Rematch: Lights look to end drought at Carroll

George Ferguson
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Week-in-and-week-out, there’s something big riding on seemingly every game in the Frontier Conference. That’s just life in college football.

But when the Montana State University-Northern Lights and Carroll College Fighting Saints hook up, it just seems like it’s a bit bigger than the rest of the games that week.

And this Saturday in Helena is no exception as the Lights (2-4, 2-4) take on the No. 7 Saints (5-1, 5-2) inside famed Nelson Stadium. Kickoff is set for 1 p.m.

There’s plenty riding on Saturday’s rivalry game for the Saints, who have a four-game winning streak and are battling Montana Tech for the Frontier title and league’s automatic bid. There’s also a lot at stake for Northern, which would love to snap its 12-game losing streak to Carroll, as well as keep its chances for a winning season very-much alive.

And though the two teams have met once this season, a lot has transpired since Carroll topped MSU-N 31-6 on Aug. 24 at Blue Pony Stadium. And a lot means a lot.

Carroll has been through an unusual season, one in which the Saints lost back-to-back games for the first time in eons. One of those games was to NCAA DI member Portland State, and the Saints played very well against the Vikings, but the other was a shocking loss at Tech the following week. After the loss to the Orediggers, Carroll dropped out of the NAIA Top 10 for the first time in quite some time.

The Saints have also seemed a little vulnerable on offense this season, whether it be the run or the pass. Chance Demarais once again leads the Frontier in rushing at 102 yards per game, but he’s been banged up for much of the season, a season in which he’s had to fight hard to gain his 720 yards on the ground.

Junior quarterback Dakota Stonehouse has also been an enigma at times. Stonehouse, at 6-2 is a fast and superior athlete who can run, as evidenced by his 537 yards on the ground this season. But from a passing standpoint, Stonehouse has been up-and-down. He’s thrown for 1,243 yards and 12 touchdowns, but he’s also turned the ball over nine times. And turnovers are something Carroll isn’t used to doing too often. Offensively, the Saints are just third in the Frontier in scoring at 26 points per game, while they are seventh in passing. Carroll is only fourth in the Frontier in total offense, averaging just over 400 yards per contest, and the Saints have had some close calls, including a 21-14 win over UM-Western just last week.

Never-the-less, Carroll has managed to keep going, despite an offense which hasn’t put up a lot of points, in spite of some key injuries and in spite of the back-to-back losses. And the Saints have kept going behind a veteran and huge offensive line, a ground game which grinds out a league-best 236 yards per and a Carroll-like staunch defense.

The Saints’ defense, behind stars like end Rhakeem Harris, who has five sacks this season, linebackers Joe Dunning and Sean Blomquist, who have combined for 88 total tackles and 12 tackles’ for loss, and defensive backs Tucker Vezina and Matt Upham who can lock up in the secondary, has been as stingy as ever. Carroll only allowed Northern a last-second touchdown the first time the teams met, and the Saints
are giving up just 16 points per game on the season. As usual, Carroll is tough to be balanced against too, considering the Saints lead the Frontier in both rushing and passing defense.

So that's what a Lights’ team coming off a 65-34 home loss to Southern Oregon is facing. And possibly being without head coach Mark Samson on the sidelines (see related story), as usual, Northern is facing an uphill battle.

But it’s a battle the Lights are ready for. Northern brings an offense to Helena, which is certainly rolling in the passing game. After last Saturday’s 500-yard outing, junior Derek Lear is now second in the NAIA in both passing and total offense. Lear has thrown for 1,831 yards and 20 TD’s, and he’s rushed for over 200 more this season. He’s also got all his weapons healthy for Saturday’s game, including junior wide out Brandon O’Brien, who’s averaging an NAIA-best 22 yards per reception. O’Brien is having a huge season, as he’s caught 23 balls for 526 yards, while Kyle Johnston, Orin Johnson and Brandt Montelius are also among the Top 10 receivers in the Frontier.

But where Northern has fallen short in the past against the Saints is where the Lights will try and make hay on Saturday. MSU-N would love to establish the run with senior Stephen Silva, who’s playing his last game against Carroll in what has been a brilliant career. Silva was bottled up against SOU’s run defense last week, but he’s still averaging 89 yards per contest. But if Silva is to get going against the Saints, Northern’s offensive line must win a battle it hasn’t won often against Carroll and that’s in the trenches. Carroll’s defensive line has been stout against the run all season and the Lights must figure out a way to reverse that trend Saturday.

Northern also needs to defend the run against Carroll. That’s every team’s goal against the Saints and it’s easier said than done. But the Lights’ are playing well on defense, especially against the run, and defensive tackle Mike Carbone is coming off a career-high 12 tackles against SOU. Northern’s linebackers all are amongst the league leaders in tackles, while senior safety Matt Reyant, a Helena native is a strong run support player. But stopping Carroll’s running game is two-fold, as it’s not only Demarais and backup tailback Dustin Rinker who are the main concerns, it’s also Stonehouse, who can break free and did break free against the Lights back in August.

And perhaps the biggest key to Saturday’s game is turnovers, and that goes for both teams. The Saints are just seventh in the league in turnover margin, an unusual spot for them, while the Lights are sixth. The two teams are a combined -12 in that category, and together, they combined to turn the ball over seven times in their meeting in Havre. So there’s no question, whoever holds onto the ball on Saturday will have a huge edge in a game which is very meaningful to both bitter rivals.

Saturday’s game between the Lights and Saints will kick off at 1 p.m. in Helena. Northern is on the road again next week, at Montana Tech, while Carroll travels to SOU.

**Samson hoping to be in Helena**

It’s up in the air whether Montana State University-Northern head coach Mark Samson will be on the sidelines or able to coach for Saturday’s Frontier Conference showdown at Carroll College, though he said on Thursday afternoon he hopes to be.

Samson was hospitalized and underwent surgery earlier this week for an undisclosed ailment, and as of Thursday afternoon had not been cleared to leave the hospital.

Samson said he’s feeling a little better and recovering from the surgery and is still hoping to make the trip with the Lights, who play Carroll Saturday at 1 p.m. Samson is in his ninth season with the Lights and is a Helena native.

**Battle in Helena**

**MSU-Northern Lights (2-4, 2-4) at No. 7 Carroll College Saints (5-1, 5-2)**

**Saturday at 1 p.m. at Nelson Stadium in Helena**

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