MSU-N Game Day Notebook: Big plays and broken records highlight finale

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For much of the season, Rocky Mountain College’s A.J. Tolbert has gotten the lion share of attention as the top receiver in the Frontier Conference. On Saturday, MSU-Northern’s Kyle Johnston and Carroll College’s Matt Ritter showed just why they both have something to say about that.

Johnston had his second straight huge game, and though he didn’t reach the endzone, three of his four catches had enormous consequences. Johnston racked up 141 yards on four grabs, with three of them setting up Northern in scoring position.

"I liked the fact that I got some deep balls my way today," Johnston said. "It wasn’t as much planned as it was seeing where defenders were and breaking off my routes. Derek (Lear) did a great job of seeing where I was and getting the ball deep."

Johnston had two monster grabs down the right sideline in the second quarter of Carroll’s 42-24 win over the Lights at Blue Pony Stadium. Both catches were highlight reel quality and both led to Orin Johnson touchdowns – the second of which pulled the Lights to within 21-17 at halftime. And he wasn’t done. With Northern down by 11 points nearing the end of the third quarter, Johnston made a leaping catch in between to Carroll defenders down the right sideline. Moments later, Stephen Silva was in the endzone, only to have the TD called back on a holding penalty. In all, Johnston’s three catches covered 122 yards on the day and it was his second straight game with over 140 yards receiving.

Meanwhile, Ritter, the Carroll senior who has played quarterback and scat back in his career, grabbed seven balls for a silly 200 yards. Ritter also scored three times, including a throw-back pass in the first quarter from backup QB Dakota Stonehouse.

"'KJ' (Johnston) had a big game again," Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "Boy, he and 'OJ' (Orin Johnson) really made some big plays for us, and I still think Derek Lear did some really good things in the passing game.

"Matt Ritter was all over the place today," Samson added. "He has been a great, great player in this league for a long time and he was great again today."

Adjustments to miscues

For a period of Saturday’s game, the Lights looked every bit Carroll’s equal. But an inspired second-half defensive effort by the Saints, as well as a pair of interceptions left the Lights having to wait until next year to get another chance at Carroll.

Northern totaled just 346 yards of offense, but over 250 yards came in the first half. After a second quarter which saw Northern rumble to 17 points and the two teams combined for 38 points, the Lights’ offense never found the endzone again.
“We were upset at halftime,” Carroll head coach Van Diest said. “We lost some containment on our pass game so consequently they got some big plays. We gave up that big touchdown drive right before the half, we weren't happy with how we were playing. That first half, they out-coached us a little bit.

“I thought they (Saints) did a real good job defensively, especially in the second half,” Samson said. "We just couldn't get much going there and when we did, we hurt ourselves with penalties and turnovers."

Carroll obviously played better in the second half. The Saints got back-to-back INT’s in the fourth quarter. Colten Sherley had a pick six with 7:11 to play which made the final margin, and Galen Mills, with a broken arm and all had a pick on the series before. Both thwarted Northern rallies and had Van Diest singing the praises of not only his players, but also of defensive backs coach Jarrod Wirt, a former Carroll DB and star at Havre High.

“Jarrod Wirt did some amazing things,” Van Diest said. “What a great second half.”

Record Breaker

Northern junior running back Stephen Silva may not have known it when Saturday's game ended, but the 5-9, 190-pounder from Bakersfield, Calif., with his father, a former Carroll standout himself in attendance, broke both the Northern single-season rushing record and the career rushing mark Saturday. Silva gained 1,098 yards this season which edged him past Justin Moe, who gained 1,082 yards in 2008. Silva also set a new Northern career mark with his now 2,035 yards in three seasons at MSU-N.

It also appears linebacker Landry See will leave Northern as the school’s career leader in tackles. See came into the season with 323 tackles and according to Dakstats he added 96 more this season. That would give him a career mark of 419 which would move him past former Northern All-American Marc Samson, who had a career total of 416 from 2004-2007.