Lights start over in Oregon
George Ferguson
Friday, September 7th, 2012

The Montana State University-Northern football team has already played one game in 2012. But it still seems like the Lights are getting ready to play their season-opener.

Northern opened the season with a 31-6 loss to No. 2 Carroll College back on Aug. 24 in Havre, and the Lights have had nearly two full weeks off since that loss. So, as Northern prepares to play at No. 15 Eastern Oregon on Saturday, it feels like the Lights (0-1) are starting all over.

MSU-N invades Community Stadium to take on the 1-0 Mountaineers at 2 p.m. M.S.T. Saturday in LaGrande, Ore.

“I don’t really like the bye week this early in the season,” MSU-Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “I mean, we’ve been going hard for over six weeks now, but we’ve only played one game. I guess, the week off was good for us because it gave a chance to get some guys healthy. We came out of that Carroll game pretty banged up and I think we got some guys rested. We still aren’t as healthy as we need to be, but we have some guys back now that probably wouldn’t have been able to go had we not had the week off.

“But with so much time in between games,” he added. “It does feel like we’re getting ready to play our first game. So hopefully we have a lot of focus and we’re ready to go on Saturday.”

The Lights did get banged up in their season-opening loss to the Saints, and one big loss is starting linebacker Jared Rohrback, who suffered a concussion against the Saints and will be out this week against EOU. The Lights are dealing with other nagging injuries, but other than Rohrback, the starters for Saturday’s game in LaGrande should be the same as against the Saints.

But what Samson is hoping isn’t the same is MSU-N’s execution and he’s definitely hoping it’s better than it has been in recent years on this trip. Northern has won just once at Community Stadium since EOU joined the Frontier seven years ago.

“One big thing is, we have to be more resilient in the second half,” Samson said. “I thought we were flat against Carroll in the second half, and that’s been our biggest issue with games at EOU in the past. We’ve been in some good ballgames with them (Mounties) down there, but we haven’t played well in the second half of those games. So we’ve got to do a better job of that on Saturday.”

With the new Frontier schedule, this will be the only meeting between the Lights and Mounties this season. EOU swept Northern in 2011 and the Mounties are coming off a 26-24 win over Montana Tech last Saturday night in Butte. But like Samson is hoping for a different result this Saturday in Oregon, fans will see a much different EOU team – especially on offense.

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Junior quarterback Tyler Pine is now starting for Mounties, but he split time with fellow junior Jason Simonis against Tech. Both quarterbacks were efficient, but Pines appears to be more apt to run EOU’s spread-option attack, while Simonis is a more of a drop-back passer, standing 6-5. At running back, the Mounties are also new. Chris McGinnis-Parker and converted linebacker Sean Hurlburt split the carries and
Tech last week and combined for 133 yards on the ground. Both have speed and power and are a good compliment to EOU’s big and veteran offensive line.

“Offensively, they (Mounties) are pretty much the same in what they want to do,” Samson said. “They lost a lot of really good football players from last year but they haven’t changed what they run. And at times, they looked pretty good against Tech. I think the only thing that appears to be different is, they are not stretching the field with their young receivers as much, but that might change when they play us.

“So defensively, we have to go down there and expect to play a good football team,” he added. “We know how good they’ve been offensively in the past and we have to be ready for more of the same. We just have to play mistake-free, assignment football against them and we have to play hard for 40 minutes.

If EOU is new on offense, the Mounties are much more veteran on defense. Despite giving up over 500 yards of offense at Tech, EOU is loaded with playmakers, including linebacker Howard McDonald, who recorded 21 tackles and two sacks in Butte last Saturday. Defensive back Max Hannah is a ball hawk in the secondary and end Michael Goings is a great pass rusher.

So Northern’s offense will look to kick start its season against a stout defense. The Lights, who led the Frontier in total offense a year ago, only totaled 250 yards of offense in their season-opening loss to Carroll. Derek Lear did throw for 225 yards against the Saints, but star running back Stephen Silva was held to just 22 yards and 2.4 yards per carry against the vaunted Carroll defense. Northern also got banged up at receiver against the Saints, as both Kyle Johnston and Brandon O’Brien left that game with injuries, though they’re both expected to play Saturday at EOU.

On defense, James Chandless will step in for Rohrback, who had 16 tackles against the Saints, at middle linebacker.

“Hopefully we’re a little healthier than we were at the end of last week,” Samson said. “But we do still have a few guys who are banged up. But everyone does at this point, so you just have to play through these types of things.”

And the Lights need to play through the nagging injuries because they certainly want to avoid an 0-2 start to the season, though Northern is playing back-to-back games against nationally-ranked opponents. Still, MSU-N not only wants to win this week, the Lights are desperate for a win inside Community Stadium, something that hasn’t happened in a long time.

“For a half, we’ve played really well down there on several different trips,” Samson said. “But we have to be ready to play for 40 minutes. We have to come out focused and ready to answer the bell right away. And then we need to be able to do it in the second half too.

“The kids are ready play,” he added. “With the bye week, it seems like the Carroll game was a long time ago. So they’re ready to go. And I think we’ll well-prepared. Now we just have to go down there and execute. We need to go down there and take care of business for a full 40 minutes on Saturday.

Northern and Eastern Oregon will kick off at 2 p.m. M.S.T. Saturday at Community Stadium in LaGrande, Ore. The Lights are back on the road next Saturday, traveling to new league member Dickinson State.

Fresh start
MSU-Northern Lights (0-1) at No. 15 Eastern Oregon Mountaineers (1-0)
Saturday at 2 p.m. at LaGrande, Ore.

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