

The State News

By Zach Smith

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A Wild Finish

Tempe, Ariz. – When MSU head coach Mark Dantonio walked to the podium after his team's dramatic 17-16 win against Texas Christian University in the Buffalo Wild Wings Bowl Saturday night, he smiled, sighed and spoke with what little voice he had left.

"I just want to congratulate our team, and Spartan Nation for a great win," Dantonio said. "We've got great leadership at the ground level, which to me is the players' level, and we remain resilient. We push through the tough times."

In a season where five out of six MSU losses came by one score or less, a narrow victory could not have meant more.

Senior kicker Dan Conroy kicked the go-ahead field goal with 1:01 left in the game, and the Spartan defense stopped TCU when it mattered most with less than a minute left.

The last kick in his career was to win the game. Conroy said there is very little that can add to the unfiltered frenzy of the moment.

"That was pretty exciting in and of itself," Conroy said. "With so many close games, losing like we did so many games this season, to have one go our way was definitely exciting. I didn't even see the referees lift their arms up before my teammates picked me up."

The win marked the first time the Spartans have won back-to-back bowl games since 2000-2001.

However, at the onset of the game, it looked to be anything but momentous for MSU.

TCU led 13-0 at halftime after a touchdown run and two field goals from freshman kicker Jaden Oberkrom.

But in the second half, MSU came out with the fire on defense that fans had been looking for all year, a fire junior linebacker Max Bullough said they knew they had in them all along.

"We've been in a lot of similar situations this year," Bullough said. "There's no doubt in my mind, even with how many losses we've had this year, we're going

to come out on top. That's the kind of confidence we have in each other and the kind of confidence I have in my teammates."

Redshirt freshman quarterback Connor Cook played much of the second half in relief of junior Andrew Maxwell, and led the Spartans to their longest drive of the season when they drove 90 yards, but Dantonio said he had all the confidence going with the young quarterback.

"We had to go with a guy that had moved us a little bit," Dantonio said. "Maybe more importantly, we felt like he could scramble a little better than Andrew. We needed to get in field position, so that's the way we went. We came out on top."

Junior running back Le'Veon Bell, who was named offensive player of the game, rushed for 145 yards and one touchdown, which gave MSU the lead with seven minutes left in the game.

Bell said he knew he was going to have a big role in the game even after the TCU defense shut him down in the first half.

"We just wanted to stick to our guns, stick to what we do, and that's run the football," Bell said. "We know those guys are good players. One of the best D-lines we played all year. The O-line kept pushing and getting better, we started wearing those guys out."

Bell is one Spartan who might forgo his senior season and enter the NFL Draft, but he said he wasn't ready to make a decision quite yet.

"(There's) a whole bunch of other factors that's going to go into the decision," the Big Ten's leading rusher said. "I want to make sure I do things the right way, talk to my family about it, the players and coaches about it. Make sure I get output from everybody and see what everybody thinks."

Whether or not this win will help right the ship of a season that Dantonio said took the program back a step is up for debate, but when the team flies home to East Lansing, they can only do the one thing that Dantonio said they did throughout the game.

"We just kept believing."