**WERTS WINS BART STARR MVP TROPHY**

**MONTGOMERY -** With the game hanging in the balance on fourth and 10, Georgia Southern quarterback Shai Werts took off for 29 yards to the Eastern Michigan 30 to set up a game-winning field goal by Tyler Bass three plays later in the fifth Raycom Media Camellia Bowl at Cramton Bowl on Saturday night.

“I really should’ve thrown the ball,” Werts said. “Ellis (Richardson) was wide open.”

Werts didn’t dazzle anyone with his 4 of 7 passing performance, but he was crucial in directing the Georgia Southern offense to a 23-21 victory to give the Eagles their first 10-win season in Football Bowl Subdivision history.

“Our guys never quit believing, our fans never quit believing,” Georgia Southern coach Chad Lunsford said. “We’ve talked about it all year, our mental toughness. I think that’s what that drive was. It got to a fourth-down situation, the offensive line did a good job, Shai was able to scramble and really make a good play after having a self-inflicted wound early in the drive and being able to make that play and get us in field goal range.”

And while there were plenty of heroes on the Georgia Southern sideline, Werts was the one who made crucial play after crucial play on Saturday night, driving the Sun Belt Conference team down the field after Eastern Michigan grabbed a one-point lead with 3:33 remaining.

“I didn’t say anything at the beginning of the drive,” Werts said, “but a few drives into the second half I kind of noticed we were a little dead. I just talked to them, told them we had to finish and get that spark back. We fought through and got the job done.”

To put the drive in perspective. Georgia Southern is a shotgun option team, accustomed to moving the ball on the ground. Werts did set a school record for freshmen quarterbacks in 2017 for both passing yards (passing the legendary Tracy Ham’s 1983 mark) and total offense, but the 5-foot-11, 200-pound sophomore isn’t accustomed to bringing the Eagles back from a late deficit with his arm.

“We haven’t been in those situations a lot,” Lunsford admitted. “We always talk about being able to finish the football game, we always talk about winning the fourth quarter. Now, we didn’t (Eastern Michigan outscored the Eagles 7-6 in the final 15 minutes) but we scored the last points to put the game away. It’s all about our guys understanding that they can do it one more time and never give up.”

Werts, whose 13-yard completion to Malik Murray on a third-and-12 play led to Werts’ 26-yard scoring run for the game’s first points, did complete a pass to Richardson on the second play of the final drive, but the rest came on the ground. None was bigger than the 29-yard scramble on fourth and 10. He dropped and surveyed the field, then saw the entire left side of the field open and started running.

“Wes (Fields) had made a block on the linebacker and there was no one in front of me, so I just took off,” Werts said.

Eastern Michigan, who had dropped its linebackers in coverage, couldn’t get a hand on Werts until he had run 20 yards into field goal range for Bass, who had drilled a 50-yard field goal earlier in the game.

“I wasn’t really surprised,” Werts said. “I felt like they were going to play the (first down) sticks. They just gave me a running lane and I took it.”

He finished with 79 yards rushing and two touchdowns on 16 carries, adding 33 yards passing. His 26-yard scoring run is the longest in bowl history for a quarterback and his fourth-quarter run helped earn him the Bart Starr Most Valuable Player Trophy.

Werts was the fifth recipient of the award, following Bowling Green quarterback James Knapke in 2014, Appalachian State tailback Marcus Cox in 2015, Appalachian State quarterback Taylor Lamb in 2016 and Middle Tennessee linebacker Darius Harris in 2017.