George Ferguson Column: Plenty to see tonight at Blue Pony Stadium
From the Fringe...
George Ferguson
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When it comes to the Montana State University-Northern Lights and Carroll College Fighting Saints playing each other on the football field, or any venue for that matter, fans don't really need any extra motivation to show up.

Simply put, when the Lights and Saints meet, that’s reason enough to go.

And tonight’s season-opening Northern-Carroll matchup at Blue Pony Stadium is no different. The fact that the Lights are playing the Saints under the lights at Blue Pony Stadium should mean the grand old stadium in Havre should be sold out and rocking.

However, if you are going to the game, and if you’re not, you better have a dang good reason for not doing so, here’s some of the many things you need to know, and need to be on the lookout for as the Lights and Saints kick off the 2012 Frontier Conference football season.

1. The Quarterback Battle: The secret is already on out Northern junior quarterback Derek Lear. He’s a tremendous talent, an excellent passer and a natural leader, all of which helped him earn first-team all-conference honors in 2011. But keep an eye on the statistical battle between Lear and Carroll junior Dakota Stonehouse (6-2, 200). Unlike Lear, who has started since his redshirt freshman season, Stonehouse has been waiting his turn and makes his starting debut tonight. He’s much in the mold of Lear, and can run and throw and there was a reason he was targeted by the University of Montana and Montana State coming out of high school. It’s rare to see two great athletes playing the QB position in one game, but fans get that treat tonight.

2. Make Noise, Lots of it: It’s college football and it’s not enough for fans to just simply pack the stadium. When the Lights are on defense, fans should make as much noise as possible, and Blue Pony Stadium is the perfect place to do it. The metal bleachers provide a perfect compliment to your vocal chords, so instead of just yelling when the Lights are playing D, stomp your feet and yell at the same time. Carroll has one of the best college football atmosphere’s in the NAIA, and tonight, Northern fans have an opportunity to leave their mark on this great rivalry.

3. Ground and Pound: Carroll senior Chance Demarais, a former Malta prep star, is as good as it gets in the NAIA, so keep an eye on how many times he touches the rock tonight. Carroll also has a great backup in Dustin Rinker, a back Northern fans already know all too well after he torched the Lights for 200-plus yards last season. If the Saints get their running game going, and those two backs get a lot of carries, it could be a rough night for the Lights. However, Northern will counter with Stephen Silva, the school’s all-time leading rusher. Silva’s dad played college football at Carroll, and the younger Silva is the perfect anecdote for Carroll’s scary-good rushing attack.

4. Night Game Magic: As the sun goes down, the Lights seem to get bright and hopefully tonight will be another example of that. Dating back to the 2004 season, Northern is 4-0 in home games starting after 6 p.m. Last year, the Lights hosted and drubbed Rocky Mountain College in a November Friday night game, and as darkness ascends on Havre tonight, it could spell doom for the Saints.

5. NFL Prospect: Carroll is no stranger to having long-shot NFL prospects, and the Saints have a player who has already garnered some attention from pro scouts. Senior offensive lineman Connor Goudreau is
one of the best in the NAIA and is already a two-time NAIA All-American. So keep and eye on Goudreau and how he paves the way for the Saints tonight.

6. Wind is nothing new in these parts: This game was scheduled because Carroll couldn’t make the original opening date of Saturday, Sept. 1 as the Saints are going to play Portland State in the Vikings’ season-opener next weekend. So the game was set for tonight with a night start being reasonable because of the heat in late in August. Ironically though, the temperature is supposed to fall to as cool as 60 degrees during the games, and high winds could have it even feeling a bit cooler. Gusts of 20 MPH are expected to blow through the Pony tonight, so keep an eye on which team it affects and at one point in the game. Northern is used to playing in windy conditions, but it’s never ideal for passing games and kicking games, so it could play a key role in tonight’s outcome.

7. Receiving Difference: Last season, Carroll receiver Matt Ritter was almost unstoppable in a 42-24 Carroll win in Havre. Could Northern’s receivers be the key tonight? Northern offensive coordinator Kyle Samson, who quarterbacked the Lights to their only win over Carroll since the school brought back football, said that this group of receivers is the best the Lights have ever had. Kyle Johnston, Orin Johnson, Brandon O’Brien, Mick Miller, Brandt Montelius and tight end Brian Torgerson could all come together to be a huge component in Northern’s chances at leaving Blue pony Stadium tonight with a huge victory.

8. Historic?: One way or another, history will get made tonight in Havre. The Lights are hoping they have a team much like the 2006 squad which ended Carroll’s 32-game winning streak on a dark and dreary October day at Blue Pony Stadium. The Lights would like to repeat that historic feat tonight, while Carroll would like to take the first step in winning a 13th straight league title, which would also be historic in its own right.

9. Coaching Connections: There’s plenty of intrigue inside the connections between both teams tonight. Mark Samson coached at Carroll and his wife Kellie is the daughter of legendary former Saints’ head coach Bob Petrino. Then there’s two former Blue Ponies coaching in tonight’s game in Northern’s Scott Leeds and Carroll’s Jarrod Wirt. Leeds was an all-american receiver for the Saints and an all-state standout for Havre High. He’s now been Northern’s wide receiver’s coach for 14 seasons. Meanwhile, Wirt, a former all-state standout himself at Havre High, started 34 games and won four national championships as a defensive back at Carroll, is the defensive backs coach for the Saints.

10: Something’s got to give: Turnovers, who can stop who’s offense, weather, emotions, penalties, the rivalry, the crowd, all of those things are big story lines in tonight’s game. But when it’s over, a streak will have come to an end one way or another. The Lights have won six straight season-opening games under Samson, while Carroll has beaten Northern 11 straight times dating back to a 2006 NAIA playoff game in Helena. Simply put, with two great teams, two great coaches and two great streaks intact, something has to give tonight in Blue Pony Stadium.

Stay Tuned...

Five Things You Need to Know about the 2012 Lights

1. Northern returns eight starters on offense which broke or tied 34 school records in 2011. The Lights set 18 individual and 16 team offensive records last season.

2. Running back Stephen Silva already holds the school’s all-time rushing record with 2,042 career yards with his senior season still to play. Silva has started 26 games in three years as a Light.

3. The Lights have finished second in the Frontier Conference twice under Mark Samson after going 5-5 the previous year. Northern went 5-5 in 2011 and returns 17 starters from that team.

4. In each of the last seven seasons, the Lights have had three or more defenders finish in the top 10 in the Frontier in total tackles. Former Havre Blue Pony and current junior linebacker Jordan Van Voast did it in 2011, and he is a candidate to lead the league in tackles in 2012.
5. MSU-N is in the new East Division of the Frontier Conference, so the Lights will play Carroll, Rocky Mountain College and Dickinson State twice this season. The Lights were 2-2 against Carroll and RMC last season, and haven’t played Dickinson since the 2008 season-opener.