Over the years, the Carroll College Fighting Saints have been a tough nut to crack. Not just for the Montana State University-Northern Lights, but for every team in the Frontier Conference.

And following Saturday’s 31-3 loss to the Saints at Nelson Stadium in Helena, the Lights haven’t cracked Carroll’s halo in 16 straight games. And an even bigger streak continued as Northern still hasn’t beaten Carroll in Helena since the school reintroduced football almost 15 years ago.

In college football, the win is the bottom line. There are no consolation prizes, and if you don’t go home with the “W,” you go home with an “L.” It really is that simple.

But I saw some things in Saturday’s game in Helena which told me Northern’s most recent foray into Nelson Stadium was a little different than the ones I’ve covered in the last three or four years.

No, MSU-N didn’t win. In fact, the Lights only put up three points, and failed to get the ball in the endzone. And Northern head coach Mark Samson was the first to say that just isn’t good enough. And I’m sure the rest of the Lights’ offensive players wholeheartedly agree.

The one thing about playing Carroll, or any other powerhouse team on the road is you better score and you better score points when you get into the redzone. The Lights didn’t do that Saturday, coming away with just one field goal on five trips inside the Saints’ 20-yard-line. And that was the biggest difference in the contest.

Yet, Saturday’s game never felt like a 28-point Carroll win. It just didn’t feel like the Saints blew the Lights out. And for much of the game, it felt like Northern was out-playing Carroll on both sides of the ball.

Why did it feel like that to me?

Well, it did because of the start to the game for starters. Northern’s defense was not intimidated, despite the fact that as many as eight underclassmen are on the MSU-N defensive two-deep. Instead, the Lights played defense like they knew they were going to stop Carroll’s rushing attack even before they arrived in Helena Friday night.

Carroll College possesses one of the best defensive tackles in the NAIA in senior Dakota Amy, but MSU-Northern newcomer Weston Mudge sure looked like a monster to me Saturday. Mudge had two sacks of shifty Carroll quarterback Dakota Stonehouse, he bottled up the middle on Carroll’s run game, and he seemed to be in the backfield all day long, as were defensive ends Tyler Phillips and Tyler Craig, even up against one of the most massive offensive lines the Lights will ever see.

It didn’t seem like Carroll blew out Northern because after 15 minutes, the Lights not only had the lead, but the MSU-N defense had gone then five straight quarters without giving up a single point. And even by the end of the first half, the Lights’ defense had only given up 10 points and one Carroll touchdown in six quarters of the 2013 season.

That’s a pretty great start to the season for a defense which is still gelling, still learning, and has had to mix in some young players with some talented veterans. And the Lights did much of that damage against a team picked to win the Frontier this season.

Northern didn’t start the game intimidated by Carroll’s great defense either. And even more importantly, the Lights looked like they had just as much confidence in their offense with Travis Dean at the helm, as
they do when Derek Lear is out there. Dean, who has battled knee injuries seemingly the whole time he’s been at MSU-N started in place of Lear, who suffered a knee injury of his own last week at Dickinson State.

And Dean did a great job if you ask me. The last time he started a game against Carroll, he was in his first year at Northern, and Lear was again sidelined. That game in Havre, four years ago, didn’t go well. But Saturday, Dean was solid. He moved around well, eluded Carroll’s strong pass rush, and threw the ball confidently, despite last week being his first live-game action in nearly two full seasons. Dean made good decision with the ball for much of the game, and made some nifty third-down conversions.

While two interceptions in the endzone hurt the Lights’ comeback bid, what Dean and the Lights’ offense did Saturday was pretty remarkable. Consider the fact that Lear is a four-year starter. He’s one of the best QBs in the NAIA, and he’s the single biggest part of MSU-N’s offensive game plan each and every week. Then take him away, and the Lights go to Nelson Stadium against a Carroll defense which just dismantled Menlo College last Saturday in Cheney, Wash. For Dean and the Lights to move the ball as well as they did, adding in two running backs who’ve never played against a defense like Carroll’s, and I’d say that’s pretty impressive.

Again, I realize the Lights didn’t score. I realize the Lights only managed one Jordan Rueschoff field goal Saturday, and I realize that kind of production wasn’t good enough on Saturday, and it won’t be good enough going forward. But to me, from the sidelines on a hot and unusually humid day in Helena, it sure didn’t feel like the Lights were only good enough to score three points. The game, from an offensive standpoint, sure felt like it was closer than that, just as it did on the defensive side of the ball.

The biggest reason the game didn’t have a blowout feel however was attitude. Samson has talked at length this season about how his team needed to have a different attitude this season … about needing his team to have a belief that they can win football games.

Well, right from the start Saturday, Northern sure looked like a team who believed. The Lights looked confident, not intimidated. And though I feel like I’m way too old to use the word, it sure seemed like the Lights rode into Nelson Stadium and played with a lot of swagger. Whether leading 3-0, driving to try and catch up down 17-3 late in the third quarter, or when Carroll was marching to salt the game away ahead 24-3 in the fourth, the Lights looked like a confident group. Maybe they were a bit tired in the fourth quarter, but confident nonetheless, even with the game in hand at that point.

And again, that means nothing when talking about the final score, and Carroll certainly deserves all the credit for beating a confident MSU-N team. But the way the Lights played, the attitude they played with, and the gains they made Saturday in Helena, it sure made it seem like a much tighter ballgame from beginning to an end. And it sure will mean something going forward.

I can’t sit here and say that Northern will go on to a certain amount of wins the rest of the season, or say the Lights will win the Frontier or any of that. I don’t have a crystal ball and I have no idea what the future holds for the Lights in 2013 as it relates to the win-loss column.

But I can say, with absolute certainty, that if Northern continues to play, continues to battle and continues to believe like it did against Carroll Saturday in Helena, good things will happen. Points will go up on the scoreboard, and stops will be made on defense. Near interceptions will turn into picks for the Northern defense and big plays will start to materialize on offense.

Those are some of the things that almost happened Saturday in Helena, and if the Lights hold on to that swagger, that confidence and belief they’re playing with right now, I have a feeling I won’t be talking about what might have been, or how the game was closer than it appeared much this season.

Instead, I have a feeling I’ll be talking a lot more about what was, and what kind of great season the Lights are having. With no crystal ball in my possession, we’ll just have to wait and see. If Saturday was any indication, though, the wait could very well be worth it.