Lights, Saints set for final showdown
George Ferguson
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The date was Oct. 18, 2006. The scoreboard read, Lights 10, Saints 3. That was the first and last time the Montana State University-Northern football team beat the Carroll College Fighting Saints in the modern era of Lights’ football.

As far as the 2011 season goes, the Lights get one last chance at ending that streak Saturday when they host the No. 2 Saints at 12 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium.

The Northern/Carroll rivalry has really blossomed since that fateful day in October of 2006, but the Saints have again made it somewhat one-sided. Since that loss to the Lights, Carroll has beaten MSU-N 10 straight times, including a 37-21 win over the Lights on Oct. 1 in Helena.

But the past is the past, for both the Lights (5-4, 5-4) and Saints (9-1, 8-1) and history isn’t really what’s at stake on Saturday. Carroll has a chance to claim the league title outright with a win Saturday – something the Saints haven’t needed to do this late in the season in quite some time. With a win, Carroll would likely lock up one of the two top seeds in the NAIA playoffs as well. So for the Saints, there’s plenty riding on Saturday’s outing. There’s also plenty at stake for Northern, aside from the fact that every team in the Frontier covets a chance to beat the most dominant program in NAIA football. The Lights can also earn a winning season and an outright third-place finish in the Frontier. It would be quite a leap for a Northern team which won just four games during the prior two seasons.

And all of that sets the stage for Saturday’s matchup which pits the two top offenses and the top two defenses in most statistical categories in the Frontier Conference against each other.

“As good as they (Saints) already were, I think they’ve gotten better since we played them last,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “Offensively, they’ve been really steady all year. But defensively, they’ve just gotten better and better as the season has progressed.

“I think this has been as good a job as Mike (Van Diest) has done with his defense, getting them to play at such a high level,” he added. “They lost a lot of talent from what I thought was a great defense last year, but here they are, doing it on defense again this season. Coach Van Diest just really understands his talent and his team’s strengths and he does such a great job of making his team’s weaknesses better as the season goes along. And that defense is really playing well right now.”

The Saints’ defense is dominating, just as it’s expected to around Helena. In Carroll’s current eight-game winning streak, the Saints are allowing just over a 15 points per game and the Saints hold their opponents to just under 90 yards rushing per outing. Carroll may not have some of the star names of past defenses, but the unit has played great none-the-less. Safeties Brian Strobel and Ted Morigeau are two of the best in the country and have combined for 90 tackles and two interceptions this season. The Carroll secondary has also got a league-leading six interceptions from Mike Siegersma, while the line is led by tackles Rhakeem Harris and Spencer Savage, who’ve combined for 11 sacks. The linebackers are led by Thomas Robison, a pure tackling machine and one of the smartest football players in the league.

And that alone presents a challenge for the Northern offense, which leads the Frontier in total offense and passing and is second in rushing. The Lights have had a stellar passing game with Derek Lear all season
long, while wide receivers Kyle Johnston and Brandon O’Brien are both having breakout campaigns. But as of late, it’s Northern running game that’s really jumped to the forefront. Junior Stephen Silva has seven straight 100-yard games to his credit and he’s now over the 1,000-yard mark for the season. Silva is the first running back to reach 1,000 since Justin Moe did it in 2008. And Northern’s balanced attack looked especially hard to stop in last Friday’s 24-0 win over Rocky Mountain College, where the Lights ran nearly three times as many plays as the Bears and absolutely dominated the time of possession.

“Carroll has a talented defense with great depth,” Samson said. “But we feel like we have some pretty good players too. I’m very pleased with what our offense has accomplished this season and even in the loss in Helena, I thought we did a good job of moving the ball and sustaining drives. It was just those two third-quarter turnovers that really hurt us. And that’s the key against Carroll, you have to score points. You have to limit turnovers and penalties, because, especially defensively, they just don’t make many mistakes.”

While Northern’s potent attack should challenge the stellar Saints’ defense, the Lights’ defense has a big task in front of it.

Carroll averages 250 yards per game on the ground and puts up 34 points per contest. And the Saints don’t do anything fancy, simply because they don’t have to. Former Malta star Chance Demarias has led the NAIA in rushing from wire-to-wire and he comes into his return to the Hi-Line having rushed for 1,422 yards and 14 touchdowns. And when Demarias needs a break, freshman Dustin Rinker has done just fine. Rinker ran for over 100 yards on the Northern defense last month and scored twice, and to date, he’s piled up nearly 700 yards this season. Both running backs benefit from an offensive line which features several all-american candidates.

And stopping the run is only half the battle. Though the Saints are last in the Frontier in passing, senior quarterback Dane Broadhead, who is starting after the graduation of former Havre Blue Pony great Gary Wagner, has thrown for 20 touchdowns and just five picks this season. Senior wide receiver Matt Ritter is the Saints’ leader, totaling 706 yards and nine TD’s on 52 catches. The Saints’ receiver group also includes a standout target in Lat Wipplinger as well as former Blue Pony Billy Wagner, and tight end Cole Coba.

“They’ve got great talent,” Samson said. “Demarias, in my opinion is the best running back in our league and Matt Ritter has been a great player in this league for a long time. They have a really good offensive line too.”

So while Carroll has shined on defense this season, it’s Northern’s defense which will be presented with a tall order on Saturday afternoon. Seniors Will Andrews and Landry See have had big seasons thus far, but interior linemen like Than Schopp and Mike Carbone, as well as the rest of the Northern linebacking crew and secondary will be charged with helping try to shut the Carroll run game down and keep the Saints out of the endzone – just as they did in their shuout of RMC last week.

“It’s going to be a heck of a challenge for us on both sides of the ball,” Samson said. “Offensively, we need to get yards on the ground, shorten the field and try to shorten the clock, like we did so well last week. And we have to be very sound on special teams. Carroll always plays well on special teams and you have to match that.

“Defensively, we just have to go out and play hard for 60 minutes,” he continued. “We have to be physical with them right from the start. This is always a physical game and it’s no secret what Carroll wants to come in here and do. Our kids just need to come out ready to play and go as hard as they possibly can. I think it’s going to be a heck of a football game.

“You have to be ready to play error free football against Carroll because they just don’t give you many mistakes or opportunities,” Andrews said. “We feel we match up well, but we have to go out and play hard-nosed football with every man on this team ready to stand up and do their jobs. It’s going to take a hell of an effort by us to get it done but I believe this team is up to that effort.”
Saturday’s Senior Day game between the Lights and Saints will kick off at 12 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium. Northern will honor its 10 seniors before kickoff.

Game Notes: Carroll will certainly bring plenty of familiar names to Havre on Saturday. Aside from Wagner, the Saints’ roster also includes former Havre Blue Pony Will DeVries, who plays offensive line, as well as Chester/J-I’s Tyler Han (WR), Garrett Graff (RB) and Brandon Graff (RB). Carroll’s coaching staff includes former Havre High star Jarrod Wirt, who is the Saints’ defensive backs coach. Northern wide receiver Scott Leeds was an all-conference wide receiver for the Saints.