James “J.J.” Johnson’s road to the National Football League took a life-changing tour through the Scooba campus of East Mississippi Community College. Following his senior year at Davidson High School in Mobile, Ala., Johnson joined the United States Naval Academy and was stationed in Aviano, Italy. In the summer of 1994 while working as a postal clerk on assignment in the Mediterranean Sea aboard the USS John F. Kennedy, Johnson contacted his high school coach, Tate Marsh, who in turn reached out to then-EMCC head football coach Tom Goode. Johnson would make the trek to Scooba a year later and his football career took off from there. After rushing for 592 yards and 11 touchdowns as a freshman for the Lions, Johnson blossomed as a feature back despite an injury-plagued sophomore season. In only eight games, he gained 909 yards on the ground and scored a league-best 15 touchdowns to collect NJCAA All-Region 23 honors and help lead EMCC to an 8-2 record in 1996. Having then signed with Coach Jackie Sherrill at Mississippi State University, Johnson put together a pair of 1,000-yard rushing campaigns for the Bulldogs. Following his junior season in which he tallied a team-high 1,069 rushing yards and 12 touchdowns on 217 carries, Johnson ran for an SEC-most 1,383 yards and a dozen scores in 236 attempts as a senior. In addition to being a consensus All-SEC First Team selection, he was named second-team All-American by The Sporting News as well as the recipient of the 1998 Conerly Trophy as Mississippi’s best college football player. Johnson then realized a childhood dream by being selected in the second round (39th pick overall) of the 1999 NFL Draft by the Miami Dolphins. He enjoyed a productive rookie season with a club-best 558 rushing yards and four touchdowns along with catching 15 passes for 100 yards on the year. Having played in 36 contests during his three-year pro career with the Dolphins, Johnson finished out his NFL stint with the Cleveland Browns in 2002.