Lights look to bounce back at Rocky
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights had a big opportunity to make up some ground in the Frontier Conference against a high-powered Eastern Oregon offense last week in Havre.

Things didn’t go the way of the Lights however, but the beauty of football is, there’s always next week. And next week is here as Northern gets a chance at redemption against another high-powered offense when the Lights travel to Billings to take on the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears. Saturday’s game at the Rocky Bowl is also the second straight for the Lights against a nationally-ranked opponent and it’s the second straight week in which the Lights (2-1, 2-1) are playing the team they are tied with in the Frontier standings. Northern, the No. 17 Bears (2-1, 3-1) and No. 4 Carroll College are all tied for second in the Frontier this week.

And while MSU-N’s defense will surely be on alert this week, after Eastern Oregon’s 48-29 win over the Lights last Saturday, in which the Mounties amassed over 500 yards of offense, the Lights will also be concerned with the Bears’ defense. Rocky has the top scoring defense in the Frontier, yielding just 23 points per game. The Bears are also the top-rated defense against the pass, while the Lights are the top passing team in the conference. Rocky is also second in the conference in total defense, while the Lights are second in the Frontier in total offense.

So, once again, matchups will play a key role. Rocky has great defenders in defensive backs J.T. Fitzgerald and Thomas Ackerman. Up front, the Bears are also stout, especially with sophomore defensive end Josh Johnson, a South Carolina transfer, and all-conference rush end Phil Urlacher. Then there are the Bears’ linebackers, a duo of stars in Steffan Blume and leader Travis Bertelsen. So there’s no doubt the Bears possess one of the best defenses in the conference and one of the best Rocky has had in a decade.

On offense, the Bears haven’t been the same without graduated quarterback Kasey Peters, but they still run the same offense — a wide-open, no-huddle passing attack. Redshirt freshman QB Bryce Baker is in control of the offense and he’s played well at times. Comforting to Baker is having an all-American receiver in A.J. Tolbert as well as a veteran receiver in senior Levi Sutton, both of whom have had great games against the Lights in the past.

So, once again, Northern’s defense will be up against a fast-paced attack. The Lights will want to lift themselves back up after the loss to Eastern Oregon last week, and to do that, they’ll need strong play from the secondary, led by safety Matt Reyant and sophomore corner Tanner Varner. Northern will look to also pressure the young Rocky QB, especially with Will Andrews, who has a league-leading 3.5 sacks in three games.

Offensively, the Lights will look to score more often in the redzone. They’ll no doubt be able to move the ball against Rocky, as Northern has proven to be a potent passing attack. Derek Lear leads the conference in passing, while Kyle Johnston, Brandon O’Brien and Orin Johnson are three of the top five pass catchers in the Frontier. But two things head coach Mark Sampson would like to see on Saturday is, one, Northern run the ball more effectively and be a little more balanced, and, two, the Lights cash in on scoring chances. MSU-N let three such chances slip away last week against EOU, including twice inside the redzone.
Northern also needs to bounce back and put the EOU game in its rearview mirror because Saturday is the first of three straight road games. After the game against the Bears, the Lights will travel to Carroll and UM-Western before returning home.

“Rocky is a very good team, they have a really good defense and they run the same offense as always. That will be the third straight week we see that kind of offense, so we should be ready for it,” Samson said. “We just can’t get down. We have to stay positive, and be ready to win some games on the road.”

Saturday’s game between the Lights and Bears will kick off at 1 p.m. in Billings. The game can be streamed live on the internet by logging on to www.havredailynews.com.