Three seasons is a long time to go without a victory over a conference rival. Six games without one will make it seem even longer. But the long wait for a win over the Eastern Oregon Mountaineers turned out to be well worth it for the Montana State University-Northern Lights.

Saturday afternoon, in their home opener at sunny Blue Pony Stadium, the Lights took out three years of frustration by throttling the Mounties 45-28 in a Frontier Conference clash. With the victory, Northern also improved to 2-1 in league play ahead of this Saturday’s Homecoming game against Dickinson State.

And not only did the Lights break free of their long losing streak to the Mounties (0-2, 0-3), they also broke free of the offensive doldrums which had plagued them so far this season.

MSU-N racked up an astounding 634 yards of offense, while running an ultra-fast 81 plays on offense. The Lights got a career day from freshman running back Zach McKinley, who piled up over 200 yards and two scores on the ground, while Derek Lear returned from a knee injury to throw for over 300 yards and two scores.

"We executed better," Lear said. "Our tempo has been good the last few weeks, but little key things have kept us out of the endzone. Today we started fast and finished fast. The big thing was our tempo. Once we got them (Mounties) on their heels, we knew we just had to keep going and going and we did that. So it felt really good for this offense to have the kind of game we knew we were capable of having.

"Overall, we did some great things offensively," echoed MSU-N head coach Mark Samson. "We ran the ball really well, Derek played a really good game, OJ (Orin Johnson) had a phenomenal game, and our offensive line played extremely well. It was a game we’d kind of been waiting for. And I think we knew we were ready to play this way because we had a great week of practice. So I’m just really proud of the kids for coming out and executing the way they did today."

It took a couple of drives, but when the execution came, it came quickly for the Lights, who lost a heartbreaker to EOU, 17-14 last September in LaGrande, Ore. McKinley broke loose on a 39-yard scamper, and just two plays later, Lear found a streaking Orin Johnson over the middle, and he did the rest, breaking several EOU tackles on a 31-yard jaunt to the endzone.

And that was just the start of a huge game for Johnson. With the Lights leading 21-7 late in the first half, and backed up on a third-and-15 play, Lear hit Johnson running up the right side, and he once again did the rest, racing 60 yards to the house to put the Lights ahead 28-7.

Johnson, the senior and four-year starter from Cut Bank, who was already off to a great start this season, wound up catching 11 balls for a career-high 196 yards and two scores. And his big plays kept the Mounties’ defense on their heels for much of the day.
"It feels awesome," Johnson said. "We knew we were a good offense from the get-go, we just needed to get rolling. Once we get rolling, you see what we can do. Today, we felt like we had good matchups and we knew we could make big plays. And we ran the ball well and that just opened things up for us and Derek (Lear) was on the money all day long. It felt really good to get rolling the way we did today."

Northern led 28-14 at halftime, thanks to Johnson, but also thanks to the hard running of McKinley, and the fact the Lights were also able to finish long drives — not to mention a stingy effort from the MSU-N defense.

Leading 7-0 late in the first quarter, the Lights marched on a 14-play, 69-yard drive, mostly on the back of McKinley, and fittingly, he finished it off with a short TD plunge just minutes into the second stanza.

EOU would answer with a 13-yard scramble and score from 6-6 quarterback Dominique Blackmon, but another monster drive by the Lights ensued. MSU-N started on its own 17-yard-line, but huge runs by McKinley, and a devastatingly impressive debut by freshman Mario Gobbato helped the Lights drive into EOU territory. Big gains by Lavorick Williams and Johnson set the Lights up with a goal-to-goal situation and Lear wound up hitting Brandt Montelius for a short scoring pass which put the Lights ahead 21-7.

After Johnson’s long TD reception made it 28-7, the Mounties did put together a quick scoring drive to still make it a game at halftime as quarterback Zach Bartlow found Justin Hernandez from seven yards out to make the score 28-14 at the break.

"We once again started off a little too slow," Samson said. "But once we got that first score, I think they relaxed out there. It just felt like the pressure was off them a little bit, and for most of the game, the offense really controlled things and really clicked. It was nice to see us get into a groove and play the way we know we’re capable of playing.

“And I thought, with the exception of that last drive in the first half, the defense continued to play well," he added. "That's a speedy team (EOU) and they give you a lot of different looks. They played four different quarterbacks today, and I thought, for most of the game, our defense did a really good job of adjusting to what they were doing and flying around and making plays."

Though the game was still somewhat close at halftime, a dominant third-quarter performance on both sides of the ball by Northern put the Mounties away for good.

Lear did throw his only INT on Northern's initial drive of the second half, but MSU-N's defense did an outstanding job of making sure EOU couldn't capitalize. A fake punt call by Trevor Baum also got the MSU-N offense rolling again. Baum took the fake and ran for a first down midway through the third quarter, and from there, the MSU-N offense took control. Lear hooked up with Dylan Woodhall on a big pass play and Gobbato gave the Lights a commanding 25-14 lead with his first career TD at the 8:17 mark. Northern added a Jordan Reuschoff field goal and led 38-14 with 15 minutes to play.

EOU did put two scores on the board in the fourth, while the McKinley added one more TD, but the performance in the third quarter all but ended EOU's chance at a comeback — and guaranteed the Lights would finally break the streak against their rivals from Oregon.

And that meant a lot to Lear, who missed last week's road game at Carroll with a sore knee. He threw for 313 yards on 19-of-27 passing to go along with three TD's. He looked good on his knee, as well, as he rushed for 20 yards on 10 carries.

"Eastern Oregon is a team we haven't beaten before, in the time I've been here," he said. "So this game was pretty personal to me. I kind of took that onto the field today. I think I wanted this game more than some of the other games in my career."

While Johnson was his favorite target on Saturday, Lear once again was able to spread the wealth. Montelius caught four passes for 44 yards and Woodhall hauled in two for 65 yards. Overall, Lear found seven different receivers on the day.

And then there was MSU-N's running game, which came into Saturday struggling, but left the field with a monster effort. McKinley racked up a staggering 202 yards on 28 carries, while Gobbato was equally
impressive by filling in for the injured Jai Johnson with 47 yards on nine totes. Orin Johnson also ran 18 yards out of the “wildcat”.

MSU-N’s defense was no less impressive. Trevor Baum had a team-high 10 tackles, while senior David Arteaga added eight stops and a sack. Josh Baum had five tackles and Kaimi Kanehailua registered a sack as well.

“I felt like it was a pretty good all-around game for us,” Samson said. “I thought our effort was good. We did a really good job of finishing drives, which is something we really focused on this week. And I thought our defense was very solid for much of the game.

“And it’s nice to see us come back and play this well after the trip to Carroll,” he continued. “I thought we were very focused today and we executed really well for the most part. We still have a ways to go. It’s still early, but I’m pleased with this one, and I’m proud of our guys for the way they played today.”

“The big thing today was the way we responded as a team,” Lear added. “To come back from a loss, even though we played good at Carroll, and put 45 points up on the board and beat a team we haven’t beaten in a long time, that feels good. It speaks a lot to how hard this team has worked to be able to do what we did today.”

The Lights will look to add another win to their early-season resume’ this Saturday when they host Dickinson State (0-3). It will be Northern’s Homecoming game and kickoff is set for 1 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium.

**Breaking Loose**

Lights are 2-1 overall and 2-1 in the Frontier; Next Up: vs Dickinson State Saturday

Lights Notes: The Lights’ last win against EOU came in October of 2009 at Blue Pony Stadium. MSU-N went from averaging just seven points after two games this season, to now averaging 21. Teams are scoring an average of 41 points per game against EOU this season. Jai Johnson left the game in the first quarter with what appeared to be a rib injury. Orin Johnson now has 24 catches, three TD’s and is averaging a whopping 18 yards per catch in three games this season. MSU-N and EOU won’t meet again until the fall of 2014 in LaGrande, Ore.