Lights finish spring with a strong showing
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It’s only the spring game, but the Montana State University-Northern football team has reason to be highly optimistic.

In Saturday’s annual Maroon/White scrimmage at the Havre High practice fields, the Lights closed spring drills with a bang. The Northern offense scored seven times, as the 1’s went against the 2’s mainly. And on the other side of the ball, the MSU-N defense did some very good things as well, leaving veteran head coach Mark Samson enthusiastic about what his team accomplished over the last month, as well as what the future holds.

“I thought this scrimmage was a good one on both side,” Samson said. “I thought our offense did a really good job again. They were very consistent throughout the spring. And I thought our defense got a lot better. We played so many young kids on defense this spring, and in this last scrimmage, I saw them really improve from the first day to the last. So I like where we’re at right now. And I’m pretty pleased with how the last scrimmage went, and with what we were able to do this spring.”

The spring saw a veteran Northern offense take command, and both offensive units had their big moments in Saturday’s final scrimmage.

The scoring opened with junior-to-be Stephen Silva breaking off a beautiful 55-yard touchdown run. The scamper was part of a 65-yard day for Silva on just three carries. Northern’s first-string players were mixed into both teams, and both offensive units kept making big plays. Derek Lear put the next score on the board when he executed a great red-zone pass play to tight end Brian Torgerson for the an 8-yard scoring strike. That score was followed by a 48-yard run which junior-to-be Justin Monetelius broke off.

With all of the fireworks on offense early on, freshman quarterback Travis Dean got into the act as well, and so did Northern’s “wildcat” formation. Dean threw three touchdowns, the first of which went to speedster Brandon O’Brien for 54 yards, then he threw back-to-back TD passes of six yards to Mick Miller and 27 yards to Brandt Monetelius, who caught three scores in the spring. But perhaps the biggest play came just before Dean’s first TD when Orin Johnson hooked up with O’Brien for a 27-yard score out of the “wildcat”.

For the second straight scrum, the Lights totaled 500 yards of offense as a unit, and turned the ball over just once. Those numbers, along with the play of a increasingly veteran offensive line made Northern offensive coordinator Kyle Samson more than happy.

“I thought we moved the ball very well on,” Kyle Samson said. “We are able to get seven TD’s and had over 500 yards of offense again. I think we have really shown our big play capability this spring and we have a lot of guys that are making big plays for us.”

Big plays indeed. Dean led in the passing game with 149 yards and three scores, while Lear was a highly efficient 10-of-14 for 112 yards an no interceptions. Lear and Dean both also showed what they can do with their feet. Dean totaled 41 yards on seven carries while Lear added 20 yards on three carries.

And as a tandem, both quarterbacks impressed their head coach, not just on Saturday, but all spring long.
“I thought both quarterbacks improved a lot from last fall until now,” Mark Samson said. “They both did really good things this spring, and I think they have both come a long way, not just physically, but in their ability to lead this team. I’m pleased with the progress they’ve made.”

Northern’s backs and receivers also made plenty of progress on Saturday. Silva led the way, while Justin Montelius had his best outing of the spring, racking up 61 yards on four carries. Powerful fullback James Chandless added 22 yards on three carries, and as a team, the Lights chewed up 232 yards on the ground. O’Brien led all pass catchers with 90 yards on three grabs, to go along with two scores. Brandt Montelius continued to shine, totaling 56 yards on four catches, while Kyle Johnston caught four balls for 40 yard and Johnson added 26 yards on two grabs. Tyson Lucier and Torgerson also made big plays in the passing game on Saturday.

“I think we are in a good position right now on offense,” Mark Samson said. “And this last scrimmage showed we not only have a lot of talent on offense, but we have depth there too. We had some young kids really step up and make plays on offense in this scrimmage, and I think we’ve accomplished a lot offensively to this point.”

Youth was the story of the Lights’ defense all spring long, and it was again on Saturday. But despite big offensive numbers, the MSU-N defense made plenty of plays in Saturday’s scrimmage. And one of those big plays came from sophomore-to-be-corner J. Nusbaum, who made a leaping interception of a Dean pass.

“We ended spring ball on a very high note,” MSU-N defensive coordinator Jake Eldridge said. “We continued to get better week by week this spring and this last scrimmage showed just how far we have come as a unit. We ended the day with a couple interceptions, seven QB sacks and a handful of passes knocked down, and we got ourselves off the field on some crucial third and fourth down plays. This unit has continually been a very coachable group and their hard work and attention to detail really paid off in this scrimmage. This was our best scrimmage yet and you could really see the confidence grow with these guys as the day went on.”

Confidence indeed. The Lights played a lot of players on defense in the spring, and that trend continued on Saturday. And many of those players stepped up and made big defensive plays at one time or another. Johnny Figueroa, Nathanael Schopp, Tyler Langhus and Pake Morris are al younger players who had sacks in the scrimmage, while veterans Will Andrews and A.J. Pasalo also got to the quarterback.

More Lights to shine on defense Saturday included former Havre Blue Ponies Jordan Van Voast, who finished the game with five tackles and a pass breakup and Kyle Finneman, who totaled six tackles. Sophomore linebacker Ryan Halko led the scrum with seven tackles and Kaimi Kanehailua continued to impress by totaling five tackles on the day.

“Our defense has gotten much better,” Mark Samson said. “Because of injuries and graduation, we really are a pretty young defense, and a lot of young kids got a lot of reps this spring. And in this last scrimmage, I thought we started to see those reps pay off because we had a lot of young kids stepping up and making plays. So I’m pretty happy with the progress we made on defense Saturday, and really this whole spring on that side.

“This was a good last scrimmage,” he added. “The kids really played well, and they really worked hard this spring. And after this last scrimmage, I’m really pleased with what we accomplished as a team. We know we can and will get even better, but going into the summer, I think we have a chance to be a pretty good football team next fall.”

**Maroon/White Game**

**RUSHING** – Chandless 3-22, Silva 3-65, Lear 3-20, J. Montelius 4-61, Wilson 5-2, Dean 7-41, Radden 1-11, O. Johnson 3-10.

**PASSING** – Lear 10-14-112, Dean 7-15-149-1, O. Johnson 2-2-32.

Scoring Plays
1 – 55 Yd TD Run By Silva
2 – 8 Yd TD Catch By Torgerson from Lear
3 – 48 Yd TD Run By Montelius
4 – 54 YD TD Catch by O’Brien From Dean
5 – 27 YD TD Catch by O’Brien from Orin Johnson (Wildcat pass Play)
6 – 6 YD TD Catch by Miller from Dean
7 – 27 YD TD Catch by B. Montelius from Dean