Lights look to build in the spring
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When it comes to spring football, it’s generally hit or miss for the Montana State University-Northern Lights as Havre’s version of Mother Nature always has something to say about it.

And right on cue, Monday’s winter storm left the Lights’ practice field buried in over a foot of snow, leaving the beginning of spring practice up in the air.

Eventually however, the Lights will take to the field for 13 full practices and three scrimmages over the next few weeks. Today was to mark the beginning of spring drills with the first practice set for 4:15 p.m. That is unlikely however, so the Lights will obviously have to adjust their schedule.

Northern has three scrimmages planned throughout the spring session, with the final scrimmage, the Northern Spring Game set for April 14.

Weather aside, the Lights will also go into spring drills a little short-handed. Northern has several key players who will miss at least some of spring drills while recovering from injury or surgery. That includes promising running back Josh Wilson who tore a knee last fall and is still recovering from that injury.

The Lights will also be somewhat short-handed on the offensive and defensive line this spring. Northern graduated three starters on the offensive line, including center Jorge Magana, as well as three-year starters Joe Pittman and Zeb Olson. MSU-N will also be without graduated defensive end Will Andrews. The 2011 Frontier Conference Defensive Player of the Year is now trying to earn a spot in the NFL or CFL next fall. Also gone is linebacker Landry See, a four-year starter and four-time all-conference performer, who graduated as Northern’s all-time leading tackler.

In all, the Lights will start spring ball with just nine offensive linemen, including all-american candidate Brock Hyder, as well as junior college transfers Patrick Criner and Jordan Sharp.

But while the Lights are a little thin for spring drills, and while the weather isn’t cooperating at the start, MSU-N head coach Mark Samson is excited and says his team will make the most of the next three-plus weeks.

"As far as what we do, we’re going to have to monitor some things with how much we scrimmage and with 11-on-11 because of our numbers,” Samson said. “But at the same time, we can’t just go through the motions for three and a half weeks and then be done. We have a lot of work to do. We have a lot of work to get done on the offensive and defensive lines and those units are going to have to work closely together this spring.

“The talent is there right now,” Samson added. “And we have some more guys that will be coming in this fall that will help us. But we definitely have a lot of work to do this spring, so even with the numbers we have, we’re going to go forward and accomplish what we need to.”

One area the Lights aren’t lacking in is returning starters on offense. The o-line will have a somewhat different look this season, but Northern returns junior-to-be Derek Lear at quarterback, as well as senior-
to-be Stephen Silva at running back. Both were first-team all-conference performers as the Lights went 5-5 and led the Frontier in offense. Also back is first-team all-conference wide receiver Kyle Johnston, as well as fellow starters Brandon O'Brien and Orin Johnson. Mick Miller and Brandt Montelius also saw significant time at receiver last fall, while senior-to-be Justin Montelius is back for his third season at running back. Backup quarterback Travis Dean also returns with plenty of experience as well. The Lights also bring back kicker and punter Juan Garcia.

“The big thing about this spring is, we return a ton of skill players with experience,” MSU-N offensive coordinator Kyle Samson said. “So we don't have to use a lot of time teaching the offense. We have a lot of skill guys back and we can use this time to sharpen the offense and work on some new things. That's nice to be able to do that.”

On the defensive side of the ball, the Lights will certainly miss Andrews and See, but they do return a bevy of players who started a year ago. Included in that group are linemen Thann Schopp, Ryan Craig and Cory Budak. Jordan Van Voast returns at linebacker after an all-conference 2011 campaign, as does Jared Rohrback, a promising linebacker who was riddled with injuries a year ago. Defensive backs Tanner Varner, Josh Baum, Chris Hamilton and Ralphael Huizar also started games last year, with Varner earning all-conference honors. New to the mix is linebacker Kyle Wagar, a transfer from Central Washington. The Northern defense will also be looking at plenty of younger players who will look to move up and have impact this coming season.

“We're not really looking at this spring to establish our full depth chart,” Mark Samson said. “We're more looking at in terms of finding out which kids will step up and help us next fall. Which ones can step up and be No. 1’s this season. This is the time for those kids to prove themselves.

“'We have a lot of talent out there this spring on both sides of the ball,’” he added. “But we also have a lot of work to do. We have a lot of work to do on defense. We need to get tougher, both mentally and physically. But even on offense, we need to improve. We led the league in offense a year ago, but we didn’t score enough points. We weren’t as efficient as we need to be. So there’s plenty of work to do on both sides and that’s what this spring is going to be about for us.”

And spring for the Lights will likely have to wait a few more days. Northern is looking at Friday as the most likely day it will start spring drills. The first scrimmage was set to be held on Sunday afternoon, but that isn’t set in stone at this point.

One thing is for sure however, when the Lights do hit the field, they will do so with an enthusiasm after such a positive 2011 season, in which they finished solo third in a difficult Frontier Conference.

“I think everybody’s excited to get out there,” Mark Samson said. “Everybody worked really hard in the offseason. The kids did a great job with winter conditioning and our offseason program. Now it’s time to get out there and see how much we’ve improved.

“We want to build on what we accomplished last season and hopefully take it even further,” he added. “And that has to start with everything we do this spring.”