Saints say not just yet
Lights put up a great fight, but in the end, Carroll pulls away
George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights had the Carroll College Fighting Saints on the ropes, if only for a moment. But like any great heavyweight fighter, the Saints got back up and threw the final punches.

The No. 2 Saints rebounded from a 3-point third-quarter deficit by scoring 21 unanswered points, also riding a career day from freshman running back Dustin Rinker to a 42-24 win over the Lights Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium. The win gave the Saints a remarkable 12th straight Frontier Conference championship, while the Lights’ season came to an end at 5-5.

The Lights played a great all-around game, but in the end, a few miscues, a staunch Carroll defense and Rinker became Northern’s undoing. Carroll was without the NAIA’s leading rusher, Malta’s Chance Demarias, but the Saints never missed a beat as Rinker rushed for 241 yards and the Saints piled up 332 of their 562 yards of total offense on the ground.

“He’s been doing this all year,” Saints head coach Mike Van Diest said of Rinker. “The offensive line’s been doing a great job blocking, and Dustin Rinker really set the tone for this football team.

“Chance Demarias is probably the best running back in the country,” Northern head coach Mark Samson added. “And I’m not sure this kid (Rinker) isn’t the second best in the country. He was tremendous today. I think Carroll’s offensive line was a big difference in the game too. Our defense played really hard and really well at times, but they just really wore us down as the game went on.”

After a scoreless first quarter, Saturday’s game looked like an old-school Northern/Carroll slugfest. But then the two teams exploded for 38 points in a dramatic second stanza. Carroll struck the first blow when reserve quarterback Dakota Stonehouse threw an option pass to senior Matt Ritter for a 47-yard touchdown – the first of three for Ritter on a day which included a whopping 200 yards receiving.

The Lights however, showed the ability to get back up from many of Carroll’s punches. Northern scored two big touchdowns in the second quarter to keep pace. Both were TD passes from Derek Lear to Orin Johnson, one covering six yards to tie the game at 7-7 and the second going 13 yards to pull the Lights to within 21-17 at halftime. Both TD’s were sparked by deep pass plays to Kyle Johnston, who had 141 yards on just four catches.

“Those balls just kind of hung up in the air and in the wind a little,” Johnston said. “I had defenders on me, but I knew I could go up and make a play on the ball. It’s about getting your hands to the highest point and that’s what I was able to do. I’m just glad I could make a couple of big plays for us today.”
In between Ritter’s first score and Johnson’s TD with :36 left in the half, there were plenty more fireworks. Rinker started a rough sequence for the Lights when he broke off a 72-yard run just one play after the Lights tied the game. On Northern’s next possession Carroll blocked a punt and on the very next play, Dane Broadhead hit Ritter for 59-yard TD pass. That put Carroll ahead 21-7 and it all happened in a span of just seven plays and 1:32. Northern responded with a 25-yard Juan Garcia field goal which made the score 21-10.

“I thought we did some really good things today,” Samson said. “But I’ve said it so many times, you just can't make the types of mistakes we made today and expect to beat Carroll College. The blocked punt was a big play and we had a few defensive mistakes that hurt us on some of their pass plays. Carroll is just too solid, you just can’t give them those types of opportunities.”

Despite that stretch, the Lights answered the call and felt good about only trailing by four points at halftime. And what ensued in the opening minutes of the third quarter made Northern feel even better.

On the Saints’ first possession of the second half, Broadhead and Rinker fumbled an exchange and Northern’s Will Andrews picked the ball up and raced 31 yards to the endzone. The score gave the Lights a 24-21 lead and brought the crowd into a frenzy which would last the rest of the afternoon.

“We had some chances to make things different,” Samson said. “I thought when Will scored, we maybe had them on their heels a little bit. But they played great defense in the second half and we made a couple of turnovers and that kind of cost us any momentum we might have had. Give Carroll credit, they came in here and played a great game. Their defense was very, very good and they made big play after big play on offense.”

And the Saints did stymie the Lights on both ends of the ball the rest of the way. Carroll only allowed Northern around 100 yards of offense in the second half and no points. And the Saints put together back-to-back big drives following Andrews’ scoop and score. Carroll marched 80 yards in 10 plays to go back in front 28-24, then went 81 yards in eight plays, capping that drive with a Lat Wipplinger TD catch that put the Saints up 35-24 heading towards the fourth quarter.

MSU-N put together a pair of good late drives but both were thwarted. One drive came away with no points after a Stephen Silva TD was called back on a holding penalty, then Lear was intercepted by Galen Mills early in the fourth, ending another good chance. The final nail in the coffin came when Lear was picked off by Colten Sherley, who raced to the endzone untouched for the final margin.

“It’s always been a lifelong dream since fifth grade,” Sherley said of the return. “Once I caught it everything just went blank, it was kind of in slow motion.”

As well as the Carroll defense played, the day belonged to Ritter, Broadhead and specially Rinker. The walk-on redshirt freshman has had an amazing season as Demarias’ backup and on a day when the NAIA’s leading rusher didn’t even travel to Havre, Rinker came through.

“I played my heart out for him because he wanted to be out here so bad,” Rinker said referring to Demarias. “The offensive line, all the credit goes to them. I just have to make my reads and run through those big gaps they give me.”

Offensively, Northern was held to nearly 100 yards under its season average. The Lights gained 346 yards and 16 first downs to Carroll’s 27 first downs. Lear finished the final game of his sophomore season with 246 yards, two TD’s and two picks as Carroll won the turnover battle 3-1. Johnson had a great all-purpose day for the Lights, totaling 62 yards on six catches and 32 yards on six carries. Brandon O’Brien added three catches, and while Silva was held under 100 yards for the first time in seven games, he gained a hard-fought 65 yards on 17 carries and broke Northern’s single-season rushing record in the process.

Carroll had its biggest offensive output of the season, thanks to a combined 441 yards of offense from Rinker and Ritter alone. But Northern’s defense still played well. Several Lights combined to block a Tom Yaremko field goal in the fourth quarter, while Nick Weller had seven tackles in his final game. See added six tackles as did Jordan Van Voast, while Andrews had four to go with his fumble recovery.
Now Carroll (10-1) will move on to defend its 2010 NAIA national championship. The Saints play Valley City State this Saturday in Helena. The Lights’ season ends with a solo third-place finish in the final league standings, as well as big strides made from the last two seasons combined where they won a total of five games.

"I think we made progress," Samson said. "I was proud of the effort today and I think you saw our kids really fight hard. I thought they fought hard all season. Our thing now is, we have to find a way to become a team that can win these big games, beat these good teams. That’s the next step for this team. But overall, yes, we did make a lot of progress this season. I believe we were a very good football team at times this year, and I’m proud of what all these kids did for our program this season."

**Lights Notes:** Silva not only broke the single season rushing record at Northern, but in just his junior season, he became the school’s all-time leading rusher, passing Donny Saisbury, who rushed for 1,845 yards. Silva has 2,035 rushing yards in his career. Former Havre Blue Pony Billy Wagner played his final game at Blue Pony Stadium Saturday. Wagner, a backup receiver for the Saints was in on special teams and also saw several snaps at WR on Carroll’s last drive. Northern’s third-place finish marked the fifth time Samson’s career the Lights have finished third or better in the Frontier.