Lights brighten training camp
By Daniel Horton
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Summer two-a-days do a lot for the growth of a football team like the Montana State University-Northern Lights, but with the regular season in sight, a scrimmage can do even more.

The regular season gets underway on Aug. 29, as the Lights travel to North Dakota to take on Dickinson State. But in another step of preparation, the Lights took to the MSU-N practice fields on Saturday morning for a full-pad, high-tempo scrimmage. It was the first scrimmage of the summer for the Lights, but area fans saw the No. 1 offense face the No. 1 defense, as well as several drives with the rest of the depth chart mixed in for good measure.

And while both the offense and defense displayed a lot of good play on both sides of the ball, freshman running back Zach Mckinley came in and stole the show.

After a season-ending injury sidelined Mckinley last season, he finally got his chance to prove he deserved to at least help carry the load out of the backfield. He got off to a slow start, racking up just a handful of yards on three early carries, but he soon put his powerful running style on display. Mckinley showed his ability to break tackles, gain yards after contact, and simply get up field. After the slow start, Mckinley then proved he could consistently power his way to nearly seven yards per carry. Mckinley even grabbed a couple carries for double-digit pickups. He finished with eight carries for 54 yards and broke seven tackles.

“I have to thank God for bringing me back and giving me a second chance,” Mckinley said. “I was out for 10 months and on scooter, but I actually have to thank these coaches, too, for never giving up on me. They always told me I was going to have an opportunity to come back, so all I have to do now is take advantage.”

“I have been trying to (take full advantage),” Mckinley added. “It has been a long time coming since the offseason, so I am just doing my best, trying to get that starting job.”

But junior college transfer Jai Johnson also showed off his powerful running style with his five offensive series with the No. 1 offense. If the Lights decide go with one back, they have their pick of power runners, but if they go with a committee, they will also have a very powerful 1-2 punch. Jai Johnson carried the ball six times for 35 yards, averaging nearly six yards per carry.

“We are definitely bigger this year,” Mckinley said. “And we don’t quite have the same speed. But we are big upfront and have a good offensive line, so we just have to read our blocks. We are going to be more powerful this year, and not quite as much finesse, but we are getting there. We are going to be real good upfront, we have big guys like Dylan Murphy, Patrick Kiser, and Wes Ostby, and it is just up to us because they are going to get the job done.”

Veteran quarterbacks Derek Lear and Travis Dean, and veteran wide receiver Orin Johnson, weren’t to be outdone.

On the third play of the scrimmage Lear connected with Orin Johnson on a 30-yard pass down the middle of the field. Lear also hit Johnson two other times, but looked especially impressive on a long touchdown
connection with Johnson on the third offensive drive. Lear also hit Brandt Montelius for a long score, while Dean came in and showed great poise with the No. 2 receivers, including two more offensive scores. Lear was 7-for-10 for 150 yards, and Dean was 4-for-8 for 68 yards. Orin Johnson had 96 receiving yards, including two catches for more than 20 yards. But the ball was spread around, as nine total players reeled in at least one reception.

“(Lear) is a four-year starter and a leader of this team,” MSU-N head coach Mark Samson said. “I normally tell people, how Derek Lear goes, we go. And he made a couple of mistakes with some audibles, but for the most part he was pretty good. I thought Travis Dean coming in as the No. 2 did some good things too. Overall, I am very happy with Derek and Travis.

“But Lear and Orin have both been playing and starting for me for four years,” Samson added. “They came out of the same Class B league in high school, and have become great friends. If you play this game long enough, especially quarterback and receiver, you get a good feel for how a person is thinking. As far as I am concerned, Orin is the most underrated receiver in the league. He is quiet, but at the end of the year he is always near the top. Him and Derek feed off of each other and today that showed.”

On the day, the offense ran 65 plays for 447 total yards of offense. They scored five touchdowns and hit one field goal for 38 points, all awhile averaging almost seven yards per play. The offense was also 10-of-15 on third down, ran eight plays that went for 20-yards or more, and racked up 22 broken tackles.

Defensively, the Lights had their bright spots as well.

The defense started the morning scrimmage by forcing the No. 1 offense to turn the ball over on downs. The No. 1 defense did end up allowing some big passing touchdowns, but they all came after the defense looked to be in position to snuff the offensive drives. It isn’t an area of concern for the coaching staff, but Samson will address the issue with the defensive secondary.

“Our secondary should be very good this season,” Samson said. “But I think the offense caught some kids peeking today. I do know this, with the speed we have at receiver, if our secondary can handle them, they can handle anybody in the league.”

On the upside, the defense did knock down several passes, as well as recording five sacks against Lear and Dean. Freshman defensive end Patrick Barnett had a solo sack, as did junior safety Hunter Chandler. Chandler was especially impressive and was a defensive standout Saturday.

“He has really improved,” Samson said. “He has stepped up in the safety position, taken on some leadership, and made some big plays today. He is a very good player.”

Both sides of the ball showed great potential for the upcoming season, as well as showed where they need to continue to work to get better. At times, the offense couldn’t seem to find any yards against a stiff defense, while other times the defense couldn’t seem to find an answer for the powerful high flying offense.

“I know the offense did some big runs on the defense,” Samson said. “But I thought we did a pretty good job defending the run overall. We need to just continue to work with the secondary. Like I said, our corners got caught peeking when they shouldn’t, and all of a sudden the ball was thrown over their heads. We have to learn how to play three downs, then we have to learn to play four downs. But not to taking anything away from the defense, I expect the offense to score a lot; we have a lot of experience there. The defense did have some tipped passes and some sacks, but we didn’t have any turnovers. We need to create opportunities and create turnovers, that is something that hurt us last season.”

Summer practices continue for the Lights, but the regular season will begin on August 29 when MSU-N faces Dickinson State on the road.

**MSU-N Scrimmage 1**

Passing – Lear 7-10-0-2 150; Dean 4-8-0-2; Walker 1-3-0-0-32.

Rushing – J. Johnson 6-35, McKinley 8-54, Lear 7-17, Dean 5-23, Woodhall 1-4, Gabbatto 6-54, Keltner 2-3, Walker 4-6.