Going into the 2012 season, expectations for the Montana State University-Northern football team were sky high. The Lights were picked to finish second in the Frontier, and a big reason why was the potentially explosive offense the Lights brought to the table.

In some ways, the Lights’ offense lived up to the preseason billing last year, yet Northern slumped to a 3-7 record and failed to win a game on the road.

Now, expectations for the Lights as a whole might not be as high entering the 2013 Frontier Conference season, but offensively, nothing has changed.

With the return of four-year starting quarterback Derek Lear, four-year starting wide receiver Orin Johnson, a huge offensive line, and plenty of speed and power at all the skill positions, the Lights are certainly poised to put up big numbers offensively, much like they did in 2012. Last season, Northern finished second in the Frontier to Southern Oregon in total offense (448 ypg) and passing offense (279 ypg), as well as third in the league in rushing (168 ypg).

But in order to go from good to great, which is what the Lights want to be in 2013, MSU-N must pick up the pace in a couple of areas. Last season, the Lights only averaged 25 points per game, which was fifth in the league, while they were also dead last in turnover margin, giving the ball away 24 times. Northern was also the most penalized team in the Frontier, and in spite of all the weapons the Lights have on offense, veteran head coach Mark Samson said those things must improve.

“We do have a lot of talent offensively,” Samson said. “We’ve got a veteran quarterback, a veteran wide receiver, veteran offensive linemen. We’ve got some really good young receivers and tight ends and we have good depth at running back. So we expect to be pretty darn good offensively.

“But we also understand that just gaining big yards every game isn’t enough,” he added. “We have to put points on the board when we get those opportunities. We have to be smart offensively. We have to eliminate dumb penalties that back us up, and we have to take care of the football. Things aren’t going to be perfect all the time, and some of those things happen in football. But last season, as an offense, they happened way too often. And it really hurt us in a bunch of close football games. So those are things we have to be better at this season in order to become a really good or great football team.”

Mistakes aside, the Lights do indeed have the personnel to really put heat on opposing defenses this season. And it starts with Lear and Johnson, two players who have seen it all when it comes to Frontier football.

Lear (5-11, 190) had a breakout sophomore season in which he earned First-Team All-Conference honors, while leading the league in both passing and total offense. He followed that up with a stellar 2012 campaign.
in which he threw for 2,798 yards, a school-record 26 touchdowns and rushed for nearly 400 more yards. Lear finished second in the league in total offense and third in passing and was rated in the NAIA’s top 10 in both categories at season’s end. Lear, a native of Fairfield, now enters his senior season a two-time All-Conference performer, as well as the holder of 13 different MSU-N passing records. Lear has thrown for 7,125 yards and 65 TD’s in his brilliant career, while also holding nearly every single-game and single-season passing mark in the MSU-N record book.

"Derek Lear is a really good football player. He’s already a really good quarterback,” Samson said. “He’s proven that over his career. He’s put up a lot of great stats in his career. But I told him way back in the spring, now he has to go out and be the guy that wins football games consistently for us. Not to say he has to do it all by himself, because he’s got a great group of players around him. He has a lot of weapons at his disposal. But he needs to be the difference maker. A quarterback of his caliber needs to go out and will his team to touchdown drives and wins when they need them. I know he’s capable of doing that. He’s a tremendous talent, he’s been a great leader and a great teammate, and I expect big things from him in his senior year.”

Johnson (6-0, 200), one of Lear’s favorite targets through the years is also back. In fact, he’s the only returning starter at receiver for the Lights, who said good bye to productive standouts like Brandon O’Brien and Kyle Johnston, as well as Mick Miller after last season. For his career, Johnson has averaged 40 catches and over 500 yards per season, but as a senior, he should be even more involved in Northern’s passing game.

“O.J. (Johnson) and Derek have become great friends,” Samson said. “They have a great relationship on and off the field. They were both Class B kids from the same conference and it’s really neat to see what they’ve done in their time here at Northern, together. O.J. is a guy we’re really going to lean on this season. He’s in great shape, he’s had a great fall camp, and he’s going to be the leader of what is a great group of receivers in my opinion. This group has the chance to be as good as any we’ve ever had.”

Indeed. The Lights added speedster Lavorick Williams (6-2, 195), a drop-down from UTEP last spring, while senior Brandt Montelius (6-2, 190) will finally get a chance to be a full-time starter after making plays for the Lights in a backup role the last two years. Red-shirt freshmen Dylan Woodhall (5-9, 175) and Jake Messerly (6-1, 185) have also made a big splash in fall camp and should see plenty of action in Northern’s vaunted passing attack, while tight ends John Jansen (6-3, 250) and Jake Criner (6-0, 240) also have a chance to be very productive. Junior Travis Dean, a quarterback who could start at many other NAIA schools, will once again back up Lear.

“I really like what our quarterbacks and receivers have done in fall camp,” Samson said. “And I’m really impressed with our tight ends. John Jansen really came on strong in the spring and we moved Jake Criner from the line to end, and he’s doing a great job. He gets better every day and he’s going to make an impact this season. Our receivers are fast and strong and they catch the ball. They are potentially a great group. We even have some younger guys down the depth chart that are going to be really good players for us some day, so our depth at the skill positions right now is very solid.”

And despite losing the school’s all-time leading rusher in Stephen Silva to graduation last spring, the Lights seem to be in good shape with the running game too. Junior Jai Johnson (5-8, 210) transferred in last spring and immediately took the bulk of the carries in spring ball. But a healthy Zach McKinley (5-11, 210), a red-shirt freshman who missed all of last season with a leg injury, has emerged in fall camp and really burst onto the scene, making the competition for the starting tailback position fierce. Add in junior college transfer Chance Nevarez (5-10, 240), a bulldozer at fullback, and the arrival of freshman running back Mario Gabbato (5-8, 175), and the Lights’ future running the ball certainly looks bright.

“It’s interesting at running back, because you lose a Stephen Silva, a guy who was productive for so long, and you’re wondering what you’re gonna do next,” Samson said. “But with Jai Johnson and Zach McKinley both doing so well, now we have a situation where we might have two starters. It’s tough to call right now, and ultimately, they’re going to have to share the carries because they both bring things to our offense we’re going to need. They both are running the ball really well, and they’re both going to help us win football games.

“And watch out for Mario Gabbato,” he continued. “He’s young, but he is really talented. He’s having a great camp for us, and he’s going to do some great things in his career here. So we feel really good about where we’re at with our running backs.”
Still, whether it’s protecting the passing attack, or blocking for the running backs, teams need a great offensive line, and Northern seems to have put together one for the upcoming season. Returners include senior Rostyn Pace (6-3, 275) at left guard and the massive Dylan Murphy (6-6, 300) at right tackle. After red-shirting last season, the highly touted Patrick Kiser (6-2, 295) slides into the left tackle position, while freshman Pete Morlaes (6-1, 285) will start at right guard. Junior college transfer Shomari Burton (6-2, 300) will be the starting center, while Northern’s depth on the line is solid with backups like Alex Cummings (6-0, 270), Matt McKeen (6-1, 275), Zach Bangert (6-1, 285) and Wes Ostby (6-2, 295) all able to play multiple spots on the line.

“That’s one area I think we’ve really improved,” Samson said. “The offensive line has really come together in camp. Yes, they are big and talented, but what I like is the intelligence there. Those guys all understand what we’re doing, they know the schemes, and they are all really interchangeable, which is nice to have. Patrick Kiser is having a great fall camp, Dylan Murphy is playing at an all-conference level, and as a unit, that group is really performing well. I feel really good about where we are with that group.”

And Samson should feel good. With all the talent listed above, with all the weapons the Lights can trot out onto the field each Saturday, Northern’s offense should be lights-out for opponents this fall. And that’s exactly what Samson, along with offensive coordinator Kyle Samson are expecting.

“I’d be disappointed if we weren’t a really good offensive football team this season,” Samson said. “That’s the expectation. We have the talent, we have the personnel. Now they have to go out and want it. They have to really carry that attitude and belief that we’re going to score points and win football games this season. This offense has to believe we can score when we need to. We have to have that attitude right out of the gate this season. As an entire unit, they have to believe they can get the job done every time they go out there. They just have to go out and execute like we know they’re capable of doing.”