

JMU Nation

HOMECOMING 2015

Alum delivers ESPN GameDay to JMU

BY JIM HEFFERNAN ('96)

For one glorious weekend in October, the eyes of the college football world were on James Madison University as Lee Fitting ('96), senior coordinating producer for ESPN's college sports studio shows, brought the cast and crew of College GameDay to his alma mater for Homecoming 2015.

Harrisonburg was off the beaten path for the traveling weekly college football preview show, which normally stops at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools to preview marquee matchups involving traditional powerhouse programs like Alabama, Michigan, USC, Texas and Ohio State. But with no such games on the schedule for Oct. 24, the door was open to bring GameDay to JMU for the first time — and Fitting delivered.

"JMU absolutely deserves this," Fitting said in an interview leading up to the weekend's festivities. "If it didn't, we wouldn't be here. We're not here just because of me. ... I policed myself on this one. I needed some checks and balances. But all my bosses and colleagues and the guys on the set said, 'It's the right place to be. Let's go.'"

JMU Nation didn't disappoint. A large crowd of students, alumni, faculty and staff turned out Thursday evening to welcome the GameDay bus to campus, and more than 12,000 fans packed the Quad for live broadcasts Friday afternoon and Saturday morning,

'... that was the greatest scene we've ever had for the show, ever.'

— LEE FITTING ('96)

holding signs and showing their Purple Pride for a national television audience. ESPN cameras panned overhead to capture breathtaking views of campus. JMU trended nationally in social media

throughout the week, and the number of page views on jmu.edu and jmusports.com spiked.

"You can't put a price tag on publicity like that," Fitting said. "It's a two-day infomercial and a great recruiting tool, period."

Personally, he said, being back at JMU was special. "Riding into town for the first time in 19 years, you walk through campus and you're just happy. Reconnecting with everyone ... it feels like you're part of a family. It was kind of surreal coming back here and seeing GameDay set up on the Quad. But it was awesome. It was an unbelievable week."

A mass communications major and a native of Long Island, New York, Fitting interned with *ESPN the Magazine* in Manhattan the summer between his junior and senior years at JMU. After graduation, the ESPN television network hired him as a temporary production assistant. Four years later, he was promoted to associate producer, then feature producer.

One day Fitting made a pitch to College GameDay executives explaining why he felt he should be the show's next producer. Much to his surprise, they agreed. "Then I realized, I had never produced an

entire show," he told a group of sport communications students during his visit in October.

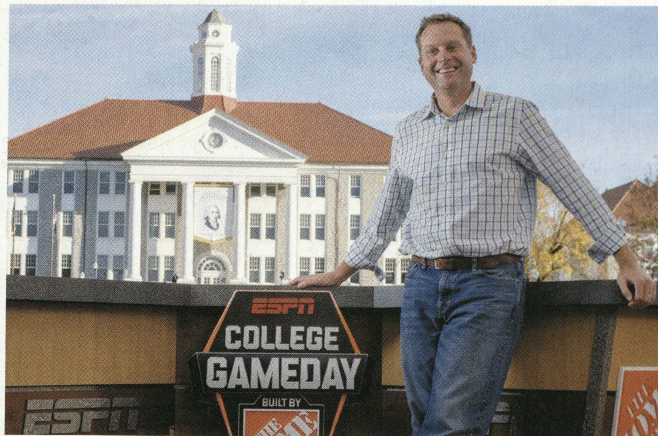
His bosses' faith in him was warranted. Since taking the helm in 2004, Fitting and his GameDay colleagues have earned three Sports Emmy Awards for Outstanding Studio Show Weekly. He also serves as producer of College GameDay for basketball as well as College Football Live, BCS Countdown and other ESPN college sports-related studio specials and content.

Fitting says JMU prepared him well for his career and for

life. "The people here, the teachers here, the community here are all great. The communication school is unbelievable ... [JMU imparts] good people skills and good life skills."

At home and on the road, Fitting fields questions about JMU. "People will say to me, 'My son or daughter is thinking about James Madison. What do you think?' And I say, 'Listen, it's the best. It's a decision that you'll never regret and it will set them up for the rest of their life.' ... My work, my wife and my family all stemmed from here. That's all you can ask for."

Fitting likes to boast that he can spot a JMU graduate, a group that includes ESPN SportsCenter anchor Lindsay Czarniak ('00). "She's personable, cool, smart — just the right mix. When you see someone like that, you know they went to JMU. They fit right in."



A mass communications major at JMU, Lee Fitting ('96) is senior coordinating producer for ESPN's college sports studio shows.