**DECEMBER 16, 2017**

**MIDDLE TENNESSEE WINS RAYCOM MEDIA CAMELLIA BOWL**

**MONTGOMERY –** Middle Tennessee defeated Arkansas State in the highest scoring game in Raycom Media Camellia Bowl history. But head coach Rick Stockstill still praised his defense following the Blue Raiders 35-30 win in front 20,612 fans on a chilly first day of the college football bowl season.

Arkansas State (7-5) ran 97 plays and piled up 462 total yards, but the Blue Raiders defense made plays in key situations to earn the win.

Middle Tennessee (7-6) had nine pass breakups, six sacks and forced three turnovers in the win. The Blue Raiders closed the game with back-to-back sacks to thwart the Red Wolves final attempt at a last second win.

“The defense played really well,” Stockstill said. “Only thing they completed were a bunch of screens. They called 100 pass interferences on us. It seemed like every time. I thought our guys played really well. They got behind us on that one ball there at the 5-minute mark, but we played really well. “

Middle Tennessee linebacker Darius Harris was named the Bart Starr Most Valuable Player after he recorded 12 tackles (8 solos tackles), two pass breakups, one tackle for loss, one sack and forced one fumble. Linebacker D.J. Sanders added 10 tackles, one sack and scooped up the ball on Harris’ forced fumble and raced 54 yards for a second quarter touchdown.

“It was an inside blitz for me,” Harris recalled. “I kind of shook it out and I guess the guard and the tackle kind of had some miscommunication and he kind of chipped me and he started rolling out. I never gave up on the play and DJ (Sanders) did a good job taking away the screen, because that was his first look and he took it away so he put the ball down, didn’t have anywhere to throw. I got the fumble and DJ came back and scoop and score.”

Arkansas State head coach Blake Anderson called a turning point in the game.

“I think the other big turnover was for a touchdown. That has to be a sack, a tackle for loss but not points, and Justice knows that. We work ball security to the highest level, and that ball can’t end up on the ground.”

The defense withstood a late run by the Red Wolves to give the Blue Raiders their first bowl win since the 2009 season. Trailing 35-23, Arkansas State went 51 yards in four plays to trim the lead to 35-30 with 5:06 left in the game. Justice Hansen fired a 41-yard touchdown pass to Christian Booker to cap the 48-second drive.

Middle Tennessee held the ball for more than three minutes but could not pick up the game-clinching first down in the final minutes. A-State forced a punt and took over at its own 9-yard line with 1:27 left in the game.

Hansen was sacked on first down by Khalil Brooks, but then hit Blake Mack on an 11-yard pass. Hansen then found Chris Murray for a 28-yard gain to the Red Wolves 42-yard line. The drive then stalled as Sanders and Darrius Liggins recorded back-to-back sacks as time expired.

Hansen completed 31-of-57 passes for 337 yards with three touchdowns. He set Camellia Bowl records for completions, attempts and TD passes. Justin McInnis caught seven passes for 107 yards and one touchdown. Chris Murray added seven catches for 76 yards.

Arkansas State picked off Brent Stockstill on the second play of the game and drove to the Middle Tennessee 3-yard like before settling for a 20-yard field goal by Sawyer Williams for an early 3-0 lead.

Middle Tennessee scored the next 14 points to take 14-3 lead in the second quarter. Terelle West burst through with a 45-yard run in the first quarter to give the Blue Raiders a 7-3 lead. The longest rushing touchdown in Camellia Bowl history came one play after A-State was called for roughing the punter.

“That can’t happen,” Anderson said “You want to go for blocks, we blocked one last year and it was a huge block. We have blocked them along the way this year. You want to be aggressive, but you also have to be smart enough to stay off of them. It did create momentum for them, and allowed them to drive and get a touchdown.

The Blue Raiders defense scored the next touchdown when Harris recorded a sack and forced fumble and Sanders picked the ball up and ran 54 yards for the score to give Middle Tennessee a 14-3 lead with 5:41 left in the half.

Arkansas State answered when Hansen capped a 13-play, 85-yard drive with a 1-yard touchdown run to close the gap to 14-10 with 1:49 left in the half.

Middle Tennessee seized momentum as it scored on its next two possessions to build an 18-point lead. Stockstill fired a 31-yard touchdown pass to Ruben Garnett to put the Blue Raiders up 21-10 at halftime. Middle Tennessee then scored the first time it had the ball in the third quarter to take a 28-10 lead. Tavares Thomas capped a 13-play, 74-yard drive with a 2-yard run to give the Blue Raiders what seemed to be a comfortable lead.

“I think it was a big swing in the game,” A-State safety B.J. Edmonds said. “We could have gotten a three and out and gave the ball back to our offense, but I failed to stay on top of the route. They threw it up and he made a great catch, it was just unfortunate because that was a big score and a big point in the game.”

Arkansas State refused to go away as they scored the next 13 points to cut the lead to 28-23 with 14:24 left in the game. Hansen threw a 20-yard touchdown pass to Justin McInnis on the next possession to make it 28-17.

Hansen then threw his Camellia Bowl record third touchdown pass to Warren Wand early in the fourth quarter to make it 28-23. Wand’s 2-yard catch capped a 9-play, 58-yard drive. After a penalty on Middle Tennessee, A-State decided to go for two points, but the attempt failed as the Wand was ruled short of the goal-line.

Middle Tennessee answered with a 6-play, 75-yard drive to extend its lead to 35-23 with 12:08 left. Stockstill found Shane Tucker on a 30-yard pass for the score.

Stockstill completed 19-of-35 passes for 232 yards with two touchdowns and a Camellia Bowl record three interceptions. Tucker had four catches for 63 yards and one touchdown, while Garnett added four catches for 57 yards and one touchdown.