MSU-N Game Day Feature: He's taking leadership head on

MSU-Northern senior Justin Montelius is a hard runner on the field, and a great leader off it

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Football teams need leaders. Leaders who’ve been through things. Leaders who have risen above adversity. Leaders who can set an example through prior experiences.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights have one of those leaders in senior Justin Montelius.

Montelius, now a senior and a Northern team captain was a highly-touted two-way player at Missoula Big Sky in high school. He originally signed on to play with his hometown Montana Grizzlies, but eventually made his way to Havre, as he was also recruited by the Lights while in high school.

And since that time, now more than four years ago, he’s had an impact on the Lights’ program which will not soon be forgotten, and in more ways than one.

Montelius started every game of the 2009 season at linebacker for the Lights. He was standout tackler and his 6-2, 200-pound frame was perfect to play on the edge and make plays.

But when his sophomore season came around, the Lights were young and inexperienced at running back, and they lacked depth, so, like a true team player and leader does, Montelius made the switch.

And he’s never looked back. Though the bulk of the carries the last three years have gone to fellow senior Stephen Silva, who is Northern’s all-time leading rusher, Montelius has averaged a whopping six yards per carry, and he seemingly gives the Lights a spark every time he touches the ball.

“The coaches approached me about making the move to running back, and I was fine with it,” Montelius said. “At that time, I was dealing with a pretty bad shoulder injury which made it hard to put on weight. So playing offense, I can play at a lighter weight. I like offense too, and when they (Lights) were recruiting me in high school, that’s pretty much what they were looking at me for. So it made sense.”

And though Montelius was an excellent linebacker, he’s never regretted the switch to running back. In fact, he’s made the most of it. His sophomore season, he totaled 200 yards and did the same as a junior, while also scoring one touchdown. And this season, with James Chandless moving to defense, Montelius is playing on almost every down when Northern runs to a two-back set, and his numbers have gone up as a result. He’s averaging nearly 30 yards per game and almost nine yards per carry. He’s made tough runs, where he’s leveled would-be tacklers, and he’s an excellent pass catcher in the screen game.

And his attitude and his leadership can’t be measured, on and off the field.

"I’ve tried to always go out and give the team a little spark,” he said. “I’ve just always tried to make the most of every opportunity, and the big thing for me is, I try to always finish runs going forward. That’s my
style. I’d rather run through someone than try to cut around them. So it’s just one of those things where I want to go out there and help the offense in whatever way I can.”

And help the offense he does.

Montelius is widely considered one of the most respected leaders on what has been a young Northern team the last two years, and he cherishes that role. He’s leading by example, as evidenced by his hard-nosed fourth quarter run in the season-opening game against Carroll, a run in which he took on two defenders rather than step out of bounds, all the while, the game was well in hand.

And not only is he relishing his role as a leader on the field, in games, but he relishes his time getting to mentor Northern’s young running backs, who will have to step up and replace he and Silva next season. He’s also spending his senior year enjoying the final season he gets a chance to play football with his younger brother Brandt, who is now an impact receiver for the Lights.

“I definitely think we have a great group of young running backs on this team, and they are going to be very good in the future,” Montelius said. “They do a great job of learning and listening to me and Steve (Silva) every day in practice. I think they look to us to help them get better and I enjoy that role.

“Playing with my brother has been really cool,” he added. “Especially this season because we’re both on the field at the same time a lot. He’s a great guy. We live together. We have the same group of friends, and really, he’s my best friend. So playing with him is a special bonus every day, and it’s been really cool.”

And that’s the kind of attitude which makes Montelius such a great leader and an example to the younger group of Lights. He plays the game with passion and respect and he accepts his roles and responsibilities and he charges forward.

And though his senior season isn’t off to the kind of start he and the Lights were gunning for, he’s continued to lead and be a positive in influence in an otherwise difficult time.

“It’s been tough, losing two games like that on basically the last play,” he said. “But we have kind of taken the motto that we have to do whatever it takes to turn this around. We have to be willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done.

“As the leaders of this team, it starts with us,” he added. “We have to go out this next game and correct the mistakes we’ve made and do whatever it takes to get that win.”

Justin Montelius has come a long way in his four years at Northern. He’s been a starting linebacker, playing in a spotlight role, and he’s been a backup running back. Now, in his final season with the Lights, he’s back in a key role, being one of the most important leaders on a Northern squad which still has high aspirations for the 2012 season.

And with seven games left in his football career, he’ll continue to approach his role as a running back, and as a leader, in the same way he took on those Carroll defenders last month at Blue Pony Stadium – head on.

Like he said, that’s just his style.