Lights headed for a big game at Carroll
First chance at Last Chance Gulch
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The Montana State University-Northern football team has played two straight, big games against nationally-ranked opponents. One didn’t go so well. The second one did.

Now the No. 22 Lights (3-1) are set for another big showdown when they take on fourth-ranked Carroll College (3-1) Saturday at Nelson Stadium in Helena. The Saints will be Northern’s third straight ranked opponent. The Lights lost to Eastern Oregon two weeks ago in Havre, then beat then No. 17 Rocky Mountain College 35-32 last Saturday in Billings.

“I think we’re at a point in the season where we know what we have to do,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “We have been at it now for eight weeks, and we’ve also played some pretty important games. So I feel like our guys understand exactly what they need to do going into this game.

“And this is a pretty critical game for both teams,” he added. “I told the kids last week that that game was a big, big game for us. But this one is just as big because it gives us a great opportunity to be where we want to be at the halfway point in the season. We do have five games left after this one, but this game is pretty important for us.”

Whether at home or on the road, the Carroll game is always important to the Lights. But Saturday’s affair pits the two teams that are in second place in the league standings, and it’s also the first time both the Lights and Saints have been ranked going into a game in over four years. The game is also being televised statewide, so there’s plenty of big-time factors involved.

And a big reason why Saturday’s game is getting so much attention is because the Lights have certainly joined the fray. Northern is off to its best start since the 2008 season, and last Saturday’s win at Rocky was a huge step. It was a road win against a ranked opponent at a time when the Lights were just starting a three-game road stretch. Northern’s offense, which ranks first in total offense, first in passing and third in rushing in the Frontier Conference, really stepped up to the plate against the Battlin’ Bears, and the Lights’ defense made a dramatic turnaround from its game against EOU two weeks ago in Havre.

Sophomore quarterback Derek Lear continues to impress, leading the Frontier in passing and total offense. Running back Stephen Silva rushed for a career-high 201 years and a score against the Bears, while the Lights’ defense held the Bears under 100 yards rushing. Northern is second in the conference in scoring defense and second against the rush coming into Saturday’s game against Carroll.

But with all there is to be excited about concerning the Lights’ 3-1 start, Samson knows this game is a different beast altogether. It’s Carroll, and while the Saints have a rare loss on their early resume, Samson notes that his team will be in for the biggest challenge of the season.

“Carroll is a very good, very well-coached football team,” Samson said. “And everyone knows how well they play at home. So this is a big challenge for our football team.”
“There aren’t any secrets about them (Saints),” he added. “You know they are going to come out and play very hard, very physical football. You know on offense they are going to run, run and run some more. That’s their bread and butter. And you know on defense they are going to give us a lot of different looks and try to create some confusion. It’s definitely no secret what they do, they just do it all very well.”

When Samson speaks of Carroll running the football, he’s not exaggerating. Former Malta prep star Chance Demarias leads the entire NAIA in rushing at just over 168 yards per game. He already has nine touchdowns on the season and has two 200-yard games to his credit. Demarias is a workhorse back with a highly-touted offensive line in front him. So Northern’s front seven, including interior lineman like Than Schopp, Nick Weller, Mike Carbone and others will be challenged on Saturday.

Carroll will also spread the ball and the Saints have a veteran quarterback in Dane Broadhead, a fifth-year senior who learned behind former Havre Blue Pony star Gary Wagner over the years. Carroll also has a versatile receiver in senior Matt Ritter as well as the good-sized Lat Wipplinger. Former Havre Blue Pony Billy Wagner also plays WR for the Saints.

The Saints also boast the top scoring defense and rushing defense in the Frontier, and they’re coming off a 26-0 shutout at Montana Tech last Saturday. Carroll also shut down the MSU-N offense in two wins against the Lights last season. With standouts like safety Brian Strobel and linebacker Rhakeem Harris, the Saints are talented on defense, and Samson says playing well offensively will be crucial.

“We can’t just focus on stopping their offense and stopping their running back,” Samson said. “We have played really well on offense for a good portion of this season, but we’re going to have to again this week. We have to play smart football on offense, sustain some drives and take care of the football. Those things are always key for us. But we also have to go in and put some points on the board. We have to take advantage of scoring opportunities when we get them.”

Scoring points hasn’t come easy for the Lights in recent games against the Saints, but this year’s Northern team has certainly shown the firepower. Leading or being at the top of the Frontier in almost every offensive category through four weeks is certainly no accident. So as much as Northern will have its hands full with the Saints this Saturday, so too will Carroll have its hands full with a visiting Lights’ team hungry to knock off the mighty Saints in Helena.

“I think we’ve had a real good week of practice,” Samson said. “The kids are excited to go on the road and play this game. The big thing for us is not getting too high or too low during the course of the game. It’s going to be an emotional game, but it’s also a game we need to stay very focused in. I know we’re prepared, I know our kids will come out and play hard. We just have to also be ready to execute and if we do that then we’ll see, we’ll see what happens.”

The Lights and Saints will kick off at 1:05 p.m. Saturday at Nelson Stadium in Helena. The game will be broadcast statewide on local CW Networks by Lyon Productions. It can also be streamed live on the internet. Saturday’s game marks the halfway point of the 2011 Frontier season. All Frontier teams have a bye next week.