Lights headed for a showdown with Saints
By George Ferguson
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The Carroll College Fighting Saints marched into Havre in a highly-anticipated season-opening game with the Montana State University-Northern Lights last August, and the Saints marched right back to Helena with an emphatic 31-6 win.

The victory didn’t catapult the Saints to a successful season, as Carroll wound up slipping to a 7-4 year, missing the NAIA playoffs and not at least sharing the Frontier Conference title for the first time in 12 seasons. The loss, did however, start a difficult 3-7 campaign for the Lights, who will now try and do some catapulting of their own.

MSU-N (1-0, 1-0) will look to spoil the Saints’ home opener when the two rivals meet Saturday at 1 p.m. inside Nelson Stadium in Helena.

Both the No. 12 Saints (1-0, 0-0) and the un-ranked Lights are off to a good start in 2013, and now one team will get its first loss of the brand new season. Northern opened its season last Thursday night with a 14-0 shutout at Dickinson State, while Carroll crushed Menlo College last Saturday on the red turf in Cheney, Wash.

“Carroll is a still very good,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “And they played really well against Menlo, both offensively and defensively. They didn’t show many weaknesses in that game. And the fact that it’s their home opener, we know we’ll have our hands full. They’re going to be fired up and ready to go, and we have to match that intensity right from the start.”

In recent Northern/Carroll matchups, the Lights have matched the Saints early on. Both in Havre, and later in Helena, the Lights got off to strong starts against Carroll and moved the ball particularly well on offense a season ago. But penalties, turnovers and missed scoring opportunities, combined with Carroll’s vaunted running game chewing up clock, led to a pair of lopsided defeats at the hands of the Saints. And the 2012 sweep by Carroll now means the Lights haven’t beaten the Saints in 15 games.

“We’ve had some games with them (Saints) where we’ve been in pretty good shape in the first quarter and at halftime,” Samson said. “But we’ve made too many second-half mistakes and we haven’t been able to put points on the board often enough. And when you do that, Carroll will make you pay because they just wear on you. The really grind you down with that good offensive line and the running game which is so effective. That’s what’s happened to us against them lately, and to have a chance Saturday, we’re going to have to play really well and play mistake-free football.”

Northern does have some momentum coming into Saturday’s clash in Helena, as the Lights’ defense pitched a shutout and allowed just 123 yards of offense at DSU. Jordan Van Voast had two sacks, as did Logan Nathe, while Josh Baum had an interception.
But on offense, the Lights missed out on scoring chances against the Blue Hawks, and were very stagnant in the second quarter. Northern also lost senior quarterback Derek Lear to a knee injury in the fourth period, and his status for Saturday’s game is still uncertain.

Still, the Lights’ offense has had success against a top-rated Carroll defense in recent years, minus missing out on scoring chances, and Carroll will have to be sharp in order to stop receivers like Orin Johnson and Dylan Woodhall, as well as running backs Zach McKinley and Jai Johnson. McKinley was especially impressive at DSU, racking up over 70 yards in his starting debut.

Carroll will counter with a star-studded defense, led by linebacker Sean Blomquist and defensive tackle Dakota Amy, two returning First-Team All-Conference performers. Cornerback Mike Siegersma anchors a strong Saints’ secondary which includes newcomers Dominique Cole (5-11, 178) and James Dowgan (6-2, 187), both of whom had picks against Menlo last weekend.

“Their defense is very solid,” Samson said. “They have some really good guys up front and they can really get after the quarterback. And on the back end, they are pretty fast and cover well. So our offensive line is going to have to really step up and play well, and we’re going to have to play really smart football. We can’t be content to just move the chains either. We’ve got to score when we get those opportunities. We’ve got to finish drives against them.”

Northern will also have to stop Carroll’s drives, something the Lights have had a tough time doing in recent years, especially in the second 30 minutes. The Saints will rely heavily on a huge offensive line and running backs Dustin Rinker (5-9, 205) and Jordan Pine (5-10, 205). Rinker has already gone over 100 yards three times in four games against the Lights, so MSU-N knows exactly what it’s up against with the junior starter. But Pine is an added feature as a power back, and he ran for 61 yards and two scores in Saturday’s win in Cheney.

While Carroll’s running game is predictable, but so efficient. What will be hard to predict is how well the Lights can contain senior quarterback Dakota Stonehouse. Last Saturday, Stonehouse threw three TD passes and ran for another 42 yards on nine carries. In his junior season, he finished in the Top 10 in rushing in the Frontier, and he’s as good an athlete as there is in the conference.

“You can prepare for Carroll to run the football right at you,” Samson said. “And it’s a matter of stopping it, of being physical, taking the right angles and getting their running backs on the ground. It’s not always easy, but that’s the goal. But Stonehouse gives them an added dimension. He’s really good with the roll outs and boot legs and he’s efficient making those passes. But where he really hurts you is in open space. He really knows when to take off and run with it, and he’s as fast as any running back out there. He’s a real dual threat, and he really makes that offense much more difficult to prepare for.”

And being prepared is what it’s all about. Samson said his team has had ample time to get ready for the Saints, especially after opening up on a Thursday night. But as much as the game against Carroll will be physical, he says his team has to be equally as sharp mentally.

“It is more mental than anything,” Samson said. “We have to be mentally ready to play hard right from the start because we know Carroll will be ready. And not only do we have to play hard, but we have to play smart. Both offensively and defensively, we just have to limit our mistakes and not make the big ones that have hurt us in past games against them (Saints).

“This will be an interesting game too,” he added. “It’s early in the season, but it’s still a big game for both teams. And we have a lot of kids who are playing and starting in only their second college game, and that game is against a very veteran, very good and very well-coached team at their place. So it will be interesting to see how our kids react early on. But also, they know they don’t have to do anything out of ordinary. They just have to go out there and give their very best. That’s what we need to do. We need to be prepared to play our very best.”

The Lights and Saints kick off at 1 p.m. Saturday at Nelson Stadium in Helena. Northern will play its home opener next Saturday against Eastern Oregon, while Carroll remains at home to host Montana Tech.

In The Gulch

Lights (1-0) at No. 12 Carroll (1-0)
Saturday at 1 p.m. at Nelson Stadium in Helena

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