Intercepted: Lights tame Bulldogs on a pair of big fourth-quarter defensive plays
George Ferguson, Havre Daily News
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights’ offense was firing on all cylinders in the first half, but it was the MSU-N defense which made the game-changing plays in what was a Northern season-opening victory.

With a resilient UM-Western team threatening to send the Lights’ 2011 debut game into overtime, junior linebacker A.J. Pasalo made a play Northern fans won’t soon forget. With MSU-N ahead 24-17, the Bulldogs took possession on the Northern 41-yard-line with 1:25 left to go. But Western quarterback Jeff Logan dropped back with a throw over the middle in mind, and Northern’s Pasalo read the pass perfectly, jumped in front of the intended receiver and made a game-saving interception. Pasalo’s INT gave Northern a 24-17 season-opening win Saturday afternoon at Blue Pony Stadium.

“I had seen them (Bulldogs) run that play a few times earlier and we had got our hands on a couple of those passes but didn’t come up with them,” Pasalo, who finished the game with nine tackles and the game-changing pick said. “So I just knew I had a chance to make a play on the ball. We needed a big play right there and thankfully, it happened. “

Pasalo’s INT was one of two game-changers for a Lights team which saw a 17-0 halftime lead deteriorate in the fourth quarter. Northern was ahead 17-3 at the start of the fourth when MSU-N’s defense forced Western to punt from near its own goal line. The result was a Ryan Craig punt block which was later recovered in the endzone for a score which put the Lights ahead 24-3.

At the time of Craig’s block, it seemed like Northern would cruise to victory, but those seven points wound up being the game-winning one’s.

“It was good to see us make some plays like that when we absolutely needed them,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “Credit Western, they played hard to the very end and they really put us up against it in the second half. Some of it was some things we didn’t do well offensively or defensively in the second half, but Western also made some big plays, and it turned out we needed those two big defensive plays to hang on."

Indeed. It was a tale of two halves for the Lights.

Northern raced out of the gates by scoring three of its first four possessions. The Lights got a 25-yard field goal from Juan Garcia before the passing game really opened. Late in the first quarter found Kyle Johnston on a quick hitter that went for 22 yards,

A statement start

Lights are 1-0. Up Next: Saturday at Montana Tech

Lights Notes: The Lights beat Western for the second straight year in a season-opener. MSU-N bested the Bulldogs 20-3 last August in Dillon. O’Brien seems to like his matchups against the Bulldogs. Not only did he shine on Saturday, but in three career games against them, he has two TDs and almost 200 yards receiving. Northern has beaten Western four straight times dating back to the 2009 season. The Lights’
appeared to be nearly injury free on Saturday. MSU-N’s next opponent, Montana Tech, fell to Eastern Oregon 31-16 Saturday in Butte.