Lights look sharp in early scrimmage
George Ferguson
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It is always tough to gauge a team when scrimmaging themselves, but after the Montana State University-Northern Lights football team completed their first scrimmage since returning to the practice field, both the offense and defense did a lot of good things.

Saturday at the MSU-N practice field in Havre, the Lights completed their first fall scrimmage in preparation for the season opener. It was the first scrimmage for the Lights since returning to practice this summer, but the improvement was still there, as the Lights continue to gear up for the home and season debut against the Carroll Saints on Friday, Aug. 24 at the Blue Pony football field.

“I have seen a lot of improvement (this first week back),” MSU-N head coach Mark Samson said. “We held our first hitting practice on Tuesday, and we had our issues on both sides of the ball. But we have hit quite a bit the last couple of days and that culminated the week. Just from an execution standpoint we are a lot better than we were on Tuesday, but what we are seeing now, is that we have depth. On both sides of the ball we have kids that can play. Now we just have to focus on getting better, and it is going to be a lot of preparation for Carroll.”

The No. 1’s saw a lot of action on Saturday, on both sides of the ball. But during the 10 different series, a lot of young Lights also saw a chance to try and prove themselves.

The offense had its share of mistakes, but had a strong outing, scoring five times. The offense came up with four touchdowns and one field goal by kicker Juan Garcia. Quarterback Derek Lear had two touchdown passes, a three-yarder to receiver Kyle Johnston, and a 15-yarder to receiver Orin Johnson. The Lights’ offense also had a rushing score, while freshman wide receiver Dylan Woodhall also reeled in two TD receptions from two different freshmen quarterbacks. Woodhall pulled in a 35-yard scoring catch in the sixth drive of the scrimmage, as well as a 25-yarder in the final series.

The passing game was most impressive by the MSU-N offense.

Lear had several big connections with the usual suspects, including Brandon O’Brien, Johnston and Johnson. O’Brien sparked the offense early, connecting with Lear on a 30-yard pass and catch in the opening drive. O’Brien also had catches for 10 and 20-yard gains, while Johnston tacked on a 15 and 18-yard gain, and Johnson had a gain for 17 yards.

“Skill wise,” Samson said. “Overall this is the best we have probably ever had at Northern, especially with this receiver group. Then you throw in (Stephen) Silva and (Justin) Montelius at the running back position, we are pretty good. Skill wise, we have a lot of weapons on offense, and Brandon O’Brien and KJ (Kyle Johnston) came up with a lot of big plays today.”
“We have been together for a couple years now,” O’Brien said. “Lear, myself, OJ, KJ, Brandt (Montelius) and Mick (Miller), and we can rotate in at any of the receiver positions and know all of the assignments. We know what to do on the field and Lear knows where to find us, and I don’t think there is a secondary in the conference, let alone the NAIA that can cover us five receivers on a game to game basis.”

But the defense didn’t do too bad either.

They did allow the offense to score on five drives, but the defense also forced two punts, a turnover on downs, and came up with an interception by junior defensive back Josh Baum. Baum also delivered a punishing hit on an unsuspecting wide receiver, sophomore Trevor Baum had an interception narrowly slip through his fingertips. The defensive backs as a whole, earned several knock downs on attempted passes.

The defense also recorded a handful of sacks, including a sack by junior defensive end Ryan Craig.

“We would like to keep improving, but this was a great starting point for us.” Craig said. “We had a lot of good things happened, but we still have room to improve. The intensity level was kicked up today, we wanted to set the tone and we wanted to make it clear we are here to play as well as here to work. We showed that on the field.”

Coach Samson also liked what he saw from his defense. They limited starting running backs Silva and Montilius, but did struggle with the pass at times. But highlighting their efforts, the defense flew to the ball, they hit hard, and they came up with some big plays.

“We’ve got kids that pursue the ball a lot better,” Samson said. “And we really need to do that. The secondary did a lot of good things. Our coverage was better and I thought we came up and hit some people. Overall defensively, I thought we looked good. I know we scored a few times on offense, but I thought we played well...Some things are happening that didn’t happen a year ago and we have a lot of kids back and some new kids that have stepped up.”

The Lights are going to be tested right out of the gate, opening their season with that statement game against the rival Saints. And while the offense and defense did a lot of things right on Saturday, the remaining practices and scrimmages will be used to keep improving. It couldn’t be stressed enough by the coaches and players, MSU-N is still improving not only in the hopes of a successful game against the Saints, but also for the hopes of a successful season.

**MSU-N Scrimmage No. 1**

RUSHING — Silva 6-21, Lear 3-16, J. Montelius 7-7, Johnston 2-25, VandanBos 1-2, Keltner 7-30, Johnson 2-0.

PASSING — Lear 19-24-216-1-2, Brady 6-8-113-0-1, Newbarry 4-7-43-0-1.


Total Plays: 73; Total Yards 513.