Mounting a charge: EOU's high-octane offense beats MSU-Northern in a shootout
Sunday, September 18th, 2011

On a homecoming day when the warm winds were gusting through Blue Pony Stadium, the Eastern Oregon Mountaineers blew threw more like a tornado.

In a matchup of first-place teams in the Frontier Conference, it was the high-octane Mountaineers who got the better of the No. 23 Montana State University-Northern Lights, 48-29 Saturday afternoon at Blue Pony Stadium.

The 12th-ranked Mounties silenced a large homecoming crowd inside Blue Pony Stadium by scoring touchdowns on their first six possessions, including a game-killing, three-play, 38-second drive and score to start the third quarter, which put Northern in a difficult 35-14 hole – a hole the Lights just couldn’t climb out of on their way to their first loss of 2011.

“They (Mounties) are a good football team,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “They have a great offense and they didn’t make a single mistake today. Chris Ware is a great quarterback and has been in this league for a long time. And right now their offense is playing too good for the rest of us in this league. So all the credit to them for how they played today.”

Ware, the two-time NAIA All-American was razor-sharp, even on a gusty day in Havre as he completed passes to 11 different receivers.

He staked the Mounties to a quick 7-0 lead after it looked like the Northern defense made a great opening stand. On EOU’s first of only two punt attempts on the day, which came minutes into the game, Eastern head coach Tim Camp opted for a fake and freshman punter Luis Ortiz ran for a first down. Just two plays later, Ware hit Dillon Bedford on a 14-yard touchdown, and the track meet was on.

The fake punt and subsequent score was all set up by an untimely interception on Northern’s opening drive. The Lights marched the ball right down the field on EOU’s defense, but near the goal line, receiver Brandon O’Brien was nailed in the back as he was going to catch a Derek Lear pass and the ball dropped right into the hands of EOU linebacker Marc-Avery Airhart. Four minutes later, EOU was on the board on a day when the Mounties would never trail.

“Again, Eastern did an outstanding job offensively,” Samson said. “But we also didn’t help ourselves either. I thought our offense actually played very well, we moved the ball pretty well today. But we got close a number of times and didn’t score. We just have to learn how to finish drives. And we had too many turnovers. No matter how they happened, you can’t turn the ball over and give a team like Eastern that many chances to score.”

Eastern went up 14-0 on the first of four Kevin Sampson TD’s with 1:09 left in the first quarter. While the day certainly belonged to Ware, Sampson was also unstoppable, rushing for 179 yards on 21 carries. Sampson’s contributions opened up EOU’s passing game even more, and Ware went on to throw three TD’s and go 18-of-26 for 324 yards and no miscues.

“We knew that they (Lights) had a great defense, they have a great front seven and the defensive backs always fly to the ball,” Ware said. “So really, we just wanted to find the areas down field that we could attack and we figured that if we could open up the field with the run, we could open things up with the passing game.”
And that’s exactly what the Mounties did, though Northern’s offense kept on trying to answer.

Down 14-0, the Lights got on the board with a great drive to open the second quarter. Lear was throwing the short routes well and the drive was capped off by a two-yard pitch to Orin Johnson.

But for every Northern response, there was an equal EOU retort.

Less than two minutes after the Lights’ first score, Ware hit a wide open Jake Burroughs on a 45-yard strike just as he was scrambling away from pressure. The play was a great one, but the Lights came right back with a five-yard TD catch by Kyle Johnston, one of two scores by the junior wideout on the day. That Northern drive was sparked by a great catch and run from Stephen Silva to set Northern up deep in EOU territory. Again however, Ware came right back. He ran a quick three-minute drive which ultimately resulted in a Sampson 22-yard catch and score. The play came just as Will Andrews was bearing down on Ware, but instead, the Mounties avoided the sack, got the score and went up 28-14 at halftime.

The opening drive of third quarter ended with Sampson ripping off a 39-yard run, his third total TD of the day.

“That quick score they got to start the second half really hurt,” Samson said. “We were hoping to get some momentum built on defense to start the second half, and instead, they go right down and score. That’s kind of how the game went for us. We just couldn’t get any momentum.”

Northern fought valiantly, answering Sampson’s run with a great drive, ending in a Lear, 2-yard touchdown run on a fourth-and-goal play. That score made it 35-21, but EOU’s offense wasn’t done. The Mounties went back up by 21 points when Sampson scored his fourth TD of the day on a one-yard plunge. EOU also added a score in the fourth quarter, while MSU-N got in on Johnston’s second TD of the day with :18 left in the contest to make the final margin 48-29.

In all, Eastern’s offense racked up 579 yards of offense against MSU-N’s top-ranked scoring defense. The Lights also came in as the No. 1 rushing defense in the Frontier. Conversely, the Lights totaled a stellar 437 yards of offense and ran 15 more plays than the Mounties. Three turnovers were costly for Northern, but the MSU-N offense still moved the ball against a much-improved EOU defense.

“We didn’t play poorly at all,” Samson said. “I thought our offense did a really good job for the most part, and we got the pressure we wanted to get on Chris Ware from our front seven, he is just so good with his feet and he made us pay too many times. I don’t feel at all like we played poorly. We made mistakes, sure, but they (Mounties) just played a great football game today.”

Lear was efficient, passing for 289 yards and completing 31-of-44 pass attempts. He also rushed for 50 yards and a score. Johnston had another stellar day in his first year as a Light. He totaled 79 yards on seven catches and also had 13 yards on a reverse to go with his two scores. Johnson had a season-high 11 catches for 47 yards, while Silva rushed for 50 yards and had three catches for 70 yards. Defensively, the Lights got six tackles, two sacks and a tackle-for-loss from Andrews. Jordan Van Voast had a team-high 12 stops, while Logan Nathe and Than Schopp also registered sacks.

The third straight road win left the Mounties at 3-0 in conference play and alone in first place in the Frontier standings as they prepare for their long-awaited home opener against UM-Western next weekend.

“I think the biggest thing we were trying to do was to be consistent in everything that we do,” Camp said. “Everything we have done in the past doesn’t mean a thing if we couldn’t come up here and get a win against a very good football team, so we just wanted to be consistent and play our style of football. It was just a great job by our coaching staff and our players today.

“We just ran our system and played our style of football,” Camp added. “We have a long ways to go, but we are a good football team just trying to play hard. There is a long ways to go and a lot of conference football still to be played, and Northern is a great football team.”

Meanwhile, Northern (2-1) will spend nearly the next month on the road. The Lights travel to Billings to face Rocky Mountain College next weekend, and won’t play in Havre again until Oct. 22.
“We can’t get down,” Samson said. “That’s one thing that happened a little today, we got down on ourselves. We can’t do that if we want to achieve our goals this season. This was one game, it was a game we really wanted to win, but it is still was one game. We have to put it in the past, come back to work this week and get ready to win some games on the road.”

Lights are 2-1. Up Next: Saturday at RMC

Lights Notes: While Ware certainly did spread the ball around on Saturday, so did Lear. He also completed five passes to sophomore tight end Brian Torgerson, three to Brandon O’Brien and two to Justin Montelius. Johnston’s big day included 104 yards on kickoff returns, as well as a 60-yard punt return for a TD which was called back on a penalty. The game was relatively clean with the two teams combining for just seven penalties. EOU has now beaten the Lights three straight times in Havre.