Training camp started over a month ago, and when it ended, the Montana State University-Northern football team had to head out on the road, playing its first two games of the 2013 Frontier Conference season away from Blue Pony Stadium.

With a positive 1-1 start to the year, the Lights are ready to make their long-awaited home debut, and they’ll do it against a team which has had their number in recent games.

Saturday, the Lights host the Eastern Oregon Mountaineers in a Frontier Conference clash. It’s the first of two straight at home for Northern, which won at Dickinson State 14-0 on Aug. 29, then lost 31-3 at No. 12 Carroll College Saturday in Helena. Kickoff is set for 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium.

"It’s going to be nice to play at home," Northern senior linebacker Jordan Van Voast said. "We’ve had two pretty tough road trips. So it will be exciting to wake up Saturday morning and know we’re going to play in our stadium, in front of our crowd. It should be a big crowd and they really fuel us on the field."

Adding fuel, as well, will be MSU-N’s opponent. Last September, EOU put together a final drive and kicked a game-winning field goal to knock off the Lights 17-14 in LaGrande’ Ore. It was the second of three straight losses for MSU-N last fall. Overall, the Lights haven’t beaten EOU since an October meeting in 2009 in Blue Pony Stadium. So with EOU bringing in a six-game winning streak against the Lights, MSU-N really wants to break out Saturday.

The Lights are looking to break out in another way. Northern’s defense is allowing just 14 points per game and is in the top three in the Frontier in every major defensive category. But MSU-N’s high-octane offense, which averaged over 400 yards per game a season ago, has been held in check. The Lights have scored just two touchdowns in two games this season and are averaging a mere 290 yards of offense. Northern is last in the Frontier in scoring and seventh in the league in passing. MSU-N has really struggled in the redzone, and also was without starting quarterback Derek Lear last Saturday in Helena, though veteran backup Travis Dean played very well in his absence.

Dean moved the ball well against Carroll’s vaunted defense, but inside the redzone, the Lights missed a field goal in the first half, and Dean threw two interceptions in the endzone in the second. Northern also had scoring opportunities go by the wayside in its opener at DSU two weeks ago.

"This has been a great week of practice,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “The kids came out of the Carroll game just fine. They know they played really well for much of that game, but they were also disappointed that we didn’t make enough plays to stay in it late. And their attitude this week has been great. These are some of the best practices we’ve had this season."
“And I told the guys today, we really need to break loose on offense,” he added Wednesday. “It feels like we’re pressing a little on offense. So we need to quit worrying about trying not to make mistakes and just go out and execute. We have too much talent on this offense not to put points on the board. We need to start scoring points when we get those chances.”

It remains to be seen if EOU (0-2, 0-1) can stop the Lights from doing so. The Mounties are a relative mystery as they opened the season with a 57-17 thrashing at Big Sky Conference power Portland State, then opened Frontier play with a 23-7 loss at home last Saturday against Montana Tech.

Defensively, EOU is last in the Frontier in almost every category, but those numbers are skewed some because of the yards and points the Mounties gave up at PSU. Against Tech, EOU played much better defense, but offensively, the Mounties struggled mightily.

“They (Mounties) are kind of an unknown to us,” Samson said. “Personnel-wise, they have a lot of new faces. They have new quarterbacks, a lot of new offensive linemen, and defensively, they lost three or four really good players from last year.

“We know what they want to do scheme-wise,” he added. “But as far as personnel goes, we’re not so sure what to expect. But that’s fine. We understand that we have to play our game. Control the things we can control, and we have to execute in all three phases. That’s the main thing for us, execution, no matter who we’re playing.”

Quarterback has been EOU’s main issue since three-time NAIA All-American Chris Ware departed. This season, head coach Tim Camp has mostly played the tandem of Zach Bartlow and T.J. Esekeilu, both redshirt-freshmen. However, last Saturday, Idaho transfer Dominique Blackman (6-5, 255) made his debut and threw for 98 yards for the Mounties. Samson expects to see all three play again this week, though Bartlow is listed as the starter.

One thing EOU doesn’t lack on offense is speed. The Mounties still have Kedrick Starr, a lightning-fast return man, as well as senior tailback Chris McGinnis-Parker (5-7, 185) and talented wide receiver Jace Billingsly (5-9, 185). But an inexperienced offensive line, as well as the loss of star linebacker Howard McDonald on defense has put EOU in somewhat of a rebuilding mode.

“Offensively, we expect them (Mounties) to do the same things we’ve seen from them in the past,” Samson said. “They give you multiple looks and they want to get the ball in the hands of their speed guys. And they will run a lot of no-huddle, which will be the first time we’ve seen that this season. Defensively, they will give us a lot of different looks at the line of scrimmage. So we just have to be well prepared, and be ready to execute. It’s the same game plan, we just have to play smart, fast, physical football. That’s what we’ve been working on, and that’s what we’ve got to try and do this week.”

Being at home should help the Lights, and likely getting Lear back on the field will help too. The four-year starter injured a knee at DSU, but could be ready to go come Saturday. Northern’s big offensive line will look to make a push as well for running backs Zach McKinley and Jai Johnson. Both players have showed flashes early this season, but the Lights would love nothing more than to get the ground game going early against an inexperienced EOU defense, which is surrendering over 300 yards per game on the ground.

Defensively, Northern wants to just keep doing what it has been. The Lights went the first five quarters of the season without giving up a single point, and MSU-N was particularly good against Carroll’s dominating run game last week. MSU-N is also getting good quarterback pressure early on, as exciting defensive tackle Weston Mudge had two sacks against the Saints, while seniors Van Voast and Logan Nathe also have two sacks on the season. Northern held both of Carroll’s top running backs under 100 yards last Saturday, and the Lights’ defense has really been stingy thus far.

“They’re a balanced team offensively,” Van Voast said of the Mounties. “We know they want to use their quick routes and get their running game going too. They are a quick team. But we just have to do what we’ve been doing, and that’s play physical and play disciplined as a defense. That’s our goal every time we go back out there.”

And the overall goal for the Lights is to get another win in conference play, while defending their home field. MSU-N has a great opportunity to make some early headway in the conference standings, with EOU coming in Saturday, and winless DSU coming to Havre on Sept. 21.
But first things first, the Mounties have to be dealt with, and as Northern knows from past experiences, that won’t be an easy task.

"I think we’re very well-prepared for this game," Samson said. "We learned a lot about our football team with that game at Carroll. It gave us a better idea of what we have to do to get to where we want to be.

"This team just has a different attitude," he added. "They came right back from that game and went to work preparing for what we expect will be a fast and dangerous bunch from Eastern Oregon. Our guys are focused and fired up to finally play at home. And now we just have to go out and play hard for 60 minutes and execute in all three phases. If we do that, the rest will take care of itself."

The Lights and Mounties kick off at 1 p.m. Saturday inside Blue Pony Stadium. The Lights and EOU now only meet once a season. Northern is home against next Saturday to take on DSU in the Lights’ Homecoming Game. EOU returns home to host rival Southern Oregon.

**Home at last**

**Lights (1-1, 1-1) vs Eastern Oregon (0-1, 0-2)**

Saturday at 1 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium

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