In 2011, the Montana State University-Northern offense garnered a lot of attention, and rightfully so. The Lights put up some staggering numbers and led the league in a host of offensive categories.

But Northern’s defense was no slouch in 2011 either, as the Lights had the Frontier Conference Defensive MVP in Will Andrews, as well as four first-team all-conference selections on that side of the ball.

But as the 2012 season draws near, and the Lights’ season-opening game with Carroll College approaches, the Lights are looking to be even better defensively, and if they can be, this season could yield great things in Havre.

“We do return a lot of starters and some pretty darn good players on defense,” ninth-year Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “But really, when you look at our two-deep, we’re still pretty young over there. We’re going to start just three seniors and we have a couple of guys who graduated last year who left some pretty big shoes to fill.

“But so far, in fall camp, I’ve liked what I’ve seen from those guys (defense),” Samson continued. “We had a lot of guys come back in really good shape, and all of our returning starters and a lot of our younger kids came back in great shape and have really improved. We have to keep getting better, but I really like this unit.”

Gone is Andrews and Landry See, two of the best to suit up for the Lights in a long time. But Northern does return a bevy of starters anchored by all-conference performers Jordan Van Voast at linebacker and Tanner Varner at cornerback. Both are juniors, and along with senior Matt Reyant, give Lights some veteran leadership on defense.

Because the Frontier is so run-oriented, Northern’s defensive line will play a key role in its success this season. The Lights return starter Ryan Craig, who played opposite Andrews at defensive end a year ago. Craig had a good sophomore season and is poised for big things in 2012. Logan Nathe (6-1, 230) also saw significant playing time at end last year and has shifted to defensive tackle this season, while senior Mike Carbone (6-2, 265) will be the run stopper at nose tackle. Carbone can also slide out and play end, and he’s a beast up front for the Lights. Central Washington transfer Kyle Wager (6-3, 230) was brought to Northern as a linebacker, but with his size and speed, he’s an excellent rush end and will be very versatile for the Lights in 2012. Samson and defensive coordinator Jake Eldridge are also excited about the depth of the line, with the likes of Than Schopp and Corey Budak both playing key roles this season. Redshirt freshman Taylor Buck has also been impressive in fall camp.

A strength for the Lights could also be the linebacker position, giving Northern a solid front seven.

Van Voast has been among the tackling leaders for the Lights the last two seasons, while a fully healthy Jared Rohrback gives the Lights a physical presence in the middle. Rohrback suffered nagging injuries in 2011 after transferring the Northern from Montana State, where he was a highly-touted recruit out of CMR. But so far in 2012, Rohrback is healthy and is ready to make plays all over the field. The third
starter will be sophomore David Arteaga, a 5-11, 230-pound speedster from California. He’s really impressed in fall camp and that trio, along with Kaimi Kanehailua give the Lights some much-needed experience at linebacker. Also impressive this fall has been the play of freshman Jordan Brusio out of Billings, while the Lights moved fullback James Chandless to inside linebacker to add more depth.

"I think we’re pretty deep and pretty talented up front," Samson said. "Ryan Craig has really looked good, as has Mike Carbone. And we have really good depth up front.

"I think linebacker has gotten better as fall has gone on," he continued. "We lacked a little depth there, so we moved Chandless over and he’s done a really nice job. He’s going to make plays for us there. So now, I think if we can stay healthy, we’ll be pretty darn good there too. Van Voast has come back and looks even better and Rohrback is healthy and playing really well. So I’m pretty pleased with where out front seven is at going into the season."

The secondary has been an area of ups and downs for the Lights the past few years, but Northern returns an athletic and speedy group on the back end.

Varner has started every game the past two seasons and has the ability to take away one side of the field alone. Reyant has quarterbacked the secondary from his safety position the last season and a half and his experience and speed gives Northern the ability to mix up coverage’s. Meanwhile, Josh Baum will start at safety after splitting time there a season ago, and he’s been very impressive this fall, while corner Raphael Huizar started several games for the Lights a season ago. Depth in the secondary should be solid too, as the Lights look to players like Mike McCrary, who saw action at corner a year ago, as well as youngsters like Hunter Chandler, Trevor Baum and Butch Hyder to step up this season.

And at the end of the day, some of the Lights most successful seasons have hinged on great defense, and the Lights are hoping they have that in 2012. Samson says it’s a unit that will need to get its feet wet and keep improving, but he’s certainly excited about the talent, the depth and the speed his defensive unit brings to the table this season.

“As far as the defense goes, I see a unit, that for the first time in a while, doesn’t have even one true, preseason all-American pick,” Samson said. “We’ve always had one or two of those guys. But at the same time, I think we have a chance to better defensively this season than we’ve been in a while.

“This group is really coming together,” he continued. “They are athletic, they really run well to the ball and they play smart football. So as a group, I think they have a chance to be really good there. So at this point, I’m really pleased with, and excited about our defense.”