Bulldogs nip Lights at the buzzer
Western's last-second field goal thwarts a furious Northern comeback
George Ferguson
Sunday, October 16th, 2011

Just when it looked like the Montana State University-Northern Lights and UM-Western Bulldogs couldn't play any more barn burners against each other, they did it again.

The second game of the MSU-N/ Western series went to overtime last year in Havre with the Lights coming out on top. Then, last month in Havre, Northern snuffed out a last-ditch Western drive to preserve a victory. On Saturday in Dillon, it was the Bulldog's turn to win the final seconds.

Western's Yim Sribenjakul kicked a 31-yard field goal as time expired to life the Bulldogs to a 30-27 win over the Lights Saturday afternoon in Dillon. It was Northern's first Frontier Conference loss to the Bulldogs since the 2009 season, and the game-winning field goal spoiled a gutty come-from-behind effort by the Lights.

Northern scored two touchdowns in the final four minutes of the game to erase a 27-12 deficit. But with 51 left in the contest, Western pushed the ball down field, including a great run by T.J. Leep which put the Bulldogs in position to make a game-winning kick and prevent the game from going into overtime.

“It’s a tough loss for sure,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “They (Bulldogs) did some really good things, they are a much-improved football team. Their quarterback had a pretty good day against us and they made a play to win the game.”

The Lights showed plenty of resilience Saturday, but it wasn’t quite enough.

Northern overcame a horrific first half in which the Bulldogs shut the Lights’ offense out and led 14-0 at intermission. MSU-N finally got on the board early in the third quarter when Derek Lear capped off a strong drive by throwing a 5-yard touchdown pass to Justin Montelius. Northern missed the extra point, which proved costly, but the TD showed the Lights offense was getting back on track. MSU-N cut the lead to 14-12 seven minutes later when fullback James Chandless scored the first of his three TD’s on the day. Western answered with a Charlie Dotson 5-yard run to lead 20-12 heading into what would be a dramatic fourth quarter.

“We did some things better in the second half,” Samson said. “But in that first half, we didn’t do anything well at all. We just didn’t play well in any phase of the game and that hurt us. We had to play from behind the rest of the game.”

And the Lights had to eventually come from way behind. Western opened the fourth quarter with a screen pass that Leep took to the house from 32 yards out to build a 27-12 advantage with just 7:09 left in the game.

Northern responded with a quick 3-minute drive, capped off by Chandless’ second TD to cut the lead 27-19. MSU-N’s defense then forced Western to a quick three-and-out and the Lights drive 89 yards in just over two minutes, and Chandless plowed in from two yards out to cut the lead to two points with 51 left in the contest. Stephen Silva then raced in for the game-tying two-point conversion, which then set up Western’s game-winning drive.

“We did some really good things to get back in the game,” Samson said. “We had two really good drives there in the fourth quarter and our defense did a good job of getting the ball back to our offense. Those things were really good and our kids did a great job of battling back.”
Silva and the Northern rushing attack had a big day. Silva rushed for 189 of Northern’s season-high 284 yards on the ground. Chandless scored on runs of five, four and two yards, while Kyle Johnston had four carries for 54 yards. As a team, the Lights out gained Western 417-369, but Western’s defense did a good job limiting Lear, especially in the first half. Lear finished the game 14-of-26 for a season-low 133 yards, one touchdown and one interception. Orin Johnson led the Northern receivers with five catches and 76 yards. Defensively, the Lights got a big game from defensive end Ryan Craig.

UM-W QB Zach McRae paced the Bulldogs. He threw for 221 yards and two scores and was also their leading rusher with 59 yards on seven carries.

Western’s special teams also had a big impact. Sribenjakul’s game-winner proved to be the difference, but the Bulldogs also blocked a Northern punt and recovered it in their endzone which gave them a 14-0 lead in the second quarter.

"It’s disappointing right now," Samson said. "Because we went down there and we know we can play so much better than we did. It’s a tough loss, and hopefully we can respond to it this week.”

The loss dropped to Northern to 3-3 in the Frontier Conference and 3-3 overall. The Lights are still tied for second in the Frontier standings because Rocky Mountain College also fell to 3-3 after a loss at Carroll College on Saturday afternoon.

After over a month on the road, Northern finally returns home to host Montana Tech this Saturday.

Bulldogs 30, Lights 27
Northern  0 0 12 15 — 27
Western    7 7 6 10 — 30

First quarter
MW — Mike Gallagher 41 pass from Zach McRae (Aukkarapong Sribenjakul kick), 2:16

Second quarter
MW — Ryan Otto recovered blocked punt in end zone (Sribenjakul kick), 9:13

Third quarter
MSU-N — Justin Montelius 5 pass from Derek Lear (kick failed), 11:40
MSU-N — James Chandless 4 run (run failed), 4:39
MW — Charlie Dotson 5 run (kick failed), 1:41

Fourth quarter
MW — TJ Leep 34 pass from McRae (Sribenjakul kick), 7:09
MSU-N — Chandless 2 run (Juan Garcia kick), 4:18
MSU-N — Chandless 2 runn (Stephen Silva run), 0:51
MW — Sribenjakul 31 FG, 0:00

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<th>MSU-N</th>
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INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

PASSING — Northern, Lear 14-26-1, 133 yards. Western, McRae 18-25-0, 221 yards.