Special teams win football games. Whether it’s the kicking game, a big special teams tackle or a punt return for a score that sparks a squad, there’s no doubt, special team’s play is huge in college football.

In 2012, it will be huge to the Montana State University-Northern Lights, who open the season Friday night against the Carroll College Fighting Saints in Havre.

At key special team’s positions, the Lights will be very skilled this season, but one phase will be brand new.

Northern will be breaking in a brand new kicking game, starting with sophomore Trevor Baum, who will handle the place kicking and punting duties for the Lights. Baum is a standout punter, but will also be called upon to keep Northern’s consistent kicking game going. Redshirt freshman Zack McKinley was also a standout kicker at Great Falls High, and is the younger brother of former Northern kicker Luke McKinley. He’ll start the year being limited because of an injury suffered last spring, but he too will likely be called upon to help Northern in the kicking game.

“Trevor will do a good job for us,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said of Baum. “He’s a really good punter, and I think he’ll come along nicely in the kicking game too. It’s one of those things where you need to just get out there and do it to be consistent and I think both Trevor and Zack will get there.”

One area the Lights have a host of veterans in is the return game.

In 2011, Kyle Johnston earned all-conference honors as both a punt and kick returner and he’ll do both again this season. Johnston racked up nearly 700 total yards in the kick return game last season, and with his speed and shiftiness, he’s a threat to take one to the house every time he touches the ball. Orin Johnson will back Johnston up as a punt returner, while senior Stephen Silva will spend his fourth straight season as one of the Lights’ top kickoff returners. Silva has three career kickoff returns for touchdowns and is still considered one of the fastest players in the Frontier Conference. Johnson and Trevor Baum will also be in the mix to return kicks this season.

“We have some pretty good return guys,” Samson said. “We have guys who have been doing it for a while now, so you really trust them and the rest kind of takes care of itself. It’s nice to have reliable guys like that returning kicks because it can be a big advantage setting up your offense with great field position.”

Another key to the kicking game is the snapper and veteran James Chandless will once again handle both the short and long-snapping duties for the Lights in 2012. Like Northern’s return men, Chandless is very reliable with the snapping duties.

And at the end of the day, the rest of the special teams, like coverage’s and return units are made up of backups and younger standouts, and Northern has plenty of good ones to fill those roles this season. And if the Lights are to reach their ultimate goals this season, they’ll need to be sound in every phase of special team’s play.
“We have some kids who are ready to step up and do their part,” Samson said. “I think we can be pretty good on special teams this season and we’ll need to be because they are so important.”