**ON THE MARKS**

*Buffalo Backup Running Back Wins MVP Trophy*

**MONTGOMERY -** Shortly before the kickoff of the seventh Camellia Bowl on Friday afternoon, Buffalo coach Lance Leipold looked at Kevin Marks and knew the junior tailback didn’t look at the bowl game like just another game.

And who could blame him? The nation’s leading rusher was sidelined for the Bulls and into those huge shoes would step Marks.

“I could tell Kevin was a little more nervous for this game,” Leipold said. “I think he really embraced his role as the co-pilot in the backfield but I knew it would just take a couple of runs for him to get going.”

Actually, it didn’t take a couple of runs. On Buffalo’s first carry, Marks sprinted around right end for 22 yards, the longest yardage for a first play in Camellia Bowl history. Marks hit a lull in the third quarter as the Marshall defense stiffened, but he finished with a Camellia Bowl-record 35 carries and scored the game-winning touchdown on a 2-yard run with 1:09 left to give the Bulls a 17-10 victory and earn the running back the Bart Starr Most Valuable Player trophy in the process.

“It means a lot for the team,” Marks said. “I know it was a rough (performance in last week’s loss in the) MAC championship but what we did today against one of the top defenses in the nation is big time.”

By halftime, Marks had carried the ball 23 times for 117 yards, helping the Bulls to a 10-0 lead. It was a remarkable first-half showing against the nation’s top-rated scoring defense and second-rated rushing defense, but it didn’t surprise his coach.

“Kevin has started games in this program,” Leipold said. “You think about the Temple game and how physical he played at Temple that year, his big runs against Central Michigan where he showed his speed. Kevin has shown it before. It was great to see him play well today. I was proud of him.”

Last week’s knee injury to starting tailback Jaret Patterson left his status for the bowl game up in the air. He rested a couple of days, worked out lightly late in the week, then took the field for warmups before reporting back to Leipold that his knee was not responding well enough for him to take the field.

For a lot of programs, the news would have been disastrous, but Marks ranks fifth nationally in yards per carry (7.8) and averages 100.5 yards per game, so the absence of Patterson only meant that Marks would get more carries.

“We were tying to get JP ready throughout the week,” Marks said, “but our best option was just to keep him safe.”

Marks had 603 yards rushing this season, but had not carried the ball more than 16 times in a game this year (after a career-high 17 last year against Penn State). To the junior from Norfolk, Va., the Thundering Herd defense was a lot like the Ball State defense he faced the week before in gaining 93 yards on nine carries.

“Both teams had a pretty good defense,” Marks said. “With this game, it was all about patience. With a good defense like that, it’s a game of inches. Just following my O-line, studying the plays all week and knowing the tendencies they have, our O-line showed up today and got the job done.”

As impressive as he looked in the first half, most of his carries went for a yard in the second half, where he managed a paltry 21 yards on 12 carries. Still, the last two yards were the most important, providing for the game-winning points.

In the process, his 138 yards rank third in Camellia Bowl history behind Appalachian State tailback Marcus Cox, who had 162 yards in 2015 and 143 in 2016. His 35 carries shattered the bowl record set by the 2015 Bart Starr MVP recipient, who had 24 carries.

On this particular day, however, Marks wasn’t thinking about individual honors. He was just relieved he had filled in nicely for Patterson and was flying back to Buffalo with the championship trophy.

“It just shows the relentless team we have, the fight to never give up and the will to win, the passion we have for this game,” he said.