The season opening game against Dickinson State is only getting closer, but the Montana State University-Northern Lights football program must first get through this first week of practice, as well as the upcoming summer scrimmages.

And as of now, the early stages of the new season are continuing to go very well for head coach Mark Samson and his Lights.

Summer two-a-days began on Sunday morning at the MSU-N practice fields in Havre. And on Tuesday, the Lights’ momentum is nearing 100 percent as they prepare for a scrimmage Saturday, and ultimately the season-opener against Dickenson State Aug. 29. The Lights were picked fifth by the Frontier coaches, but Samson knows he has more talent than people are giving him credit for.

“I am not sure about it being motivation,” Samson said. “But I believe that we can be better than the fifth-best team in the league. We have a lot of returners, a lot of good skill players back, and just a good nucleus of kids. There is some of motivation for us, but I do believe we have a good football team this year.”

It is hard to judge a team after just three complete days of practice at the beginning of the season, but the Lights are continuing to work hard on all areas of their game, and are continuously doing good things. And with tempo being one of the main focuses early, players are buying in already, and are excited to be on the field.

“The coaches are talking about tempo,” senior quarterback Derek Lear said. “And from the beginning of practice to the end of practice, we have to have great tempo. Now, in the thick of two-a-days, kids tend to slack at times, but this group is picking it up well, and it is just great to be out here running around.”

And bouncing back and forth between drills, the Lights are doing plenty of running around.

Tuesday morning’s practice was a lot of fine-tuning and technique work. The Lights’ defense continued to work on things like their assignments, while the offense continued to run plays against several different defensive looks. And with just helmets and shoulder pads, the hitting was at a minimum as both the offense and defense saw ample action against scout teams.

But as the evening practice rolled around, the Lights took the field with a little more intensity. Players were in full pads for the first time, and with the green light for full contact in most of the drills, intensity and tempo was not hard to come by.

While in pads, MSU-N still had to spread its focus. There were still individual drills for both the offense and defense to go through, as well as a run through kick and punt return. Seeing Dylan Woodhall return punts this season should look familiar to Lights’ fans, a speedy resemblance to Kyle Johnston, a former return man and standout receiver for Northern. But after a short split between the offense and defense, the team came together for a more exciting finale.

In preparation for Saturday’s scrimmage and the rapidly approaching season opener, the Lights are beginning to hit full speed. And ending the day with full-speed 11-on-11, the offense and defense continue to take strides, and have fun doing it.

"It is great,” linebacker Jordan VanVoast said. "It has been a long, long summer. We are all back and now getting to hit each other a little bit feels good. But we just need to be perfect. We all need to get up to
speed, and get up to game speed. We have done some drills, but these upcoming scrimmages will also help
get us up to game speed and get us ready for that first game.”

During the final mini scrimmage, the offense and defense had some individuals step up.

The No. 1 offense opened up the drive with a deep pass attempt to Woodhall down the sideline, but
defensive back Trevor Baum made an amazing play for the defense, breaking up the pass fully stretched out. The defensive line and linebackers also did a standout job sniffing out the screen plays ran by the offense. Quarterbacks Lear and Travis Dean also completed some nice passes, while Orin Johnson and Woodhall were both on the receiving end of most of the completions. Freshman Zack Mickinley, a running back from Great Falls, also had a couple of nice runs in the series that lasted less than 20 plays.

The improvements continue to spill out of the Lights’ program, but a true test will come from Saturday’s scrimmage.

"We just want to see where we are as a team,” Samson said. “We aren’t scheming anything for Dickinson State, we just want to see what we have learned in the 12 or 13 practices, and see how much better we have gotten. A lot of kids will play and we will run a lot of plays. It won’t really resemble a game like scrimmage, but it will show us how kids will play given a large number reps. We do have a couple of positions to nail down, but mostly we are looking at our depth, who will be our No. 2s and that type of stuff. We are anxious, but we still have a lot to do.”

The Lights will scrimmage Saturday, but their first game will be Aug. 29 against Dickinson State.