Springing ahead: Lights move forward

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Spring may finally be in the air in Havre, but so are footballs. On Monday afternoon, the Montana State University-Northern football team went to work, conducting the first of 16 planned practices over the course of the next month for the Lights' 2010 spring drills. And already, the Lights are using spring drills as a chance to build towards the 2010 season, which begins Aug. 28 at UM-Western in Dillon. And they aren't looking back either. "The number one thing about this spring is getting that feeling and that attitude of winning around here back again," veteran head coach Mark Samson said. The Lights struggled to a 2-9 record in 2009. "And I'm really proud of the kids because I think already, they've put last season in the past and moved beyond it. "We've had a good offseason," he added. "Guys have worked hard in the weight room, the conditioning has been good and we've seen a lot of improvement. The attitude has been really good. Really since January, things have been really good." The Lights have 65 players on the field for spring practice, although returning starting defensive linemen Christian Lehnert will miss spring drills due to an injury. Still, Samson is happy with his numbers, especially the quality of returning players and newcomers, and he says the objectives of spring drills are pretty straight forward. "We can use this spring to establish depth at almost every position," Samson said. "We're in pretty good shape personnel-wise right now with the guys out there. There might be a few kids who can come here in the fall and compete for depth at a couple of positions or on special teams, but for the most part, we're sitting pretty well with the guys here right now. We've got solid core players at almost every position." The Lights return just five starters on offense, but with several quality offensive lineman transfers, as well as University of Kentucky transfer Brendan O'Brien in spring camp, the Lights will have plenty of talent on the offensive side of the ball. The Lights have 10 offensive linemen in spring drills, a somewhat low number, but that's also due to a couple of players being moved back to the defensive line. Five running backs are working in the backfield this spring, including returnees Stephen Silva and James Chandless, as well as freshmen Josh Wilson and Michael King. Starting linebacker Justin Montelius has also moved to running back this spring. Wide receiver has its bright spots too with returning Frontier All Conference standout Matt Stuart as well as fellow starter Kyle Kercher. Those two, along with O'Brien give the Lights a solid nucleus. Freshman Mick Miller of Fairfield will also see plenty of action this season as could the likes of Orin Johnson, Brandt Montelius, Damon Moe and Tyson Lucier. Of course the big question mark this spring is the quarterback position at Northern. The Lights graduated starter Jeff Van Nest, but return a pair of freshmen in Matt Reyant of Helena and Derek Lear of Fairfield. Reyant started several games for the Lights last season, while Lear red shirted. The two are basically taking most of the snaps this spring, and
Samson is hoping the competition yields a starter before fall camp begins. "It's one of the things we would really like to come out of spring with a starting quarterback in mind, but you never what's going to happen," Samson said. "Either way, we're going to be young at that position, but the good thing about both those guys is, they have great leadership qualities and we need that. And they are both smart guys who can learn and execute what we're trying to do out there. Still, it's a huge position for us, for any team, and we'll just have to see what happens over the next few weeks." Spring is also an exciting time for the MSU-Northern defense. Which returns six starters. The Lights were plagued by injuries all over the field last season, but perhaps no injury was more devastating than senior linebacker Stetson Koffman's season-ending knee injury suffered in MSU-N's season-opener against the University of Calgary. Now, just six months later, Koffman is back on the field, and having not only a returning NAIA All-American, but also the team's emotional leader back is a huge lift to what was a young MSU-N defense last season. "He's (Koffman) been cleared to play and can pretty much do everything," Samson said. "Of course, I'm going to limit him to some degree this spring, but having him back is just really big for our defense, and just for the team in general." Northern also gets back a pair of starting all-conference defensive ends in Jared Weigel and Will Andrews. Weigel didn't play last season after earning all-american honors in 2008. And Andrews has been sidelined with a foot injury since the end of the 2008 season. With those two defensive ends back, as well as returners like Sean Thorton, Jeff Mahana and Joe Pittman in the middle, the defensive line should be one of Northern's strong points. Samson also likes the play of three freshmen linemen in Logan Anderson, Matt Bean and Ryan Parrish. At linebacker, the Lights return all-conference standout Landry See as well as Koffman. Anthony Tate, former Havre Blue Pony Jordan Van Voaost, Todd Hendrich and Cole Brevig are players Samson has also seen make big strides at linebacker, giving MSU-N a lot of depth in the front seven. In the defensive backfield, the Lights return leading tacklers Casey Varner and Wade Kelly, as well as starter Seth Wildung and cornerback Ethan May. Samson says the backfield is probably MSU-N's most pressing area of need, but there are young players on the roster ready to step up. "Overall, we're in pretty good shape on defense," Samson said. "Obviously, having guys like Stetson, Will and Jared back makes a huge difference. But we have a lot of guys, veterans who have really improved and I like a lot of younger guys. We'll be much better on the line this season and we have a lot of depth at linebacker. "We definitely want to improve, last year wasn't us (defense) and this year will be," Varner said. "Defense at Northern has always been key, and last year we let the offense down, we let the town down and we let the coaches down. It's one of those things where we have to get better. "We are getting two good defensive linemen back and our starting middle linebacker back," he added. "Mainly our goal is going to hold teams to under 10 points, and if we can do that we will get a lot of wins." And wins will be a big goal in 2010 for the Lights. However, there are more immediate goals this spring and Samson is excited about what his 65 players are working towards, even after just one day. "The thing about spring is, you want guys to come out and really compete for their spots," Samson said. "You want to see the younger guys start to step up and take their turn, but you also need you veteran players to come in and get better, not be complacent because their starters or because they've played a lot. That's what spring is about, competing and getting better, and so far, the attitude has been really good in that regard. The guys were hungry to get out here and get started. They were excited to get out and compete. And I'm proud of them for the attitude and work ethic they've shown. Now we just have to use that and go out there and come out of spring a better football team." The Lights will take today off, then go for six straight days through Next Monday. Included in that stretch will be the first planned scrimmage of the spring on Sunday at 3:30 p.m.