Lights blow by Tech
George Ferguson
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It was windy, it was cool, and the visiting team was on a six-game losing streak with its back against the wall.

And none of that mattered to the Montana State University-Northern football team Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium as the Lights blew out Montana Tech 41-20 in a Frontier Conference rivalry game.

Northern’s return home from a three-game road trip in which the Lights hadn’t played at Blue Pony Stadium since Sept. 17 coincided with Military Appreciation Day, and the Lights made it a triumphant one. The win also gave MSU-N (4-3) a season sweep over the Orediggers, as well as snapped its own two-game skid.

But perhaps just as important, the Lights were dominant from start to finish, and that was something head coach Mark Samson was looking for.

“I think we’re starting to show some real consistency,” Samson said. “We actually played really well in the second half last week at Western and today, I thought we put together a pretty complete four quarters. Sure there were a few breakdowns here and there, but I felt like we had a great effort for four quarters and we continued to play well throughout the game.”

Saturday was also a coming out party for MSU-N sophomore wide receiver Mick Miller, who set up Northern’s first score with a 49-yard catch and run in the first quarter. One play later, fullback James Chandless barreled his way in for a 7-0 Lights lead at the 9:10 mark.

Miller wound up having a huge impact as he scored twice in the second half, once on a 26-yard strike from Derek Lear, his former Fairfield High teammate, which gave the Lights a 33-14 lead with 6:04 in the third quarter, and again on a 74-yard pass play with 11 minutes left in the fourth, which put Northern ahead 41-14.

“We studied a lot of film this week as an offense, and the coaches did a great job of making the right calls today,” the 6-4 Miller said. “We knew going in where we could hit them, where their weak spots were and where we could make big plays. The coaches did such a great job of having the right plays called, and Derek (Lear) made all the right reads. And I’m just glad I was able to get my chances and make big plays to help our team win a big game.”

Miller finished with 159 yards and two touchdowns on just four catches, but Saturday’s win was a total team effort.

The Northern defense forced Tech into four turnovers, including a blocked punt by senior Will Andrews in the second half. The Lights limited the Orediggers to 350 total yards of offense and chased starting quarterback Brian Schwarzkoph from the game before halftime.
"It was really important for us defensively. After last week the defensive line knew we didn't do what we needed to do, and today we knew they had a young quarterback and we knew if we could rattle him it would give us the advantage and so that's what we did," Andrews said. "It's always about preparation and we did a lot of that, but as far as scheming we just had to get back to the basics, the hard-nosed play. It was just a lot of physical play today and that is what Northern defense is known for and that is how we need to play."

Andrews finished the game with two sacks, the punt block, six tackles and a forced fumble. Northern’s dominant defense also got a season-high 14 tackles from Landry See. Matt Reyant had nine tackles, Jordan Van Voast added seven, Tyler Langhus had a fumble recovery and Chris Hamilton had an interception.

"I thought we came out with great effort and energy, especially defensively," Samson said. "Tech is a good football team, but we had a lot of kids step up today. I thought we played a very consistent football game."

The Lights were equally as consistent on offense. MSU-N built its 21-7 halftime lead via two second-quarter scores. Stephen Silva capped off a great drive by scoring on a one-yard TD run early in the second, then Lear finished off another march with an 18-yard run to paydirt with 3:48 left in the first half.

Northern upped the lead to 28-7 when Lear found Kyle Johnston, who made a great diving catch in the endzone for a 17-yard score with 10:57 left in the third period.

The Lights totaled 496 yards of offense with almost 300 on the ground. Silva rushed for 115 yards and a score, while Chandless and Orin Johnson each gained 35. Lear was a modest 13-of-25 for 235 yards and three scores, with no interceptions. He also ran for 39 yards. Johnston caught five balls for 40 yards.

"Everybody just came out and played hard," Johnson said. "We knew we had the talent to get the job done and I think everybody just came out and did their job and that was how we were able to succeed. We just played up to our standards."

The Orediggers got three TD passes from backup Nick Baker, who replaced Schwarzkoph in the second quarter. Freshman running back Pat Hansen ran for 167 yards. Tech’s loss was is seventh straight this season and third straight to the Lights dating back to last year.

Meanwhile, with the win, the Lights improved to 4-3 on the season and remained in a third-place tie with Rocky Mountain College. Northern has just one road game left, which will be next Saturday against second-place Eastern Oregon in LaGrande, Ore.

"I’m really proud of this football team," Samson said. "They not only played well today, but they showed a lot of character. They didn’t hang their heads about last week, instead they got back after it and beat a good football team today.

"It was huge for us to rebound like this, things are always better when you win compared to when you lose," Johnson said. "It was a big win for us."

**Lights Notes:** Chandless’ TD in the first quarter was his fourth in the last two games. Lights’ receiver Brandon O’Brien, who received the Marine-Navy Medal before Saturday’s game, didn’t play due to injury. Johnson had several positive carries out of the “Wildcat” formation, something the Lights haven’t used as much this season. Cornerback Chris Hamilton recorded his first career INT. Saturday’s win avenged Northern’s loss to Tech last year in Blue Pony Stadium.