

Bitten by Bulldogs

(Created: Monday, September 21, 2009 1:02 PM MDT)

George Ferguson Havre Daily News sports editor gferguson@havredailynews.com

The Montana State University- Northern football team experienced the ultimate high last Saturday in Havre, coming from behind to win a game in the final seconds. A week later, the Lights were in position to do it again. But on Saturday afternoon, on a sweltering day at Blue Pony Stadium, the No. 16 Lights couldn't summons the magic from a week earlier as two critical fumbles ended their comeback bid in a 27-21 loss to the UM-Western Bulldogs. Twice in the final five minutes of the fourth quarter, the Lights lost fumbles on what possibly could have been game-winning drives, and in all, MSUN turned the ball over an uncharacteristic six times as Western won for the first time this season. "Obviously, you can't do what we did today and expect to win," MSU-N head coach Mark Samson said. "Too many turnovers, too many penalties, too many mental mistakes. We just didn't do the things you need to do in order to win football games." And the game ended the same way it started for the Lights. Northern and Western combined for four turnovers on the game's first four possessions, but the Bulldogs got an early break when quarterback Michah Mamiya threw a 72-yard touchdown pass to Kahai Sevilla on the play immediately following the Lights' second miscue of the day. Trailing 6-0, MSU-N looked like it was going to answer the score when the Lights went on a nearly six-minute march down the field, only to see that drive end in quarterback Jeff Van Nest's second interception of the first quarter. However, the Lights got the ball right back on an interception by Fort Benton native Wade Kelly, and they finally made Western pay when Van Nest found Matt Stuart for a 19-yard TD to put the Lights ahead 7-6 after 15 strange minutes. "The thing that's disappointing is, I thought our defense played pretty well, especially late in the game," Samson said. "And when we took care of the ball, we moved it pretty well. They (Bulldogs) weren't really stopping us. But we just made too many mistakes and with their offense, you just can't keep giving them the ball back like that." The second quarter was where most of the offensive fireworks took place on Saturday. Northern opened the stanza with Van Nest's third INT, and Western scored off the turnover when Mamiya hooked up with Kekoa Perbera to put the Bulldogs ahead 14-7. Northern answered with a solid drive, resulting in a game-tying sixtyyard scoring pass to former Havre Blue Pony Kyle Finneman. After trading possessions, Western regained the lead when Mamiya, who threw for 349 yards on the day, hit Craig Cornelius on a 41-yard strike to put the Bulldogs ahead 21-14 with just three minutes left in the half. But the scoring wasn't done. Northern struck right back on just two plays to Stuart, who had his second straight 100-yard-plus receiving game. First, Van Nest found Stuart for 31 yards, and on the next play, Stuart made a great catch and run across the middle, resulting in a 44-yard score with 2:29 left in the half and a 21-21 tie. But the Bulldog's hurry-up offense got them three more points as Aukkarapong Sribenjakul nailed a 25-yard field goal as time expired in the first half, giving them a 24-21 lead, which, it turned out, would be all they needed to pick up their first win of the season. "Really, when you look at it, if we don't get even two of those turnovers, the outcome was probably going to be a lot different," Western second-year head coach Rich Ferris said. "We did play well on offense, and a lot of that is because our offensive line was healthy and together for the first time this season. I thought they did a great job. And our kids did play with a lot of intensity and emotion and they really played together. They wanted to win pretty badly, and they kept after it. It was really nice to come up here and play as well as we could, but we also know we're very fortunate to leave here with a win." Both defenses stood tall in the second half. The Lights held Western to just a 54-yard Mackenzie Crossley field goal in the final 30 minutes, and trailing 27-21, the young MSU-N defense came up with several key stops late in the game, including two

straight stands in the final six minutes when Western was trying to put the game out of reach. But the two late fumbles and a penalty for too many men on the field in the final minute cost Northern a real solid chance at a comeback. On offense, the Bulldogs weren't perfect, as Mamiya was picked off twice, once by Kelly and once by Casey Varner. But he did throw three long touchdowns and also ran for a team-high 54 yards as the Northern defense limited Western to just 67 net yards in rushing. Kelly, Justin Montelius, Jeff Mahana and Ethan May all had nine tackles each for MSU-N and former Blue Pony Chris Buskirk had the Lights' only quarterback sack to go with five stops. Northern's offense, which broke the school record for total offense a week ago, was paced by Stuart's 125 yards receiving and two scores. Van Nest was 13-of-27 for 204 yards, three Tds and three INTs. He also totaled 33 yards on the ground, while Ty Cochrell had yet another solid game, rolling up 118 yards on 20 carries. The win over Northern put UMWestern at 1-2 in Frontier Conference play and 1-2 overall. But more importantly, it gives the Bulldogs a muchneeded break from all they have gone through so far this season. Western was reeling after not only an 0-2 start, but dealing with the tragic loss of two former players before the season even began. "This definitely does a lot for us," Ferris said. "Not only is it big to win on the road because it's so hard to do in this league, but it is going to make coming to practice a lot easier on Monday. We have been through a lot as a team this year, but this can put a smile on our face for a while, and it also gives us a real confidence boost going forward." Meanwhile, the Lights dropped to 2-2 overall and 1-2 in league play. Now, Northern must find a way to regroup with a daunting road trip to upstart Eastern Oregon University coming up on Saturday. Northern and EOU will square off at 12 p.m. M.S.T. in LaGrande, Ore.