**DARIUS HARRIS WINS BART STARR MVP TROPHY**

MONTGOMERY - It’s not often a defensive player can be on the field for 97 plays, surrender 30 points and still earn most valuable player honors.

Middle Tennessee outside linebacker Darius Harris was in the right place at the right time. In fact, he was in the right place most of the night.

“It’s an honor to be MVP,” Harris said. “I can’t give enough credit to the team and those guys, the hard work they put in, the preparation they put in prior to this game. It’s just an honor for us to get this win as a team.”

Harris became the first defensive player in the short four-year history of the Raycom Media Camellia Bowl to win the Bart Starr MVP Award. Previous winners were Bowling Green quarterback James Knapke, Appalachian State tailback Marcus Cox and Appalachian State quarterback Taylor Lamb.

For a defensive player to win the award, you’d think it would take a superhuman effort in a titanic defensive struggle between the two teams. Instead, Middle Tennessee and Arkansas State combined for 65 points in the Blue Raiders’ 35-30 victory and Arkansas State ran an incredible 97 plays.

“Coming into the game, we knew that they were a tempo team,” Harris said. “Going into a game, you can’t pick how plays you play. You just put the ball down and play the next snap. It’s just our mindset. Put the ball down and play the next snap and whatever happens, just live to see another down.”

That’s was the mindset that survived the Red Wolves’ second-half rally that came up short as Middle Tennessee came up with a pair of big sacks in Arkansas State’s final drive to turn back the Blue Raiders’ former Sun Belt Conference foe.

“The defense was outstanding,” Middle Tennessee coach Rick Stockstill said. “I thought they were really special tonight. They completed screens, that’s all they completed. They got a couple comebacks and then they hit the seam, the vertical there where our safety didn’t get over the top fast enough, but our defense really played well tonight. They put pressure on the quarterback. I thought our defense was really special tonight.”

Harris, a fourth-year junior from Horn Lake, Miss., turned in one of the biggest plays of the game when he sacked Arkansas State quarterback Justice Hansen by slinging him to the ground and forcing a fumble which fellow linebacker DJ Sanders scooped up and returned 54 yards for a touchdown and a 14-3 lead.

“It was an inside blitz,” Harris said. “I guess the guard and the tackle kind of had some miscommunication and he kind of chipped me and he started rolling out. I never gave up on the play and DJ did a good job taking away the screen, because that was (Hansen’s) first look. He took it away so he put the ball down, didn’t have anywhere to throw.”

Harris would finish with 12 tackles, good for third all-time on the short four-year history of the Raycom Media Camellia Bowl. He also had a pair of pass breakups to go with his sack and forced fumble.

More importantly, he helped the Blue Raiders win their bowl game since 2009 and give Middle Tennessee players and fans some comfort heading into the offseason in what has been an unusual year filled with injuries.

“It feels good to just win a bowl game and just send the seniors off the right way,” Harris said. “From not supposed to be in a bowl game to winning, it is just an amazing feeling. I’m just glad that we got Coach a win and the seniors went out the right way.”