Lights brace for a Bear attack tonight
George Ferguson
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Friday night football is such a rarity at the Frontier Conference level. But in the case of the Montana State University-Northern Lights and Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears, a night game has happened before.

And it will happen again tonight when the Lights host the Bears under the Lights inside Blue Pony Stadium in a pivotal Frontier Conference clash. Kickoff is set for 7 p.m.

Northern gave Mark Samson his first home win as head coach under the Blue Pony Stadium lights in November of 2004. Now the Lights begin their final home stand looking to do the same seven years later.

"I think everybody will be fired up for this one," Northern defensive tackle Nick Weller said. "We always seem to play better at home, and playing college football under the lights, it’s different and it’s exciting."

Weller was a part of the last Northern team to play on a Friday night in Havre. Northern ended the 2008 season with a resounding victory over Montana Tech, and these Lights are looking to go out in similar fashion.

Neither the Lights (4-4, 4-4), who lost 41-14 at Eastern Oregon last Saturday, or the Bears (4-4, 5-4) who were beaten at Tech last Saturday, are going to make the playoffs or win a Frontier Conference title this season – but tonight still has plenty of intrigue for both teams. For starters, the two are rivals and have waged some great battles in the past, while Rocky has won two straight times in Havre. RMC will look to also avoid a sweep at the hands of MSU-N after the Lights handled the Bears 35-32 last month in Billings. That game was never as close as the final score indicated. And to top things off, both teams are trying to cap off winning seasons. For Northern, it would be the culmination of a rebuilding process that has really started to take shape this season. For Rocky, it would be back-to-back seasons over .500 after the Bears finished at or near the bottom of the conference for the better part of the last decade.

Northern also has an opportunity to finish strong at home. The Lights had an odd schedule this season and have played four of their last five games away from Havre. Tonight is the start of a two-game home finale against the rival Bears, then Carroll College.

"We have to look at this game as an opportunity," Samson said. "To see that we can keep getting better. We didn’t play well for most of last week’s game. But we have the opportunity to go out against Rocky, in front of our home fans, under the lights and do something about that. We have to seize that opportunity.”

Seizing it won’t be easy however. Despite the Lights’ road win over the Bears this season, Rocky has been ranked in the NAIA Top 25 for much of the season, and the Bears bring with them perhaps the best defense they’ve ever had. That defense, led by all-conference types like defensive end Phil Urlacher, linebackers Steffan Blume and Travis Bertelsen, and four ball-hawking defensive backs who have combined for 10 interceptions this season will try and slow down the No. 1 offense in the Frontier Conference.

Northern comes into tonight’s game averaging over 450 yards of offense, with quarterback Derek Lear leading the Frontier in passing and total offense. The Lights’ ground game has really started rolling as well, thanks to junior Stephen Silva who ran for 200-plus yards in MSU-N’s win last month in Billings. Silva
has now rushed for 757 yards on the season, he averages 6.1 yards per carry and gains 108 yards per outing. His hot streak has pushed him all the way to the No. 3 rusher in the country.

“Stephen is really playing well,” Samson said. “And so is our offensive line. He had a great game against Rocky the first time out and we’re hoping he’ll do the same this time.

“We really played very well offensively the first time we played them,” he added. “They (Bears) have a really talented defense. They have some really athletic guys who make plays. But fortunately for us, that didn’t slow us down the first time we played them. We executed really well, and we just didn’t do many things wrong on offense down there. But again, this is a new game. We’ve seen each other now, and we’re aware of how good Rocky’s defense can be.”

The Bears can also be good on offense, though they may not have starting quarterback Bryce Baker. Baker went out with an injury against Tech and it’s unknown as to whether he’ll play tonight. If Baker, who has only thrown three INT’s in his first year of replacing three-time all-american Kasey Peters, can’t go tonight, the Bears will turn to senior Paxton Paynter to try and get the ball into the hands of stars A.J. Tolbert and Levi Sutton – two players who have tortured the Lights in the past. Rocky’s ground game has been up-and-down this season, but Nate Ray is a bruising back who can run between the tackles.

The task of trying to stop the Bears’ wide-open attack will fall on the shoulders of an up-and-down MSU-N defense. Seniors Will Andrews, who leads the Frontier in sacks, and Landry See, who leads the Frontier in tackles will lead a Northern defense that has fallen to last in the Frontier in total defense, though the Lights had great success limiting RMC the first time out, as well as played outstanding in creating four turnovers in a home game two weeks ago against the Orediggers.

“Even without Kasey Peters, Rocky has really not changed anything,” Samson said. “They like to spread you out, and get the ball out of the quarterback’s hands as fast as possible. They want to get the ball into the hands of their skill players and let them do the work. And they do have great skill kids. A.J. Tolbert is the most talented receiver in our league and they just have a bunch of fast kids who make plays with the ball in their hands.

“So we understand what we need to do defensively,” he added. “This time of year, especially defensively, it isn’t as much about x’s and o’s as it is lining up, playing hard and each man doing his job to the best of his abilities. I think our defense will be ready to do that Friday night.”

And if past night games in Havre are any indication, the Lights will indeed be fired up and ready to go. Northern is 2-0 under the lights on their home field, the Lights are, for the most part healthy and they are still hungry for a win at home – a place they haven’t gotten a chance to play at very often in the last month.

“I think we are still a confident group,” Samson said. “One of the things about the last time we played Rocky was, we responded well every time we had to. We would score, then they would score and we would respond. I was really proud of our kids for that.

“We’ve played really well at times this season and we’ve shown what kind of football team we can be when we do that consistently,” he added. “I think our main thing is, we just haven’t been as consistent as we needed to for the entire season, and I think that’s very similar to what Rocky has gone through this season. So this is a matchup of two good football teams who are both hungry to win a football game. We’ve had a really solid week of practice and I really think our kids are ready to go.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Bears kicks off at 7 at Blue Pony Stadium in Havre. The Lights will also be at home next Saturday to face Carroll, while Rocky closes out the season at home against Eastern Oregon.