Lights bite back at Western
Northern knocks off No. 15 UM-Western in Dillon
By George Ferguson
September 30, 2013

The Montana State University-Northern Lights and the UM-Western Bulldogs were both on a roll. Both teams garnered national attention this past week, and both teams were being led by star running backs chewing up gobs of yards in the last couple of games.

So something had to give Saturday afternoon at Vigilante Stadium in Dillon. But what didn’t give was the Lights. Northern’s defense held the top rusher in the Frontier Conference, Western’s Sam Rutherford, to just 47 yards on 18 carries, while MSU-N’s Zach McKinley scored three touchdowns as the Lights knocked off the No. 15 Bulldogs 33-21 on what was Western’s homecoming day.

"I’m happy for our kids,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "This was a great win. It’s been a while since we’ve had a road win like this. The kids played very, very well.”

Defense, and a second-quarter explosion played a big part in Northern’s win, which pushed the Lights to 4-1 and into first place in the Frontier. Not only was Rutherford held to 163 yards below his season average, the Lights held the Bulldogs to a measly 213 yards of total offense. Western also scored just two offensive touchdowns on the day, while the MSU-N offense broke loose in the second frame.

The Bulldogs took a 7-3 lead into the second quarter on the heels of Tim Mundaniohl’s 80-yard interception return for a TD. The Lights responded with a great drive, capped off by a McKinley one-yard run give MSU-N a 10-7 lead with 5:49 left in the first half. Minutes later, Northern blocked a Western punt in Bulldogs territory, and three players after that, McKinley scored again to push the Lights out to a 17-7 lead.

But Northern wasn’t done with its barrage. Western fumbled the ensuing kickoff and the Lights recovered and when Jai Johnson bowled his way in from three yards out, the Lights took a 23-7 lead into intermission.

Takeaways were a big reason why the Lights succeeded, not only in the second quarter, but over the course of the entire game. Marc Evans blocked the Western punt, while Victor Fermin caused the kickoff fumble and Butch Hyder got the recovery. Jordan Van Voast also had a fumble recovery, caused by Josh Baum, while Tanner Varner picked off a Western pass at the end of the game. In all, the Lights got four turnovers.

"The defense really took it to them (Bulldogs),” Samson said. "They never let their running back get going, and they went out and got turnovers and gave our offense short fields to work with. The defense just played very, very well. They were very focused and very determined.”

But heading into the second half, the game was nowhere near over. The Bulldogs roared back to life with third-quarter scores by Dylan Kramer and Rutherford to climb back to within 23-21 heading into the final 15 minutes. Northern however, wasn't going to be denied. MSU-N answered the Rutherford TD with a great drive, resulting in McKinley’s third score of the day.

From there’s MSU-N’s defense took over again, and stymied any chance the Bulldogs had at a comeback. Jordan Rueschhoff put the cherry on top of a huge win for the Lights by kicking his second field goal of the day to make the final margin 12. Rueschhoff opened the game with a 25-yard field goal which put the Lights up 3-0.
Defense and special team’s play was huge for the Lights, but Northern’s offensive onslaught also continued. MSU-N’s defense turned away Rutherford time and time again, and also knocked Western starting quarterback Tyler Hulse from the game, while the Lights’ offense capitalized.

Northern went over 400 yards of offense for the third straight week, and the Lights rushed for 241 yards. Western came into Saturday’s game with the third-best rush defense in the Frontier, but McKinley picked up a hard-earned 98 yards to go along with his three scores. Jai Johnson picked up another 43 yards on the ground, while Derek Lear burned the Bulldog defense for 60 yards rushing.

Lear also completed 13 passes for 221 yards, including seven balls to Orin Johnson. Dylan Woodhall had a career-high 98 yards on just three catches as the MSU-N offense continued its balanced attack.

"I left that game very impressed with Western’s defense,” Samson said. “Those guys are very physical. So for us to do as much as we did offensively, I was very pleased. We moved the ball quite a bit, we ran the ball pretty well and we put 33 points on the board. Against that good of a defense, I’m very happy.”

The win was not only big for the Lights because they beat a nationally-ranked opponent (Western had ascended to its highest ranking in a decade), it was also big because the Lights are in the beginning of a daunting three-game road trip. This Saturday, the Lights, who should move into the NAIA Top 25, will travel to Billings to face Rocky Mountain College. The Lights hold a half game lead on RMC, as well as Carroll and Western heading into Saturday’s game in Billings.

"We did some really good things,” Samson said. “It’s a really good win for this team. We have a ways to go. We’re playing another very good football team on the road this week when we go to Rocky. But where we’re at right now, we’re pretty excited.”

**Lights 33, Western 21**

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**First quarter**

MSU-N — Jordan Rueschhoff 25 field goal, 8:18

Western — Tim Mundaniohl 80 interception return (Connor Greth kick) 1:59

**Second quarter**

MSU-N — Zach McKinley 1 run (Rueschhoff kick) 5:49

MSU-N — McKinley 1 run (Rueschhoff kick) 3:10

MSU-N — Johnson 3 run (Rueschhoff kick) 2:20

**Third quarter**

Western — Dylan Kramer 12 run (Greth kick) 11:23

Western — Sam Rutherford 2 run (Greth kick) 3:24

**Fourth quarter**

MSU-N — McKinley 2 run (Rueschhoff kick) 12:42

MSU-N — Rueschhoff 34 field goal, 3:51

**MSU-N UM-W**
First downs 21 13
Rushes-yards 58-241 27-61
Passing yards 221 152
Total yards 462 213
Fumbles-Lost 1-0 3-2
Penalties-yards 4-36 2-25

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING — MSU-N, Zach McKinley 29-98, Derek Lear 8-61, Jai Johnson 9-43, Orin Johnson 7-32, Mario Gobatto 4-11; Western, Sam Rutherford 18-47, Dylan Kramer 2-12, Tyler Hulse 5-11, Charlie Switzer 2 (-9).

PASSING — MSU-N, Lear 13-23-1-221; Jake Messerly 1-1-0-3; Western, Switzer 8-13-1-82, Hulse 7-13-0-70.