**2021 TaxAct Camellia Bowl**

**Saturday, Dec. 25, 2021**

**Grainger Takes Home Bart Starr MVP Award**

**By Tim Gayle**

**MONTGOMERY -** Darren Grainger offered no insight into the type of game he would have in the early moments of the TaxAct Camellia Bowl on Christmas afternoon.

“There in the first half, he made a couple of what I call dreaded sinkers,” Georgia State coach Shawn Elliott said. “I said your two legs are better than your two arms. Let’s keep it on the ground and run the football.

“He just smiled. And then he threw a little corner route on a naked bootleg and he makes an awesome throw. He’s smiling off to the side, looking at me. When you get a chance to encounter someone like him, it makes coaching so much fun.”

The Panthers saved their best game of the 2021 season for their last, routing Ball State 51-20 at Cramton Bowl on Saturday in what was Grainger’s best game as well.

The transfer from Furman stepped into a starting role early in the year against Charlotte and accounted for 180 yards (50 rushing, 139 passing), so it wasn’t like it was unexpected. Nearly a month later, he threw for 230 yards and four touchdowns against Louisiana-Monroe and later in the year, he returned to his hometown of Conway, S.C., and completed 18 of 24 passes for 198 yards and a pair of touchdowns in a win over Coastal Carolina.

On Saturday, Grainger delivered again, completing 79 percent of his passes (15 of 19) for 203 yards and three touchdowns, while rushing for 122 yards and another touchdown.

“I really just wanted to win,” he said. “It really didn’t matter how it came. We were talking so much about getting the (team’s) eighth win this week so I really just wanted to get the win and contribute however much I could.”

In the third quarter, the Panthers broke open a tight game with touchdowns on three consecutive possessions. Grainger capped a 75-yard drive with a 10-yard touchdown pass to Robert Lewis; ran 34 yards down the sideline for another score five minutes later; and threw to Aubry Payne for another touchdown with 1:33 remaining in the quarter to turn the contest into the biggest rout in Camellia Bowl history.

“It was great just to get that momentum, get that ball rolling,” Grainger said, “get the game out of reach. Offensively and defensively, we played great. We came out with a great ‘W.’”

From transfer to backup to starter to winner of the Bart Starr MVP Award, Grainger’s year paid off for the fourth-year junior and his Georgia State teammates.

“Just knowing whenever I got my opportunity to take full advantage of it, that was the whole mindset for me this year,” he said. “I got my opportunity and I just did the best with it. I tried to bring the team together. We were down at one point during the year … and try to get some wins to get the momentum going.”

On Saturday, he was nearly flawless after a few early moments. When asked about Elliott’s early input, Grainger had a quick response.

“Just keep Coach Elliott quiet,” he said. “Hey, I made the one throw and gave him the ‘cannon’ thing, so it was fun. That’s a fun guy to be around and he keeps me motivated. You can’t slack off around him. He holds you to the highest expectation. He makes me better.”

His 34-yard scoring run was the longest by a quarterback in Camellia Bowl history and his 79 percent completion percentage was the highest in the eight-year history of the bowl. Grainger feels his biggest contribution was the team’s performance to close out 2021 should provide great momentum for 2022.

“Just want to keep that confidence for next year,” he said. “Keep everything rolling. We put up 51 points tonight so next year, coming in, we want to keep the same momentum we had (and) keep the ball rolling.”