

## Lights strike in Dillon

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Published: Monday, August 30th, 2010

The Montana State University-Northern football team brought the lightning — literally.

But what the Lights brought back to Havre on Saturday night was much more spectacular, and even more rewarding. The Lights returned home with a season-opening win, a Frontier Conference victory and plenty of good feelings and confidence from a game which included a 20-minute weather delay in the second quarter.

On Saturday, Northern snapped a seven-game losing skid dating back to last season with a resounding 20-3 win over the UM-Western Bulldogs at Vigilante Stadium in Dillon, and the Lights couldn't have been happier, or more proud of the win.

"This does mean a lot to us," said MSU-N senior defensive back Casey Varner, who led an inspired Northern defense on Saturday. "This game, this win is something we worked really hard for, we wanted this, actually we needed this. I know it's just one game, but it was an important game for us as a team, as a program, and it's a good first step."

It wasn't pretty at times on either side Saturday, but the Lights had heroics all over the field.

There were plenty of MSU-N veterans who did plenty to make sure the Lights opened the season with a win, but on offense, two newcomers made their mark.

Freshman quarterback Derek Lear threw a pair of touchdown passes to University of Kentucky transfer Brandon O'Brien, both coming when the Lights were looking for a spark. Lear hit O'Brien from 28 yards out late in the first quarter to put the Lights up 10-0. MSU-N got an early 36-yard field goal from Kyle Kercher on a stellar season-opening drive which included a big run up the middle by speedster Stephen Silva.

The Lear/O'Brien combo also hooked up again to pretty much put the game away when Lear aired one out midway through the third quarter, and O'Brien made the catch and turned on his blazing speed to score from 55 yards out, putting the Lights up 17-3. The score was an answer to Western's only points of the day, a field goal by Mackenzie Crossley early in the third period.

O'Brien was stellar in his Northern debut, catching four balls for 96 yards, while Lear also sparkled, completing 13 passes for 207 yards and two scores. But it was what the game meant and where the Lights are heading which stood out to O'Brien.

"We talked about starting fast, the coaches really emphasized that all week," O'Brien said. "And I think we did that. We wanted to get this game off to a good start, score right away and in turn get this season off to a fast start and we were able to do that today. You have to give a lot of credit to the offensive line, those big plays Derek (Lear) and I had can't happen without good protection. And I thought Derek played really well. Coaches always talk about a quarterback having to play with confidence, and he has that. He was really poised out there today and he did a really good job."

Kercher wrapped up the scoring for MSU-N with a 25-yard field goal in the fourth quarter, but it was the Lights' defense which really left its mark. Northern grabbed four interceptions on the day, three coming from Casey Varner and the other coming from Casey's brother, Tanner. The Lights had a monster game

on defense, forcing Western to go 0-for-5 inside the red zone, and they held the Bulldogs to just 14 first downs and 240 yards of total offense, Western's lowest output in a long, long time.

The MSU-N defensive line, guys like Will Andrews, Jared Weigel, Nick Weller, Sean Thorton, Jeff Mahana and Travis Hjort were in the Western backfield all day harassing Western quarterbacks Zach McRae and Michah Mamiya.

"I thought our defense had a great day," MSU-N head coach Mark Samson said. "I thought the line played really well, obviously the Varners played great and our linebackers, Landry See, Anthony Tate and A.J. Pasalo all had really big games. The biggest thing was, this is a good Western offense and we shut them down when they got in the red zone. I was really proud of the defense today, and it gives us a lot of confidence going forward."

Offensively, the Lights got on track after struggling to score points a year ago. MSU-N had its mistakes, 95 yards in penalties and two turnovers, but Northern also showed flashes of a bright, bright future.

The Lights out gained the Bulldogs in total offense, and in the passing game, senior receiver Matt Stuart had a strong first half, catching three balls for 69 yards before sitting out the second half with a minor injury. Another newcomer, tight end Luke Wildung also made several key catches, as did Cut Bank's Orin Johnson. In the running game, Silva carried 17 times for 32 yards and fullback James Chandless bulldozed his way to several key gains.

"It was up-and-down offensively," Samson said. "But we also did some really good things at times. I keep cautioning people that we are a really young football team, especially on offense, so the biggest thing we can take away from this is, I know we can get better. I'm excited about the win, especially it being a road win, we didn't have many of those last year. And I'm excited about how hard every kid out there played today. I'm proud of this team right now, and I'm looking forward to watching us get even better."

And Northern (1-0, 1-0) is certainly hoping the glow of Saturday's big win turns into a bright 2010. But never-the-less, the Lights played extremely well for their first game of the season and they are off to a perfect start. And even more so, they have finally put all of the frustration from a difficult 2009 campaign firmly in their rear view mirror.

"I wasn't here for the (2009) season," O'Brien said. "But I know it was tough, when things are tough like that it leaves a bad taste in your mouth, and we wanted to change all that with this game. This win means a lot to this team, and it feels good to come down here and accomplish what we've been working so hard for."

The Lights have a bye week coming up, then they will make their home debut on Sept. 11 against Montana Tech.