Coaching Corner: Eldridge's troops making a stand
MSU-Northern defensive coordinator Jake Eldridge has the Lights playing at a high level
By George Ferguson
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For the past four seasons, Jake Eldridge has been the man in charge of the Montana State University-Northern defense. But in actuality, Eldridge was in charge of the Lights’ defense way before that.

Before a knee injury forced Eldridge to move to wide receiver for his senior season, he was a standout defensive back for the Lights, playing on some of the greatest defenses the program has ever had. A shutdown corner with blazing speed, Eldridge originally went the University of Mary. But when Mark Samson took over the Northern program in 2004, Eldridge, like many former players who won a state title under Samson at Helena Capitol, followed suit.

Eldridge wound up a four-year starter for the Lights as well as a four-year captain at defensive back where he garnered many All-Conference and Academic All-Conference honors while playing on those stingy and standout MSU-N defenses.

Eldridge is still a Light. He’s still a defensive guy and is trying to keep the Lights headed back towards those great defenses of the past. It hasn’t always been easy, but the 2013 MSU-N defense has started strong and is turning heads.

Coming into Saturday’s homecoming game with Dickinson State, the Lights are allowing just 19 points per game, surrendering under 300 yards of total offense, which is second-best in the Frontier, and are equally stingy against the run and pass. MSU-N gives up a scant 101 yards on the ground, second only to Carroll College, and is third in the league in pass defense.

It’s a quick turnaround for a Northern defense which struggled at times a season ago. Eldridge is a huge part of that process.

Here are five questions with the former MSU-N speedster who could cover the best receivers in the Frontier Conference in his day.

HDN: What is the biggest improvement as you see it with the defense this season?

Eldridge: “The biggest improvement this season is the players understanding of the scheme as a whole. They really see how it all fits together, they understand each unit and a position’s individual success is what contributes to the success of the scheme overall. With that understanding, I’ve really seen a shift in their mindset about just doing their jobs, not pressing to do everything and being patient with the game. They are finally really trusting in each other and their chemistry and bond with each other has really strengthened because of it.”

HDN: Talk about the impact of having a strong secondary.
Eldridge: "In this league you're going to see some great offenses who can run and pass the ball very effectively. To have an experienced and strong secondary really is the difference between being an average defense or a great defense. In our defense, the secondary is responsible for getting us into the right coverages and making sure our alignment is where it needs to be. In order to do that, you must have a great group of guys back there leading it. The veteran leadership from that group is really what’s allowed us to do all the different things we’ve done back there this season."

HDN: How much is senior leadership playing into how well the defense is performing this season?

Eldridge: "Senior leadership is always so vital to your success. The game experience they bring, their knowledge of the schemes and the examples they set with work ethic and preparation do way more for the success of our unit then a coach could ever bring. My seniors, Tanner Varner, Jordan Van Voast, Logan Nathe, David Arteaga, and Josh Baum have invested so much into this program for so long that they won’t accept anything less than every one’s best this season."

HDN: What are some of the basic goals you guys set for each game?

Eldridge: "We don’t have typical number goals each game that we set. We used to do that in the past, but have since found that instead of focusing on numbers and all that, we would rather just focus on what we can control; and that’s ourselves. So we set some standards to which we want to perform and hold ourselves accountable to. I guess they are somewhat measurable by a numbers standpoint. No. 1, we want to stop the run. No. 2, we want to create turnovers. Fumbles, interceptions, turnover on downs, they all contribute to giving our offense the ball back so they can do what they do. No. 3, we want to always play with relentless effort. Never slow down and never speed up. We feel that if we can focus on those three things, and if we can be successful with all three, then we should find ourselves to be successful at the end of the game. And it makes us focus on us, not the opponent and I really believe that has helped our guys focus and play each down for each down, and each series for that series and so on and so on."

HDN: Knowing the Lights have a big-play offense, does the defense go out with the mindset of wanting to give the ball back to the offense as quick as possible?

Eldridge: "Yes that’s a huge part of what we try to do on defense. Our job as a defense is to stop the opposing offense from scoring and to get the ball back to our offense. If our offense has more opportunities to score than the opposing team, we feel that nobody should be able to beat us. When our offense is clicking and putting the ball in the endzone like they can, that gives our defense more fuel to go out and get the ball back fast so the offense can do it again. We understand we can’t win without the offense putting points on the board, so we want to go out and give them as many opportunities as possible."