Lights go mining for a win at Tech
George Ferguson, Havre Daily News
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights are off to a 1-0 start for the second time in the last two years. Now Northern will hope to do something it hasn’t done in a while – start the season with back-to-back wins.

MSU-N took care of UM-Western 24-17 in a hard-fought game last Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium, and now the Lights are set to take on Montana Tech (1-1, 0-1) Saturday night in a rare night game in Butte. The Lights and Orediggers will kick off at 6 p.m at Alumni Coliseum.

And though it’s only the second game of the season, Northern head coach Mark Samson said it’s already a big one.

“This is an important game for both teams,” Samson said. “It’s early, but it’s still important for us to go down there and play well. It’s an important game for our goals this season.”

The Lights and Orediggers split the season series a year ago, each team winning on the other’s home field. Tech edged the Lights in week two in Havre, but Northern repaid the Orediggers with a 21-14 last October in Butte. In fact, MSU-N has won five of the last seven games against the Orediggers in Alumni Coliseum.

“We usually play pretty well in Butte,” Samson said. “Hopefully that continues. But what I expect is for it to be a typical Northern/Tech game. A bit of back and forth and very hard-fought. The big key for us is to get our offense on track early. Scoring early on is always key when you’re on the road.”

Though it may look like a typical Northern/Tech game, from the Orediggers’ point of view, Saturday’s tilt will be anything but. Tech is under the direction of first-year head coach Chuck Morrell, who replaced Bob Green after 24 years. The Orediggers also have a new quarterback, new running back, three new offensive linemen, and they return just three starters on defense from a team which went 5-6 a year ago.

“Everything is certainly different,” Samson said. “With a new coach comes new philosophies on offense and defense, plus they have a ton of new players. A lot of different personnel.

“They are running a no-huddle spread offense, they are running a multiple front defense and they’ve even changed some things in the kicking game,” he added. “So this is different than any other time we’ve played Tech.”

Tech will rely heavily on the arm of sophomore Brian Schwarzkoph at quarterback and running back Pat Hansen. The duo combined to put up big numbers in Tech’s season-opening, double-overtime win over Southern Oregon two weeks ago. But last week, the Orediggers managed just 15 points in a 35-15 home loss to Eastern Oregon, so obviously, kinks are still being worked out.

On defense, the Orediggers are almost brand new all over, but noseguard Marcus Johnson and linebacker Kevin Shey will be the anchors.
“They (Orediggers) are still big up front,” Samson said. “On both sides of the ball. The quarterback has a big arm and the running back does a nice job. He’s a solid player. So we will have to be physical, but smart on defense.”

Samson also wants to see more consistency Saturday in Butte.

The Lights came out like gangbusters, scoring 17 unanswered points to start the game against Western. Derek Lear threw for 342 yards and wide receiver Kyle Johnston had a huge game. But Northern’s offense was held out of the end zone for the final 40 minutes of the game, and running back Stephen Silva was held to just 2.7 yards per carry for the game. Western also started to move the ball on MSU-N’s defense late in the contest – that is until A.J. Pasalo’s game-winning interception.

“What I really liked was that our defense played great for three quarters,” Samson said. “They tired a bit in the fourth, but did a really good job. Our offense played really well for a half. Now we have to go to Tech and learn how to carry those things over for an entire game. We have to learn to be more consistent in everything we do. And a big key for us is, we have to better in the running game. What we did against Western is not going to cut it this season. Our line has to do a much better job in run blocking. We can’t be a one-dimensional football team. So while I was pleased with a lot of things on Saturday, I want to be able to go in the film room after this game and be able to see we got better and more consistent as a football team.”

And Samson believes that will happen. Against the Bulldogs, he didn’t think his team was unprepared by any means, but he says preparation for this week’s game has gone much better and with a week of game-experience under their belts, the Lights should play much better football Saturday night.

“We didn’t have any film on Western and they had a new coach and new philosophies,” Samson said. “We got to see Tech on film and two games they’ve played this season. So I think the kids will be much more prepared and in a much better position to execute our game plan this week. I think Derek (Lear) will feel much more comfortable this week than he did last. I just think we’ll be much better prepared for this game.

“But Tech will be well-prepared too,” he added. “So I expect it will be a very hard-fought, well-played game. And hopefully we can go down there and execute and come away with a win.”

The Lights and Orediggers will kick off at 6 p.m. on Saturday. The game can be seen via the internet by logging on to www.havredailynews.com. Northern returns home for its homecoming game next Saturday against Eastern Oregon.