

Northern gets Defensive

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If Saturday's 20-3 Montana State University-Northern victory over the UM-Western Bulldogs was about putting the past to bed forever, it was also about the Lights' defense reclaiming what it once was.

For years, Northern was home to some of the best defenses in the Frontier Conference. But in 2009, the Lights struggled due to injuries, inexperience and loads of bad luck.

But if Northern's performance Saturday at Vigilante Stadium in Dillon is any indication, the Lights are back to doing what they do best — playing defense.

Northern held a usually-potent Western offense to just 14 first downs and 240 total yards. But the scoreboard is where the Lights made the most hay, holding Western to just one field goal the entire day.

More so, the Lights got five turnovers, including four interceptions — three by senior safety Casey Varner, and one by Varner's younger brother Tanner, who was making his first start at cornerback.

"The turnovers were big, they were an important part of this game," Casey Varner said. "But I think what's just as big is we came out as a defense and really played hard, and we kept it up for 60 minutes. It was important to get this season off to a good start and we accomplished that."

Varner was the star of the game, but he got plenty of help from his friends.

While the MSU-N offense put up 20 points, the Lights' defense made plays all day long, especially in the red zone. Western did have some big plays, especially when speedy wide receiver Kahei Sevilla had the ball in his hands, but the Lights kept the Bulldogs out of the endzone and that's what was most impressive to head coach Mark Samson.

"I was really happy with the way our defense played," Samson said, "proud of their effort. They created turnovers, got a lot of pressure on the quarterback, and they played hard. You have to do that to be successful in this league."

And it wasn't just the defensive backs making plays. Sean Thornton and Jared Weigel had sacks, while fellow linemen Will Andrews, Nick Weller, Jeff Mahana and Travis Hjort got plenty of pressure on Western quarterbacks, and helped stuff the run. Linebackers Landry See, Anthony Tate and A.J. Pasalo as well as safety Seth Wildung also came up big in the tackle department.

"The DB's weren't doing anything out of the ordinary today," Casey Varner said. "When you have great linemen like we do, who get to the quarterback and force him to make throws he doesn't want to, it makes our job pretty easier. So I think our line deserves the credit for what we were able to do today."

While the Varner brothers and Northern's entire line came up plenty big in helping the Lights snap their seven-game losing skid, the entire MSU-N defense deserves credit for a big stand on Western's first possession of the game. The Bulldogs took a gamble and tried to pick up two yards on a fourth-down play early in the first quarter, but the prideful MSU-N defense stood tall and stopped Western cold. The fourth-down stand changed the complexion of the game, and it might have just set the tone for the entire season.

"I'm proud of these guys," Samson said. "I thought we did a lot of good things on defense today. Everybody who played stepped it up and played well. And this is a Western team who has a chance to be pretty darn good offensively, so our defense should be very proud of what they did today (Saturday)."

They say lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place. Saturday, that wasn't the case, as the Lights' defense waited out one lightning storm, then delivered a storm of their own.