MSU-N Game Day Feature: Lights are on the verge in 2012
MSU-Northern’s returns a wealth of talent and is riding high as tonight’s Carroll game commences
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In eight seasons under head coach Mark Samson, the Montana State University-Northern football team has made plenty of history.

The Lights have had solid seasons, they’ve made the NAIA playoffs, they’ve had all-Americans and conference MVP’s and they’ve shattered school records.

But nothing the Lights have done in Samson’s time here will compare to the 2006 season, where the Lights racked up a school-record nine wins, ended then No. 1-ranked Carroll College’s 32-game winning streak and reached the NAIA playoffs for the first time in school history.

However, one thing the Lights haven’t done in Samson’s time, or any other since the school re-instated football over a decade ago, is win a Frontier Conference championship.

But entering the 2012 season, and tonight’s season-opening game with the vaunted Fighting Saints, a big question looms. Are the Lights on the verge of a 2006-type season? Or even better than that?

No football team looks ahead and Samson and Lights’ players certainly aren’t interested in prognosticating what might happen this season. Still, with such a talented and dynamic roster of players, a veteran coaching staff and momentum built from a 5-5 season a year ago, there’s no getting around the fact the 2012 Lights are on the verge of greatness.

And on top of that, they are playing the No. 2 Saints in the season-opener, at home, under the Blue Pony Stadium lights.

“There is a lot of confidence on this team, and we have high expectations for this team,” Samson said. “And there’s a lot of excitement around this first game. But the thing is, this is the first game of the season and it’s not going to make or break us or Carroll. There’s a whole season left after this game, and when you put all your eggs in one basket you set yourself up to fail. So we’re not doing that with this game and I’m certain Carroll isn’t either.

“We feel like we have a chance to be pretty darn good this season,” Samson added. “And we have set some big goals. But this is just the first game and that’s all we’re concerned about right now.”

While the Lights are only concerned with Carroll right now, it’s hard for fans and other schools not to think of the Lights as one of the teams to beat this season.

Northern returns a total of 17 players who started full or part-time last season, the Lights bring five first-team all-conference performers from its third-place team a year ago, an offense that scorched eight different school records last season and a defense which is made up of veterans and promising newcomers. That combination of factors is much like the 2006 season when Northern went 9-3 overall.
and came within one game of winning a Frontier championship, including its historic win over Carroll in October of that year in Havre.

Also eerily similar to the 2006 season is the fact then, and now, Northern is coming off a much-improved 5-5 season, where a great group of young talent forged a solid and respectable season, only to be picked high the next year.

And in 2012, the Lights are picked to finish high in the Frontier. They garnered a second-place pick in the Frontier Coaches Poll and are receiving votes in the NAIA Preseason Coaches Poll. They have talent all over the field, with the likes of quarterback Derek Lear, running back Stephen Silva, wide receiver Kyle Johnston, linebacker Jordan Van Voast and cornerback Tanner Varner. They have more depth than they’ve had in quite some time and they have an aura of excitement around the program that hasn’t been felt in several seasons.

So again, the question remains, is this the year of the Light? Like Samson said, time will tell, and come November, everyone will know the answer to that question as the Lights chase a league title and a playoff berth.

"That’s the plan,” Samson said. “We want to win a conference championship and got to the playoffs. But that’s our goal every season. There is some hype around us this season and I think this team deserves that because we do feel like we have a chance to be pretty good.

“But we also understand we have to prove it on the field,” he added. "We have to go out and make sure we put points on the board, we have to play smart and tough defense, we have to be good on special teams, we have to do the basic things right. And, we have to get some good breaks too. It’s a long season, and even though we feel really good about where we’re at right now, we have to be able to do it week to week.

"I think we can do unbelievable things with all of the talent we have this year," Silva added. "From the offensive line, to the wide receivers, quarterback, running backs, defensive line, defensive backs, linebackers, I honestly think we can do some unbelievable things. We are going to have a great game on Friday night to kick things off."