latter), I learned the missing man was Steve.

I immediately let out a mournful sigh - the same inarticulate, disconsolate reaction I had two days ago when hearing that Ray Rojas, one of Guam's most adored baseball players and by virtue of the binding nature of sports, a friend, was killed in a horrific Mangilao car crash.

In addition to his role as a wide receiver for the Pepsi Warriors, Steve also starred as a pitcher in the Budweiser Baseball League and was off to a fine season on the mound for the Bank of Guam Athletics. He's equally, if not more, respected in that sport's community, too. And fans still grieving Rojas' loss now mourn another diamond star.

Many of the Warriors joined Steve's family Saturday night as soon as they heard the news, standing vigil at the search site down south. Less than twenty-four hours later, Steve's teammates donned their helmets and with heavy hearts took the field against the league's best team, the undefeated Cars Plus Rams, in a battle for first place. Ultimately the Rams won 13-7, with Steve remembered during a moment of silence before kickoff.

His team played valiantly, even deep into the 4th quarter while unbeknownst to them the news broke that his body had finally been recovered.

With his situation on their minds they played hard for him, knowing full well that in the grand scheme of the universe their football game meant little. But to honor a teammate in the best way they could and for those who knew him, such a moment meant everything. It meant hope.

It galvanized the spirit of team and exhibited true friendship.

I wish I could reciprocate Steve's kindness to his family and loved ones. I wish I could send them the same encouraging smile he sent to me that fateful night in the ER. I wish I was able to say or write something profound to give them peace in the face of a sorrow I can't even begin to imagine. I'd like to offer them the faith he offered me as a total stranger. Like his teammates, I pray for him. And wish that somewhere at sometime I'll be able to see him again.

So that I might have the opportunity to smile back. Rest in peace, Steve.

WEEK 6

The ageless wonders of the MFL

A funny thing happened during KUAM's broadcast of the Miller Football League Game of the Week about a month ago. While calling a Pepsi Warriors game I announced an unrehearsed line, proclaiming, "Father Time just keeps placing calls to Warriors middle linebacker Ryan Rios, but for some reason the reigning Defensive MVP just doesn't want to pick up the phone". The quip inadvertently shed light on an interesting angle of the MFL that a cursory glance may not pick up on: we've got some top-shelf talent on the field playing at an extremely high level, who by athletic standards...are pretty old.

Rios, now 43, is a shoe-in to repeat as the season's most outstanding defensive player, despite his team finishing third in the regular season. His counterpart in accolades, Cars Plus Rams quarterback Brant McCreadie, has put up statistics that surpass his 2010 campaign in which he was the consensus Offensive MVP, with his next birthday cake to sport a jaw-dropping 42 candles.

(Assuming I'm invited to the party for my on-air partner of 10 years, I'll spring for the Metamucil.)

In similar fashion, McCreadie's longtime friends and fellow native Hawaiians Eddie Ko and Brian Hahn are still getting it done on the gridiron as receivers. Strong safety Fayth Thompson patrols the Warrior deep field as a savvy veteran and still hits with youthful intensity, as does teammate Freddie Tupaz at guard. The Shell Hal's Angels' Mike Kono and Allan Blend continue to be two of the league's top playmaking linebackers, as well as fan favorites. Rams defensive leader Frank Arriola told me before a game he's proudly "representing the eighties". Ray Dela Cruz's children, who never miss a game, provide a raucous cheering section as the Angel defensive tackle punishes any runner coming his way. And Rams wideout Danny Cepeda - the most dominant high school athlete I ever saw play during his years with the GW Geckos - celebrated his 20-year graduation reunion last year.

Even Charles Churchill, the ageless-lineman-turned-league-commissioner-then-unretired-the-very-next-year-so-he-could-suit-up-again, still brings the pain when he lines up for the Rams, recording 3 huge tackles in a key red zone defensive stand against archrival Shell.

Comparatively, most NFL running backs are considered over-the-hill depreciable assets the moment they turn 30. Not here. Not in our league. At the time McCreadie eclipsed that milestone, we were still collectively pontificating about how much of a technological lap dance the Y2K Bug wound up being.

It's important to understand that on Guam we live in a community where perhaps the most highly-regarded virtue is respect for one's elders. And the new

generation of MFL superstars do. But such an honor obviously hasn't slowed down the men that were putting on shoulder pads when Reagan was in the White House. They continue to impress. They're not old farts who just lazily rely on gravity to let their bulk to crash into one another - these are athletes who lead, inspire and make plays.

The canonical example is Mike "Malojloj Madness" Meno, the Angels left guard whose salt-and-pepper hair (notably more salt than pepper) is now clearly visible from either sideline. And at 50 - yes, F-I-F-T-Y - lines up directly beside his 21-year-old son, tight end Travis. Mike's also been an eligible receiver on several occasions with 5 receptions this year, 3 for touchdowns. He's Mike Vrabel, island-style.

The demands of football that make it a young man's game haven't fazed these modern-day gentlemen gladiators. If age has added anything, it's wisdom. They impart timeless knowledge by mentoring younger players - offering insight on technique, use of energy, how to fight through pain, and being a quality teammate, lessons forged by years of experience. The very same lessons handed down to them by their predecessors.

In so doing, they epitomize the spirit of the Guamanian athlete. Such is a trait all younger players recognize immediately, respect greatly and aspire to someday have, too.

So with the MFL playoffs right around the corner, the next time you're at a game keep an eye on some of the *man'amko* on your favorite team's roster (and maybe *amen* them, if you're so daring). They may not be setting records in the 40-yard dash anymore, but their positive impact can be felt all around the league.

And whatever Fountain of Youth the MFL seems to be drinking from, get me some of that.

WEEK 7

All-MFL Team is Guam gridiron's greatest

This year's Miller Football League featured some of the most talent we've ever had on the field across all teams. As such, the arduous task of selecting the best of the best for our All-MFL Team was the most difficult tasks we've had here in Harmon this season. These are men who light up the stat sheet as well as the scoreboard. They're fan favorites and valued teammates who lead by example and leave it all out on the field.

Several of the legends of the Guam gridiron continued to perform at a high level, young stars emerged and talented players from the U.S. military dazzled the crowd week after week at the UOG Field in Mangilao.

The Cars Plus Rams, who finished the regular season undefeated at 6-0, led the KUAM All-MFL Team with 13 picks, with the Pepsi Warriors having 7, the Shell Hal's Angels placing 5 (including all three of its star wideouts), and the DOCOMO Chargers having 2. Rams quarterback Brant McCreadie became the league's first five-time Offensive MVP, with Ryan Rios also repeating as the MFL's top defensive player.

KUAM All-MFL Team

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OFFENSE

Quarterback

Brant McCreadie, Rams

Running Back

Dave Delgado, Warriors
Jess Manglona, Rams

Fullback

Anthony Viemanu, Rams

Wide Receiver

Jared Ada, Angels
Josh Bulla, Angels
Danny Cepeda, Rams
Mike James, Angels

Tight End

Brian Kitson, Chargers

Center

Joshua Walsh, Angels

Guard

Chris Brub, Rams
Mark Mesgnon, Warriors

Tackle

Leonard Calvo, Rams
Mike Tamua, Warriors

DEFENSE

Linebacker

Kailua Faamui, Rams
T.C. Mix, Chargers
Ryan Rios, Warriors
Chris Sgro, Rams

Defensive Tackle

Manny Cruz, Warriors
Roque Martinez, Rams

Defensive End

Leonard Kaae, Rams
Joe Taimanglo, Rams

Safety

Ryan Bigler, Angels
Chris Santos, Rams

Cornerback

Randy Mendiola, Rams
Trevin Jones, Rams

SPECIAL TEAMS

Kick Returner

Stephen Santos, Warriors

Kicker

Jared Wood, Warriors

MVPs

Offensive

Brant McCreadie, Rams

Defensive

Ryan Rios, Warriors

WEEK 7

MFL 2011: a look back

Over the course of another successful two-month season, Guam was treated to incredible action in the Miller Football League with a cornucopia of storylines, personalities and scenarios that made The MFL Experience like nothing else in island sports. So with the playoffs now upon us, I'm basing my column on an age-old (and debatably lazy) television trope: the end-of-season clip show.

So for those of you still reading at this point, here's a retroactive look at the 2011 season.

This never gets old...

The 2011 season couldn't have kicked-off in more dramatic fashion, as last year's championship game saw the mutual dislike between the Cars Plus Rams and Shell Hal's Angels renewed in absolute nail-biting fashion. In a driving rain, both teams played to a tie and sludged through an exhausting three overtime periods before Rams fullback Anthony Viemanu punched-in the walkoff touchdown from 2 yards out.

It was the perfect cardiac ending to a nearly four-hour exhibition of the game's best rivalry, setting the tone for the rest of the season.

The return of Tommy Gun

Two games in, Pepsi starting quarterback Eric Fejeran aggravated an already injured ankle, breaking it midweek during practice. Head coach Loring Cruz placed a call to an old friend, Tommy Morrison. The gesture proved to be the difference in the Warriors' season, with Morrison injecting instant leadership and willing his team to consecutive victories. The Umatac native helped secure the Warriors a 2nd place standing until being upset by the Angels in the regular season finale.

The multisport star - Morrison's also training for the Pacific Games this fall where he'll start at pitcher for Team Guam Baseball - was able to find rhythm with veteran receiver Sandy Fejeran and exploit the young talent of Stephen "Juice" Santos, Mychal Borja and Keola Fernandez. He's brought strong guidance to a promising squad.

And upon returning to the gridiron after a year's hiatus, he was all smiles. "This is so much fun," Morrison said. "I'm glad to be back". Couldn't put it any better myself.

Big Mac gets one for the thumb

2011 crowned the league's first five-time Offensive Most Valuable Player, Rams

quarterback Brant McCreadie. The former Milwaukee Brewers minor league pitcher, sportscaster and now entrepreneur had a better season than he had last year, in which he also won the honor.

While the 41-year-old signalcaller said his team was a run-first offense, he had his most efficient QB rating of his MFL career, finding his best target in 38-year-old Danny Cepeda, who also had his best season in years.

The call of the year

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please...the Miller Football League kindly requests that you NOT sit on the scoreboard." 'Nuff said.

Heavenly triplets

No one could have predicted that three receivers from the same team - much less a veteran coming back from a broken collar bone and two rookies - would finish the regular season first, second and third in yardage. No one, perhaps, except for the Angels wideouts themselves - a trifecta of athletes whose play is equal parts stunning, selfless and supportive.

Newlywed and expectant father Jared Ada led the league in yards, catches and receiving touchdowns. North Concord, California's Josh Bulla didn't play until the third game, but the former junior college player made quite the introduction with 11 grabs against the Warriors, dazzling the crowd and confusing defensive backs with his deceptive moves. And Mike James proved that you don't mess with Texas, as the Fort Worth native showed off mercurial breakaway speed, leading the league with a 23.4 yards after catch average.

Built Ram tough

Four playing as one, one playing as four - that's all you need to know about the 2011 Rams defensive line. "Baby Joe" Taimanglo, Ashton Adams, Roque Martinez and Leonard Kaae were the primary reason this was a year no opposing team rushed for more than 42 yards per game on the Rams. The front four was absolutely dominant all season long, forcing the most turnovers of any team.

On a defense loaded with talent, the Cars Plus quartet collectively proved to be THE standout star.

Nickname-a-palooza

One of the truly fun things about calling MFL games is sharing the stage with the master: The Voice of the MFL, public address announcer Phil Leon Guerrero. Andy Wheeler and I call the games for broadcasts, but it's Phil that works the crowd. And for more than a decade he's adorned the league's superstars with memorable nicknames. So it's with great joy that we were able to add a verse to this ongoing symphony.

In addition to mainstays and fan favorites like Mike "Oh No" Kono, Ryan "Chairman of the Board" Rios, Allan "Say Ow" Blend, Mike "Malojloj Madness" Meno, "Curly" Chandler, Emonty "Means Business" Means; and some recent handles like Justin "The Shocker" Cruz, "Big Island" Billy Pahulu, Andrew

"Terminator" Staats, The A-Bomb (Ashton Adams), Brian "Big Country" Kitson, and Ryan "Mr. Biggs" Bigler, Andy came up with some gems of his own for some of the sport's more entertaining personalities.

In our Week 6 broadcast, Andy dubbed 6'5"/240-lb. Warriors guard Mike Tamua "The Condominium" and Mike Pangelinan "Mass Transit" after the Angels fullback lumbered ahead for a big gain.

(Personally, I'm ashamed that we've got receivers named Sandy and Danny (Fejeran and Cepeda), and neither of us attempted to make a single "Grease" reference all season.)

Red & black & blue

An interesting sidebar to this year's season was the overlooked but undoubtedly felt defensive presence of the DOCOMO Chargers. The team suffered its second straight winless season, giving up 118 unanswered points in the first three games before scoring on a pick-6 (more on that in a moment). But throughout, the Chargers played inspired defense, struggling through teammates having to fulfill military duties to guys dropping out, eventually playing iron man football their last game, with most of the defensive unit lining up in the backfield or on the line.

They put together an impressive highlight reel of hits and stops, despite their outcome, and were one of the most-fun teams to watch.

Which leads us to (*clever segue*)...

In the Mix

...a star was born in Week 3, as Chargers middle linebacker T.C. Mix juggled a tipped McCreadie pass, taking the pigskin 60 yards to the house for DOCOMO's first score of the season. From that point on, Mix became the focal point of his team's defensive unit, the guy teams were forced to game plan against. And still, the Motor City native and Air Force firefighter continued to make big play after big play.

He would eventually be an obvious KUAM All-MFL Team pick, as well a finalist for Defensive MVP.

Bon Jovi (FINALLY!) gets the Old Yeller treatment

A running gag with players, coaches, fans and certain broadcasters who will go unnamed has always been the repetitively uncreative background music at the UOG Field on gameday. In short, you'd be treated to former radio disc jockey James Castro's iPod...which evidently only contains Bon Jovi's "Slippery When Wet" CD and "Welcome to the Jungle". It's as if the music industry ceased to exist after 1987.

Fortunately, Tropical Productions promotions extraordinaire John Galu Muna mercifully decided to open up his eclectic iTunes library in Week 3 to immediate rave reviews. There's now a healthy mix of tracks - hip-hop, nu metal, reggae, country, classic rock - that everyone enjoys.

Old dudes can still play

I wrote last week about how the MFL's older generation still gets it done. There's a whole bunch of guys in the 40-and-over club who not only put on pads, but will soon have to consider AARP benefits. You know who you are.

And a child shall lead them

The rookie that led all rookies, pocket-sized tailback Jess "Pompy" Manglona, combined quicksilver speed with Paul Bunyan toughness, handily winning the league rushing title by racking up 370 yards from scrimmage and scoring 4 touchdowns. His ability to cut in traffic and dash behind his massive linemen made him the MFL's top backfield threat, and a finalist for Offensive MVP - the first rookie to earn the honor since legendary Angels running back Scott Persing in the late-90s.

Socially networked

The unofficial postseason award for Best Team Presence on Facebook is split between the Chargers and Angels. I highly doubt Mark Zuckerberg is a fan of our league, but his players certainly were quick to post status messages and multimedia about their practices, gameday hype, trashtalk, pride and stats. They were also incredibly gracious, accepting any friend request, interacting with fans and each other, injecting into the game a human element not seen before.

Talented-yet-temperamental

Ivan Shiroma might have a few more gray hairs than when he started out the 2011 season. As much as the Angel coach would like to keep the dirty little secret that is Steve Phillips' outbursts swept conveniently under the carpet, the ugly truth of the matter is that despite his phenomenal ability, the star quarterback's rants can get quite public, quite often.

SP had his best season ever, being the only QB to pass for over 1,000 yards, throw 10 TDs and rush for 6 scores; he was also 4th in the league in rushing. But his questionable leadership can juxtapose his gaudy numbers, as he's been known to storm off the field after a bad series or blown call, chuck his helmet and pout on the sideline, or even engage in scraps with teammates that escalate beyond just verbal confrontations.

He's a gifted athlete and big-game playmaker and the odds-on favorite for next year's preseason Offensive MVP with McCreadie having announced his retirement. I don't at all doubt his desire to win. But in a sport where tempers run high, he shoulders the burden of a position where you just can't afford to throw tantrums.

In Sunday's playoff against Pepsi, a costly muffed punt return by the Warriors with 1:06 left to go in the game gave Phillips one last shot at victory. SP simply took over the game with his arm, legs and heart. He was clearly the best player on the field in engineering the game-winning drive. Afterward he wasted no time in thanking his teammates and their effort. This was a completely different man than the frustrated quarterback I saw on occasion earlier in the season.

It was a glimpse at the future.

"Franchise #88"

The island was shocked to learn of the death of Pepsi Warriors wide receiver Steve Alcantara on February 26, as the MFL mourned the loss of one of its most popular players. Alcantara's teammates joined his parents, girlfriend and the Angels at midfield before kickoff of their season finale for a prayer for their fallen friend.

Both teams wore "88" helmet stickers and many of the Angels wore items of red clothing to honor the former GW Gecko and athlete his teammates affectionately called "Franchise". It was THE moment of the season...and one of the most touching moments I've ever seen in sports.

Alcantara was also a star pitcher in the Budweiser Baseball League, where fittingly the Bank of Guam Athletics will retire his #27 jersey.

So there you have it. The 2011 MFL season in a nutshell. A year unlike any other we've covered. And with the Edward M. Calvo Cup up for grabs in next weekend's Miller Bowl with the Angels and Rams, there's one more chapter to add to this great story. Like most of you, I can't wait to see how it all turns out.

See you at the field on Sunday!

WEEK 8

The MFL All-Dude Team

I'm writing an unplanned midweek installment of "MFL Rocks!" with this weekend's Miller Bowl just four days away because I need to get something off my chest: [the KUAM All-MFL Team](#), announced last week, was incomplete. While it celebrated the achievements of the Miller Football League's top statistical performers and most-heralded athletes, it was remiss in neglecting to mention some of the other stars in our league.

Thus, we continue our cavalcade of postseason superlatives by creating the first-ever MFL All-Dude Team.

This list is different. It's not based on numbers, records or victories. To be a Dude, you have to be tough. A man's man. An anti-pretty boy. Hardcore. A Dude lives for gameday. A Dude inflicts pain. A Dude exists to take another man's will. You can clearly see it in his eyes through his facemask - to be a Dude, you have to be cut from a different cloth. And to a Dude, to be regarded as such is the highest honor.

These are men whose sideline demeanors aren't necessarily politically correct and whose four-letter applications of the English language aren't exactly kid-friendly. The gridiron is the only place they feel truly free, their *sanctum sanctorum*. Never mind utensils - they'd rather eat steak with their bare hands, chasing it with a hearty swig of A-1 straight from the bottle. Hell yeah.

This crop consists of those that for mere love of the game have no problem laying the lumber full-speed on a sibling, as is the case with the Angels' Curly Chandler to younger brother Brandon of the Warriors; or instructing men to go after their offspring, seen in Chargers head coach Leonard Ware against his son, Rams halfback Hosea; or drink gasoline from a Gatorade bottle, which utility player Allan "Acme" Hamilton of the Chargers actually did, accidentally. (It's a crazy story, which I'll leave to Acme to tell - *don't try this at home, kids.*)

And the roster I'm about to present wasn't chosen democratically. This is all my call, based on the countless hours of observation and analysis I've put in this season. Some Dudes already are All-MFLers. We don't have a Dude for every position; some positions have multiple Dudes. Some Dudes play two, three, four, even as many as five different positions.

This isn't about proper organization - this is about being a Dude.

The KUAM MFL All-Dude Team

Shell Hal's Angels

Ryan Bigler, free safety
Curly Chandler, middle linebacker/defensive end
Ivan Gabriel, defensive end
Rick Hernandez, outside linebacker
Brian Jackson, cornerback
Joaquin Pangelinan, halfback

With the Angels returning to the championship game this Sunday, several members of their big-time hit squad were key in helping the team defend their title. Pangelinan (who's Facebook message to me was a strong reminder to never call him "Kin" on the air - in itself a Dudeworthy gesture) actually looks for contact, and usually lays some poor opposing lineman out. Despite being one of the MFL's smaller players, he's tough as nails and packs a Voltron-sized punch. When Pangelinan sits, Bigler wastes no time stepping-up as a running back or wideout when needed.

Curly and Gabriel have been near-flawless in cutting guys in half on sweeps and sealing off the edges of the Shell frontline. They've also displayed a penchant for going for the big game - feasting on fullbacks - and forcing runners inside for one of Hernandez's textbook suplex tackles, straight out of SummerSlam.

In the secondary, rookie Jackson's had impressive closing speed and devastating hits, with the always-dangerous Mr. Biggs coming over the top.

It's almost like the Angels play defense with four down linemen and seven linebackers.

DOCOMO Chargers

Jacob Dowdell, quarterback
Jontue Lee, defensive tackle
Emonty Means, defensive lineman
Andrew Staats, defensive end
Ruben Walston, center

Forget the 0-6 record. These guys can play. Considering how much punishment Dowdell took this year, he came out every series and gave it his all. The man that's won local championships coaching at Guam High and in the Guam Youth Football League was a real leader, most notably in a brilliant no-huddle red zone drive against the Warriors. And it's no surprise that he rarely was touched up front, because nobody's moving "Big Ru", the powerful force that blocked anything coming up the middle.

Staats lived up to his "Terminator" namesake, using his frame and speed to deliver huge hits coming off the edge and stuff runners looking to turn the corner. Lee played the entire season with a torn hamstring and still put guys coming his way on their backs. And "Means Business" Means, despite playing through numerous injuries this season, by way of sheer will outmuscled offensive tackles en route to the Promised Land of the quarterback's chinstrap.

Emonty's a Dude.

Cars Plus Rams

Ashton Adams, defensive lineman

Eddie Ko, wide receiver

Cody Reidy, defensive end

Anthony Viemanu, fullback

Hosea Ware, halfback

Consider it poetic justice that Reidy, the league's only legally deaf player, brings the noise each and every time he lines up on the Cars Plus defensive line. He's an absolute terror up front when the Rams shift into a 3-4 scheme and since Week 1 has demonstrated the size, strength and stamina to help make his team's run-stoppers the best in football.

What makes Adams a Dude is his night-and-day personalities triggered when he suits up; pads on the A-Bomb are like Dr. Jekyll's elixir. He counters his softspoken, easygoing nature with his force and athleticism. He's the culprit behind many a taiback's next-day bruises, and has picked-off three passes (one negated due to a holding call), returning one for a touchdown.

The Flyin' Hawaiian has proven to be the MFL's most reliable 3rd down possession receiver, making clutch grabs in traffic, on the sideline and over the middle. That being said, Ko gets hit. Hard. A lot. But he gets right up and does his thing again. He's automatic when the Rams need a big catch to move the chains.

Viemanu is simply a freak of nature - nothing on God's earth that thick should be able to move that fluidly. And new Ram Ware lived up to his "manchild" nature, showing he's still got the speed and power that made him a star last season.

Pepsi Warriors

Manny Cruz, defensive lineman

Justin "The Shocker" Cruz, cornerback

Craig Goldsmith, outside linebacker/fullback

JoJohn Quinata, defensive end

Ryan Rios, middle linebacker

Cruz earned his spot on the All-MFL Team with his relentless penetration and brute strength. He absolutely owned opposing guards, and used his timing and upper body strength to finish near the top of the leaderboard in sacks. Cruz is also one of the most-fierce defenders we've got - when he hits you, you know. And your team knows. And the crowd knows. And you don't want it to happen again. Because it looks like it really hurts.

In my humble opinion, Shocker was this season's best pure lockdown defensive back. He stuck to guys like glue and delivered vicious hits. He was also the

target of many a punter once teams learned how dangerous Stephen Santos was on returns, so he got a lot of special teams work.

Goldsmith, who prowls Loring Cruz's defensive line and scored a pair of TDs against the Angels out of the backfield, proved his Dudeness in a sideline fight in the playoffs against Shell. After he felt he was held a little too long, he cocked back and stapled receiver Isu Mendiola's helmet - barefisted. He wasn't afraid to get ejected from a game as long as he made his point.

Quinata's playing time was cut short by work obligations this season, but the guy is a beast of a playmaker who backs up his intimidating smacktalking with serious game. He tied with Hernandez for the league lead in recovered fumbles and is deceptively quick. Had he played every snap, it might be the Warriors facing the Rams for the Edward M. Calvo Cup.

And what hasn't already been said about the dominance of the Chairman of the Board? Ryan Rios is a living legend and the most instinctive player in the league. The seven-time MFL Defensive MVP is still playing a cut above everyone else, notching nearly double the number of tackles as the next closest guy (Bigler). I wouldn't reserve a room at St. Dominic's just yet...#55's got game in him still.

So there you go. Assuming I don't get fired from KUAM for going rogue and assembling my own all-star team, I'll be back next season to handpick another worthy roster of tough guys that are admittedly happier bleeding in the trenches than standing on a podium doing interviews. But even if my career should meet its untimely end because I bucked the system and did my own thing - what could be more Dude than that?

WEEK 8

The better team won the Miller Bowl

Sunday - the day of rest. That may have well been the scenario in your household this afternoon, but for the 70+ men that took the field in the 2011 Miller Bowl, that certainly wasn't the case. The Miller Football League's championship game capped a phenomenal season of action, living up to all of its ultra-hyped billing. The game sought to definitively bring closure to the ongoing debate about who the best in the business is.

Just as the season started two months prior, so too did it end, with a blood feud between the league's two best teams.

The Shell Hal's Angels defeated their archrivals, the Cars Plus Rams, 30-20, capturing back-to-back MFL titles - a fitting achievement, since through whipping wind, a driving rain and at a breakneck pace, back-to-back is precisely how the Angels players performed on Super Sunday. And in the end, that's how they concluded their season - all for one, one for all. It was a complete team victory.

Milking my lumbar metaphor for all its worth, the Rams, who went undefeated in the regular season, stormed through the playoffs and notched more players on the All-MFL Team than any other squad, found themselves in some very unfamiliar territory: with their backs against the wall.

From kickoff it was all hands on deck by both teams, each firing like a well-oiled V10 engine - loud, fast and intimidating. The Angels and Rams had playmakers lighting it up at every position on all sides of the ball. This was a man's game - if you didn't buckle your chinstrap and bring the heat on every snap, you didn't belong on the gridiron. The tension behind the UOG Field House permeated the air like so many of the smells of the wafting barbecue from fans cheering on their favorite MFL superstars.

Miller Bowl MVP Steve Phillips had the game of his life, as the quarterback threw for 233 yards and 3 touchdowns, while rushing for 59 yards and another score on 11 carries. (It was the most yardage the Rams defensive line gave up all season.) "SP" executed head coach Ivan Shiroma's game plan to perfection - getting the ball to his dangerous wide receivers "The Triplets" in one-on-one coverage situations and letting the pure speed of Josh Bulla, Jared Ada and Mike James blow away the opposing DBs. Did they ever.

All three receivers found the end zone on long passes, each time inciting an eruption from the Angel sideline and their sea of supporters in powder blue. Bulla's go-ahead score late in the 4th, putting the Angels up by 10, evoked the most raucous ovation. They absolutely torched the vaunted Rams secondary,

who succumb to the axiom of physics that says trying to catch something running like the wind at full stride while backpedaling isn't going to work.

As I mentioned, for the first time this season the Rams played from behind. They'd never trailed at all in 2011, but were down by 16 points late in the 3rd. As such, for most of the second half Cars Plus abandoned their formidable ground game. Quarterback Brant McCreadie, who had earlier meticulously assessed the Angel defense and audibled liberally throughout the first half, was forced into a hurry-up set to preserve the clock.

Unfazed by the moment, McCreadie led his team back on consecutive scoring drives, narrowing the Angel lead to 3 halfway through the 4th. McCreadie connected with Eddie Ko seven times, as the wily veteran had a monster game, netting 84 yards in his best contribution of the season. He couldn't be stopped going over the middle, keeping the Cars Plus drive alive on numerous occasions.

Shell's pesky wideouts and swarming defensive unit just made too many big plays when their team needed them to, and McCreadie and company never caught up. And what was probably the last pass attempt in the stellar career of the five-time MFL Offensive MVP was intercepted, as Jude Pinaula sealed the win after picking-off McCreadie with 36 seconds left to go in the game.

But it's not like the Angels played flawlessly, either. Shell overcame countless momentum swings, surges in intensity, a string of All-MFL center Josh Walsh's uncharacteristically high snaps in the shotgun, and penalties that were perfectly (and ear-splittingly) categorized by Shiroma using a word I won't reprint here in the interest of career preservation. But time and time again the Angels stuck together, spurred-on by Ada's impassioned halftime speech, with the star receiver repeatedly driving home "**FAMILY!**" so loud the residents at the nearby dormitory were inspired to suit-up. They played team football - Angel football - and just kept clawing back and kept finding ways to win.

Defensive tackle "Big Drew" Johnson, playing through the indescribable pain of a sports hernia, plugged up the middle of the field and stunted the MFL's top rushing game. Ozzy Sylvia, who lined up all year on the offensive and defensive lines, didn't let anything past him. Rick Hernandez, who redefined commitment by voluntarily suspending his Facebook account so he could concentrate on the title game, was an absolute demon from his outside linebacker slot. The speedy Will Williams, who I predicted would be a huge factor in the Angel offense, played a huge role in the game as an option outlet for Phillips and ran past, around and through Ram defenders. Cornerback Brian Jackson made a critical stop in a goal line stand after committing a costly pass interference penalty earlier in the drive.

Everybody contributed. Everybody was valuable. Everybody got some.

Today's Miller Bowl was simply a game that nobody in attendance in any capacity will ever forget. It was a battle, pure and simple. Lots of guys are going to hurt tomorrow, with several probably aching for awhile after that. But they'll all bear the scars and endure the pain of a noble quest with a priceless payoff. It's yet another thing they'll have in common together...as a family.

So enough dancing around the issue. Who is the better team? That's a perpetual argument. The only undisputable truth is that the team that played best on this day won the 2011 Miller Bowl.

And that team, and for all time, was the Angels.

Epilogue

The Rumble in (or at least near) the Jungle

To say that the season ended with sportsman's eloquence would be unjust. In terms of class, the season ended VERY badly. A huge fight, as referenced in the foreword to this work, broke out on the last play of the Miller Bowl between the Angels and Rams following Jude Pinault's backbreaking interception of Brant McCreadie's pass. The game's result solidified, both teams spilled onto the field in a hailstorm of fists, shoving, words and stares.

One squabble quickly escalated into an entire mass of players and coaches either engaging each other or imploring one another to back down. The crowd, who had initially cheered on the aggression, quickly fell silent as it got uncomfortably scary.

I deliberately didn't write a column about the fights that week - not as a means of burying an ugly headline, but more to not take away from the amazing on-field achievements of the players. The actual event only lasted about three minutes on camera, which, as cliché as it sounds, in the moment felt like an eternity.

The blemish on The MFL Experience didn't tarnish the Rams' season-long dominance or the Angels ultimate victory in the championship game. But the size and scope of the post-game fight wasn't pretty, and made for an awkward ending.

Like it does here.

