A heavyweight fight in Havre: Lights host Eastern Oregon in a nationally-ranked homecoming showdown
George Ferguson, Havre Daily News
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First place in the Frontier Conference at stake. The chance to start 3-0. A nationally-ranked game. Things like this haven’t happened at Blue Pony Stadium for a while now.

But that’s exactly the circumstances surrounding Saturday’s Frontier Conference showdown between the No. 23 Montana State University-Northern Lights (2-0) and the No. 12 Eastern Oregon Mountaineers (2-0) inside Blue Pony Stadium.

And to top it all off, it’s Northern’s Homecoming game too.

“It is a big game, an important game,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "It isn’t the end of the world and it won’t break either team’s season with a loss. But for sure, it’s an important game for both teams and it’s one we want to win."

Saturday’s game already had plenty of intriguing factors – Northern lost twice to EOU last season by a combined seven points. In both games, the Lights let large leads slip away; EOU is trying to finally get over the hump and make the playoffs for the first time since joining the Frontier; Northern is celebrating homecoming this weekend and would certainly like a victory in front of what figures to be a large crowd.

Those factors are all good and well, but perhaps more important is the fact the Lights and Mounties are both off to a 2-0 start with much of their fate in their own hands. And when EOU beat Carroll 41-33 last week in Helena, it tacked on added significance to Saturday’s tilt in Havre.

“Eastern Oregon is playing well, they did a great job with their win at Carroll,” Samson said. "They are playing with a lot of confidence right now. But I think we’re playing pretty good football too. I think we have a lot of confidence right now and I think we’ll be ready for this game. It should be a great matchup.”

And matchups are what Saturday’s game will be all about.

The Lights are the top-rated passing offense in the Frontier with Derek Lear the top passer in the league at 275 yards per game. Brandon O’Brien and Kyle Johnston combine to average just over 180 yards per game in the air and Northern is still a threat to run the ball with speedster Stephen Silva, as well as bruiser Justin Montelius. Conversely, the Mounties are much-improved on defense this season, especially against the pass. Defensive back Max Hannah led the league in interceptions a season ago, and linebacker Marc-Avery Airhart is great in coverage or on the blitz. EOU also has a stout run stopper in Nathan Rudder and a solid pass rusher in Michael Goings.

Then there’s Northern’s defense against the EOU offense. The Lights lead the Frontier in scoring defense, yielding just over 14 points per game. MSU-N held Montana Tech to just 56 yards rushing in a 223-12 a week ago in Butte, and the Lights lead the Frontier in that category as well.

But EOU’s no-huddle, spread-option attack is a different animal. The Mounties possess two of the best offensive weapons in the NAIA in senior quarterback Chris Ware and senior running back Kevin Sampson.
Ware hurt the Lights with both his feet and his arm last season, just as he did Carroll a week ago. He's also a two-time NAIA All-American and a former Frontier Offensive MVP. And Samson went over 100 yards against the Lights in both meetings a season ago. Receivers Jake Burroughs and Kedrick Starr are speedster, and Starr is also a threat in the return game.

But the Lights are ready to stand up to the challenge. Northern needs to get pressure on Ware from the likes of senior defensive end Will Andrews and the rest of the front four, while great linebackers Landry See, A.J. Pasalo and Jordan Van Voast will be key in both the run and passing game. But it’s the secondary which will be surely tested on Saturday, especially by EOU’s speedy and talented receivers, as well as all-American tight end Dillon Bedford (6-4, 240). Cornerback Tanner Varner is the reigning Frontier Defensive Player of the Week and he had a huge game against Tech last week, but most of Northern’s secondary has yet to face an offense quite like EOU’s so their play will be key to Northern’s success.

"It would be nice if you could just focus on one player or one aspect defensively,” Samson said. “But EOU has a lot of weapons. Chris Ware been around a long time and I think what he does the best is extend plays with his feet. He is just really good at making things happen, and he can really hurt you in a lot of different ways. Our job is not letting him run around and go crazy back there. He’s going to make some plays but we have to limit what he does. But then you also can’t let the running back just have his way either. He’s a good player, he’s got a lot of speed but he can also run inside on you. So they definitely have the weapons and we’re going to have to be very smart and sharp defensively.

"But our defense is playing really well right now,” he added. "I think our defense has played great the first two games. They’ve done a really good job and I know they’ll be ready to go on Saturday. But it’s certainly going to be a challenge. I also think the kicking game will be really important in this game. We have had some breakdowns there, and the two teams we have played have also had some breakdowns in that aspect. But we’re going to get that shored up this week. I think the kicking game and field position will play a big role in the outcome of this game.

“As a defense we just have to be ready to go out and play good fundamental football,” See said. “Their quarterback is a really good player, their running back is a really good player and they are a tough offense to stop. But we’ve worked really hard to improve each week as a defense, and we just have to be ready to play, every play on Saturday.”

It remains to be seen whether either team can be fully stopped however. The Lights are a potent offense, just as EOU is, and Northern has a stingy defense, hungry to make plays. On paper, it’s a great matchup, and it’s also one with high stakes because the winner will have a leg up on the rest of the league as September draws to a close. This game is also key for the Lights given Northern won’t play at home again until mid-October.

In other words, the stakes couldn’t be higher and the Lights are certainly ready to roll the dice.

"It really is a great matchup,” Samson said. “Their (Mounties) offense is very good, and we’re playing really well on defense. Their defense has played well the last two weeks and their coming off a big win against Carroll. And our offense has done some really good things this season. Derek (Lear) has a very good grasp on things right now and we a have a lot of guys making plays. So on paper, it looks like a great matchup.

“It’s also really nice to have this game at home,” he continued. “I think the kids will be ready. The kids realize now what we can do this season, what we can accomplish. We’re gelling as a team really well. All the kids are playing their roles really well and I think we’re definitely ready for this challenge. It should be a great battle and we’ll just have to see what happens on Saturday.”

Saturday’s homecoming game between the Lights and Mounties will kick off at 1 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium. The game can streamed live on the internet by logging on to www.havredailynews.com. It can also be heard locally on 92.5 KPQX FM. Northern is back on the road next week at Rocky Mountain College.