Homecoming: Lights rematch with Hawks
By George Ferguson
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The round-robin schedule in Frontier Conference football has been altered, but divisional opponents still play each other twice a season. Yet, it’s rare for two opponents to play twice in a four-week span.

That’s exactly the case for the Montana State University-Northern Lights (2-1, 2-1), who will celebrate homecoming with their second meeting with the Dickinson State Blue Hawks (0-3, 0-3). The rematch is set for Saturday at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium.

The Lights come into Saturday’s tilt fresh off a 45-27 win over Eastern Oregon last Saturday in their home opener. Northern’s offense rolled up 600 yards, 24 first downs and 45 points in a dominating display last Saturday. That performance was a far cry from MSU-N’s season-opener just four weeks ago in Dickinson, N.D., and the Lights are hoping for the same result in the win column, but a different route to get there the second time around.

Against the Blue Hawks back on Aug. 29, the Lights scored just 14 points in a 14-0 shutout win. Northern was held under 300 yards of offense, under 200 yards passing, and only scored on 2-of-6 trips into DSU territory. It was a rough opener for the MSU-N offense, which also saw star quarterback Derek Lear injure a knee in the fourth quarter. The night wasn’t all bad, though. The Lights’ defense made an impressive debut, holding the Blue Hawks to just 187 total yards and keeping them off their own scoreboard completely.

On Saturday, in front of what should be a large homecoming crowd, the Lights would love nothing more than to keep the Blue Hawks out of the endzone for 60 minutes yet again. But more importantly, head coach Mark Samson is hoping his team builds on the momentum it built up in last Saturday’s win over EOU.

“When you look at that first game against Dickinson, it’s amazing how many mistakes we made,” Samson said. “That’s not to take anything away from Dickinson’s defense, because I thought they played hard and did a good job against us. But we also didn’t play very well. We made a lot of mental mistakes on offense, and I think we’ve made some strides since then.”

Northern certainly made strides last week against EOU.

Lear returned from his injury with a vengeance, throwing for just over 300 yards and three scores. He was incredibly efficient, and he hit six different receivers, including wideout Orin Johnson, who caught 11 balls for 195 yards and two long touchdowns. Johnson is off to a hot start in his senior year. He leads the Frontier with 24 catches, and has 334 yards to go along with four touchdowns. Johnson also caught both TDs in the win at DSU last month.

But Northern’s offense showed the ability to be diverse against EOU last week by rushing for nearly 300 yards. Zach McKinley ran for a career-high 202 and two scores against the Mounties, while freshman Mario
Gobatto made an impressive debut, filling in for the injured Jai Johnson. And the Lights would like to be able to run the rock again Saturday — much better than they did the first time they played the Blue Hawks.

"When we get rolling like that, you really see what this offense is capable of," Johnson said following last Saturday’s win. Now, we just have to go back to work and get ready for the next one. We want to keep rolling.”

And while Dickinson State might be limping into Blue Pony Stadium Saturday, the Hawks will still be hungry for a victory. And their offense, despite not having a true starting quarterback, showed signs of life in a blowout loss at home to UM-Western last Saturday. The Blue Hawks lost to the Bulldogs 55-21, but DSU did record nearly 400 yards of offense, including 117 yards rushing by junior Jesse Carney (5-10, 185). Carney, as well as tailback Myren Moore (5-9, 200) give the Hawks a powerful combo in the backfield. And they like to run over the side of massive offensive lineman Curran Irvine (6-3, 315).

However, as much as veteran Hank Biesiot believes in the running game, the Blue Hawks have thrown more this season, and tried to throw deep often against the Lights last month. DSU has a deep-threat wide receiver in J.T. Keith (6-4, 195), as well as a big tight end in 6-4, 250-pound senior Brock Overbo. But quarterback issues still abound. Thad Lane and Kaler Ray have both started games for the Blue Hawks, with both playing multiple quarters in each of DSU’s three losses. Neither QB is averaging 100 yards per contest, while DSU is last in the Frontier in scoring (14 ppg), last in total offense (260 ypg), is sixth in passing (131 ypg) and is seventh in rushing (127 ypg). The Blue Hawks have also lost six turnovers this season, including four interceptions.

Those numbers don’t bode well going up against an MSU-N defense which has really asserted itself in the first three games of 2013. MSU-N allows just 19 points per game, while the Lights have pitched shutouts seven different quarters this season. Northern is second in the league in total defense, allowing just 281 yards, and is second in the Frontier, allowing a scant 102 yards rushing per outing.

The Lights have done it on defense by committee too. Senior linebacker David Arteaga has a team-high 22 tackles this season, while Josh Baum and Hunter Chandler are racking up stops and playing really well at safety. Up front, the Lights aren’t just stopping the run, they’re pressuring the quarterback as well. Weston Mudge is filling up the middle, while Logan Nathe has a team-high two sacks. But overall, the entire MSU-N defense, up-and-down the depth chart is playing at a high level right now, while the DSU defense is having issues.

Still, with as well as the Lights played last week, Samson said there’s plenty to improve upon, and he would like to see those improvements come to fruition against the Blue Hawks on homecoming.

"I thought we did some really good things against Eastern Oregon, on both sides of the ball,” Samson said. "But I told the team on Sunday night, I wasn’t happy with the penalties, and the fact we’re still not getting any turnovers. If we want to keep getting better, those are things we’ve got to do a better job on. And I think the kids responded well, because we’ve had a really good week of practice and they seem ready to go again on Saturday.”

Though Northern will be fired up and ready to go, and with the Blue Hawks reeling, especially on defense, last week against Western, DSU gave up over 500 yards of offense and over 200 yards rushing to Bulldog freshman Sam Rutherford, Samson expects a tough fight from a team the Lights saw just four weeks ago, especially on the defensive side of the ball. The Blue Hawks do have a big front line, led by Sam Herauf (6-3, 255) and Wyatt McEntire-Mette (6-2, 255).

"I expect them (Blue Hawks) to come in here and play very hard,” Samson said. "They seem to be at a crossroads in their season in regards to what they want to accomplish. But I think they have some very good players on defense, and while they aren’t going to change their schemes for this game, they’re starting some different players this week. I know one thing, Dickinson State always plays hard for a full 60 minutes, and we have to be ready to match that on Saturday.”

Though the numbers, and recent experience suggest a MSU-Northern win over the Blue Hawks on homecoming, the Lights won’t take Saturday’s tilt lightly. After all, MSU-N begins its toughest stretch of the season following Saturday’s game. Northern is on the road three straight weeks and won’t play at
home again until Oct. 26 against Carroll. Saturday’s game could also be the last meeting between the Lights and Blue Hawks as well, as DSU joins the North Star Athletic Conference next fall.

So with some momentum gained, and wanting more, Northern is taking nothing for granted.

“One of the things we talk a lot about is expectations going into each game,” Samson said. “If we want to get to a certain level, and achieve our goals in this league, we have to raise the bar each week. That’s something I think we’re still learning. I think we have a ways to go with that still.

“But I also think the kids are starting to understand it, because again, we’ve had another really good week of practice,” he continued. “The kids came back to work this week very focused and very excited about this game. So I expect, and I think we will come out and play very well again.”

Saturday’s homecoming game between the Lights and Blue Hawks kicks off at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium. The Lights travel to Dillon to face UM-Western next Saturday, while DSU returns home to play Southern Oregon.

**Homecoming**  
**Lights (2-1, 2-1) vs Dickinson State (0-3, 0-3)**  
**Saturday at 1 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium**

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