Lights look to avoid a 'Bear Trap' at home

Numbers usually never lie. In football, so often is the case, teams back up their stats, and numbers are a clear indication of what a team can and can't do. If that's the case, then Havre fans should be ready for a classic case of a Goliath versus Goliath, offense versus defense matchup when the No. 18 Montana State University-Northern Lights make their home debut against the Rocky Mountain College Battlin' Bears Saturday afternoon at Blue Pony Stadium.

Coming into the game, the numbers say MSU-N has the best pass defense in the Frontier Conference, and the second-best defense in terms of points allowed. If the numbers hold true, it should make for one interesting contest because the Bears are all about numbers. Rocky is averaging almost 500 passing yards and 39 points through two games under first-year head coach and former RMC offensive coordinator Brian Armstrong. And quarterback Kasey Peters is again the NAIA's most prolific passer. That fact would seem to spell trouble for an MSU-N team which is opening its home schedule off a difficult 50-13 loss to Carroll College last Saturday in Helena. But numbers don't always tell the whole story — in Rocky's case, and in Northern's. "You think that they (Bears) will come in here and throw the ball all over the place and just pass, pass, pass and they will," MSU-N head coach Mark Samson said. "But what makes them so scary is their running game. They will and can run the football, so they really keep a defense honest. We know what they want to do, it's a matter of our defense stepping up and making plays and stopping them from doing it. That's the big challenge this week." But the main challenge for Northern is just getting a grasp on Peters and covering his many talented wide receivers. Peters, the Grand Valley State transfer, has already racked up 934 yards and eight touchdowns in two games, including a 500-yard-plus passing performance in Rocky's 58-50 loss at Eastern Oregon last week. Peters also has true deep threats in Levi Sutton and Nathan Barnett, but it's Centerville native Brian Guisti who really makes the Rocky receivers dangerous, and his sure hands and ability to make yards after the catch only add to Peters' huge numbers. "He's just a really talented quarterback," Samson said of Peters. "He understands their offense really well, he has a quick release and he knows where to put the ball every time he throws it. He's got all the things you want in a quarterback and a leader. And he just fits their offense really well." Of course, the Lights did have some success against Peters and the Bears last season. MSU-N beat RMC in an overtime thriller in Billings last September, then held the Bears to just seven points in a 37-7 win in Havre later that season. But Northern is a different team defensively this season, especially with the injuries the defense has suffered as of late, and the task of stopping the Rocky offense on Saturday now falls on a talented but younger group of MSUN defenders, many of whom didn't take many snaps against Peters and the Bears a year ago. "Pass rush is going to be at a premium this week," Samson said. "We've got to come up with ways to get pressure on him (Peters). And our linebackers and defensive backs are going to have to be very sharp in coverage. They (Bears) can really mix things up on you, so we have to be really focused on defense. We're going to have to play really well defensively to slow them down." And at times, MSU-N has done just that. The Lights held the University of Calgary to just three points in the second half of their season-opener in Canada two weeks ago. And last week at Carroll, the MSU-N defense intercepted Carroll quarterback Gary Wagner twice in the first half and held the Saints to just 13 points in the first 30 minutes. But on the flip side, Samson says his offense will need to take advantage of what the MSU-N defense does much better against RMC than it did last week at Carroll. Northern made six trips inside the Carroll 20-yard-line in the first half last week.
and came away with just six points. In all, MSU-N's special teams were responsible for all 13 points the Lights scored last Saturday and the Northern rushing attack was held to a net total of six yards. "That's where it starts, we have to run the ball better than we did last week," Samson said. "That's what we want to do first, and against a team like Rocky, you have to be able to run the football, control the clock and get first downs. You can't keep giving their (Bears) offense chances to score, because not only can they score a lot of points, but their offense is geared towards sustained drives, short passes, things that really eat up the clock, so we really need to be able to run the football this week to be successful." And MSU-N, which is still second in the Frontier in rushing, will try to take advantage of the Bears' fifth-ranked rushing defense. Ty Cochrell is second in the conference in rushing at 88 yards per outing, and true freshman Stephen Silva should see plenty of action on offense as he continues to electrify fans with his speed and shifty moves. But again, numbers don't always tell the story, and talent-wise, RMC is much-improved on defense. Rocky, which runs a base 3-4 defense, is big on the line, and the Bears have a talented quartet of linebackers led by Steffan Blume and Deegan Barber. In the secondary, University of Washington transfer James Vela is considered a shut-down corner. But as disappointing as last Saturday was for the Lights, Northern has regrouped and will look to play much better in their first home game of 2009. And if the numbers hold true, the game could be a war of attrition with both defenses trying to stop the other's offense — the Bears' passing game, and the usually-dominant MSU-N ground attack. "Practice has been ok this week," Samson said. "We had no choice after the Carroll game but to just get back to work and get ready for Rocky and that's what we've done. "They (Bears) are a good football team and we know exactly what they're capable of," he added. "I think our focus and preparation has been really good this week, and I think you'll see us come out and play extremely hard on Saturday. I think the kids are really fired up to finally play at home, and they'll be ready to go on Saturday." The Lights (1-1, 0-1) and Bears (1-1, 0-1) will kick off at 1 p.m. Saturday inside Blue Pony Stadium. The game can be heard locally on 92. 5 KPQX FM.