Frontier Conference, meet Zach McKinley

From the Fringe...
By George Ferguson
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I’ve been covering the Montana State University-Northern football team since Lights’ standout Donny Saisbury was running and catching passes out of the Lights’ backfield. Not to make Donny feel old or anything, but that was already nine seasons ago.

And starting with Saisbury, it’s incredible to me just how many good running backs the Lights have had in my short, or long time at the HDN, depending on how you look at it.

When Saisbury’s career came to an end, there were question marks about who the starting tailback would be. All that followed was a stellar two-year run by Justin Moe, including Moe breaking the single-season rushing record during his time as a Light.

Then, in the blink of an eye, Moe was gone, and there was again consternation surrounding the Lights’ running game. Enter Stephen Silva. All the speedster from California did in his time with the Lights was break every Northern rushing record in the books, earn Frontier All-Conference honors three teams, and twice achieved NAIA All-American.

When Silva played his last game for the Lights last November, he not only left some humongous shoes to fill, though he stood just 5-9, he also left a gaping question mark about who was going to fill them heading into the 2013 season.

Over the last four weeks, and especially the last two games at Blue Pony Stadium, the next great running back at Northern question has been emphatically answered.

Meet red-shirt freshman Zach McKinley.

Last Saturday, in his home debut, the former CMR standout rushed for 202 yards and two touchdowns, while averaging a whopping 7.3 yards per carry. And while those numbers were eye-popping, anyone wondering if they were an anomaly, or if EOU’s defense was that soft, can stop wondering.

Saturday, on a hot homecoming day inside Blue Pony Stadium, McKinley backed up last week’s performance with a 138-yard outburst in Northern’s 49-24 win over Dickinson State.

And McKinley wasted little time in showing last Saturday’s game was no flash in the pan. On only his second carry of the afternoon, McKinley broke over the left side, mowed down two DSU defensive backs, then raced 51 yards untouched to the house.

"I really wanted to break a big one today,” McKinley said. “On that play, things were kind of clogged up in the middle, so I bounced it out. I saw that Brandt (Montelius) and Orin (Johnson) had their guys blocked, so I only had one guy to beat.”

The score came on just Northern’s fourth play from scrimmage Saturday and was part of a powerful day by the Great Falls standout. McKinley carried the ball just 11 times, but scored twice, while adding a 48-yard, tackle-breaking run to his total. On the day, he averaged a staggering 11 yards per carry and spent much of the afternoon plowing over a good-sized DSU defensive line.

McKinley, who stands 5-10, weighs 205 pounds and has had to overcome injuries early in his Northern career, runs bigger than his frame. He’s one of those backs who doesn’t go down on first contact, and once
he breaks a tackle, he’s got the speed to run away from a defense. He put that explosive combo on display Saturday afternoon.

"Zach runs really hard,” Northern senior wide receiver Brandt Montelius said. “He gets those tough yards and the way he is running right now, that’s really opening up this offense. With what he brings out there, it really opens our play-action passing up, and he’s helping make us a pretty dangerous offense.”

Indeed. McKinley, along with fellow running backs Jai Johnson, another power back, freshman Mario Gobatto and fullback Chance Nevarez, and not to mention a powerful and skilled MSU-N offensive line, are revolutionizing the MSU-N rushing attack.

In the last two weeks, Northern has bulldozed over two opponents, with McKinley leading the way. And with a veteran quarterback like Derek Lear, and a bevy of speedy wide receivers, the running attack makes an already potent passing game that much better.

It shows on the field. Northern’s offense is as diverse as it gets and is becoming extremely hard to stop. After Saturday’s performance, nobody seems to be having more fun than McKinley.

"It is a lot of fun running in this offense," McKinley said. "It starts with the offensive line. They do a great job, and they make our job a lot easier. Our receivers do a great job of blocking too. So when I get out in the open, it’s a lot of fun. Today was a lot of fun."

When you lose a running back the caliber of Stephen Silva, there’s going to be a little worry, especially when no current MSU-N back took a single snap last season. The worry last spring might have been understandable.

Four games into the 2013 season, and on display during Saturday’s homecoming game, Zach McKinley and the rest of the MSU-N running game put all those worries to bed for good. Once again, Northern’s present, and future in the backfield is very, very bright.