Montana State University-Northern head coach Mark Samson emphatically stated that his team needed to start the 2013 season off on the right foot, right away. That meant playing well right from the opening kickoff against the Dickinson State Blue Hawks. And it also meant coming back to Havre with a season-opening win.

Thursday night in Dickinson, N.D., the Lights accomplished half of that mission, meaning Northern did bring a win back to Havre, but the Lights didn’t exactly start the game, or the season in the manner in which they wanted.

MSU-N overcame monumental struggles offensively, as well as some penalty issues to edge the Blue Hawks 14-0 Thursday night inside a steamy Henry Biesiot Activities Center. While Samson was happy his team is 1-0, he said there’s a lot to do before next Saturday’s road trip to arch rival Carroll College.

“For whatever reason, we just don’t play well down here (Dickinson). I just don’t know why that is,” Samson said. “And for most of the game, offensively, we didn’t play very well at all. We did some nice things at times, and we started off alright. But we had trouble finishing drives, and putting points on the board. We had way too many penalties and some really dumb mental mistakes, all which hurt us offensively. But the bottom line is, we got the win and now we have something to build on. Now we can go home and show these guys what they do well and what they don’t. Now, we have a better idea of where we’re at as a football team.”

The win didn’t come easy, and it had an especially intense moment in the fourth quarter when senior quarterback Derek Lear ripped off a 25-yard run (which was called back on a holding penalty), but ended the run by injuring his knee and having to be helped off the field. Lear didn’t return, but the initial report is, the injury is just a sprain, and Lear should be good to continue on with his season.

Thursday night’s win was also tumultuous in that, a normally high-powered MSU-N offense, which put up 42 points on DSU last November, was stymied in the first half. The Lights put together an impressive first two drives and got into scoring position, mainly on the hard running of red-shirt freshman Zach McKinley. However, the first drive came to an end when Lear misfired and was picked off near the endzone, while the second one resulted in a missed field goal by Jordan Rueschoff.

Things got even more difficult for the Lights in the second quarter, and overall, in the first 30 minutes, the Lights managed just 99 yards of offense, with one turnover and one missed field goal.

But while the MSU-N offense couldn’t get on track, the Lights’ defense came up big. Northern forged a 0-0 halftime tie thanks to two big stops on defense. The first stop came as DSU’s Myren Moore was just heating up and had just rambled for 28 yards. From there however, the Lights stiffened. A sack by senior Jordan Van Voast took the Blue Hawks out of field goal range. The second stop came after the Lights were penalized almost 30 yards on a punt, with a late hit, and failing to allow the punt return to make a fair catch. That set DSU up inside the Northern 20, and ultimately, the Blue Hawks had the ball inside the
Northern 5-yard-line. MSU-N was stout again however, and the Blue Hawks wound up missing a 24-yard field goal attempt.

“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.”

Right before the half, MSU-N picked off a DSU hailmary attempt in the end zone, and that would really be as close as DSU would get to scoring. The Blue Hawks did miss a 39-yard field goal attempt in the second half, but for much of the game, MSU-N’s defense was in full control.

Meanwhile, the offense finally gained some ground early in the second half. MSU-N responded to the missed DSU field goal by quickly marching down the field and putting the first points of 2013 on the board. McKinley and Jai Johnson both had big gains on the drive, while Lear hooked up with Orin Johnson three times, including a 25-yard scoring strike to put Northern ahead 7-0 with seven minutes left in the third quarter.

MSU-N then seemed to have all the momentum going on its next drive, but a fumbled snap ended the Lights’ mojo. Still, Northern was able to effectively finish the Blue Hawks off with a gutsy fourth-down call late in the third period. On a fourth-and-seven in DSU territory, Samson elected to keep the offense on the field, and Lear hit his Cut Bank buddy, Orin Johnson for another score.

Lear would leave the game in the fourth with the injury, and the Lights’ offense was shut out the rest of the way, but big plays by Tanner Varner and Trevor Baum on long passes kept DSU at bay, and the Lights escaped with a win and a 1-0 start to the season.

“I thought we played hard all night, I was certainly proud of our effort,” Samson said. “And at times, we did some good things offensively. We did put some good drives together. And credit Dickinson State. They gave us some looks defensively, and on special teams that we weren’t ready for. They did some things they have never ever done, and it caught us off guard. And their defense played hard and played physical. So it was a pretty tough game, and it wasn’t pretty. We made way too many mistakes, and our offense just never got in a rhythm. But we’ll take the win and hopefully learn from this game, the good and the bad.”

Northern totaled just 272 yards of offense with much of it coming in the first and third quarters. McKinley, making his first career start after missing last season with a foot injury, gained 73 yards on the ground, while Jai Johnson added 34. It wasn’t one of Lear’s better night’s passing, as he went 16-of-24 for 123 yards, two touchdowns and an interception. Before he injured his knee, he was leading another solid drive, and he did scramble for 22 yards in the game. Travis Dean came on in relief and did a good job of directing the MSU-N offense, while Orin Johnson caught six balls for 56 yards and Dylan Woodhall had five grabs for 27 yards.

The MSU-N defense held the Blue Hawks to just 126 yards of total offense, with fullback Jessey Carney gaining 44 yards. DSU’s two quarterbacks, Thad Lane and Kaler Ray managed to combine for 59 yards passing, while MSU-N out-did the Blue Hawks 18-13 in first downs. Senior Logan Nathe had eight tackles and two sacks, while Van Voast added seven stops to his two sacks. Tyler Craig and Patrick Barnett added sacks, while Josh Baum had MSU-N’s one INT.

“It’s good to get the win,” Samson said. “And I’m pleased with the effort. The kids played hard. The defense did a nice job. But we know we have work to do. We know we have a lot to improve on, and we’re going to
have to do it in a hurry because next week we’re going to have to be ready to get after a really good Carroll College football team.”

The Lights (1-0) face the Fighting Saints next Saturday at Nelson Stadium in Helena. The 0-1 Blue Hawks are also on the road, visiting Rocky Mountain College in Billings.

**Lights 14, Dickinson State 0**

MSU-Northern 0 0 7 7 — 14

Dickinson State 0 0 0 0 — 0

**Third quarter**

MSU-N — Orin Johnson 24 pass from Derek Lear (Jordan Rueschoff kick)

**Fourth quarter**

MSU-N — Johnson 6 pass from Lear (Rueschoff kick)

**INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS**

**RUSHING** — MSU-Northern (37-129), Zach McKinley 14-73, Jai Johnson 10-33, Derek Lear 7-13, Travis Dean 2-10, Chance Nevarez 1-0. Dickinson State (32-67), Jesse Carney 12-44, Myron Moore 11-36, Jerum AuClaire 1-9, Thad Lane 1-6, Zach Sandau 1-(-1), Kaler Ray 6-(-27).

**PASSING** — MSU-Northern, Derek Lear 16-24-1, 123 yards; Travis Dean 0-1-0, 0 yards. Dickinson State, Thad Lane 5-9-0, 41 yards; Kaler Ray 2-11-1, 18 yards.