



# Midnight in Chattanooga: The game, the team and the dream behind the rise of JMU football

*James Irwin*

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During a five-year stretch in the middle of the decade, the James Madison Dukes emerged as one of the elite programs in FCS football. Behind a confident coach and an established recruiting pipeline, the Dukes steamrolled their way to four playoff appearances, one national championship and a 49-15 record from 2004-2008. The origins of this run, however, began much earlier - in critical moments and decisions made during a long rebuilding effort. Madison football had most recently been marked by poor attendance, young players, mediocrity and tragedy when the 2004 season opened. And yet there also existed a foundation of camaraderie, purpose and talent - the building blocks of a successful program. As the '04 season got underway, the backdrop of an embattled coach, a quarterback controversy and a family in pain gave way to thrilling plays, comeback victories, and a historic run that changed the future of the program. In *Midnight in Chattanooga*, James Irwin examines the disparity between the pre-and post-championship landscapes of JMU football, giving readers an exclusive look at the pivotal season - and game - that catapulted the Dukes to the upper levels of the FCS arms race. Fortunate to cover the Dukes throughout the 2004 season, Irwin weaves through a powerful story of a group of men on the doorstep of their first championship, the friendships they developed, the tragedies they overcame, and the community that embraced them.

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