

Sports:

MSU-N's foray into Canada answered plenty

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George Ferguson From the fringe...

In the days leading up to my first venture into Canada in almost a decade, there were several questions I didn't have answers to. Was the golf course I had a tee time at worth the price? Did Canadian Pepsi still taste as strange as I remember? But mostly, my questions surrounding the trip to Medicine Hat last weekend were centered around football, and the Montana State University-Northern Lights' season-opener against the University of Calgary. What kind of game was this really going to be, considering all of the differences between American and Canadian football? How good could the Dinos really be? How were the Lights going to be this season, and how would they adjust to the different rules that were set for this game? Was this game really going to be worth MSU-N's time in the long run? But by the time I was driving back through the beautiful Cypress Hills on Saturday night, I had few questions left dancing in my head, especially when it came to football after MSU-N took care of the Dinos 30-19. First and foremost, don't let anyone tell you the Calgary Dinos weren't for real. I don't know about the rest of CIS football, but Calgary is a talented, big, athletic and physical football team. I had seen some comments on NAIA message boards this week about how Northern basically had a glorified scrimmage for its first game, but anyone who was in Medicine Hat on Saturday can tell those people different. The Dinos came to play, and they have a very good football team north of the border. It was four years ago that Carroll College hung 70 points on Calgary, the last time the Dinos played a Frontier school. But in talking with several Dino fans, and a few former players on Saturday, the program has changed for the better in so many ways and is now making a push to be one of the premier teams in all of CIS football. And having seen every team in the Frontier over the last four years, I'm here to tell everybody, NO program in our league would put 70 points on Calgary now. Those days are long gone. So with the first question about Saturday's trip being answered by the Dinos, another question mark fell into place too. The game, despite several major differences in rules and in the size of the field, turned out to be a great test for a Northern team which has the Saints this week, and overall, has lofty goals and lofty expectations in 2009. After the game, which was played in searing heat on a humongous field, Northern players, fans and coaches were all commenting on the stern test Calgary presented, and just how tough of a game it actually was. Sixth-year Northern head coach Mark Samson remarked that the game was intense from a physicality standpoint and that his team got plenty accomplished on Saturday. Indeed, for a Lights' team aspiring to do big things this season, the game itself was a good season-opening test, good preparation for their upcoming showdown in Helena, and a good gauge of what lies ahead for the Lights in 2009. Mission accomplished. And as for the Lights themselves, and any questions I had about how they were going to look this season, those questions got answered as well. It's always hard to tell just how it will all come together by watching a college football practice. So it was good to see the Lights in game action. And early observations from Saturday's tilt with the Dinos confirms what most of us already suspected — the Lights are talented at every position, they are fast, physical and they play traditional, hard-nosed MSU-N football. Northern's offense looked dynamic. The Lights got plenty done in the passing game, as senior quarterback Jeff Van Nest looked very comfortable in his starting role. And while its hard to replace a league MVP like Justin Moe, MSU-N's running game looks to be in good hands with Tyrell Cochrell, who racked up 133 yards in his first start at tailback. The Lights showed they have a the makings of a dominant offensive line, a deep group of backs, great wide receivers, and most importantly, it looks like they have a chance to be very diverse on offense, something that can elevate a program from good to great. On defense, Northern struggled a little early on Saturday, but by games end, the Lights found their groove there too. Despite injuries, graduation and changes all over the defense, with star linebackers like Stetson Koffman and Landry See, solid defensive backs like Casey Varner, Luke McKinley and Jhevon McMillan and talented young players all around, the Lights still have the potential to be what has become tradition at Northern — a stingy, ballhawking defense which could be as good as anybody in the Frontier. Special teams was good too, especially this early in the season. The Lights looked very good in the return game, and kicking was solid, as McKinley already has a field goal under his belt this year. Now I know its early. I know the Lights would be the first to say they have plenty of wrinkles to iron out, and they are still going to be underdogs when they go into vaunted Nelson Stadium to play Carroll on Saturday. But as with any football team coming into its season opener, there were plenty of questions surrounding the 2009 Lights, and

at least, for one week, they answered all of those — and the general answer is, the Lights are a solid football team again this year. How that plays out the rest of the season, that's anybody's guess at this point. But it will certainly be fun to watch. And with most of my football questions gone for at least one day, all I was left with from the weekend was to find out that yes, Pepsi still tastes different north of the border, even after all these years, and yes, the course, named Desert Blume, was worth every penny, including the five balls I left behind, never to be hit by me again.

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