Lights suffer an Air Raid
MSU-N can't overcome Southern Oregon's explosive offense
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The first quarter was like a dream come true for the Montana State University-Northern Lights. But the next 15 minutes were more like a bad dream the Lights couldn’t wake up from.

In just one quarter of play, the Southern Oregon Red Raiders scored 35 points, 28 of them unanswered, which ultimately led to a commanding 65-34 win over the Lights on a warm and breezy Saturday afternoon at Blue Pony Stadium.

The Red Raiders rolled up a school-record 729 yards of total offense, including 502 through the air by sensational sophomore quarterback Austin Dodge, in what was the first-ever Frontier Conference meeting between the two schools. And, SOU handed Northern its first setback since a Sept. 15 loss at Dickinson State.

“They (Red Raiders) are very good,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “I thought we were well prepared for what they do on offense. But we just didn’t execute defensively.

“And we really shot ourselves in the foot with some really stupid mistakes,” he added. “I’m really disappointed, in myself and my entire team because we really did some dumb things today, with penalties and mental mistakes and mental breakdowns. The kinds of things we did at times today are just not acceptable. But credit to Southern Oregon for coming in here and playing a great game.”

It looked early on as though Northern would overcome some of those mistakes, which turned out to be four turnovers and 11 penalties, including several personal foul calls.

After MSU-N quarterback Derek Lear threw an interception, which led to three points for SOU, on the opening play of the game, the Lights’ defense shut the Red Raiders down and got the ball right back. And Northern took advantage as Lear threw a bomb to a wide-open Brandon O’Brien for a 46-yard touchdown. And Lear was just getting started, as just a few minutes later, he threw a dart to Brandt Montelius for 51 yards, then overcame a 3rd-and-goal from the 25-yard-line by drilling a pass across the middle to Mickey Miller for a 25-yard score which put Northern up 14-3 just seven minutes into the game.

Northern then struck again when Lear marched the Lights right back down the field and found Kyle Johnston for a 15-yard score which made it 21-10 with 5:30 left in the first quarter. SOU’s only touchdown in what was a wild first 15 minutes came by way of a fake punt.

“We started off really well,” Samson said. “Derek was clicking with all the receivers and we were doing well on offense. And I thought our defense did an outstanding job in the first quarter.
“But after that, our offense really went away for the most part and Southern Oregon got going,” he continued. “You’re just not going to shut a team like that down, and we needed to stay sharp on offense, which we didn’t do in the second quarter.”

If MSU-N wasn’t sharp in the second period, the Red Raiders were like a razor’s edge.

Just 23 seconds into the period, Dodge hit Cole McKenzie on a fade route for 36 yards which made it 21-17. And the Raiders were just getting started. Three minutes later, Dodge hooked up with Mike Olson from 60 yards out to give SOU a lead it would never relinquish, and the Raiders added scores on Olson and Manny Barragan runs as the Lights went from leading 21-10 to trailing 38-21 in a span of 12:10.

"We clicked late, because on our first couple of drives we just stalled out,” said Dodge, the 6-3 transfer from Central Washington. "But the playmakers on this team, the offensive line, and offense in general, as well as the coaches, we all believe in our game plan and we believe in each other. That is why we ended up being able to click and start executing. That is a big thing for us, especially today when the receivers out wide had to deal with the wind. They were able to adjust to the ball and did a great job for us."

And the Raiders kept on executing and executing, though Northern never gave up the fight.

The Lights finally stopped the bleeding with a great drive late in the half, as Lear found Orin Johnson for a key third-down conversion, then hooked up with O’Brien for a five-yard score. And it looked as though the Lights would only go into halftime down 11 points at 38-27, as well as have survived the SOU onslaught.

However, the Raiders stuck a big dagger in the Lights’ heart when they didn’t go into the locker room conservatively. With just :38 left in the half, Dodge needed just three plays to score again, and give his team a seemingly insurmountable 47-27 lead.

“I thought, there were times in the game when we still had opportunities,” Samson said. “But it comes down to execution and playing smart football, and we didn’t do enough of that today, and Southern Oregon did.”

One of those opportunities came midway through the third quarter.

The Lights put together a solid drive after limiting SOU to a field goal on the opening march of the half. Northern’s six-play, 65-yard jaunt resulted in Lear’s fifth TD pass of the day, a 26-yard strike to Johnston which pulled MSU-N to within 48-34 with 8:38 left in the period.

And more good things were starting to happen for Northern’s defense as the Lights came up with a Barragan fumble and were looking at good field position. However, three plays later, Lear was picked off by Josh Leff for the second time and what ensued pretty much sealed the game for SOU. After the pick, MSU-N offensive lineman Rostyn Pace came in way late and hit Leff while he was already down and after the play, which resulted in a personal foul and an ejection. The play seemed to inspire the Red Raiders, who scored 17 unanswered points from there to win their second game in a row in which they scored 60 or more points.

And not only did SOU score big, they put up some staggering numbers. Dodge attempted 56 passes, completing 38 of them for six touchdowns and no INT’s. Olson had an enormous day as well, catching 11
balls for 204 yards, while also rushing for a score. Patrick Donahue grabbed 11 catches for 115 yards and the Raiders ran for 227 yards and gained 36 first downs to Northern’s 19. Colin Amsler also made field goals of 29, 26 and 35 yards.

MSU-N put up some gaudy passing numbers as Lear hit the 500-yard mark for the second time this season. He threw five touchdowns, but was also sacked six times. O’Brien continued his big season with seven catches for a whopping 173 yards, while Brandt Montelius totaled a career-high 98 yards on three grabs. Johnson added 71 yards receiving while Johnston had 41.

But as good as the Lights were though the air, SOU’s run defense made the second-leading rushing team in the Frontier look inept. Northern wound up with -9 yards on the ground, and the league’s leading rusher, Stephen Silva was bottled up all day, to the tune of 10 yards on 10 carries.

“We couldn’t get the run going,” Samson said. “And then when you’re trying to play catch-up, against these guys, you pretty much go away from that. So it was rough in that aspect.”

Defensively, Northern was paced by a career-high 18 tackles from senior linebacker James Chandless. Fellow linebacker David Arteaga had 15 tackles while Tyler Phillips came up with the fumble in the third quarter. But no sacks on Dodge and no interceptions, as well as a defense which was on the field for an absurd 46 minutes didn’t help the Lights’ cause.

And things won’t get any easier for Northern, which fell to 2-4 in the Frontier. The Lights head to Carroll College this Saturday for a rematch with the Saints, who beat Northern 31-6 back on Aug. 24 in Havre. Meanwhile, the Red Raiders improved to 4-2 in conference play and remain firmly within shouting distance of the NAIA playoffs.

“It wasn’t for a lack of effort today,” Samson said. “Our kids played very hard. It was a physical football game and our kids played hard. We just made too many mistakes, had way too mental errors and against an offense like that, you can’t do that and expect to win.”

The Lights will be on the road for back-to-back games, at Carroll this Saturday and at Montana Tech on Oct. 27. Northern plays its final home game Nov. 3 against Dickinson State.

**SOU raids Havre**

**Lights are now 2-4; Next up at Carroll on Oct. 20**

**Lights Notes:** After Saturday’s performance, O’Brien leads the NAIA in yards per catch at 22.3. Chandless continues to have a fine season and has now moved up to second in the Frontier in total tackles with 63. Dodge has thrown for 1,053 yards in the last two weeks. With his five TD passes, Lear already broke his 2011 single-season record of 19 TD’s. He now has 20 on the season. Pace, a junior starting offensive lineman, will have to serve a one-game suspension for being ejected after his personal foul for spearing on Saturday.