A shutout after dark
MSU-Northern blanks Rocky under the lights at Blue Pony Stadium
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The Friday Night Lights scenario sure has been good to the Montana State University-Northern Lights. And so have games against the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears this season.

In a dominating performance in all phases of the game, the Lights earned a season sweep of the Bears with a resounding 24-0 shutout on a chilly Friday night at Blue Pony Stadium.

The win pushed Northern to 3-0 in Friday night games at home, but a more glaring result was a stellar performance by the Northern defense and an impressive display of ball control by the MSU-N offense.

"I am proud of the way they responded (to last week’s 41-14 loss at Eastern Oregon),” Northern head coach Mark Samson said, who improved to 7-0 in career night games with the Lights. "I thought we just played hard. I tell these guys that there's a certain way they can play and be as good as anybody in the league. But we can't sit and wait. And we didn't tonight.

"It was awesome the way we came out tonight and got after it,” Northern linebacker Landry See said. "You can see what happens when we play really well for four quarters. This was a complete game tonight."

Complete indeed.

The Northern defense was as dominant as it’s been all season. The Lights stifled Rocky to the tune of just 127 yards of total offense and eight first downs. The Bears, behind backup quarterback Paxton Paynter, gained just 47 yards passing – in an offense that has been one of the top passing attacks in the NAIA in recent years, and boasts perhaps the best receiver in the league in A.J. Tolbert, who was limited to just two catches on Friday night. Northern was so good defensively, the Bears crossed into MSU-N territory just once in the first half and only reached the red zone twice.

“This is the first shutout in my four years here I think,” See exclaimed. “It was just a really great effort by our defense. Guys just stepped up and did their jobs tonight.”

Northern’s offense was equally up to the task against a Bears’ defense which was rated second in most defensive categories coming in.

The Lights got a 39-yard Juan Garcia field goal on their first drive of the game. A 45-yard strike from Derek Lear, to Kyle Johnston, who had a huge game with 138 yards receiving got Northern into striking distance. Then came one of the most dominant second quarter’s in Northern history as Tanner Varner picked off a Paynter pass to end the first stanza.
Following a trade of possessions in the second period, the Lights went on a nearly nine-minute, 90-yard drive which was capped off by a two-yard Stephen Silva touchdown run. Big plays on the drive included big catches by Mick Miller and tight end Brian Torgerson. The drive, Northern’s longest of the season led to a 10-0 halftime lead, but it must have seemed like more considering the Bears had the ball for a total of just 3:31 in the entire period.

“I thought we really executed well offensively,” Samson said. “Rocky has a very, very talented defense and we have a tremendous amount of respect for them. But our kids came out on offense and just played hard and played well. Even that first field goal was a really good drive. And the drive in the second quarter was really something special.

“We just had a lot of kids and even some younger kids step up and make big plays tonight,” he added. “I thought “KJ” (Kyle Johnston) made a ton of big plays tonight, Stephen Silva ran the ball really well, and Derek Lear had a really good game. And really, our offensive line took over the game.”

Yet the game wasn’t out of reach for Rocky as the second half got underway. But it didn’t take long for Northern’s offense to take care of that. On the Lights’ first drive of the second half, Lear rocketed a ball to Johnston in the corner of the endzone on a fourth-down play to put the Lights out in front 17-0. The TD pass covered 25 yards, and the march milked another almost seven minutes off the clock as Northern crushed the Bears in time of possession.

And with Northern’s defense dominating the way it was, there was no chance of a Rocky comeback. The Lights put the finishing touches on their masterpiece at the start of the fourth quarter when Lear hit Brandon O’Brien for a 16-yard score.

Lear finished the game 22-of-36 for 292 yards, two TD’s and one interception. He also scrambled for 29 yards. Johnston had a game-high seven catches, while O’Brien, Miller, Silva and Justin Montelius each had three grabs.

“The passing game was very important tonight,” Johnston said. “It was cold, but we didn't worry about that, we just came out and played our hardest. We stuck to what we do, we look good in practice, but that doesn't always translate into the game, but today it did.”

As it has in the last few weeks, the Lights’ running game was paramount too. Northern battered Rocky’s top-rated defense to the tune of 201 rushing yards, including a hard-earned 114 from Silva on 30 carries. Orin Johnson added 15 yards in an effective “wildcat” formation. In all, Northern racked up 492 yards of offense and ran 89 plays, while the Bears ran just 39 plays the entire game.

Defensively, the Lights were spurred by Varner’s early INT, as well as six tackles each from See and Josh Baum. Jared Rohrback and Jordan Van Voast each had five tackles and tackle Mike Carbone added three and a huge hit on Paynter.

It was a great night for the Lights, who improved to 5-4 on the season and took third place in the Frontier Conference away from the Bears (4-5, 5-5). The win avenged last year’s season sweep to Rocky and more importantly it gave the Lights added confidence heading into their season finale with second-ranked Carroll College this Saturday in Havre.

“It was a lot of fun and I was glad for the goose egg,” Samson said. “We just had kids come up with big plays at different times and that’s how you have to win these things.

“It was great to see our kids pick their heads up after last week and come back and play so hard,” he added. “It’s great to win like this, great to see the smiles back on our kids’ faces and again, I’m just very, very proud of them all.”

**MSU-N D' traps Bears**

Lights are 5-4. Up Next: Saturday vs No. 3 Carroll
Lights Notes: Northern senior defensive end Will Andrews missed the second half with an injury. RMC starting QB Bryce Baker was inactive due to a concussion he suffered last weekend at Montana Tech. Silva now has 315 yards rushing in two games against a Bears’ defense which was ranked nationally against the run. RMC linebacker Steffan Blume was ejected in the fourth quarter for attempting to throw a punch. The Lights beat the Bears for the first time in Blue Pony Stadium since 2009. The Lights also beat the Bears’ in a night game in Havre in 2004.