Tonight is the night for the Lights
MSU-Northern football starts fresh under the lights at Dickinson State
By George Ferguson
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Week one was just one match to see how things went. Week two was an endurance test, with six matches in three days. But now the Montana State University-Northern volleyball team is really off and running.

Friday and Saturday, the Skylights will play four matches at the Embry-Riddle Invitational in Daytona Beach, Fla., and all four matches will be against quality NAIA opponents. Friday the Skylights take on the University of Mobile (Ala.) and Ashford University of Iowa. Saturday, Northern has matchups with University of Northwest Ohio and nationally ranked Madonna of Michigan.

“The trip to Florida is going to be a great experience for this team,” Northern head coach Bill Huebsch said earlier this season. “We will be playing four very good teams. Some of which might be ranked nationally this season. It’s going to be quality competition, and those four matches will certainly make us better in the long run.”

“I think we have a team which feels like they have a lot to prove,” MSU-N senior quarterback Derek Lear said following last Thursday’s final preseason scrimmage. “Every day, I feel like this team has come to practice wanting to get better. The attitude and intensity on this team has been really good, really positive. And I think as entire group, we know we can better than we were last season.”

And tonight’s game, which kicks off at 6:30 p.m. will be a good measuring stick for a Northern team chalked full of talent, but perhaps lacking some game experience in areas.

“We’ll find out a lot about our football team when we play Dicky (Dickinson State),” Northern head coach Mark Samson, who begins his 10th season at MSU-N tonight said. “We’ve had a great fall camp. I’m really proud of what these guys have accomplished and how hard they’ve worked. But now it’s time to play a game. It’s time to see what kind of football team we have instead of just wondering how we’ll look out there.

“And I know everybody is picking Dickinson State to finish at the bottom of our conference this year,” Samson added. “But we can’t look at it like that. We have to go in there expecting them to play a great game against us. We have to be ready to play our best football right out of the gate.”

That’s something Northern didn’t do to start 2012. The Lights lost under the Lights of Blue Pony Stadium to Carroll, then gave away fourth-quarter leads at Eastern Oregon and DSU to start 0-3. The loss last September in Dickinson was particularly difficult as Northern led 20-7 in the fourth quarter, but self-destructed down the stretch. MSU-N did rebound to trounce the Blue Hawks 42-10 in a rematch last November in Havre, but by that point, the damage had been done.
"I really think that game at Dickinson was the point in the season where it made it really tough for us to recover," Samson said. "Neither team played well in that game, but we were able to build a nice lead in the fourth quarter. But instead of finishing them off, it felt like we were just trying to hang on, and we didn’t hang on.

“That’s the mentality that has to be different right away with this team,” he added. “We have to believe we’re going to win football games. We have to believe we can score when we need to, or get defensive stops when we have to have them. We can’t sit back and wait for things to happen. We have to have the attitude that we’re going to go out and make things happen and that players are going to step up when their number’s called. And we have to do it right out of the gates. We have to do those things in this first game, and set the tone in a positive way.”

And Northern should be able to set the tone. The Lights’ offense will showcase Lear, a bevy of talented new receivers around veteran Orin Johnson, and a new-look running game which features red-shirt freshman Zach McKinley, transfer Jai Johnson and new fullback Chance Nevaraz.

On defense, Northern doesn’t return as much experience, but the Lights, led by defensive backs Josh and Trevor Baum, Tanner Varner, linebacker Jordan Van Voast and seniors Tyler Phillips and Logan Nathe on the defensive line, should be able to slow a DSU offense which features only three returning starters down.

"Offensively, we just don’t know much about them (Blue Hawks),” Samson said. "They will have pretty much all new starters at the skill positions, and I know they lost most of their line, too. It’s pretty hard to game plan for them when they have so many new guys, and we haven’t seen any film because it’s the first game. But we expect them to pretty much run the same stuff, and if they change anything, it won’t be anything our defense hasn’t seen before. So we feel like, despite this being the first game, we’ll be really well prepared for them defensively.

"As far as their defense goes, I think they’ll be solid,” he added. “That’s the side of the ball they do return some good players who played a lot last season. I think they’ll be pretty strong defensively, and we’ll have to be ready for the looks they throw at us.”

Dickinson’s starting quarterback competition this summer included as many as six guys. And while no starter has been named, it could be sophomore Thad Lane, or newcomers Rob Sterling or Kaler Ray, or a mixture of more than one QB. The Blue Hawks do return a solid running back in Myren Moore, but for the most part, they will be relatively new across the board offensively. It could be a struggle considering DSU’s offense was senior-laden a year ago, yet the Blue Hawks finished near the bottom of the league in most offensive categories during its 2-9 inaugural season in the Frontier.

DSU’s defense has more veterans than the offense. The Blue Hawks are big up front, and linebacker is a particularly deep spot on the roster. However, the Blue Hawks graduated all four starters at defensive back, and that could be an issue considering they are facing Lear and a vaunted Northern passing attack.

Still, despite being favored on the road tonight, the Lights won’t take anything lightly and certainly aren’t taking the Blue Hawks for granted. Instead, Northern is expecting a great effort from DSU, an electric atmosphere on the road, and all the while, needing to come out on top with a season-opening win.

“I think they’ll be fired up when we come in there,” Samson said. “It’s a Thursday night, under the lights. They’ll have a really good crowd, and they’ll be excited to start the season, just like we are. So we’re going to have to play well right out of the gate. We have to get to off to a good start and play smart, fast and physical football. We can’t make the mistakes that hurt us so much early last season.

“And we need to win this game, we don’t just want to win it, we need to win it,” Samson said. “We need to get off on the right foot this season, and the way to do that is to go win a game at Dickinson State on Thursday night. When you win early, it can really set the tone for the rest of the season, and that’s what we want to do right from the opening kickoff Thursday night. We want to set the tone.”

Tonight’s opener between the Lights and Blue Hawks will get underway at 6:30 p.m. in Dickinson, N.D. Northern is on the road again next week at Carroll College, while the Blue Hawks travel to rival Rocky Mountain College. MSU-N will play its first home game Sept. 14 against Eastern Oregon.