The Montana State University-Northern offense was all the rage leading up to Thursday night’s season-opening game at Dickinson State, while the MSU-N defense didn’t get the hype.

But in Thursday night’s 14-0 win over the Dickinson State Blue Hawks at the Henry Biesiot Activities Center in Dickinson, N.D., it was the Lights’ defense which came up big and lit the way to a victory.

The Northern offense, which finished second to record-setting Southern Oregon in most Frontier Conference offensive categories a year ago, couldn’t get going for much of Thursday night’s game. In fact, the Lights mustered just 99 yards of total offense, turned the ball over once and missed a field goal in the opening 30 minutes.

But Northern’s defense made sure the Lights weren’t going into halftime empty handed. MSU-N held DSU without a first down in the first 15 minutes, and came up with a huge goal-line stand just before halftime, a stand which resulted in a missed chip-shot field goal by the Blue Hawks and a 0-0 tie.

The second half didn’t get much better offensively. The Lights did score twice with two really good drives, but they also turned it over one more time and failed to really put the Blue Hawks away. The offense also lost star quarterback Derek Lear to an injury he suffered late in the second half.

Nevertheless, the MSU-N defense never wavered. Time and time again, the Lights went back out on the field and turned the Blue Hawks away. Big stops from the likes of Weston Mudge, two sacks by Jordan Van Voast, stops by Tyler Craig and Tyler Phillips, and big pass breakups by Trevor Baum and Tanner Varner forced DSU to play from behind for much of the second half.

And one more redzone stand in the third quarter, which forced another missed field goal by the Blue Hawks was just what MSU-N needed to escape Dickinson with a season-opening victory.

Yes, Northern’s offense deserved to be highly touted coming into the season, and I have no doubt the Lights will get on track and put up better offensive numbers as the season goes on.

But in the first game of 2013, the MSU-N defense deserves the kudos. The Lights, having not seen a shred of game film on DSU, pitched a shutout on opening night. The Lights, who returned just five true starters from a season ago, held the Blue Hawks to a scant 126 yards of total offense. The Lights’ defense, which came into 2013 very underrated, and perhaps not given enough credit, allowed DSU to throw for just 55 yards on the night.

And perhaps most importantly, the Lights’ defense gained a ton of confidence and built some major momentum Thursday night. Yes, it’s true, the competition will get better, and it will get better in a hurry as Northern faces a veteran Carroll College offense next Saturday in Helena. But the MSU-N defense proved its worth and then some Thursday night. The Lights couldn’t, and didn’t sit back and wait for the offense to make the magic happen. Instead, Northern’s defense went out and got the job done over and over again.

“I thought the defense pretty much played well from beginning to end,” Samson said. “I thought we controlled their running game pretty well, and we shut down their passing game. They continued to throw deep on us, but our guys made plays all night, and kept them from really getting much going offensively.”
It was an impressive performance on a night when little seemed to go right for the Lights on the offensive side of the ball. And while the offense wound up doing enough to get a win, that win was made possible by an outstanding effort from every Northern defender who played Thursday night.

Overall, a 14-0 win over Dickinson State might not have been what Northern was expecting. But for a defensive unit who had some question marks coming in, it was a great start. It was an impressive night, and the Lights' defense may have just sent a message to the league’s power-house offenses that they should by no means be overlooked this fall.