Lights started to blossom in the spring
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MSU-N accomplished plenty in spring drills and now looks forward to UM-Western in September.

The Montana State University-Northern football team made big strides this spring. In fact, the Lights will go into the summer feeling very good about the team they are constructing for the 2011 season. A season which gets under way on Sept. 3 in Havre against UM-Western.

And while Northern head coach Mark Samson stopped short of prognosticating just how good his Lights could be in 2011, following spring drills he was understandably optimistic.

“I thought we accomplished some good things in the spring,” Samson said. “Especially considering we didn’t have an consistent weather to work with. It was pretty difficult weather-wise this spring. But the kids really worked hard and got through it, and I thought a lot of kids really improved. I was really pleased with how it went.

“We definitely can get better as a football team,” he added. “But right now, looking ahead, I think we have a chance to have a pretty good season.”

This spring saw Northern’s offense shine. In three scrimmages, the Lights averaged nearly 500 yards of offense and five scores per. Much of that success is due to returning stars like running backs Stephen Silva and Justin Montelius, receivers Orin Johnson and Brandon O’Brien, as well as fullback James Chandless. There’s also Northern’s two quarterbacks, who battled it out all spring, both receiving high marks. Derek Lear won the starting job a year ago, but fellow freshman Travis Dean saw action in 2010 as well. They went into spring headed for another quarterback battle, and while Samson hasn’t named a starter for 2011 yet, both QB’s made plenty of headway in the last month. And while they will both only be sophomores next fall, they both are starting to show signs of being veteran Frontier Conference signal callers.

“I thought both quarterbacks did an excellent job this spring,” Samson said. “They both got better, and not just physically, but in understanding the game, the offense and how to lead this team. I was proud of both of them for how they played this spring. And we know we’ll need both of them next season.”

Perhaps more importantly even than having two budding stars at quarterback however, is having a great offensive line. And that’s what MSU-N seems to have heading into the fall, and that’s one of the main reasons the Lights’ offense was so sharp this spring.

Starters Zeb Olson, Brock Hyder, Joe Pittman, Matt Cervenka and Jorge Magana are all back for the Lights, and all have a full season under their belt. As a group, they are big, strong and tough, and they also help make MSU-N’s offense more versatile. And while they all played well this spring, Samson also noted that the Lights started to build some depth on the line as well, something that can be crucial to a team’s success in the NAIA.

“We have all our starters on the line back, and they were all pretty healthy this spring, so that was big for us,” Samson said. “And I thought they all improved this spring. They are a very good group. But we also saw some backups really step. Jake Criner (Kalispell) did a really good job as our backup center this
spring and Rostyn Pace (OT, Sunburst) had a really good spring too. I thought our line just did a really good job this spring, and that’s a big plus for us heading into next season.”

Of course, spring ball is always about younger players, redshirts and newcomers getting a chance to step up and show the coaches they are ready to take their game to the next level, and MSU-N certainly did that this spring.

Receivers Brandt Montelius and transfer Kyle Johnston certainly made their presence felt in the passing game, as did tight end Brian Torgerson. There were young offensive linemen making plays, while Samson also said former Power star Willie VandenBos made big strides over the last month at running back.

“He (VandenBos) is going to be a really good player I believe,” Samson said.

And Northern’s defense, which by graduation or injury, lost key players like Jeff Mahana, Jared Weigel, Travis Hjort, Seth Wildung and Casey Varner, was all about younger players making an impact this spring.

“I thought our defense got much better from day one of spring until the last scrimmage,” Samson said.

“Because we had to, losing pretty much nine defensive linemen from last fall, we played a lot of young kids, a lot of kids got a lot of reps this spring, and I thought they all took some important steps.

“We have things we have to address in the fall, but for the most part, I thought our defense really improved this spring.”

The Lights still have veterans and stars on the defensive side of the ball. Will Andrews and Landry See return for their senior season as two of premier defenders in the Frontier Conference, while transfer Jared Rohrback should have an instant impact on the MSU-N defense. A.J. Pasalo, Jordan Van Voast, Anthony Tate and Cole Brevig will also be back at linebacker, while sophomores to be Tanner Varner and J. Nusbaum return in the secondary. And to go along with those players, Samson mentioned many young players who look ready to step in and help make Northern’s defense as dominant as it has been.

“I thought guys like Ralphie (Huizar) and Valentine (Kanehailua) did a really good job in the spring,” Samson said. “I thought Matt Reyant played really well for us at safety, he had a great spring back there, and Kyle Finneman really started to come on strong at safety. He also did a really good job. So we have some kids really have a good spring camp, and we’ll also get some more help on the defense in the fall. So I still think we have a chance to be very solid on that side of the ball.”

Indeed. The Lights still have transfers and signees who will arrive for fall camp, and several will be expected to step up and help MSU-N immediately. But after 16 practices, including three scrimmage, the current MSU-N roster is already showing signs of being ready to go in September.

“We had a great offseason, a great winter conditioning,” Samson said. “And I was really proud of the effort and the attitude our kids showed, and that carried over to spring. It was a very productive spring and I think we accomplished a lot. We did many of the things we set out to do, so feel pretty good about where we’re at heading into the summer.

“We have plenty we can improve on,” he added. “But right now, where we’re at, I’m very pleased and excited. So now we’ll just have to see where we are in August.”

Notes: Rohrback, a Montana State transfer was only able to participate in one of MSU-N’s spring scrimmages due to minor injury. However, the Lights were able to remain healthy through much of the spring. MSU-N used just two QB’s this spring, as former Havre Blue Pony C.J. Evans, who redshirted for the Lights last fall, has decided to transfer to Minot State University.