**Arkansas State Passes Camellia Bowl Test**

**By Barry Allen**

**Camellia Bowl Media Relations**

**MONTGOMERY -** Arkansas State had lost four of its last five bowl games, including its last visit to the Camellia Bowl in 2017.

After a season of filled with emotions and injuries, the Red Wolves were determined to turn those bowl fortunes.

On a soggy night at the historic Cramton Bowl, Arkansas State literally passed that test with fly colors.

Redshirt freshman quarterback Layne Hatcher set Camellia Bowl records with 393 passing yards and four touchdowns, and senior wide receiver Omar Bayless set the Camellia Bowl record with 180 receiving yards leading the Red Wolves to a 34-26 win over FIU in the sixth annual Camellia Bowl in Montgomery.

Arkansas State (8-5) led by 14 points on two separate occasions but the game was not decided until a pair of late interceptions by the A-State defense sealed the win.

“Nobody wants to end the season with two straight losses,” an emotional Blake Anderson said after the game. “These kids have been through a lot. I am happy they were able to end the season on a positive note.”

Bayless caught nine passes for 180 yards and one touchdown to earn the Bart Starr Most Valuable Player Trophy. He caught a 4-yard touchdown pass on the game’s opening drive and added two long receptions to set two more A-State scores. Bayless hauled in a 51-yard pass that led to a second quarter field goal. His 52-yard catch in the fourth quarter set up the final touchdown for the Red Wolves.

Arkansas State set Camellia Bowl records for total yards (525), passing yards (393), first downs (31) and touchdown passes (4).

The Red Wolves scored on two of their first three possessions to take a 14-0 lead. A-State capped a 15-play opening drive when Hatcher threw a 4-yard pass to Bayless to put the Red Wolves up 7-0 with 9:25 left in the first quarter. Hatcher threw his second touchdown pass of the first quarter when he found Kirk Merritt on a 9-yarder to make it 14-0. The pass to Merritt capped a 13-play, 90-yard drive.

FIU (6-7) found its rhythm in the second quarter, outscored the ASU 13-6 over the next 15 minutes to make to 20-13 at halftime.

Senior running back Napoleon Maxwell put the Panthers on the board with a 3-yard run to cut the deficit to 14-7 with 12:50 left in the half.

The teams then traded field goals the remained of the half.

ASU kicker Blake Grupe stretched the lead to 17-7 with a 46-yard field goal with 9:31 left. FIU kicker Jose Borregales followed with a 25-yard field goal to make it 17-10 on the next possession. Grupe added a 37-yard field goal for the Red Wolves to make to 20-10 and Borregales capped the scoring with a 25-yard field goal with 25 seconds left in the half. A-State led 20-13 at halftime.

Arkansas State stretched the lead back to 14 points with a touchdown on its opening drive of the third quarter. Hatcher found Reed Tyler on a 15-yard pass to give ASU a 27-13 lead with 12:22 left in the third quarter.

Like the first half, FIU answered.

FIU took advantage of a Hatcher fumble and turned into a quick touchdown.

FIU quarterback James Morgan fired a 15-yard touchdown pass to senior wide receiver Austin Maloney to cut the deficit to 27-20 last in the third quarter. FIU made it 27-23 on Borregales 48-yard field goal with 38 seconds left in the third quarter.

Maloney finished with a Camellia Bowl-record 10 receptions for 178 yards and one touchdown.

Borregales capped a 13-0 run by the Panthers with a 52-yard field goal in the fourth quarter to trim the lead to 27-26. The 52-yard field goal was the longest in Camellia Bowl history. He also set the Camellia Bowl record with his fourth field goal of the game.

FIU was posted to take the lead after another turnover in the fourth quarter, but Borregales pulled a 29-yard field goal to the left with 5:10 left in the game.

ASU took advantage of the missed kick and drove 80 yards in five plays for the game-clinching score. Hatcher capped the scoring with a 13-yard touchdown pass to Jonathan Adams.

The Arkansas State defense did it part, too. The Red Wolves forced two turnovers on FIU’s final two possessions to seal the win. Senior cornerback Jeremy Smith thwarted the first drive with an interception at the A-State 38-yard line. Senior nickel back Darreon Jackson sealed the win with an interception at the A-State 47-yard line in the final 30 seconds.