A Dark Night
Powerful Carroll spoils Northern's home and season opener
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A new season and a new Frontier Conference – but it looks like the same old Carroll College.

In a highly-anticipated showdown between the predicted top two teams in the Frontier, the No. 2 Carroll College Fighting Saints were up to the task Friday night at a windy Blue Pony Stadium, handing the Montana State University-Northern Lights a 31-6 season-opening home loss.

The Saints broke open a 7-0 halftime score by scoring three times in the third quarter, thwarting what was an outstanding first 30-minute effort by the Lights’ defense. The 21-point barrage also sucked the life out of a huge Blue Pony Stadium crowd who had gathered in hopes of seeing the Lights open the season with a monumental victory.

But it wasn’t to be.

“There’s a reason they (Saints) are the No. 2 team in the country,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said after he saw his Lights lose to Carroll for an 11th straight time. “They are a better football team than we are right now. It’s that simple. They dominated us where it matters most, they dominated the game on the offensive and defensive lines and that was one of the biggest differences.”

Indeed. The line of scrimmage was the key as the Saints rolled up 265 yards rushing, 145 of them coming from reigning NAIA Player of the Year Chance Demarais.

And it started early on.

Demarais capped off a game-opening, 8-play 80-yard drive with a three-yard score, one of two TD’s on the night for the former Malta prep star who only gained 67 yards against the Lights a season ago. Carroll didn’t complete a single pass on the drive, but junior quarterback Dakota Stonehouse made his presence felt by keeping the drive alive with a 24-yard run on third down.

After the initial touchdown however, Northern’s defense stiffened immensely. The Lights didn’t allow Carroll a point the rest of the way, including denying Tom Yaremko an easy 21-yard field goal in the second quarter which would have given Carroll a bigger cushion. Northern also came up with two big turnovers, as Logan Nathe recovered a muffed punt by Carroll’s Dustin Rinker in the first quarter, and Josh Baum recovered a Stonehouse fumble in the second. Jordan Van Voast stripped Stonehouse while he was running free on a broken play.
However, as good as Northern’s defense played, the Lights’ usually high-octane offense couldn’t take advantage.

Northern stalled on several key first-half drives due to bad penalties, and after the Rinker fumble, the Lights gave it right back via a Derek Lear interception in the end zone. Backup safety Tucker Vezina stepped in front of a would-be Lights’ TD and made a great diving catch to thwart Northern’s best first-half scoring opportunity. The Lights also saw key passes dropped and kept back themselves up with penalties throughout the first half.

“As an offense, we shot ourselves in the foot too many times,” Lear, who completed 20 passes with one touchdown and one INT said. “And it starts with my interception. I have to be better than that and that pick kind of set the tone for us an offense. Carroll played really good defensively, they are a good team. But we beat ourselves on offense too. When we had to step up and make plays tonight, we didn’t do it.

“Anything that we could do wrong on offense, we did tonight,” Samson said. “The most disappointing thing about this game is that we are a veteran team, especially on offense, and we didn’t play like one tonight. We had some really stupid penalties that just killed drives, we had some costly turnovers, we had a few dropped passes and we just were never able to get it together on offense. And when you’re playing a defense as good as Carroll’s is, you just can’t do those types of things and expect to win football games.

“Our defense did everything we could ask of them in that first half,” he added. “We found ways to slow their running game down and overall, the defense played their tails off. We were only down 7-0 at half, it was a ballgame at that point.”

Exactly. Despite all of the chaos in the first half, the Lights were down just 7-0 with 30 minutes left, and they had the ball to start the second half.

But another stalled drive gave Carroll the ball right back and the Saints wasted little time in putting the game away.

Demarais busted off runs of 39 and 20 yards, the latter giving Carroll a 14-0 lead at the 9:33 mark of the third. Then, just when it looked like the Lights were finally going to respond, Orin Johnson was hit from behind and fumbled after a good gain on a Lear pass. Five plays later, the lead was 21-0 when Stonehouse hit Graham Bogumill from 14 yards out. The Saints put an exclamation point on the quarter when Stonehouse hooked up with linebacker Sean Bloomquist on a 6-yard bootleg pass play to push the lead to an insurmountable 28-0 with 15 minutes to play. Carroll added a Yaremko field goal in the fourth quarter.

“We made some mistakes in the first half,” Carroll head coach Mike Van Diest said. “But we had the lead and our defense was playing very well. We made a few adjustments at halftime and we felt that if our defense continued to play the way they did in the first half, that we would be ok. That first drive of the second half was the key, it set the tempo for us and I thought our offense played much better the rest of the game.

“I’m really very proud of these guys,” he added. “We’ve been through a lot already this season, and we have a lot of kids who have never played in a college football game before. So for us to be able to come up here and play as well as we did, I’m just very proud of them for that.”
Demarais was as advertised, but Carroll also got a major debut from Stonehouse, who mentored under former Blue Pony great Gary Wagner. He only threw 11 times for 63 yards, but he picked up another 63 on the ground and he calmly executed Carroll’s offense throughout the dominating third period. Rinker, who torched Northern for 240 yards last November added 54 yards on 11 carries while Carroll out-rushed the Lights 265-44 and outgained last year’s No. 1 offense in the Frontier 328-228 in total yards. And that was a telling stat as Northern ran 14 more plays and held the ball for four more minutes than the Saints.

And offensively, it was a brutal night for the Lights all the way around.

Northern saw senior running back Stephen Silva rush for just 20 yards on nine carries, and miss a portion of the game with a leg injury. Silva did have three catches for 20 yards but Carroll’s defensive line really took the Lights’ run game away early on. Lear finished 20-of-32 for 184 yards and one touchdown, which came as the game ended on a 15-yard strike to Brandt Montelius. Kyle Johnston led the receivers with five catches for 82 yards but he too had to leave with a leg injury. Brandt Montelius had four grabs and a score and Justin Montelius finished with three catches for 20 yards.

Defensively, the Lights did all they could do to hold down the Carroll rushing attack, and except for the third-quarter onslaught, they did just that. Jared Rohrback had a game-high 16 tackles, while Matt Reyant added nine. Van Voast, Baum and Mike Carbone each had seven tackles, while Carbone, Kyle Wagar and Ryan Craig each had a sack.

“I don’t think we played as poorly as it might of looked,” Samson said. “But we didn’t step up and make plays when plays had to be made. Give Carroll credit, their offensive line is pretty new but they really dominated up front and their defensive line did the same. They came in here and played well.

“I’m not disappointed in our effort,” he added. “I thought our kids fought hard all night. But we made too many mistakes and we just didn’t make plays when we had to. So we have to go back to work and get things corrected because it doesn’t get any easier for us having to go out to Eastern Oregon next.

Actually, it doesn’t get any easier for either team. While the Lights (0-1) have a bye this week, Carroll (1-0) travels to Portland, Ore., for a meeting with Big Sky Conference power Portland State next Saturday night. But no matter what happens in Portland, the Saints already have a leg up in the Frontier standings, something they’re very used to.

And the Lights, they must regroup as they have a week off before going to EOU, a place they haven’t won in quite some time. They must also find a way to put Friday night’s loss behind them after such a huge, nine-month buildup to the game.

“We have to realize we lost to a really good football team tonight,” Lear said. “Carroll is No. 2 in the country for a reason and they showed it tonight. We also have to realize we beat ourselves for a good portion of this game. The opportunities were there tonight, we just didn’t make the plays.

“We need to go back to work, take the positives away from this game, get in the film room and learn from our mistakes,” he added. “We need to remember it’s a long season and we have a lot of games left to play. So we can’t dwell on this one at all. We just have to work hard and get better from here.”

The Lights visit Eastern Oregon on Sept. 8 and Dickinson State on Sept. 15. Northern is next at home on Sept. 22 to face the UM-Western Bulldogs.

**Saints run through**

*Lights are now 0-1; Next at EOU Sept. 8*

**Lights Notes:** It was an injury-filled night for MSU-N. Not only did Silva and Johnston leave with injuries, but receiver Brand O’Brien left in the first quarter with what looked to be an ankle injury. Rohrback’s 17 tackles were a career-high and a Northern-high for a single game in three years. Demarais only played once against the Lights last season, and didn’t even make the trip to Blue Pony Stadium last November.
because of an injury. Northern was also without starting offensive lineman Patrick Kiser. Lear wasn’t sacked in the first half as Northern’s line held up under a relentless Carroll pass-rush in the first 30 minutes. An estimated 3,100 fans were on hand for Friday night’s game.