

TOP THIRTY: CHAMPIONSHIP GAMES – 1978/2008

By David Coulson, Guest Columnist

1. 1985

Georgia Southern 44, Furman 42

Tacoma, Washington

In a game that birthed one of the top rivalries in FCS, the Furman Paladins raced to a lead in the first half before QB Tracy Ham and the Georgia Southern Eagles stormed back to win their first of six FCS titles with 10 seconds left.

GSU had survived one of the greatest games in playoff history, outlasting Northern Iowa 40-33 in the semifinals on Ham's 20-yard TD run with 34 seconds left, while Furman was cruising past Nevada 35-12.

In the title contest, Furman took a 21-6 halftime lead when QB Bobby Lamb (14-of-22, 210 yards passing) darted into the end zone with 56 seconds remaining. But Ham caught fire in the second half to bring the Eagles back, finishing 23-of-47 passing for 419 yards and four touchdowns. He also added 90 yards rushing on 19 carries.

The Paladins built the lead to 22 points, 28-6, just four minutes into the second half on a 33-yard scoring connection between Lamb and Larry Grady. But then the Eagles started their comeback on a 96-yard drive, with Ham hitting Monty Sharpe for a 24-yard scoring strike to begin the 38-point second-half explosion.

Ham's final pass was a 13-yard scoring strike over the middle of the end zone to Frank Johnson (seven receptions for 149 yards and two scores). The Eagles scored 38 points in the second half and had 640 yards of total offense for the game.

2. 1995

Montana 22, Marshall 20

Huntington, West Virginia

McNeese State and Appalachian State had dominated the regular season with undefeated seasons, but both were upset in the playoffs. The No. 1 ranked Cowboys were beaten by Marshall 25-13, with a controversial holding call stalling a McNeese drive with the Cowboys trying to score a go-ahead TD late in the fourth quarter. No. 2 ASU was undone by injuries to All-Americans cornerback Matt Stevens (knee reconstruction) and linebacker Joe DiBernardo (sprained toe) and lost 27-17 in the quarterfinals to Stephen F. Austin when they were a first down away from clinching things.

But that set up one of the all-time great championship games as Marshall met Montana in the final. While Marshall was struggling in its semifinal win, Montana was completing its domination of the first three rounds. Behind 1,219 yards and 11 TDs from Dave Dickenson, the Grizzlies outscored Eastern Kentucky, Georgia Southern and Stephen F. Austin by a combined 163-14 score.

In the title game, Montana led most of the way and built its advantage to 19-10 on Dickenson's second TD pass to Matt Wells with 12:30 remaining. But Marshall charged back on Tim Openlander's 21-yard field goal and Chris Parker's 26-yard scoring scamper to edge in front 21-20 with 4:45 left.

Dickenson (29-of-48, 281 yards) was magical on the final Montana drive, however, moving the ball from his own 20. At midfield, a fourth and three completion to Mike Erhardt kept the drive alive and the Grizzlies got the ball to the Herd eight on fourth down. Andy Larson, had missed a field goal attempt from 37 yards and made one from 48 earlier in the game. This kick was threaded straight through the uprights to give Montana a 22-20 lead with 39 seconds left.

Marshall's freshman QB Chad Pennington (23-of-40, 246 yards) responded by getting in position for Openlander to try a remarkable 63-yard kick on the final play, but his effort fell far short and the Grizzlies had their first national championship.

3. 1992

Marshall 31, Youngstown State 28

Huntington, West Virginia

Stung by a tough loss to Youngstown State in the 1991 championship game, Marshall earned revenge in the most unusual of ways, playing at home in the 1992 title contest. Coach Jim Donnan faced a tough decision before the game when he suspended kicker David Merrick for violating team rules. Replacing Merrick for the game would be his brother, a soccer player named Willie Merrick, who had never kicked in a college football game.

It didn't look like kicking would be much of a factor when the Thundering Herd roared to a 28-0 lead on two Michael Payton TD passes, one of them to running back Orlando Hatchett, with 5:46 left in the third quarter. Hatchett (15 carries, 112 yards) also had a scoring run.

But showing its championship grit, Youngstown State stormed back for 28 points and tied the game with 3:28 remaining on the third touchdown from fullback Tamron Smith (20 carries, 82 yards).

It took Payton 13 plays, mixing runs and passes, to move Marshall from its own 19 to the YSU five and set the stage for Willie Merrick to kick his first and only college field goal from 22 yards with seven seconds left. Troy Brown, who would go on to fame as an NFL receiver, came in as an extra defensive back and ended Youngstown State's final hopes with an interception on the final play of the game.

4. 1980

Boise State 31, Eastern Kentucky 29

Sacramento, California

Boise State and defending champion Eastern Kentucky both held on for tough wins in the semifinals, with Boise State beating Grambling 14-9 with a late goal line stand and ECU holding off Lehigh 23-20 in a rematch of the 1979 championship game. That set up a classic final.

Boise State used its passing game (358 yards) on a drizzly, foggy day to build a 24-16 lead after three quarters. But ECU stormed back behind Tony Braxton's two-yard scoring plunge and Chris Isaac's 60-yard pass to David Booze with 55 seconds left.

But in the first of several classic, late finishes in the title game, Aliotti led the Broncos 80 yards in seven plays. Facing fourth and 10, Aliotti scrambled to the right and threw across the field to tight end Duane Dlouhy for a 14-yard scoring pass with 12 seconds left lifted the Broncos to their only I-AA title.

5. 2000

Georgia Southern 27, Montana 25

Chattanooga, Tennessee

It was a classic battle between two of the top teams in I-AA. Georgia Southern and Montana survived tough semifinal games to reach the final, the Eagles overcoming four turnovers at Delaware 27-18 and Montana needing overtime to hold off Appalachian State 19-16.

Georgia Southern looked like it might turn the final into a rout, building a 20-7 halftime lead, but the Eagles were slowed by rainy conditions in the second half and Montana mounted a comeback. A 17-yard pass from John Edwards to Etu Molden and a 42-yard scoring run by Vance Huntsberger on a fake punt got the Grizzlies back in the game at 20-15.

Josh Brannon recovered a J.R. Revere fumble for Montana at the Georgia Southern 18 and Yohance Humphries (26 carries, 119 yards) banged in from the two with 11:53 to give Montana a 23-20 lead. But then Adrian Peterson, bringing back memories of a 1999 championship game run against Youngstown State broke loose for a 57-yard touchdown to put the Eagles back on top just five plays later. The dramatic highlight play was named “Son of the Run.”

Peterson rushed 23 times for 148 yards and the Eagles held the Montana offense at bay the rest of the game, taking a safety with 10 seconds left to account for the final score as GSU won back-to-back titles for the third time in its history.

6. 2005

Appalachian St 21, Northern Iowa 16

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Two of the most storied programs in FCS advanced to the championship game for the first time in dramatic fashion. Northern Iowa held off top-seeded New Hampshire in the quarterfinals, and then rallied to take Texas State to overtime before winning 40-37 in the semifinals. Appalachian State overcame the loss of star QB Richie Williams to a sprained ankle tendon against Furman to rally behind Trey Elder's late TD and held on to win 29-23 in the semifinals when defensive end Jason Hunter forced a fumble by QB Ingle Martin with less than 40 seconds left that was recovered by Omarr Byrom.

In the championship game, ASU's defense survived three first-half turnovers to hold UNI to 16 first-half points before Williams came off the bench on the final play of the half to replace Elder. Williams gave the Mountaineers an emotional lift to rally them within 16-14 midway through the third period.

With less than 10 minutes to play, DE Marques Murrell slapped the ball out of the hand of UNI QB Eric Sanders. Hunter scooped up the loose ball and darted 15 yards for the go-ahead score. The Appalachian defense then throttled the high-powered offense of the Panthers the rest of the way and Kevin Richardson closed out the win with a first-down run on a third and eight play to keep the ball away from the danger UNI offense and allowed the Mountaineers to run out the clock.

7. 1989

Georgia Southern 37, Stephen F. Austin 34

Statesboro, Georgia

Few coaches have accomplished what Erk Russell did during his far too brief career at Georgia Southern. He had already coached the Eagles to back-to-back national titles in 1985-86 and had lost in the title game in 1988 to Furman.

In his final game as the Georgia Southern coach, Russell watched his Eagles team rally from a 27-20 deficit to Stephen F. Austin in the fourth quarter to become the first program to win three national titles.

Fullback Joe Ross scored (31 carries, 152 yards) from two yards out on the first play of the fourth quarter to tie the game. SFA running back Larry Centers (111 all-purpose yards) caught his second touchdown pass from quarterback Todd Hammel, going 46 yards to put the Lumberjacks back in front 34-27 with 12:32 remaining.

But the SFA defense struggled to stop the Georgia Southern option the rest of the way as quarterback Raymond Gross (26 carries, 103 yards, one TD rushing, 7-of-15 for 113 yards passing) directed two final scoring drives. Gross directed a six-play, 49-yard march after the Eagle defense had pinned SFA back at the five-yard line and forced a punt. Ernest Thompson plowed into the end zone from a yard out and it was tied again at 34.

The Eagles got the ball back when Taz Dixon intercepted a Hammel pass — Hammel's fourth pick of the game — at the SFA 30 with five minutes remaining. GSU moved the ball to the three before calling on Mike Dowis to kick a 20-yard field goal with 1:41 left. He split the uprights and an interception by Randall Boone clinched the win with 12 seconds remaining.

8. 1987

Northeast Louisiana 43, Marshall 42

Pocatello, Idaho

In a memorable playoff year, Marshall upset No. 1 seeded Appalachian State — a team that had beaten the Thundering Herd during the regular season for the Southern Conference championship — one week after ASU had ended Georgia Southern's two-year title reign.

Northeast Louisiana needed two overtimes to topple snake-bit Northern Iowa 44-41 in the semifinals after beating Eastern Kentucky 33-32 in the quarterfinals.

The Indians continued their late-game heroics in the championship game, scoring 15 points in the final quarter and holding off the Herd for another one-point win. Stan Humphries (26-of-43, 436 yards, three TDs) fired a 10-yard pass to Kenneth Johnson, hit Jackie Harris with a two-point pass and then scampered in from three yards out with 7:19 remaining to tie the game. Teddy Garcia then banged through the extra point that gave the Indians the victory.

Marshall trailed 21-13 at the half, but rallied for 29 points in the third quarter behind QB Tony Peterson (28-of-54, 474 yards and four TDs). But Peterson was intercepted three times, twice by Stephone Avery. The teams split eight turnovers.

9. 2006

Appalachian St. 28, Massachusetts 17

Chattanooga, Tennessee

A freshman quarterback had never taken his team to a national championship, but that was the assignment that faced Armanti Edwards after Trey Elder was slow to recover from shoulder surgery less than two months before the season started.

But Edwards made up for his lack of experience with sheer athleticism, winning 12 consecutive starts as the Mountaineers rolled into its second straight championship game.

UMass had missed the playoffs the previous year with a late-season loss to Army and played with a vengeance to reach the final, including a memorable 19-17 win at Montana in the semifinals behind running back Steve Baylark, quarterback Liam Coen and safety James Ihedigbo.

The Minutemen tried unsuccessfully to rattle Edwards with its blitzing defense, but the cool quarterback kept his team in the game as the contest was tied through three quarters. Kevin Richardson scored the third of four touchdowns from four yards out to give the Mountaineers a 21-14 lead early in the fourth quarter and UMass could only counter with a field goal.

With Edwards (15 carries, 81 yards rushing, 12-of-19 passing for 146 yards) and Richardson (30 carries, 179 yards rushing) moving the ball down the field on the ground and Edwards coming through with a key third-down completion to fellow freshman Josh Johnson, Appalachian State ran down the clock.

Richardson smashed in from the two with 1:51 remaining to make it an 11-point game and safety Corey Lynch, playing with a surgically-repaired arm, broken a month earlier, intercepted a pass to clinch a win for the third straight week.

10. 1991

Youngstown State 25, Marshall 17

Statesboro, Georgia

In the first of three consecutive Youngstown State-Marshall finals, the Penguins rallied for 19 fourth-quarter points to win their first national championship.

Youngstown State was basically playing elimination games from early November on after a 4-3 start, beginning its title drive by knocking two-time defending champion Georgia Southern out of the playoffs with a 19-17 victory on the road. The Penguins also survived a close call in the first round of the playoffs before Jeff Wilkins kicked a winning field goal with six seconds left for a 17-16 win over Villanova. A week later, Nevada's Rick Schwendinger missed a 27-yard field goal wide left with one second left to preserve a 30-28 YSU victory before the Penguins held off Samford 10-0 in the semifinals.

In the title game, touchdown passes of 13-yard to Troy Brown and 18 yards to Ricardo Clark from QB Michael Payton turned a 3-0 YSU lead into a 14-3 Marshall advantage in the third quarter. It was a 17-6 game after the teams traded field goals from Marshall's Dewey Klein and YSU's Jeff Wilkins.

Penguin QB Ray Wilkins started the comeback with a 33-yard scoring strike to Herb Williams with 13:38 left, but a two-point conversion pass failed. Ryan Wood capped off a drive at the 7:09 mark with a three-yard TD plunge to give YSU an 18-17 lead.

Following a Marshall turnover, Tamron Smith extended the lead to eight points with a five-yard scoring surge with 5:42 remaining. Marshall had one last chance and had a desperation pass knocked down in the end zone as the game ended.

11. 1997

Youngstown State 10, McNeese State 9

Chattanooga, Tennessee

In a perplexing game that turned into a defensive struggle, Youngstown State won its fourth title of the decade over a snakebit McNeese State program as the championship moved to Chattanooga for the first time.

Villanova, with its high-powered offense, was 11-0 and ranked No. 1 heading into the playoffs, but the Wildcats were upset 37-34 by No. 8 YSU in the quarterfinals. No. 6 McNeese State outlasted 10-1 and No. 2 Western Illinois 14-12 in the quarterfinals. The Penguins then beat Eastern Washington 25-14 and the Cowboys edged Delaware 23-21 in the semifinals to set up an unlikely championship clash.

McNeese State built a 9-3 lead after three quarters on the strength of a trio of Shonz LaFrenz field goals, but the Cowboys missed out on numerous opportunities to put the game away, including a dropped touchdown pass in the end zone. The game turned for YSU when Jeff Fackrell intercepted a Blake Prejean pass with 12 minutes left at the Penguin 35, killing what could have been a game-clinching drive.

Youngstown State then embarked on a time-consuming drive that lasted 11 plays, with two penalties. Disaster nearly struck for the Penguins when Jared Zwick fumbled at the Cowboy four, but YSU recovered. After an illegal procedure penalty moved the ball to the nine on the next play, Demond Tidwell hit Renauld Ray in the end zone for the game's only touchdown. The most important extra point of Mark Griffith's career gave the Penguins a 10-9 lead with 8:08 remaining.

McNeese State got the ball twice more, but poor field position and the strong Youngstown State defense kept the Cowboys from getting a first down the rest of the way.

The two teams combined for just 23 first downs, 131 yards rushing and 270 yards passing. The final stats showed heartbroken McNeese State with a 201-200 advantage in total offense, but one point short on the scoreboard in this closest of games.

12. 1982

Eastern Kentucky 17, Delaware 14

Wichita Falls, Texas

In a matchup of two coaches who would finish as members of the 300-win club, Eastern Kentucky's Roy Kidd and Delaware's Tubby Raymond, the Colonels became the first team to win two I-AA titles by holding off a late Blue Hen rally.

Richard Bell's 77-yard TD return of a blocked field goal gave ECU a 7-0 lead just 4:20 into the first quarter as the Colonels built a 17-0 advantage after three periods. The Blue Hens broke their drought with 9:35 remaining on a 20-yard option pass from Dan Phelan to Mark Steimer and QB Rick Scully's five-yard TD pass to Tim Sager and two-point toss to Steimer made it a three-point game with 5:38 left.

But that was as close as Delaware could get. The Blue Hens had one last possession and got as far as midfield before the final seconds ran out on the clock. Thompson rushed 24 times for 110 yards and Nicky Yeast added a one-yard TD run in third quarter for the Colonels on day when ECU was outgained 325-251.

13. 1978

Florida A&M 35, Massachusetts 28

Wichita Falls, Texas

The first NCAA championship tournament was a four-game playoff with Florida A&M scoring all its points in the first quarter to defeat Jackson State 15-10 and Massachusetts rolling to 21 first-quarter points to stop Nevada 44-21 in the semifinals.

After falling behind 6-0 on a pair of Sandro Vitello field goals, FAMU got its ground game in gear and began to run over the Minuteman defense, piling up 470 yards rushing. Behind Mike Solomon's 27-carry, 207-yard three-TD performance and McFayden's 22-carry, 177-yard effort, the Rattlers established a 14-6 lead at the break and held off several UMass comeback efforts.

Solomon had scoring runs of 65, 27 and 20 yards in the second half after the Minutemen had surged ahead 15-14 in the third quarter. UMass closed to within seven points in the fourth quarter on a 34-yard pass from Mike McEvelly to Chris Kurtz, but couldn't get any closer before a crowd of 13,604 at Midwestern State University. FAMU won the title despite QB Albert Chester not completing a single pass. but rolled to a 470-241 total offense advantage.

14. 1988

Furman 17, Georgia Southern 12

Pocatello, Idaho

Revenge stirred at Furman after its gut-wrenching 44-42 loss to Georgia Southern in the final seconds of the 1985 national championship game. But the Paladins got their chance to get even with the Eagles in 1988.

Furman battered Georgia Southern with its defense and built lead of 10-3 at halftime and 17-6 in the third quarter. Frankie DeBusk's 19-yard scoring pass to Greg Key and Dwight Sterling's five-yard TD burst bookended a 36-yard Glen Connelly field goal.

Georgia Southern renewed hope of another championship comeback when Mark Giles blocked a Bruce Leicht punt and returned it 30 yards for a touchdown to cut the lead to five. But the Eagles watched their dreams die when defensive end Kelly Fletcher forced a fumble by quarterback Raymond Gross and Wade Sexton recovered at the Furman two.

After an exchange of possessions, Jeff Blankenship capped off Furman's title with an interception to end GSU's final threat.

15. 1998

Massachusetts 55, Georgia Southern 43

Chattanooga, Tennessee

UMass was the most unsung of teams heading into the 1998 playoffs. The Minutemen barely made the playoffs and needed tight wins over McNeese State (21-19), Lehigh (27-21) and Northwestern State (31-21) to reach the final. Georgia Southern, meanwhile was one of the most dominant teams in the history of FCS for the first 14 weeks of the season, cruising to an undefeated record.

But in the championship game, on a rainy day, Georgia Southern stumbled to seven turnovers and UMass took quick advantage. UMass rolled to a 21-7 first-quarter lead and a 38-21 halftime edge. Georgia Southern mounted a furious second-half comeback, but couldn't slow the UMass offense to win.

Marcel Shipp rushed for 244 yards on 35 carries for UMass and Todd Banhead completed 17-of-25 passes for 152 yards. Greg Hill had 228 yards rushing and passed 111 on a day when GSU outgained UMass 595-462, but the Eagles couldn't overcome those turnovers.

16. 1981

Idaho State 34, Eastern Kentucky 23

Wichita Falls, Texas

Eastern Kentucky had earned a split in championship appearances the previous two years, but the Colonels' playoff experience couldn't stop Idaho State in a third consecutive title game.

EKU had avenged a championship loss from 1980 to Boise State with a 23-17 victory on Boise's snow-swept blue Astroturf in the semifinals.

Idaho State had crushed Rhode Island 51-0 and South Carolina State 41-12 to advance to the title clash.

Idaho State exploded for 21 second-quarter points on three consecutive scoring drives to build a 28-9 halftime lead against Eastern Kentucky and held on for an 11-point win. Trailing 3-0 early, the Bengals used a pass from Dirk Koetter to Jerry Bird on a fake field goal from the 29-yard line to turn the momentum of the game. Mike Machurek's 17-yard TD pass a play later to Chris Corp gave ISU a 7-3 lead.

EKU rallied to go up 9-7 in the second period on Hairston's three-yard second-effort blast before Idaho State's offense took complete control. Machurek's passing (29-of-44 for 330 yards and two TDs) keyed the running attack and set up two Dwain Wilson scoring runs. Lamar Fite made it a 34-20 game for the Bengals on the first play of the fourth quarter with a two-yard scoring burst. The Bengals finished with 499 yards of total offense and managed to control the ball for 10 minutes of the fourth quarter.

17. 2004

James Madison 31, Montana 21

Chattanooga, Tennessee

During the regular season, Georgia Southern and Furman had dominated FCS play and many people expected a rematch of Furman's 29-22 win over the Eagles in the championship game. But New Hampshire upset Georgia

Southern on a rainy night in the first round and James Madison came back to beat Furman in the final minute in the quarterfinals. It was one of three road wins for the Dukes on the way to the championship clash.

Montana was facing a second-round trip to Georgia Southern before New Hampshire's win and instead got to play its first three games at home, including one against a Sam Houston State club that had crushed the Grizzlies in Texas during the regular season. Montana won the rematch 34-13 to advance to the final.

Field conditions quickly took the center of attention as new grass turf that had been installed late in the season began to uproot. The game went back and forth with Montana holding a 21-17 lead before James Madison's ground game took control.

Maurice Fenner (29 carries, 164 yards) gave the Dukes the lead with a one-yard plunge ending a nine-play, 72-yard drive late in the third quarter and Justin Rascati's six-yard TD scramble midway through the fourth period capped a 16-play, 80-yard march to clinch the game.

Craig Ochs passed for 371 yards, completing 29-of-38 passes for three TDs, but the Montana defense couldn't stop JMU's big offense line, which opened holes for the Dukes to rush for 314 yards.

18. 2007

Appalachian St. 49, Delaware 21

Chattanooga, Tennessee

After Appalachian State stunned No. 5-ranked FBS team Michigan on the opening Saturday of the season, the Mountaineers had a huge target on their chests as they attempted to win an unprecedented third consecutive national title.

The Mountaineers struggled through injuries to quarterback Armanti Edwards and others during a 9-2 regular season, losing to Southern Conference foes Wofford and Georgia Southern. But ASU tied Wofford for the regular season title and advanced to the playoffs.

Appalachian State's run of eight consecutive playoff wins nearly ended against James Madison in the first round, but the Mountaineers survived for a 28-27 win when Jacque Roman forced a fumble and Pierre Banks recovered as JMU was setting up for a game-winning field goal attempt. The Mountaineers then stormed past Eastern Washington and Richmond to reach the title game.

Delaware won an historic first-ever game with Delaware State at home and then went on the road to defeat previously unbeaten top-seed Northern Iowa and No. 4 seed Southern Illinois to reach the final.

Everything seemed to bounce ASU's way in the title game as the high-powered Mountaineer offense dismantled the Blue Hens to build a 28-7 lead. Instant replay showed Delaware's Omar Cuff was down before crossing the goal line with the Blue Hens trailing 7-0 early and the Mountaineers recovered for a goal-line stand to keep Delaware off the board. ASU then went ahead 21-0 on Devon Moore's 46-yard scoring jaunt and a fumble recovery by offensive lineman Daniel Kilgore in the end zone.

Appalachian State's pass rush harassed QB Joe Flacco (23-of-48 for 334 yards) continually in the second half, ASU's Kevin Richardson (22 carries, 118 yards rushing) scored on a pass reception and a run and Trey Elder broke loose for a 53-yard TD scamper as the Mountaineers extended their lead to 49-14. Edwards was an efficient 9-of-15 passing for 198 yards and added 89 yards on 18 carries as the Mountaineers piled up 556 yards.

19. 1996

Marshall 49, Montana 29

Huntington, West Virginia

Marshall had announced the previous spring that it was leaving for I-A in 1997 and the Herd stormed through their final I-AA season undefeated on the way to the title game. The closest call Marshall had all season was a 24-10 win at arch-rival Appalachian State. Montana also went undefeated to reach the title game, setting up a rematch between the 1995 finals.

But unlike the thrilling final-seconds win by Montana in 1995, this game quickly turned into a rout as Marshall's high-powered offense took control with 541 yards. Erik Kresser hit 18-of-28 passes for 324 yards and four TDs and Randy Moss caught nine of them for 220 yards and four scores as the Herd took a 23-0 lead midway through the second period and a 46-6 edge at the start of the fourth quarter.

Montana closed strong as Brian Ah Yat (36-of-55 for 335 yards and two TDs) led the Grizzlies to 23 fourth-quarter points, but it was far too late to catch a Marshall team that many believe was the best in FCS history.

20. 1984

Montana State 19, Louisiana Tech 6

Charleston, South Carolina

Louisiana Tech had piled up 131 points in three playoff wins, but the Bulldogs were throttled by the Montana State defense, led by Montana State linebacker Mark Fellows, in the championship game.

The Bobcats struck for two first-half touchdowns of 16 and 33 yards from Kelly Bradley to tight end Joe Bignell and two Mark Carter field goals of 33 and 48 yards to take a 19-0 lead at halftime and never looked back. Bradley hit 32-of-57 passes for 334 yards and Bignell had 10 catches for 130 yards. The first TD was set up by a blocked punt and second occurred after MSU had recovered a fumble by QB Kyle Gandy at the Bobcat 27.

Tech didn't manage to score until the final minute of the fourth quarter as MSU held the Bulldogs to minus-25 yards rushing and forced seven turnovers. The Bulldogs didn't manage a first down until the second quarter, were limited to 62 yards in the first half and were burned by two early turnovers.

Tech QB Kyle Gandy (24-of-38 for 287 yards) was sacked 11 times and intercepted on four occasions, but finally tossed a 10-yard touchdown pass to Mike Sherman with 48 seconds left.

21. 2001

Montana 13, Furman 6

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Montana and Furman came in with reputations for strong offenses, but the 2001 championship game turned into a defensive struggle that the Grizzlies managed to win.

The Grizzlies had jelled defensively as the season wore on to win a school-record 15 games, with the only loss a 30-12 setback at Hawaii. Furman stunned Georgia Southern 24-17 in the semifinals, handing the Eagles their first-ever home playoff loss to avenge a regular-season loss to GSU.

Montana wasted several scoring threats, but finally put a 16-play, 99-yard drive that ended with Yohance Humphries' two-yard TD blast midway through the second quarter. Humphries raced for 142 yards on 30 carries.

Chris Snyder added a field goal in the final minute of the first half and another with 6:13 remaining in the fourth period as the Grizzlies built their lead to 13-0. QB John Edwards pecked away at the Paladin defense, completing 18-of-28 passes for 124 yards.

Furman's offense was slowed by a knee injury to tailback Louis Ivory that limited the 2000 Payton Award winner to 33 yards on 12 carries. The run-oriented Paladins could do nothing with the Montana defense, being held to 121 yards of rushing, while quarterback Billy Napier was 10-of-26 for 172 yards and two interceptions.

Most of the crowd missed the only score for Furman when Napier tossed a 54-yard TD pass to James Thomas on the final play of the game.

22. 1993

Youngstown State 17, Marshall 5

Huntington, West Virginia

For the third year in a row, Youngstown State and Marshall advanced to the title game. After splitting the previous two games, YSU winning in 1991 and Marshall taking the 1992 title, the stakes were higher between the rivals in 1993.

Youngstown State took much of the suspense out of things by rolling to a 17-0 first-quarter lead. Darnell Clark raced 50 yards for a touchdown on the second play from scrimmage and Tamron Smith scored two minutes later from the five after the Penguins had blown up a fake punt by the Thundering Herd deep in Marshall territory. Jeff Wilkins added a 19-yard field goal midway through the period to give the Penguin defense all of the points it needed.

Marshall managed only a 27-yard field goal from David Merrick in the third period and YSU took a safety on the final play of the game to avoid punting. YSU limited Marshall to 256 yards. Todd Donnan hit 19-of-29 passes for 207 yards, but couldn't get the Herd into the end zone and was intercepted twice. Smith led the Penguin attack with 109 yards rushing on 24 carries.

23. 1994

Youngstown State 28, Boise State 14

Huntington, West Virginia

Youngstown State's senior class became the second in I-AA history to make it to four consecutive championship games and won its third title during that stretch over Boise State. BSU had been the comeback kids in wins over North Texas, Appalachian State and Marshall, but couldn't overcome a 28-7 deficit in this one.

Boise State wasted a number of first-quarter opportunities with turnovers and penalties before Chris Cook intercepted a Mark Brungard pass and returned it 58 yards to set up a five-yard scoring play from Tony Hilde to Randy Matyshock.

But the Penguins rebounded with 28 straight points to take a 28-7 lead midway through the fourth quarter. Brungard scored on runs of two and 38 yards in the second quarter and tossed a five-yard TD pass to Don Zwistler in the third period. A 55-yard scoring scamper from Shawn Patton clinched the win in the fourth period as Youngstown State rolled to a 263-59 edge in rushing.

24. 1999

Georgia Southern 59, Youngstown State 24

Chattanooga, Tennessee

The 1999 title clash matched the two most prolific programs in FCS history as Georgia Southern and Youngstown State came in with seven national titles. GSU was making its seventh championship game appearance and YSU was in its fifth title contest.

Georgia Southern put together one of the greatest offensive seasons ever on the way to reaching another title game. But the Eagles were only the No. 2 seed in the field, with Tennessee State earning the top spot with an undefeated regular season. TSU's lack of a quality schedule showed up when the Tigers were beaten 24-10 by No. 16 North Carolina A&T in the first round and Youngstown State took out the upset-minded Aggies 41-3 in the quarterfinals.

Youngstown State had to survive a high-octane Florida A&M passing attack 27-24 to reach the championship contest, while Georgia Southern was exacting revenge for its 1998 title loss with a 38-21 victory over Massachusetts in the quarterfinals and grinding out a 28-17 win over Illinois State in the semifinals.

The championship game proved to be Adrian Peterson's playground and the Payton Award winner rushed 25 times for a record 247 yards and three TDs as the Eagles routed the Penguins. Included in his production was one incredible carry for 58 yards in the second quarter that was named "The Run" by observers. Peterson broke tackles of nearly every member of the Penguin defense on this back-breaking burst.

Georgia Southern rolled up 655 yards and broke the game open with 28 points in the second quarter to build a 38-14 lead after Youngstown State had led briefly at 7-3 in the first quarter.

25. 2002

Western Kentucky 34, McNeese State 14

Chattanooga, Tennessee

When McNeese State beat Western Kentucky 38-13 five weeks into the 2002 season, few would have expected that the two teams would meet again in the title game. It wasn't a big surprise that the No. 1 seeded Cowboys were there, but WKU had to go on the road for playoff wins over Western Illinois and Georgia Southern, winning both games 31-28.

Peter Martinez hit a 25-yard field goal with 40 seconds left to beat the Leathernecks and Mike Scifres was short from 61 yards on the final play at WIU. The win over WIU, which avenged a Gateway Conference loss, was marred by an ugly brawl, when a WKU player started swinging a sledgehammer at WIU players after the game.

At Georgia Southern, QB Jason Michael scored on a two-yard run with 46 seconds left and the Hilltoppers had to survive a 56-yard Scott Shelton field goal attempt on the final play that sailed within a yard of the right upright.

McNeese State had surprisingly close calls in victories over Montana State (21-14), Montana (24-20) and Villanova (39-28). In the Villanova game, the Cowboys were helped by two controversial officiating calls, one where an inadvertent whistle negated a Wildcat fumble recovery and touchdown and another where offensive pass interference was called to wipe out a long Brett Gordon pass completion with the Wildcats threatening to regain the lead.

The title game proved to be anti-climatic as Western Kentucky took quick control. Fullback Jeremi Johnson was so sick with the flu beforehand, he barely made it out of the locker room, but he scored on a 16-yard pass from Michael (6-of-10, 185 yards passing) to give the Hilltoppers a 7-0 first-quarter lead.

Jon Frazier (27 carries, 159 yards) broke loose on the WKU option for a 55-yard touchdown run to make it 14-0 early in the second period and he added a 14-yard TD, stretching the lead to 24-6 on the first drive of the third quarter. McNeese tried to keep up from there, but kept missing out on opportunities.

Scott Pendarvis (21-of-38, 244 yards) fired a 15-yard TD strike to fullback Luke Lawton and then hit tight end Jeff Hamilton for two points to cut the lead to 24-14 late in the third quarter, but WKU dominated the fourth quarter with 10 more points to close out the win.

26. 1990

Georgia Southern 36, Nevada 13

Statesboro, Georgia

Southern began a new era with Tim Stowers moving from offensive coordinator to head coach for the retired Erk Russell. The defending national champs struggled to three losses in four games before getting their bearings and reeling off 11 straight wins.

The final one was a dominating performance over Nevada, which had survived back-to-back triple overtime thrillers to beat Furman 42-35 and Boise State 59-52. Georgia Southern had one close playoff call, edging Idaho 28-27 in the quarterfinals.

Raymond Gross, one of the most underappreciated quarterbacks in I-AA history, rushed 31 times for 145 yards in his final game and completed 2-of-5 passes for 69 yards. Gross dashed in from eight yards out to give the Eagles a 14-3 lead in the second quarter and Georgia Southern broke the game open with 16 points in the fourth quarter.

Darryl Hopkins scored on a pair of second-half touchdown runs of three and 18 yards in the second half. Hopkins gained 86 yards on just five carries.

The Eagle defense held Nevada without a touchdown until midway through the fourth quarter and capped off the win with Alex Marsh's 15-yard interception return for a touchdown.

27. 1979

Eastern Kentucky 30, Lehigh 7

Orlando, Florida

Eastern Kentucky quickly established itself as the preeminent program in I-AA behind legendary coach Roy Kidd, making its first of four consecutive title appearances in 1979 and winning its first title.

In 1979, it was a tragedy that focused EKU on the task of winning. Colonel offensive lineman Don McKinnon lost his life to meningitis on March 11, 1979 and the team dedicated the 1979 season to his memory.

The Colonels needed double overtime to knock off Nevada 33-30 in the semifinals on David Flores' 17-yard field goal after allowing 20 points in the final 13:34 of regulation. Lehigh advanced to the championship game with a 28-9 thrashing of Murray State.

The Colonels ran over Lehigh's tough defense for 288 rushing yards, 15 first downs and four TDs on the ground, including 121 yards and a touchdown from fullback Dale Patton. Tailback Alvin Miller added 81 yards. It was a 14-7 game at the half, but EKU broke things open in the second half with 16 points

But the Colonels didn't face any second-half collapses in the final, holding the Engineers scoreless in the final two quarters and limiting Lehigh to 193 yards of total offense altogether. The Engineers also had three turnovers and were 6-of-23 for 102 yards passing.

28. 1986

Georgia Southern 48, Arkansas State 21

Tacoma, Washington

Georgia Southern became the first team to win back-to-back championships behind another memorable performance from QB Tracy Ham.

The Eagles' option offense was in high gear in the playoffs, scoring 155 points in wins over North Carolina A&T, Nicholls State and Nevada. Georgia Southern outlasted Nevada 48-38 to set up the championship match with another high-scoring team from Arkansas State.

But the Eagles limited Arkansas State to one TD in the first half, while piling up 26 points and the Indians couldn't catch up. Ham rushed 24 times for 180 yards and hit 12-of-21 passes for 306 yards to put the game away.

Georgia Southern piled up 603 yards of total offense and Tim Foley set a record with four field goals, all in the first half. Gerald Harris added 98 yards rushing on 22 attempts. The Eagle defense forced three Arkansas State turnovers and held them to 81 yards passing.

29. 2003

Delaware 40, Colgate 0

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Few teams have dominated a playoff season the way Delaware did in 2003. The Blue Hens roared past Southern Illinois 48-7, Northern Iowa 37-7 and Wofford 24-9, holding the Terriers without a touchdown until the final seconds. But Delaware saved its finest performance for last.

Colgate went into the playoffs as an unknown, despite a 12-0 regular season record. But the Raiders stopped Massachusetts 19-7 and Western Illinois 28-27 treacherous snow at home before beating Florida Atlantic 36-24 on the road.

With snow flurries flying at the start of the championship game, Colgate had the weather to its liking, but little else went right for the Raiders. Delaware's tough defense, led by defensive end Shawn Johnson, held Colgate to 157 yards and limited Payton Award winner Jamaal Branch to 55 yards on 20 carries to snap the Raiders' 21-game win streak.

Behind the play of quarterback Andy Hall (12-of-20 for 183 yards), Delaware scored two touchdowns in the first quarter and added a five-yard TD pass from Hall to David Bolar in the second period to make it 20-0. Bolar ended up with two TD catches and Germaine Bennett also scored twice as the Blue Hens completed the most lopsided win in championship game history.

30. 1983

Southern Illinois 43, Western Carolina 7

Charleston, South Carolina

Western Carolina had survived close calls in come-from-behind wins over Colgate (24-23), Holy Cross (28-21) and Furman (14-7) to reach the final, but the Catamounts ran into a buzz saw against Southern Illinois in the first real blowout of the championships.

Southern Illinois turned in an impressive defensive effort in the playoffs, allowing just three touchdowns in wins over Indiana State (23-7) in the quarterfinals, Nevada (23-7) in the semifinals and Western Carolina.

Ahead 10-0 at halftime, the Salukis burst free for 23 points in the third quarter. SIU managed only 313 yards, but the Salukis intercepted seven Jeff Gilbert passes, four of them by Greg Shipp in an NCAA record performance.

Gilbert (16-of-33, 154 yards passing) didn't get the Catamounts on the scoreboard until he fired an 18-yard scoring strike to Kiser with 5:35 left in the game.

Southern Illinois QB Rick Johnson hit 14-of-25 passes for 213 yards and TDs of 39 and 58 yards to offset a poor day on the ground as WCU held the Salukis to 100 yards on 50 carries.