Lights seek the win column at DSU
George Ferguson
Friday, September 14th, 2012

It’s early in the 2012 Frontier Conference football season, and it’s not time to hit the panic button quite yet. But make no mistake, the Montana State University-Northern Lights need a win.

And if the Lights are going to get their first win of the season, they’ll have to do it on a second consecutive out-of-state road trip, and they’ll have to get it against the only other team in the Frontier that’s in the same boat as them.

On Saturday afternoon, the 0-2 Lights will take on the 0-2 Dickinson State Blue Hawks at 1 p.m. at Badlands Activity Center in Dickinson, N.D. And someone will leave the stadium with their first win of the season.

“Just like us, they (Blue Hawks) really need a win,” Northern head coach Mark Samson. “And I’m sure this is going to be a big game for them. We had a pretty good rivalry with them a while back, and this is their first home game against us in a while, so I’m sure they are going to be excited and ready for us.

“But it’s a big game for us too,” he added. “We need to get rolling and we need to start that this weekend. It’s been a tough start to the season, but we’re not dwelling on any of that. Our kids have had a really good attitude and practices have gone really good this week. The kids are hungry for a win.”

The Lights completed their 0-2 start to the season thanks to a last-second field goal by Eastern Oregon’s Marc David last Saturday in LaGrande, Ore. The game-winner gave the Mounties a 17-14 win an hour after UM-Western handed DSU a 28-13 loss in Dillon.

And one thing the Lights have in common with the Blue Hawks is, both squads are having trouble scoring points right now. Dickinson is averaging just 16 points a game and has scored a total of 29 points this season. The Lights, surprisingly have been worse, averaging a scant 10 points per game. Northern has scored just three touchdowns in its losses to Carroll College and EOU.

However, the upside to the Lights is, they have an offense which is moving the ball. Northern was just shy of 500 total yards against EOU, and they are near averaging 400 yards per game. Between the 20-yard-line’s DSU has also moved the ball consistently, but both teams are coming up short on scoring opportunities. Both teams have had problems with turnovers and red-zone penalties, meaning Saturday’s winner will be the team which does less a lot of that.

“Dickinson is a lot like us, in that they are struggling to put points on the board,” Samson said. “They have been pretty solid on offense with their power run game and their quarterback is a really good athlete who is mobile and can do some things with his feet. But like us, they have really struggled when they get chances to score.”

The Blue Hawks do have an outstanding quarterback on a team which boasts 30 players who played high school football in Montana. Senior Dave Valesquez might be the most dangerous runner on a Blue Hawk
offense which is based off a strong rushing attack. He has 100 yards on the ground this season, while running backs Myren Moore and Presly Straub both average around five yards per carry.

On defense, the Blue Hawks are big up front, especially on the defensive line, where they average about 275 pounds across the board. And for their efforts, the Blue Hawks are yielding just 173 yards per game on the ground which is fourth in the Frontier. However, through the air DSU has struggled to defend, and that might be youth and inexperience. Overall, Dickinson starts and subs a host of freshmen, with a majority of them playing on defense.

Still, Samson expects nothing more than a dogfight from the Blue Hawks on Saturday.

“They (Blue Hawks) are a solid football team,” he said. “They have a lot of good athletes. They do some basic things on offense really well. They want to pretty much run it right at you. On defense, they are big and strong and physical. From what I’ve seen, their kids play really hard for 40 minutes and that’s what you expect from a Hank Besiot team. So, while they might be young and a little inexperienced, we know this is going to be another big challenge for our football team.”

And the Lights need to rise to the challenge. Offensively, MSU-N was superb for much of Saturday’s loss to EOU. The Lights ran the ball well with Stephen Silva and Justin Montelius combining for 122 yards on the ground. Despite not having receiver Brandon O’Brien either, the Lights receivers had a good day against a stout EOU defense. And defensively, Northern played very well against an unpredictable EOU offense. James Chandless made his first start at linebacker and recorded 11 tackles. Jordan Van Voast had 11 tackles and Matt Reyant had a huge game with nine tackles, a sack and two forced fumbles.

But it’s in critical moments where Samson says his team has fallen a little short this season, and he hopes that will change Saturday in Dickinson.

“We’ve played well at times on offense in both our games this season,” Samson said. “And I thought we improved a lot against EOU. But when the big plays had to made, in those pressure-type situations, we just didn’t make them. We haven’t made those types of plays this season. Instead, we’re making mistakes with penalties and turnovers. So that’s something we’ve really focused on this week with our offense. We have focused on being poised and eliminating those really costly mistakes.

“I think our defense played really well at EOU too,” he added. “They certainly gave us chances to win the ballgame. We’ve got a lot of room to improve there too, but I really like what our defense has done so far this season. Against Dickinson, we have to be very patient and disciplined on defense. I know we’ll play hard for 40 minutes. We just have to stay patient and make plays when they have to be made.”

And if the Lights can make some plays, and put some points on the board, the season could look a whole lot different after Saturday’s first meeting between the Lights and Blue Hawks since a 2007 matchup in Havre won by MSU-N. Northern knows, with Carroll’s loss at Montana Tech last weekend, and plenty of football still to be played, it isn’t out of anything just yet.

“The kids know we’re not out of it at all,” Samson said. “But our focus right now is getting that first win. I think once that happens, we’ll relax and get rolling a bit more. So right now, our entire focus is on going down to Dickinson and playing a really solid, smart football game and coming home with a win.”

Saturday’s game between the Lights and Blue Hawks will kick off at 1 p.m. at the Badlands Activity Center in Dickinson. Northern has won three straight against the Blue Hawks, with those wins coming from 2005-2007. MSU-N returns home to face UM-Western on Sept. 22.

**Somebody's first win**

**MSU-Northern Lights (0-2) at Dickinson State Blue Hawks (0-2)**

**Saturday at 1 p.m. at Dickinson, N.D.**

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