Lights reloading and moving forward

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To say the 2012 season was frustrating for the Montana State University-Northern football would be an understatement.

The Lights entered the fall with high hopes and lofty expectations after going 5-5 in 2011, with 16 starters back from that squad. MSU-N was picked to finish second in the Frontier Conference, only behind 12-time defending league champion Carroll College.

However, much like what happened to Carroll this season, expectations and predictions don’t always mean success. And the Lights just weren’t able to put it all together this fall.

Inconsistency and turnovers seemed to plague Northern in 2012. MSU-N was dead last in the Frontier in turnover margin, while also showing signs of greatness with an offense that finished the year second in the conference and sixth in the NAIA in total offense, and second in the Frontier in passing offense. At times, the Lights were as explosive as any team in the country.

But again, things came and went for the Lights. After starting the year 0-3, including a three-point loss at Eastern Oregon and a heartbreaking 21-20 loss at Dickinson State, Northern rebounded with a pair of impressive home wins, blowing out both UM-Western and Rocky Mountain College behind the running of Stephen Silva and a dynamic passing attack.

At 2-3, the Lights appeared to have momentum on their side, and plenty of time to continue to turn the season around. However, they would drop four of their last five games, starting with a home loss to NAIA quarterfinalist Southern Oregon, and ending with a Saturday night loss at Rocky Mountain in Billings. Another three-game slide also included a deflating loss at nationally-ranked Montana Tech, a game in which the Lights were driving for the winning score, only to come up short. Only a dominant senior-day win over DSU prevented MSU-N from finishing the year with five straight setbacks.

"It was a tough season," Northern head coach Mark Samson, who is now in his 10th season with the Lights said. "We played well at times, but in different games, we just didn’t do the things necessary to get it done. Things just didn’t click for us."

And while it looks rough on paper, and the only thing the Lights are interested in are wins, there were plenty of bright spots.

Junior quarterback Derek Lear earned all-conference honors for the second straight season, while breaking nine different school passing records. Lear finished the season with 2,798 yards and over 3,000 total yards, while also throwing for an MSU-N record 26 touchdowns. On the receiving end was Brandon O’Brien, who caught 46 balls for 806 yards and 11 touchdowns, earning him all-conference accolades as well, while Silva racked up 816 yards and six TD’s as Northern’s all-time leading rusher.

Defensively, the Lights saw a breakout year from James Chandless, who totaled 100 tackles in his first and only year at linebacker. Fellow linebacker Jordan Van Voast, as well as safety Josh Baum were also among the Frontier leaders in tackles, while both defensive tackle Mike Carbone and end Ryan Craig had strong campaign’s on the line.

But as Northern enters a long offseason, the Lights will be looking at some re-tooling for 2013.
They return Lear for his senior year, as well as standout senior wide receivers Orin Johnson and Brandt Montelius, both of whom made big plays in 2012. But they lose Silva, who started at running back for three seasons and never missed a game in four years at MSU-N, as well as O’Brien and super speedster Kyle Johnston. O’Brien is a part of contingent of Lights who were only juniors this season, but are graduating this year and won’t be returning next fall. That group also includes wide receiver Mick Miller, tight end Brian Torgerson, Craig, Than Schopp and Corey Budak, as well as running back Willie VandenBos.

The Lights also lose four-year starter Brock Hyder on the offensive line, but do return most of the starters there. Young players like wide receivers Dylan Woodhall and David Wilson will have increased roles next year. At running back, the Lights will look at a number of youngsters, like Zach McKinley and Sy Keltner.

Defensively, Northern loses consistent starters Carbone, Chandless and team captain Matt Reyant, who started the last two seasons at safety for the Lights. Young players like Jordan Brusio and Chase Vestre and others will move up the depth chart. Chandless will be a big hole to fill at linebacker, but Tyson Patterson came on strong at the end of the 2012 season, while Van Voast, David Arteaga and Kami Kanhelauia return with experience. Northern lost the talented Jared Rohrback to a season-ending concussion early in the fall, and Rohrback has since retired from football. In the secondary, the Lights return senior corner Tanner Varner, along with both Josh and Trevor Baum. Trevor had an outstanding season as a corner, but could see time at safety as well with the graduation of Reyant. Josh Baum earned all-conference honors this past fall.

“We lost a pretty good group of seniors and some guys graduating early,” Samson said. “But we feel like we return a solid nucleus of kids, including some young guys who are ready to step up and contribute.

“But the bottom line is, at the end of this season, we had some pretty big areas where we had to get better,” he continued. “And we have addressed a lot of that through recruiting. We’ve been aggressively recruiting those areas of need, and we’ll have a lot of those guys joining us for the new semester and they’ll be here for spring ball. We’ve also signed some very good kids, both transfers and high school players who will be here in the fall, so recruiting has gone really well so far.”

Samson said the Lights have added several key players, at running back, wide receiver and on the offensive and defensive line, and those players will certainly mesh with the quality returnees the Lights have coming back next season.

So the talent is there for Northern, and with another strong recruiting class coming in, the goals will be the same as they always are at MSU-N, and that’s to win and compete for a Frontier Conference title in 2013.

Yes, 2012 didn’t live up to the high expectations set for MSU-N, but Samson isn’t in the business of looking back. He’s gotten the Lights on track plenty of times in his nine-plus years at MSU-N, and with loads of talent returning, he’ll try to steer the Lights back into the light in 2013.

Samson expects to announce the first signees of the recruiting season in the coming days.