Happy Homecoming: Lights 49, Blue Hawks 24
*Lights ground Blue Hawks with big plays on both sides*
By George Ferguson
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Last month, the Montana State University-Northern Lights managed just 14 points in their season-opening, shutout win at Dickinson State. That’s 14 points in 60 minutes of football.

In their rematch with the rival Blue Hawks, it took the Lights just under four minutes to equal that total.

In a game of big strikes, long runs, and defensive highlights, the Lights celebrated homecoming by running away from the Blue Hawks, 49-24, Saturday afternoon at sun-drenched Blue Pony Stadium.

Northern, which improved to 3-1, opened the game with a 51-yard, tackle-breaking run by emerging star Zach McKinley. It was the start of a big-play day for McKinley and the Lights, and things got even better when DSU fumbled on its opening possession and senior linebacker David Arteaga scooped and scored to put MSU-N up 14-0 less than four minutes into the contest.

The large Northern homecoming crowd saw a blowout coming, but the Blue Hawks had other ideas. In just over the next four minutes, Derek Lear was picked off twice, which led directly to two DSU scores and a 14-14 first-quarter tie.

Ultimately, the Lights, who gained over 500 yards of offense, including a 138-yard effort by McKinley, wore the Blue Hawks down, and were on the receiving end of three DSU turnovers. But the start to the game was wild as it could get.

"It was a weird start," Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "We came out and got two big plays and that’s the kind of start you hope for. But then, in the blink of an eye, the game is tied. All that stuff happened pretty quickly. Those are things you don’t expect to happen, but they do in this game of football."

Northern’s responses to all the crazy things that happened over the course of Saturday’s contest were what mattered most.

Ahead 14-0, and with the ball again, a Lear pass was tipped at the line of scrimmage, and DSU linebacker Alex Huitzil caught the ball and ran it in for a score, making it 14-7 MSU-N with 9:47 still left in the first. DSU then tied the game by doing something the Blue Hawks have not done well this season, throwing the ball. On their third possession of the quarter, Kaler Ray threw three passes, all to J.T. Keith, and the third was a 16-yard fade in the endzone which knotted the game up.

However, MSU-N would answer with a big second quarter.

McKinley broke off a 48-yard run, then plunged in from three yards out to give the Lights the lead for good. And the big-play ability by the Lights kept coming. Just 1:40 after McKinley’s score, Lear hit
speedster Lavorick Williams in stride on a 71-yard TD bomb, which gave MSU-N a commanding 28-14 lead at the break.

"It was good to see us keep it rolling," McKinley said of Northern’s offensive output. "We played pretty well last week, and our goal was to come out here today and keep that going. We wanted to make sure we executed on offense today, and we did that. We made some big plays today, and it was a lot of fun."

Northern’s defense was also called upon to make some big plays as well.

DSU cut the Lights’ lead to 28-21 on a Jesse Carney TD run early in the third quarter, but the Lights answered with a beautiful pass from Lear to Orin Johnson. The score covered 16 yards, and was the only hookup on a drive which featured Johnson running the “wildcat,” including end-arounds to Dylan Woodhall and Jake Messerly.

But DSU stayed in the game with a Josh Borm field goal, and the Lights lead was shaved to 35-24 heading into the final stanza. And with DSU driving again to start the final period, senior linebacker Jordan Van Voast started a series of big plays which would help put the Blue Hawks away for good.

Van Voast batted down a Ray fourth-down pass to halt that DSU drive, and Northern responded with a good drive of its own, capped off by Lear finding Brandt Montelius for a score. Then, Van Voast picked off Ray on DSU’s ensuing possession, and again the Lights capitalized as backup quarterback Travis Dean threw his first TD pass in three years, finding Jake Messerly for a 43-yard touchdown, giving MSU-N a commanding 25-point lead with five minutes left.

And for good measure, Van Voast wrapped up his day by recovering a DSU fumble on the next play from scrimmage.

"We worked on getting turnovers all week," Van Voast said "We work hard on stripping the ball, getting picks, we work hard on that all the time. Turnovers helps our offense and our defense, and getting turnovers late in the game, like we did today, that’s huge. It built momentum for us, and shut their momentum down.

"It was nice to see us get some today," Samson added. "That’s one thing we haven’t done enough of as a defense, and that’s get turnovers. I thought we did a good job of getting some pressure up front, of rallying to the ball carrier, and playing fast and physical on defense. And when you do that, the turnovers will start to come."

And the turnovers were indeed crucial, because it seemed as though Dickinson was much-improved on offense Saturday, as opposed to the first time the Lights saw the Blue Hawks, when they gained just over 200 yards last month in Dickinson.

"They played very hard, there was no quit in them (Blue Hawks),” Samson said. “They didn’t do anything different offensively. But they just seemed like they were very determined today. They came in well-prepared and they played very hard today.”

Yet, MSU-N proved too much for the still winless Blue Hawks in the end.

Aside from the three turnovers the Lights got Saturday, Northern also held DSU to 342 yards of offense, including just 121 yards on the ground. DSU had just 15 first downs. Josh Baum paced the Lights with 10 total tackles, while Jesse Morales had seven. Van Voast had six stops, a forced fumble, a fumble recovery and an INT. Jordan Brusio tallied six tackles as well, while Tyler Craig had four tackles and a sack.

Offensively, MSU-N shook off the two early miscues and piled up 551 yards and seven touchdowns. Lear went 12-of-18 for 232 yards, while Williams caught four balls for 101 yards and his first Northern TD. Montelius had three catches for 69 yards and Orin Johnson added three grabs for 36 yards. Northern was extremely balanced, as well. The Lights totaled 275 yards through the air and 276 on the ground.

"Offensively, I thought we did some good things today,” Samson said. "We ran the ball really well again. Zach played really well, and I thought our offensive line did a great job today. We still have to get some things corrected. I felt like we were looking for the home run a few too many times today, but all-in-all, I thought we played a pretty good game offensively.”
Saturday was a key win for the Lights, not only because they improved to 3-1 and stayed firmly in the Frontier Conference race, but also because MSU-N won’t see the Blue Pony Stadium turf again for the next month. The Lights start a three-game road trip at unbeaten UM-Western this Saturday in Dillon.

“We said we were going to get on a roll after the Carroll game,” Van Voast said. “And that’s what we’ve done. We’ve been practicing really well and I think it’s shown in these last two games. Now we just have to go on the road and try and keep it going. We’ve set our goals high and we just have to keep working to get to those goals.”

Northern will face the red-hot Bulldogs (3-0), who beat Montana Tech. Game play is Saturday in Dillon. The Lights won’t be back in Havre until their Oct. 26 rematch with Carroll College.