Spring is in the air, the weather has been mild, and as far as football goes, the Montana State University-Northern Lights are in the midst of a successful spring season.

The Lights began spring practice a little over two weeks ago, and are now on the verge of conducting their first of two full scrimmages. The Lights will scrimmage Saturday at 12 p.m. at the Havre High practice field.

And as far as what Northern, which struggled to a 3-7 record in 2012 has accomplished, veteran head coach mark Samson says it’s a lot.

“It’s going good,” Samson said. “I think we’ve done very well so far. All of these guys did a great job in the offseason. We look bigger, faster and stronger. And I really like the improvements a lot of our younger players have made. So we’re definitely making some progress.”

The Lights are replacing a bevy of talented players on both sides of the ball this upcoming season, and to shore up many areas, MSU-N brought in some immediate impact transfers. Included in that group is running back Jai Johnson, who has been turning heads in practice thus far. The Lights also have a slew of big offensive lineman in camp, as well as a couple of big defensive tackles who transferred in.

Samson also noted some young players are working their way up the depth chart this spring, and are impressing as well. Tyler Craig is playing well at defensive end as a redshirt freshman, while running back Sy Keltner is also making plays for the Lights.

“All of our transfer guys are doing really well,” Samson said. “We expected them to come in play well right away and they have. That is really helping our depth right now. And I think our older guys, guys who have been in our program a while now, they are all doing a great job.”

Veterans Northern will lean on this season include two-time all-conference quarterback Derek Lear, who will enter his senior season as a Frontier Conference Player of the year candidate, as well as senior wide receiver Orin Johnson, who has started for three years, and is having a big spring according to Samson. On defense, linebacker Jordan Van Voast is now a three-year starter, as is cornerbback Tanner Varner, while safety Josh Baum is also a standout in the secondary. Another young player, who is also a returning starter, is also making big strides this spring, is sophomore to be Trevor Baum. He started in the secondary last season, while also handling the kicking and punting duties for the Lights. Baum is still playing defense for Northern but is also trying his hand at wide receiver, and he’s been making plays all spring.

“He’s really doing well right now,” Samson said of the 6-1, 200-pound standout. “We were really thin at receiver for a while, so we said we’d play him both ways and see how it goes, and in last Friday’s practice, he made a bunch of catches and picked off a pass on defense. So he’s really making a lot of plays out there. He’s just a tremendous athlete and he can do a lot of things really well.”

With Baum playing wide receiver, the return of Johnson and stalwart Brandt Montelius, as well as transfer Lavorick Williams, and the emergence of Dylan Woodhall, Lear and a healthy Travis Dean, who missed all of
last season with a knee injury have plenty of big and speedy targets to throw to. And with a big offensive line making a push for the MSU-N running backs, the Lights’ offense has clicked so far this spring.

But Samson isn’t sleeping on his defense either.

“I’ve been impressed with both sides of the ball so far,” he said. “As good as we think our offense can be this season, our defense is making plenty of plays too. We’ve been getting some takeaways in practice and guys are flying to the ball well. We’re still thin on the defensive line, but other than that, we’re not seeing any glaring weaknesses on offense or defense right now.

“And I think we’re establishing some good depth right now too,” he added. “That’s one of the important parts of spring ball and I feel like we’re getting there. We’ve got plenty of work to do, and a long way until August, but right now, it’s going really well and I’m proud of the way this group is working this spring.”

The Lights will scrimmage Saturday at 12 p.m. at Havre High. Northern will also hold its annual Spring Game April 13.