Game Day feature: Varner lets his game do the talking
MSU-Northern senior Tanner Varner has quietly put together a brilliant career at cornerback
By George Ferguson
September 20, 2013

Cornerback is as flashy a position as there is in college football. And the job is quite simple. Cover speedy receivers trying to run by you, don’t let them get their hands on the ball, tackle any other ball carrier that comes your way.

It’s a simple job in theory, but it’s considered one of the single most difficult positions to play. And that’s probably why star NFL corners get paid the really big bucks, and why those same stars are some of the flashiest, cockiest, and most noticed athletes on the field.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights have one of those rare athletes, a guy who can, and has played corner for a long time. But aside from his play, which has been exemplary the last four seasons, fans wouldn’t notice Tanner Varner on the field too often.

That’s because Varner isn’t your typical modern day corner. He doesn’t do a lot of trash talking, woofing and chest-bumping on the football field. Instead, he takes a quiet, workmanlike approach to the position. Instead of being flashy, he goes out and does his job. Instead of needing to be noticed, he leads by example and he takes pride in the fact that he’s done his job, covering a bevy of great Frontier Conference receivers over the years, and in that he plays football the right way.

“I’d say that’s about right,” said Varner when asked about his quiet demeanor on the gridiron. “I’ve never been a big talker out there. I like to just go out there and know that I’m doing my job, and helping my team win games.

“That comes from playing for Don Schillinger in high school,” the former three-time Class B All-State product from Baker added. “He taught me to play with a full respect of the game and to be humble. That’s how I was coached and that’s the way I’ve always tried to approach it.”

Varner’s ability to play corner the right way has been beneficial for the Lights ever since he stepped onto the field. Coming from a family of football players, and one of the most consistent high school programs in Montana in Baker, which produced Montana Grizzly great and current Atlanta Falcons safety Shan Schillinger, a lot was asked of the 5-10, 200-pound speedster very early in his career. He moved into the MSU-N starting lineup as a red-shirt freshman and has started 33 games since.

And playing as a young corner, in what has been a pass-happy league of late, it wasn’t easy, but it speaks to just how good of a player Varner is. And his early success also speaks to just how well he was coached,
both in high school, at Northern, and by older brother Casey, a former All-Conference corner and safety for the Lights.

"When I got here, we were pretty thin at corner," Varner said. "And early in my first season, they (coaches) were thinking of pulling my redshirt and putting me in there. Thankfully, that didn’t happen because I feel like I needed that year to really get my bearings. I learned a lot that season. I played with the main defense in practice every week, and I was able to get up to speed.

"So when I did move into the starting lineup the next year, I felt like I was ready," he continued. "It was certainly a trial by fire that year, but I think I grew into the position pretty quickly."

That first year as a starter, Varner might have been a rookie, but he made his presence felt with a bang. In his MSU-N debut, he picked off a pass in a 20-3 win at UM-Western. He picked off another one the following week, and wound up with 27 tackles and a forced fumble that season.

It was a great, and rare start for a freshman playing cornerback. And it was cemented by the fact he was able to play a full season alongside Casey, who had an All-Conference year for the Lights that same season.

"It really helped me to have him (Casey) there," Varner said. "It was fun to play with him, but more so, I learned so much. He pushed us and was hardest on us the most. He made sure we (secondary) were always studying film, he made sure we were focused in practice and he made sure we knew what we were supposed to be doing on the field, and when any of us didn’t know, he let us know about it. That was a great year and I was able to learn a lot from him."

Varner could have had a chance to mentor another brother later, but Kodee, another talented speedster from Baker, chose to go a separate way with his football career. He’s now a red-shirt freshman running back at the University of North Dakota.

"I did push him a little to come and play up here," Varner said. "But as the bigger offers started to come in, I kind of left it alone and let him make his own decision. He wanted to go to a bigger school and I fully supported that. But if he had chosen a smaller school to play it, I’m pretty sure he would have been up here."

Now, with Kodee playing in Grand Forks, and Tanner off to a solid start in his senior season, Varner’s parents, who have spent most of the last eight years following the Lights around, have to choose between games 1,500 miles in the opposite direction.

And the Lights meanwhile, have certainly gotten a lot of miles out of the ultra-talented middle Varner. In his career, he’s not only been able to start every game, but he’s racked up 131 total tackles, five interceptions and four sacks. In 2011, he earned Frontier All-Conference honors, while last season, he recorded a career-high 55 stops with 4.5 tackles for loss, one interception and one sack.

More importantly though than stats and accolades, which Varner has never been about, he’s been asked to cover some of the best receivers in the Frontier, and he’s been able to do it by training hard, working hard and, for the most part, staying healthy.

"The end of my freshman season, in the last game actually, I tore my MCL," he said. "That was tough to come back from. But yeah, for the most part I’ve been lucky to stay healthy in my career. It’s a tough position and you just have to make sure you train your body right. Do the right things in the weight room and in the offseason to stay healthy, stay fast and stay on the field."

"Tanner is a true blue collar guy. He shows up every single day and goes to work," said Northern defensive coordinator Jake Eldridge. "He’s been that way since day one back in 2009 when he first got here. I don’t think he has missed a single practice, not one winter conditioning workout, not one lifting session, not one meeting. In everything he does, you will always get Tanner’s best effort. He carries a very proud chip on his shoulder about this program and school that doesn’t come around very often. Tanner has put his heart and soul into this university and football program for every bit of his five years here."
No doubt Varner does it all the right way, and he’s stayed on the field for Eldridge’s defense. Eldridge, a former Northern defensive back himself, knows just how important it is to have a senior leader like Varner in his secondary.

“He has brought such a tremendous leadership role to our defense this year that it’s going to have an impact for many years to come,” Eldridge said. “Tanner and I have really grown together through this defense for the last four years. It’s as much his defense as anybody’s. He has had a huge role in where this defense is now.”

And while Varner doesn’t care about stats or awards too much, and he doesn’t care much for the trash talk he hears from wide receivers, he does care about wins. And if there’s one stat he cares the most about, it’s takeaways. He picked off four passes in his first two seasons at MSU-N, but the interceptions for him, and for the MSU-N secondary as a whole, haven’t come as often as they would like the last two years, and he, and the rest of the Lights’ secondary want to change that the rest of the 2013 campaign.

“The first thing this group talked about when we came back this fall was getting more turnovers,” he said. “We have worked really hard on technique, and we decided we needed to work just as hard on the scheme stuff this season. We need to know what offenses do more, what their tendencies are and where we need to be at all times. We’ve worked really hard on that as a group this season, because we know, as an entire defense, we need to create more turnovers.”

The Lights haven’t gotten many yet this season, but they’ve been close, especially the secondary, as they’ve had several near misses with INT’s the last couple of weeks. That’s something Varner wants to make sure changes as his senior season wears on.

And while he’s already had an illustrious career, as one of the most reliable cornerbacks in the Frontier Conference the last four years, the hard-working, quiet kid from Baker knows there’s still work to be done. He sees the light at the end of the tunnel, and he wants to make sure he, and the Lights get there the right way.

“We always talk about legacy and what it means and how we want to be remembered,” Eldridge said. “Well Tanner Varner’s legacy around here in my eyes is one of a tremendous work ethic, a never die easy attitude, and the ability to garner a deep pride in who you are and what your about as a person.

“It’s been a roller coaster ride the last five years, but it’s been great being a part of this program,” Varner said. “And as far as the rest of this season goes, first, I just want to stay healthy so that I can be out there and help my team win football games. And we just need to keep this thing rolling. We’re off to a good start, and we need to keep it rolling. Keep winning football games and give ourselves a chance at the Frontier title.

“If the all-conference stuff and all that comes with it, that’s great, but that’s not what I’m worried about,” he continued. “I just want to keep rolling and keep winning. That’s what it’s all about to me.”

The Lights are indeed rolling right now, and they’ll look to keep that roll going when Varner suits up for his last homecoming game this Saturday against Dickinson State.

But no matter how much success the Lights have against the Blue Hawks on Saturday, or how much Varner succeeds the rest of this season, his last in a Northern uniform, you won’t hear him talking about it. You won’t see him being flashy about it.

No, that’s not the Baker Spartan way or the Varner family way. Instead, Varner will be humble and be quiet in success. That’s his way. And that way has worked our pretty well so far.