**Bayless Overcomes Adversity to win Bart Starr MVP Trophy**

**By Tim Gayle**

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**MONTGOMERY -** It hasn’t been the senior year Omar Bayless envisioned.

Sure, on the field Bayless was one of the nation’s best receivers, a semifinalist for the Biletnikoff Award as the nation’s best college receiver after hauling in 84 passes for 1,473 yards and 16 touchdowns this year.

Off the field, it seemed the last two years have been one test after another that threatened to derail his season.

On Saturday night, he went out on top with a Camellia Bowl-record 180 yards on nine receptions to lead Arkansas State to a 34-26 win over Florida International at Cramton Bowl on Saturday night.

“Just put in the hard work and everything takes care of itself,” Bayless said. “The main thing I did throughout this year is put God first. And I learned how to overcome adversity. No matter what you go through, you can get through it because God doesn’t put more on you than you can handle. I just can’t thank God enough for it.”

Bayless struggled with his emotions during 2018 as a former high school teammate was shot and killed, a cousin passed away, then an uncle, then another high school friend. That paled in comparison to the adversity the entire team would face in August, 2019, when Wendy Anderson, the wife of the head coach, lost her battle with cancer.

Wendy had been a source of strength for Bayless when he faced adversity in 2018 and now he would do the same for Blake Anderson as his world came apart.

“Days went by when I knew he was down,” Bayless said. “I would just always text him and uplift him. Just to get this for him is an honor. I just appreciate him for never giving up on me through all the things that we’ve been through. The only thing me and Coach ‘A’ did was lean on each other all year long because we were both going through things. So we just kept each other uplifted.”

It’s difficult to put the high-powered Arkansas State offense on one person, but Bayless is the cornerstone, the foundation for a squad that put together eight wins despite an injury-filled season that robbed the team of its starting quarterback and struggles to stop opponents with its defense.

The Red Wolves’ first drive include two third-down conversions from Bayless on catches from quarterback Layne Hatcher, capped by a 4-yard grab in the back of the end zone for the game’s first points. He was instrumental in setting up a field goal late in the first half with a 51-yard reception and had a 52-yard reception late that led to a key touchdown after FIU had trimmed the deficit to a point.

“We knew going into the game those two wide receivers (Bayless and Kirk Merritt) were outstanding,” FIU coach Butch Davis said. “I think the statistic was like 72 percent of their touchdowns had at least one explosive play in the drive. You knew going into it they were going to take shots. They’re going to take it one-on-one and see if you can cover and those two kids are very, very talented and they made some big plays.”

Florida International came into the game with one of the top passing defenses in the nation, allowing just 178.5 yards per game to rank sixth nationally. With Bayless and Merritt, the Red Wolves didn’t flinch, passing for a Camellia Bowl-record 393 yards.

“It was strength versus strength,” Anderson said. “We felt like our wideouts were going to be tough to cover and they were. We just felt like we had to take what has been the best component of our offense all year and say thank you for playing man coverage and then try to go beat them.

“We were respectful of them, too. We weren’t trying to be careless, we just felt like we had good matchups that we could win and we did most of the day.”

His impact on the game earned Bayless the Bart Starr Most Valuable Player Award, the first receiver in the six-year history of the bowl to earn the award. He joins Bowling Green quarterback James Knapke (2014), Appalachian State tailback Marcus Cox (2015), Appalachian State quarterback Taylor Lamb (2016), Middle Tennessee linebacker Darius Harris (2017) and Georgia Southern quarterback Shai Werts (2018) as Bart Starr MVP winners.

Anderson didn’t have a vote, but he had to be happy the Laurel, Miss., native won the award.

“We’ve talked a lot about my relationship with Omar and I feel the same way about all those guys,” Anderson said. “I know he gets a lot of publicity and our relationship is unique but there’s no doubt we’re very close. I recruited him from the beginning and his relationship with Wendy and my family is closer than normal.”

**2019 CAMELLIA BOWL PREGAME:**

Weather: Light rain, 53 degrees, WIND: NNE 4 mph

Kickoff was at 4:35 p.m. (CT)

Arkansas State won the toss and deferred to second half

FIU will receive and defend the South goal

**2019 CAMELLIA BOWL NOTES:**

Arkansas State defeated FIU 34-26 in the sixth annual Camellia Bowl

All six games have been one possession games

The 8-points was the largest margin of victory in bowl history

The six Camellia Bowls have been decided by 25 total points

**OMAR BAYLESS WINS BART STARR MVP TROPHY**

Arkansas State senior wide receiver Omar Bayless won the Bart Starr MVP Trophy

Bayless caught nine passes for 180 yards and one TD

He set the Camellia Bowl record with 180 receiving yards

The previous record was 100 yards by Roger Lewis (Bowling Green) in 2014

Bayless caught a 4-yard TD pass on the opening drive of the game

He had a 51-yard catch to set up a second-quarter FG

He added a 52-yard catch to set the fourth quarter TD

**CAMELLIA BOWL TEAM RECORDS:**

There were 14 total teams records set in tonight’s game

Most Yards – 525, Arkansas State (500, Bowling Green, 2014)

Combined Yardage – 969 (915, South Alabama and Bowling Green, 2014)

Passing Yards – 393, Arkansas State (369, Bowling Green, 2014)

Combined Passing Yards – 705 (648, South Alabama and Bowling Green, 2014)

Most Passing Touchdowns – 4, Arkansas State (3, Eastern Mich., 2018, Ark. State, 2017)

First Downs – 31, Arkansas State (30, Arkansas State, 2017)

First Downs by Passing – 20, Arkansas State (17, Arkansas State, 2017)

First Downs by Penalty – 5, FIU (4, Arkansas State, 2017)

Combined First Downs – 54 (47, Mid Tenn and Ark. St., 2017; So. Ala. And Bowling Green, 2014)

Length of Game – 3:58 (3:57, 2017, Arkansas State and Middle Tennessee)

Third-Down Conversions – 63.2 percent, Arkansas State, 12-19

(42.9, Arkansas State, 9-21, 2017, Middle Tennessee 6-14, 2017)

Most Penalties – 10, Arkansas State (10, Middle Tennessee, 2017)

Most Yards Penalized – 142, Arkansas State (87, Middle Tennessee, 2017)

**CAMELLIA BOWL INDIVIDUAL RECORDS:**

There were 8 total individual records set in tonight’s game

Total Offense, Most Yards – 430, Layne Hatcher, ASU (392, James Knapke, Bowling Green, 2014)

Most TD Passes – 4, Layne Hatcher, ASU (3, Mike Glass, E. Michigan, 2018; Justice Hansen, ASU, 2017)

Passing Yards – 393, Layne Hatcher, Arkansas State (368, James Knapke, Bowling Green, 2014)

Most Receptions – 10, Austin Maloney, FIU (7, three players)

Receiving Yards – 180, Omar Bayless, Arkansas State (137, Roger Lewis, Bowling Green, 2014)

Field Goals – 4, Jose Borregales, FIU (3, Tyler Bass, Georgia Southern, 2018)

Most Points by Kicking – 14, Jose Borregales, FIU (11, Tyler Bass, Georgia Southern, 2018)

Longest Field Goal – 52, Jose Borregales, FIU (50, Tyler Bass, Georgia Southern, 2018)

**FIRST QUARTER NOTES:**

Arkansas State led 14-0 after the first quarter

The 14-0 score was the largest first quarter deficit in Camellia Bowl history

ASU ran 31 plays for 149 yards in the first quarter

Arkansas State was 7-for-8 on third down in the first quarter

ASU was 4-for-4 on third down on its opening TD drive

**SECOND QUARTER NOTES:**

Arkansas State led 20-13 at halftime

FIU outscored ASU 13-6 in the second quarter

FIU scored on all three second quarter possessions (TD; 2 FG)

Arkansas State was 9-for-12 on third down in the first half

The Red Wolves had 110 yards on 12 third down plays (9.2 per play)

ASU QB Layne Hatcher was 6-for-7 passing for 59 yards on third down

FIU nickel back Darreo Jackson had nine tackles (6 solo) and one 1 (PBU) in the first half

Arkansas State DE Jeffmario Brown was ejected for targeting on the first play of second quarter

**THIRD QUARTER NOTES:**

FIU outscored ASU 10-7 in the third quarter

FIU owned a 23-13 scoring edge in second and third quarters

Arkansas State scored on its opening drive to take a 27-13 lead

The 14-point margin equaled it largest lead of the game

FIU scored the final 10 points on the quarter to trim the lead to 27-23

FIU wide receiver Tony Gaiter was ejected after a personal foul penalty with 6:22 left