Northern topples Montana Tech in Butte
George Ferguson, Havre Daily News
Sunday, September 11th, 2011

When the sun goes down, the Montana State University-Northern Lights seem to be at their best against Montana Tech. Actually, the Lights also seem to be at their best just about any time their playing at Tech’s Alumni Coliseum.

That was the case again on Saturday night at Northern improved to 2-0 on the season with a gutsy 23-12 road over the Orediggers in Butte. The win was MSU-N’s fifth in the last six trips to Butte, and it was the second time in four years Northern has beaten Tech in a night game.

“I’m just really proud of the kids,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “We played well. I felt we played better than we did last week in a lot of ways. But even went things weren’t going well for us, our kids really hung in there. It was a tough, physical game and our kids did a great job of handling all of it. I’m proud of the whole team.”

Northern’s defense was especially tough even though it was facing Tech’s brand new no-huddle, spread-option attack. And while the Diggers’ ran more plays on offense MSU-N slightly outgained the Diggers' 391-333, it was the points on the board and the stops that mattered most. MSU-N forced Tech into three turnovers, one which was turned out be crucial as sophomore cornerback Tanner Varner intercepted Tech’s Brian Scharzkoph and returned it 44 yards for a score which 16-6 lead with 9:41 left in the third quarter.

“I thought the defense played great the entire game,” Samson said. “As a team, I thought we played a very physical game and as a defense, we played very hard. We also had some great individual performances on defense. Tanner Varner had a huge game, Mike Carbone got his first sack as a Light and Jared Rohrback got in a made some big plays.

“Offensively, I thought we played better than last week too,” Samson said. “Tech played very physical on defense, but I thought we did some really good things offensively. Derek Lear played a real good game, Justin Montelius came in and did a real nice job for us, and as a whole I thought we got a lot better. We didn’t finish some really good drives and three turnovers are way too many for us, especially when we didn’t have any last week. But overall, there were a lot of things I was very pleased with.”

Lear opened the scoring by connecting with Brandon O’Brien for a 34-yard TD pass near the end of the first quarter. The Lights missed the PAT and Tech answered by scoring just before the half. But the Diggers missed their PAT attempt and the Lights put together a great 2-minute drive just before the half which resulted in a Juan Garcia 25-yard field goal to give Northern a 9-6 lead at intermission.

Garcia’s kick and Varner’s INT proved to be enough for the Lights to keep the Orediggers at bay.

“We had a lot of kids step up and make plays when we needed them to,” Samson said. “I thought we played a hard, smart football game and that’s what we need to do every time out. I was really proud of that.”

The game was still in doubt with the Lights up 16-6 in the fourth quarter, but Northern’s offense salted it away when it mattered most. MSU-N went on a 13-play, seven-minute drive in the fourth quarter resulting in a 9-yard Stephen Silva TD and an insurmountable 23-6 lead. Tech scored :06 left in the contest, but it was too little too late.
Lear finished the game with 208 yards passing and another 54 on the ground. O’Brien caught 10 passes for 91 yards and a score, while Kyle Johnston grabbed four balls for 65 yards. Silva finished with 75 yards and a TD and Montelius chipped in with 41 yards on six carries.

MSU-N’s defense forced two Tech fumbles and also limited the Orediggers to just 94 yards on 34 carries on the ground, as well as just the 12 points on the scoreboard.

And the result of Northern’s hard-fought win in Butte is a perfect start to Frontier Conference play and a first-place tie with Eastern Oregon atop the league standings.

“Again, I’m just really proud of the kids, really proud of the effort they gave,” Samson said. “It was nice to go down and get a road win like that. We have a tough game ahead of us with Eastern (Oregon) and we know we must continue to get better. But this was a nice win for our team.”

EOU upset No. 1 Carroll College 41-33 Saturday in Helena, and now the Mounties will come to Havre for MSU-N’s Homecoming Game Saturday at 1 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium.

Lights 23, Orediggers 12

MSU-Northern  6 3 7 7 — 23
Montana Tech   0 6 0 6 — 12

First Quarter
MSU-N — Brandon O’Brien 34 pass from Derek Lear (kick failed) 1:52

Second Quarter
MT — Clay McQueary 49 pass from Brian Schwarzkoph (pass failed), 1:31
MSU-N — FG Juan Garcia 25, 0:04.

Third Quarter
MSU-N — Tanner Varner 44 interception return (Garcia kick), 9:41

Fourth Quarter
MSU-N — Stephen Silva 9 run (Garcia kick), 1:10
MT — James Roberts 2 pass from Schwarzkoph (pass failed), 0:06

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<th>MSU-N</th>
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<tr>
<td>First downs</td>
<td>18</td>
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**INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS**

RUSHING — Northern, Silva 16-75, Lear 12-54, Justin Montelius 6-41, James Chandless 3-7, Team 2-(minus 5). Tech, Schwarzkoph 14-12, Nick Baker 7-31, Pat Hansen 5-8, Taylor Rowe 2-17, Roberts 2-0, Jake Helbling 1-23, Craig Halko 1-11, Trent Thomas 1-(minus 6), Team 1-(minus 2).