Lights put a wrap on spring ball
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights football team took the field for the last time this spring.

Local fans were treated to a glimpse of the newly renovated offense and defense on Saturday, but just as spring football will do, it answered some questions, while it also left few to be answered at the beginning of next season. The Lights held their final spring game on Saturday at Blue Pony stadium in Havre.

After a 3-7 record a year ago, the Lights wanted to make the most out of the 2013 spring.

And after doing some positive things across the board, the MSU-N coaching staff knows they still have their work cut out for them if they want to reach the top tier in the Frontier Conference.

"It is like I said last week," MSU-N coach Mark Samson said. "We need to get more consistent on both sides of the ball. But I still think this is going to be a good football team. That is just how spring ball works, if you walk away from it and if the defense doesn't give up any scores, the offense doesn't feel all that great, and vise versa if the offense plays well. But we saw some good things on both sides of the ball."

The defense stood out in the Lights’ scrimmage last weekend, and picked up right where it left off this Saturday afternoon.

And the defensive line was especially impressive, as the defense as a whole earned a number of sacks, knocked down passes all over the field, and forced and recovered two fumbles. The No. 1 defense also allowed just one score by the No. 1 offense, a 10-yard rushing score by quarterback Derek Lear on the third series of the afternoon. The backup defense also allowed one score by the backup offensive group late in the scrimmage.

The two forced fumbles came on back-to-back drives. The Lights’ running game looked sluggish all afternoon for the most part, and the strong defensive line made them pay early. On the first two drives of the day, the defense forced and recovered two fumbles. Transfer defensive lineman Yogi Price recovered the second fumble and has helped his defense look very stout this spring.

"The defense has been wonderful,” Price said. "We have been working out hard all spring and we have been getting better and better. And I like my defensive line a lot, we are close and we work hard. We knew we were going to come in here shut the offense down today, and that is exactly what we did. We just need to keep practicing, keep working hard, and just keep getting better.”

Coach Samson agreed.
“The defense has really picked it up from day one,” Samson said. “They have been getting better all the time. I thought they played really well early on, they got some turnovers early on, and it was good to see.

The defensive line as a group is playing as well as we have seen in a long time around here. We have some big bodies and they are really getting a big up field push. That has helped us a lot.

“The offensive line,” Samson added. “We made some mistakes blocking wise and scheme wise, but our defense is stunting a lot and we are still having trouble with that. And not to make any excuses, but we are playing a lot of new kids and rotating a lot of young kids, and while we still struggle at times, at times we look pretty darn good.”

The offense ran right around 75 plays on Saturday. They had an even mix of run and pass plays, as well as let Orin Johnson take over the offense on quite a few looks out of the wildcat.

And though the running game had its share of struggles throughout, the attack through the air showed signs of its quality explosion it showed last season.

Both Lear and Travis Dean hooked up with a handful of receivers, including Johnson who had a solid outing from the receiver position. But the biggest play came on the first drive, as Lear connected with transfer wide out Lavorick Williams on what would have been a defensive scorching, 70-yard touchdown pass. But Williams had been nursing a hamstring injury and pulled up and went down on the 10-yard line, exiting the scrimmage and not returning. But Williams’ speed is promising after losing Brandon O’Brien and Kyle Johnston, former speedy wide outs.

“One of the things that is kind of hurting us on offense right now,” Samson said. “And this scrimmage didn’t help, is that we are pretty banged up. You watch that play with Lavorick Williams, probably the fastest kid in the Frontier Conference, and he was blowing by the defense. We just have to get him healthy. And our tight end is hurt, so he didn’t play either with. But these are things that aren’t going to last forever, but we have still had a lot of progress.”

John Jansen, Lights’ tight end, was out with an ankle injury.

Moving forward, the Lights are not satisfied with the progress they found this spring. They know how important the off-season preparation is, and it is safe to say fans will be anxiously waiting the start of the next season when all of the pieces are in place.

“We still have some work to do in the off season.” Samson said. “We are going to have some new kids coming in that will hopefully help us, and like I said, we just have to get everybody healthy.”

With spring drills wrapping up, the Lights will begin looking forward to their season-opener, which will be on Thursday, Aug. 29 at Dickinson State. Northern’s 2013 home opener is set for Sept. 14 against Eastern Oregon.