When nine seniors who have given their heart and soul to a football program step onto their home field for the last time, emotions are always going to run high. No one wants to let them down and everybody seems to play just a little harder and with a little more urgency, just for them.

And that kind of team unity was on display Saturday afternoon inside Blue Pony Stadium as the Montana State University-Northern Lights honored their seniors with a 42-10 stomping of Dickinson State. The win improved the Lights to 3-6 on the season and avenged a 21-20 loss to the Blue Hawks back on Sept. 15 in Dickinson, N.D.

“For your last home game of your career, you couldn’t ask for much more,” MSU-N senior safety Matt Reyant said. “We have nine great seniors on this team and everybody wanted to come out and play a complete game today for them, for us, and we, as seniors, wanted to do the same for the rest of the team. And we did that today. That’s the best we’ve played in a month. And it was a great way to end it here.”

Seniors were a big part of the Lights’ success Saturday afternoon.

Northern opened the game with a 10-play, 68-yard drive which was capped by senior Kyle Johnston’s 18-yard touchdown catch and run. And grabbing a 7-0 lead, the Lights never looked back.

Derek Lear gave the Lights a 14-0 lead on their next drive as he drilled a 6-yard TD pass to Brandon O’Brien. The score came after MSU-N recovered a fumbled DSU punt return, which was one of two turnovers the Lights got on the day.

MSU-N also set the tone defensively, not allowing the Blue Hawks to pick up a first down until the 13:35 mark of the second quarter. And by that time it was already 20-0 because Lear hit O’Brien for an 18-yard score on the third play of the second stanza.

“I thought, offensively and defensively, we got off to a really good start today,” MSU-N head coach Mark Samson said. “The kids came out pretty fired up and I thought we played a great first half.”

Northern did indeed play a complete first half. Even when the Blue Hawks finally mounted a drive, the Lights snuffed it out when junior linebacker Jordan Van Voast intercepted DSU backup quarterback Matt Harkless in the endzone midway through the second quarter. Van Voast’s pick led to three more points as the Lights topped off another long drive with Trevor Baum 22-yard field goal as MSU-N took a 23-0 lead into halftime.

“The goal today was to come out and play as complete a game as we could on defense,” said Reyant. “I think we came out and hit them in the mouth right away. That set the tone. We made some plays defensively and our offense was really clicking.”
Northern achieved its goal of knocking DSU down in the first 30 minutes, but the Blue Hawks got up and punched the Lights back in the first few minutes of the third quarter.

The Blue Hawks ran the ball effectively on their opening drive of the third quarter, and they finally got into the endzone when fellow backup QB Thad Lane tossed a pass to Harkless, who in turn hit Tanner Leak for the Blue Hawk’s only TD of the day. The half-back pass covered 24 yards and was the start of a quick rally by DSU. On the very next offensive snap for the Lights, Lear was picked off on a tipped ball by Mike Fisher, setting the Hawks up deep in Northern territory.

However, MSU-N’s defense stood tall all day long, and the Lights limited the damage to a 32-yard Chad Bryant field goal. And that was the end of DSU’s comeback threat.

“I thought our defense played well all day,” Samson said. “Even in the third quarter, I don’t think we played poorly, I just thought we gave up a few big plays. But I was really proud of the way our defense played. They were pretty consistent and really got after it today.”

And after DSU scored 10 unanswered points to open the second half, the Northern offense got after it again too. The Lights scored on the first play of the fourth quarter, which led to a closing 19 straight points. The final three touchdowns included fitting scores for senior running backs Justin Montelius and Northern’s all-time leading rusher, Stephen Silva. Montelius plunged in from two yards out as the fourth stanza began, upping Northern’s lead to 29-10, while Silva ran around the edge for 41 yards for the Lights’ final score of the day. Sandwiched in between was a tough, six-yard TD run by Lear.

“It felt great to get into the endzone one more time,” Montelius said. “Today was a good day. We just made a commitment to come out and play as hard as we could today. For everybody to do their jobs and to trust the guy next to you to get it done. And it worked out today, because I think we played a pretty complete game.”

Memorably, Silva wrapped up a brilliant Blue Pony Stadium career with 137 yards on 20 carries. It was his school-record 10th 100-yard game of his career, and he came up big on senior day, as the Lights rushed for 240 yards and racked up 486 total yards of offense.

“This feels good,” Silva said. “I’m ecstatic that we were able to play our last home this way and go out with a win. It was a lot of fun on that run and that’s what today was about, just getting back on track, playing well and all these guys having fun out there. I’m really happy and happy for this team.”

Montelius finished with 24 yards on six carries, while Johnston had five catches for 77 yards and two rushes for 16 yards in his last game at Blue Pony Stadium. Lear finished 20-of-28 for 246 yards, with three passing TD’s and one score on the ground. Orin Johnson led all receivers with five catches for 85 yards, to go along with 21 yards rushing, while O’Brien had another solid outing with five catches for 41 yards.

“I thought we did some good things offensively,” Samson said. “I thought Derek was really efficient and made good decisions, OJ (Johnson) had a really good game, and really, every receiver we sent out there played well today.
“But the big thing was, we got back to running the football,” he added. “We had a good day running the ball, and that makes us such a better team offensively, when we can do that.”

The Lights were equally as good on defense, holding DSU to a scant 235 yards of offense, including just 66 yards on the ground. DSU, once a powerful rushing team, could do little against Northern’s defensive front, which was led by senior Mike Carbone, who had seven tackles and a his sixth sack of the season. Senior linebacker James Chandless also went out in style, totaling a team-high eight tackles, to go along with one sack. Freshman linebacker Tyson Patterson recorded five tackles in his second-career start.

Tanner Leak led a struggling DSU offense, which was without starting QB Dave Valesquez, who is out for the season with a knee injury, with six catches for 116 yards. DSU’s top running back, Presley Straub, gained 50 yards on 20 carries.

“The defense played so good today,” Silva said. “They got big stops all day, they came up with three-and-outs and they got us the ball in great field position. I can’t say enough about the job they did today.”

And at the end of a gloomy and foggy final home game at Blue Pony Stadium, the Lights sent the seniors out with a one last win at home. Northern went 3-2 at home this season and will look to end the year with two straight wins when the Lights travel to Billings to take on Rocky Mountain College in their season finale this Saturday.

“I’m just really happy for these guys, especially our seniors,” Samson said. “Everybody played very hard today, and for the most part, I thought we played really well. I’m proud of this team because this kind of gets that bad taste from the last few weeks out of our mouth, and hopefully, it gives us momentum heading into a tough game at Rocky next week.”

**A Happy End**

**Lights are now 3-6; Next up at RMC**

**Lights Notes:** Northern came into Saturday’s game last in the Frontier in turnover margin and first in penalties per game. But against DSU, the Lights turned the ball over just one time and were also penalized just once all day. Trevor Baum had a crazy afternoon. As MSU-N’s place kicker, he missed three extra points, but he also converted a key fourth-down on a fake-punt by running for nine yards, after DSU had narrowed the lead to 23-10 in the third quarter. The Lights would score on that drive. Baum also laid two of the biggest hits of the day, including sidelining a DSU receiver for the remainder of the day. With one game left in his career, Silva’s all-time rushing total is now up to 2,790 yards.