**BOWLING GREEN WINS THRILLER**

**By Tim Gayle**

**Staff Writer**

**MONTGOMERY -** James Knapke capped an exciting fourth quarter with a 78-yard bomb to Roger Lewis with 64 seconds left to lift Bowling Green to a 33-28 win over South Alabama in the inaugural Raycom Media Camellia Bowl at Montgomery’s Cramton Bowl on Saturday night.

Bowling Green (8-6) led for the entire contest until South Alabama tailback Terrance Timmons scored on a 3-yard run with 1:20 left for a 28-27 lead. It took the Falcons just 16 seconds to recover as Knapke hit a streaking Lewis down the right sideline on the first play from scrimmage after the Jaguars’ touchdown.

“I saw the safety one-on-one with me and I just ran,” Lewis said. “I really didn’t have much jitters because this is what we practice every day.”

Lewis finished with 137 yards receiving and a pair of touchdowns on four catches. Teammate Gehrig Dieter added 108 yards on seven receptions for the Falcons, who snapped a three-game losing streak and a four-game bowl drought in the process.

“We want to be aggressive with that play call,” Knapke said. “Rog was one-on-one and he won his matchup. My job is to just get him the ball and he made the play after that.”

The wild fourth-quarter finish kept a crowd of 20,256 entertained after the defenses grabbed much of the attention in the second and third quarters of the inaugural game pitting teams from the Sun Belt and Mid-American conferences. Knapke completed 25 of 39 passes for 368 yards and the two touchdown passes to Lewis to earn the Bart Starr Most Valuable Player Award.

“Obviously, it’s a great honor to win this award with his name on it,” Knapke said. “Winning the first annual is obviously a huge honor as well.”

For Knapke, it was a storybook ending to his first year as a starter. Pressed into service by an injury to Matt Johnson, the redshirt freshman weathered the late-season offensive struggles with one of the best performances of his collegiate career.

“What a story,” Bowling Green coach Dino Babers said. “How he started (playing in) the first game, finishing up the WKU game, started the VMI game, big win over Indiana. Takes us to a 5-2 record, then we have a little bit of a slide. Still win the East, still get to the MAC Championship Game, then we have a bowl game like this. Man, who would have ever thunk that his name would be underneath Bart Starr for the MVP of this bowl game in its inaugural year? That’s an OMG right there.”

Bowling Green scored on its first two possessions with a 44-yard scoring reception by Lewis and a 53-yard catch by Dieter setting up Travis Greene’s 1-yard leap for a 14-0 lead. But South Alabama (6-7) refused to fold, cutting the lead in half on Kendall Houston’s career-long scoring run of 44 yards, then settling in defensively to keep within striking distance.

“We weren’t ourselves (early),” South Alabama linebacker Maleki Harris said. “We just had to calm down and realize that the grass is green, the lines are white, it’s just a 100-yard field. It’s just another football game.”

Harris set a school record with 18 tackles and free safety Terrell Brigham added 12 as the Jaguars, making their first-ever bowl appearance in only their second year of eligibility, pulled back into the contest on an 18-yard pass from Brandon Bridge to DeMarrion Buford-Hughes, then took the lead on Timmons’ 3-yard run.

But the last touchdown came too quickly, leaving the Falcons time to answer.

“My hats off to Bowling Green,” South Alabama coach Joey Jones said. “They made a lot of big plays on offense. I think they hit us with about four deep balls. They earned those. It was one of those games that came down to a play or two and we didn’t make those plays at the end of the game.”

Both teams struggled running the ball, with South Alabama gaining just 136 yards and Bowling Green averaging 2.7 yards per run in gaining 131.

“We just wanted to make them one dimensional,” Harris said. “We knew they had that tempo offense and we knew that it worked off of big plays. One thing that hurts you in a tempo offense is the run game … so stopping the run was definitely our big thing coming in. We just didn’t make the plays we needed to in the secondary.”

After the Falcons’ last touchdown, South Alabama would have one last hope but Bridge’s deep out to Shavarez Smith was tipped by Falcon defensive back Nick Johnson and intercepted by teammate Jude Adjei-Barimah.

Bridge was 20 of 37 for 279 yards and a touchdown but was intercepted twice. Danny Woodson Jr., led the Jaguar receivers with 122 yards on six catches.

“We’re not quite there yet,” Jones said. “Here we are a brand new program. They’ve probably got a few more players than we do overall, but there we are with 1:10 left, we’re up against a program that’s had football for probably 100 years. There are some positives to this, but I don’t like losing. It was a tough loss.”

In the other locker room, Babers and his team were ecstatic in winning the first-ever Raycom Media Camellia Bowl.

“I wish I could take your TV camera into that locker room with me before I walked back over here (for postgame interviews) and let it run for about five minutes and hand you the tape, every time somebody wants to eliminate a bowl like this,” Babers said in response to a question about the new bowl. “To end the season with a bowl win and to end the season with an opportunity to play in a bowl is a fabulous gift to student-athletes.

“I get the championship playoff. I get that. I get being number one and having a team that’s capable of playing for that. I understand that. But everything underneath that, there’s nothing better than bowls.”

**-30-**