

Sports:

One shining drive

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The Rocky Mountain College Battlin' Bears were all they were cracked up to be on offense Saturday afternoon at Blue Pony Stadium. But the Montana State University- Northern Lights' offense proved to be the more explosive team Saturday, and in one thrilling final drive, the Lights were the ones to come out on top of a wild Frontier Conference shootout. With his team trailing 37-31 with 3:23 left in the game, Northern quarterback Jeff Van Nest, who shattered several MSU-N passing records on Saturday, led the Lights on a 12-play 80-yard game-winning drive culminating with a 21-yard touchdown pass to Matt Stuart with :24 left on the clock, lifting the No. 18 Lights to a 38-37 victory over RMC in front of a large crowd at Blue Pony Stadium. The Lights had to survive one last gasp from RMC as Chris Buskirk blocked a last-second Bjorn Nelson field goal attempt to preserve the victory, and MSU-N not only won its homeopener but improved to 1-1 in Frontier play and 2-1 overall. "We knew right away that we were going to get the score," Van Nest, who threw for a school record 424 yards said. "We all had confidence in each other in the huddle from the first play to the last play of that drive. We knew we had to have the score and we felt confident that we could go down and get it." The late score capped off a second half which saw the Lights have to continuously play from behind. RMC opened the third quarter with a 63-yard TD run by quarterback Kasey Peters which gave the Bears a commanding 27-14 lead, and put a young MSU-N defense back on its heels. But after Peters' run, the MSU-N offense answered in just three plays as Van Nest hooked with Coda Tchida on a 53-yard strike and then hit Stuart in the end zone from 19 yards out to make the score 27-21 Bears. And Tchida, who along with Stuart, had a monster game himself, wasn't done. After RMC went back up 30-21 on a Nelson field goal, Van Nest found Tchida on a post pattern which resulted in a 90- yard touchdown as Tchida made a great catch on a great throw and then turned on the jets, running away from Rocky defenders to pull the Lights within two points at 30-28. "I knew Jeff was going to throw it to me when we broke the huddle," Tchida said. "I just had to get a step on my man and I did. After that, it was just about me running as hard as I could to get to the end zone. It was a big play and we needed one at the time." Tchida's TD gave the Lights some much-needed momentum and they took the lead for the first time in the second half on a 29-yard Kyle Kercher field goal with 12:58 left in the game. But Rocky, which racked up an uncharacteristic 340 rushing yards on Saturday, marched right back on an inspired MSU-N defense, scoring in just over two minutes on a Michael Thomas 22-yard run to go back in front with 10:19 left in the game, setting up a dramatic finish in which the Lights' defense made critical stops, including forcing Rocky into long field goal tries twice in the final 6:49, either of which would have likely won the game for the Bears. "I'm just really proud of this whole team right now," MSU-N head coach Mark Samson said. "We had some residual effects from the Carroll game in the first half, and our defense did struggle with Rocky's passing game today at times. But they (defense) also came up with some really big stops, they made some huge plays for such a young and in some places, inexperienced defense. They were a big part of why we were able to win this game today. "But really, for us this game was about this team really believing they were going to find a way to win," he added. "Our guys played as hard as they could for 60 minutes against what I still believe is a very good Rocky team. I'm just really proud of every player on this team right now." While the final 30 minutes of Saturday's game was full of fireworks, the first half was equally as interesting. RMC struck first on a 9-yard TD run by Thomas, and led 7-0 at the end of 15 minutes of play. But Northern rebounded with a 15-play nearly 6-minute drive capped off by freshman Stephen Silva's first career rushing touchdown early in the second quarter to tie things at 7-7. And Silva's TD was the first of four straight scores in the second stanza. RMC answered Silva's run with a 2-yard scamper by Thomas. But it was the play immediately after which proved to be a fatal blow to RMC as Nelson bounced the extra point try of the left upright, creating what would be the final 1-point margin. Northern answered Rocky's score with a 9-yard TD run by Ty Cochrell, and Rocky closed out the scoring with another 2-yard run by Thomas at the 3:39 mark, giving the Bears a 20-14 halftime lead. "Things were a little shaky in the first half," Van Nest said. "It took our defense some time to figure some things out, and we made a few mistakes on offense too. "But we knew this was a game we couldn't afford to let get away from us," he added. "In the second half, I thought our O-Line made some great adjustments and did an awesome job and we were able to move the football really well. And our defense deserves a lot of credit. They made some really big plays when we needed them and they just showed a lot of

heart today I thought." And so did Van Nest and his receivers. The senior from Idaho racked up an MSU-N record 424 yards passing on 26 completions to go along with three touchdowns. Tchida totaled six catches for a game-high 188 yards, while Stuart had a gamehigh nine catches for 135 yards, all career highs for both wideouts. Cochrell added a hard-fought 97 yards on the ground as the Lights rolled up a school record 572 yards of total offense. "I thought Jeff (Van Nest) played like a senior today, when we really needed him to play like a senior," Samson said. "He just got better and better as the game went on and he and the entire offense was really poised on that final drive. It was impressive to see. And our receivers played really well too. We had guys make big plays all over the field, and what I really saw was this team just really do a lot of growing up today." Not to be outdone, the Bears totaled 655 yards of offense, including a school-record 340 yards on the ground. It's rare that a Rocky team rushes for more yards than it passes for, but such was the case on Saturday as Peters collected 315 yards and no interceptions through the air. He also rushed for a career-best 96 yards, while Thomas added a gamehigh 160 yards and Sean Coleman ran for an additional 83 yards. Defensively, the Lights got a game-high 15 tackles from Wade Kelly, while Justin Montelius added 14 tackles and Luke McKinley and Jhevon McMillan had 11 a piece. Sophomore Christian Lehnert had the only sack for the Lights on the day. "We still have a ways to go on defense," Samson said. "But Rocky is a very good offensive team, it's tough for anyone to defend them. So I'm proud of the way our defense hung in there today. They (Bears) keep coming at you, and our guys never quit playing. I think our defense grew up today too." With the heartbreaking loss, RMC slipped to 0-2 in conference play and 1-2 overall, and now the Bears have No. 2 Carroll College on their slate on Saturday in Billings. Meanwhile, Saturday's win gives the Lights a boost in the conference standings, but with the way the Lights were able to overcome so much against RMC, it does more than just add to the win column according to players and coaches. "This win was huge for us," Tchida said. "This gives us a chance to go on and try to accomplish what we set out to do this season, so to come back the way we did today, it is just really huge for the rest of our season." Said Samson: "We talked at the beginning of the year about winning at home. So that's the first thing we accomplished today. But what it really does is allow us to continue to go after the season we talked about having this year back in the summer and last spring. This win will allow our kids to come to work on Monday with smiles on their faces and get back to work to get ready for Western, which will be another tough opponent. This was a great win for our team, our program and one of the best of my coaching career. It really does rank right up there for me, and it gives our football team a lot of confidence to go forward from here." The Lights will remain at home this Saturday for a game against the UM-Western Bulldogs. Saturday's game is part of Northern's homecoming festivities.