Lights look to stay hot at red-hot Western
By George Ferguson
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When the 2013 Frontier Conference Football Preseason Poll was released in August, little was expected of the Montana State University-Northern Lights and the UM-Western Bulldogs. The Lights were tabbed to finish fifth this season while the Bulldogs were predicted to finish seventh.

But heading into Saturday’s showdown in Dillon, both the Lights and Bulldogs have already proven just how wrong that poll can be.

Northern (3-1, 3-1) will meet up with No. 15 Western (3-0, 3-0) Saturday at 1 p.m. in Dillon, where the game will have huge and lasting implications on the Frontier championship, and the race to the NAIA playoffs.

“It is interesting, and a little surprising,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “I don’t think, back in the summer, outside of Havre and Dillon, too many people pointed to this game as a big game in the conference. For the teams, every game is big, but now, with what Western has done so far, this game probably became a little bigger for both teams.”

A big game indeed because both teams are red-hot coming in.

The Lights have won two straight games, averaging 45 points on offense in the process. Northern running back Zach McKinley is second in the league in rushing, averaging 124 yards per game, and he’s piled up 340 yards and four touchdowns in his last two games, wins over Eastern Oregon and Dickinson State. Derek Lear has passed for six touchdowns since coming back from a knee injury he suffered in the season-opener at Dickinson State last month, while favorite target Orin Johnson is averaging 94 yards receiving per game this season. Johnson has caught 27 passes for 373 yards and four scores already.

As a team, the Lights are rolling on offense after a slow start. MSU-N averages 464 yards per game on offense, with 247 through the air and 218 on the ground. The Lights are in the Frontier’s top three in all three categories. Scoring has also gone up for the Lights dramatically. Northern is scoring 29 points per game now, after starting out with just 20 total points in its first two games.

But as hot as the Lights are, Western is even warmer. The Bulldogs are nationally-ranked for the first time since 2004, and have achieved their highest ranking in two decades.

And a huge reason why is running back Sam Rutherford (6-1, 215). The former Centerville standout is averaging 201 yards per game, has scored nine touchdowns this season, and in Western’s thrilling 28-22 road win at Montana Tech last Saturday, he went for 188 yards and three scores against what was supposed to be a stout Oredigger defense. After three games, Western leads the Frontier in rushing, averaging 314 yards per game, and that has really helped out first-year starting quarterback Tyler Hulse (6-0, 200), who’s only throwing for 133 yards per outing. But Hulse doesn’t need to be the hero, he just
needs to manage games with the likes of Rutherford, and backup running backs Dylan Kramer and Michael Lake.

“They (Bulldogs) are a very good football team,” Samson said. “They are doing a lot of things right at the moment. Rutherford is a really powerful running back, but he’s got really good speed too. He’s broke a lot of big runs this season. He’s playing really well and obviously, their offensive line is too, and that’s really helping their quarterback out. He, and their running game have really made a huge difference in what they do.”

Of course, stopping the run will be the key for the Lights Saturday, and so far this season, MSU-N’s defense has done a good job of that. The Lights are second only to Carroll against the run, giving up just 107 yards per game. Northern is equally as good against the pass, giving up 218 yards per outing. MSU-N’s run defense is led by tackles Weston Mudge and Logan Nathe, while standout safeties Josh Baum and Hunter Chandler will have to have a big game Saturday in run support.

“They (Bulldogs) want to run the ball first,” Samson said. “And so far, no one has really stopped it. It’s pretty basic. You have to make sure you know your assignments, stay in your lanes and get them on the ground when you have the chance. That’s the challenge for our defense this week. Hopefully we can do that, and at least limit him (Rutherford) some. Our defense is a little banged up this week, but we’re playing well and I know they’ll go out and give their best effort.”

Defense is also a big reason why the Bulldogs are where they are. Western is right behind Northern in rush defense, and is in the top half of the league in both scoring and total defense. Senior defensive end Phil Selin (6-2, 234) leads the Frontier in sacks with 4, while All-Conference linebacker Kasey Griffith (5-9, 215) is third with 46 tackles. Safety Jesse McCloud (6-0, 196) is also very good in run support.

But if Northern has an edge Saturday, it’s Lear and the passing game. The Lights have really lit up the sky in recent weeks, and with Johnson, Lavorick Williams, Brandt Montelius, Dylan Woodhall, Jake Messerly and right end John Jansen, MSU-0N feels like it can exploit Western’s pass defense, which is last in the Frontier.

“If we have an advantage, it’s that we have a veteran quarterback and a really good group of wide receivers,” Samson said. “And Derek and that group have been playing pretty well the last couple of weeks and are still improving. So we feel like we should be able to get things done in the passing game, not just this week, but against anybody.

“We are still going to have to run the ball effectively against Western,” Samson added. “And we can’t make mistakes. We have to avoid turnovers and penalties. And if we do that, that should open things up even more in the passing game.”

The Lights have an edge in the passing game, Western on the ground, and both teams are playing great defense, and that sets things up to be a great game Saturday inside Vigilante Stadium, where the Lights have won two straight games, and Northern has beaten Western three straight times dating back to the 2011 season. Both teams are on a roll right now, and both teams are playing with a chip on their shoulder because no one picked either team to be in this position at the start of the season. But both are in a great position now, and Saturday’s game is as big as it gets.

“It’s going to be a battle,” Samson said. “They’re having a great season. It’s on their field and it’s their homecoming game. So they’re going to be fired up on Saturday.

“But we feel like we’re playing pretty well too,” he added. “And we have a chance to keep that going this week. So we’ll be fired up and excited to play Saturday too.

“Coach Samson has been talking about us getting on a roll since the Carroll game,” said Montelius after Northern’s win over Dickinson State last Saturday. “And we’ve took care of what we wanted to at home. Now we’re going on the road for three straight games. And we want to keep this thing going. We just have to go out and play our game, play the way we’ve been playing and see if we can keep this going.”

Saturday’s game between the Lights and Bulldogs will kick off at 1 p.m. in Dillon. The Lights travel to Rocky Mountain College next Saturday. Western travel to Eastern Oregon.
Going to the Kennel

Lights (3-1, 3-1) at No. 15 Western (3-0, 3-0) Saturday at 1 p.m. in Dillon

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