**Game Time: Lights kick off 2011**  
*George Ferguson, Havre Daily News*  
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Last season, the Montana State University-Northern football team was hoping a 20-3 season-opening win at UM-Western would be the springboard to bigger and better things. In same ways it was. The Lights were vastly improved in 2010, but got little to show for it with a 3-7 record.

Now, over one year later, the Lights will be hoping to use a victory over the UM-Western Bulldogs as that same springboard. And Northern will take that first step Saturday when the Lights host the Bulldogs at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium.

In many cases, there wouldn’t be much reason for optimism after a three-win campaign, but this is a different Lights team. It’s true, Northern still boasts one of the youngest teams in the Frontier, but youth doesn’t equate to inexperience or a lack of talent. Instead, the Lights have both.

Northern returns its starting quarterback in sophomore Derek Lear, its starting running back in junior Stephen Silva, all five starters on the offensive line, two starting wide receivers in Orin Johnson and Brandon O’Brien, its starting tight end in Brian Torgerson and fullback James Chandless.

On defense, the Lights return NAIA All-American Will Andrews at one end, starting linebackers Landry See, A.J. Pasalo and Jordan Van Voast as well as safety Matt Reyant.

MSU-N added a plethora of talented newcomers like wide receiver Kyle Johnston, defensive tackle Mike Carbone, linebacker Jared Rohrback and kicker Juan Garcia to name a few. And all of that equates to a fresh start and certainly high expectations for the Lights.

“We had ups and downs last season, but nothing beats experience,” eighth-year Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “And we have a large group of kids who played a lot last season. We have a really good recruiting class too. This is a talented football team, and I’ve seen big improvements from spring ball till now. I’m really proud of how hard every player on this team has worked, and if we execute on Saturday’s we’ll have opportunities to do some things this season.”

The Lights’ first opponent, UM-Western is coming off a dismal 1-10 season, including a sweep at the hands of the Lights. Gone is former head coach Rich Ferris and in to rebuild the program is former Bulldog great Ryan Nourse.

If Northern is young, the Bulldogs are even younger. Western lists just 11 seniors on its 2-deep roster, and of the 22 starters, eight are either a freshman or sophomore. But Nourse is excited about the talent and the opportunity for his Bulldogs to be vastly improved this season.

“It’s really up in the air for us,” Nourse said in a Frontier Conference presser earlier this summer. “I felt like we had a good spring and there is a good level of talent on both sides of the ball. I hope we can produce a competitive team in Dillon.”

Nourse has installed a quick-passing, multiple-motion offense much like the one Western ran while he was a wideout there. And the Bulldogs do have weapons. Junior QB Jeff Logan has started since midway
through his freshman year and he’s got Colton Woods back at receiver. Woods led the Frontier in receptions per game a year ago. Rashad Peniston and Casey Lamping are two more lethal targets for Logan, while senior running back Charlie Dotson (6-1, 219) rushed for nearly 500 yards a year ago.

The Bulldogs are a little less experienced on defense however, but veteran end Trent Mallory and nose tackle Peni Tuifua will lead the way. Western starts three underclassmen at linebacker in its 3-4 scheme, while corner Donte Green holds down the secondary.

“I think we’ll be competitive offensively,” Nourse said. “We’ve got a lot of good skill players, guys capable of making plays.”

And that’s something the Lights have too. Northern has the makings of a potent offense this season, while the MSU-N defense will look to get back to its stingy days of 2006-2008. And all of that starts Saturday with the Bulldogs on Northern’s home turf.

“It’s the first game for both of us, so we’re not really certain what to expect from Western,” Samson said. “We know they’ll come in here and probably want to throw it around on us. But honestly, it’s really hard to know for sure what teams are going to do at the start of a new season. You can watch film on them and they can watch film on us, but those are games from last year. And personnel changes, we have a lot of new players, they do too, so it’s all kind of a little unknown.

“We do know that they (Bulldogs) will come in here and play hard, and they do have some very good football players” he added. “And we know we’re going to do the same. We’re ready to go out and play hard for 60 minutes. I feel like we need to be more focused on what we can control, what we want to do offensively, defensively and on special teams. I do know this team has worked very hard to get to this point. I’m really proud of the effort and the work ethic of this group and I know we are very well prepared for this game. Now it’s just a matter of going out and getting the job done.”

Northern’s season-opening game against UM-Western will kick off at 1 p.m. Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium. Fans can also watch the live webcast of the game by logging on to www.havredailynews.com. Northern fans can also follow the game via twitter at havredailynews.