Lights go for four in a row in Billings
Northern and Rocky Mountain College square off in a nationally-ranked showdown
By George Ferguson
October 4, 2013

Montana State University-Northern Lights are in the midst of a three-game, month-long journey keeping them away from home, and out of Blue Pony Stadium. But that journey could very well help decide the Frontier Conference championship at season’s end.

Northern’s road trip started last Saturday when the Lights stunned then No. 15 UM-Western in Dillon, 33-21. Now, MSU-N will try and do it all over again as the No. 19 Lights (4-1, 4-1) clash with the No. 16 Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears (3-1, 4-1) Saturday in Billings.

At stake is Northern’s current three-game winning streak, first place in the Frontier standings, which the Lights currently have alone, and perhaps a chance at a Frontier title and an NAIA playoff berth.

And though it’s still early in the season, road games don’t get much bigger for the Lights than Saturday’s battle in Billings.

“It’s going to be a very interesting ballgame, that’s for sure,” MSU-N head coach Mark Samson said. “Rocky is a very good football team. They’re balanced on offense and defense. And they play well at home.

“But our kids will be ready,” he added. “They really showed me something in the win at Western. We had a terrible third quarter and Western had all the momentum. But our kids showed a lot of character and fight in that game. It felt like we grew up a little.”

Both the Lights and Bears have done plenty of growing this season, as neither was picked to contend for the Frontier title. Rocky was picked fourth in the Preseason Coaches Poll, and the Lights fifth. But now into October, first place in the Frontier is on the line between the two bitter rivals. Last year, the teams split with the Lights winning in Havre, but the Bears beating the Lights in the final game of the season in Billings.

And though both teams bring explosive offenses into Saturday’s showdown, its defense which has put both the Lights and Bears in the position they’re in at the halfway point in the season.

Northern is first in the Frontier in total defense, allowing just 280 yards per game. The Lights are also first against the run and second against the pass. Last week, MSU-N held a dangerous UM-Western offense to just 200 total yards, and the Lights shut down star Bulldog running back Sam Rutherford to the tune of just 47 yards. Rutherford entered last Saturday’s game averaging 201 yards per outing.

Individually, MSU-N is getting contributions from all over the field, and the Lights get back starting linebacker David Arteaga, who missed the last two games with a concussion. Meanwhile, Jordan Van Voast has been involved in three of the Light’s seven turnovers they’ve gotten in the last two games, while senior safety Josh Baum leads the team in tackles with 37, and Tyler Craig, Logan Nathe and Kaimi Kanehailua have combined for seven sacks on the season.
"We’re playing well defensively right now,” Samson said. "Only allowing two offensive touchdowns to Western last week was pretty darn good. But we’ll have to continue to play well this week. Rocky is a very good offensive football team.”

Indeed, the Bears are. Quarterback Bryce Baker got off to a hot start this season, and he averages 309 yards through the air and has thrown for 12 touchdowns against just four interceptions. Baker is also mobile, and can really hurt teams when he breaks the pocket. He’s also got one of the Frontier’s best receivers in sophomore Andre McCullough (6-1, 195). A First-team All-Conference performer a year ago, McCullough already has 32 catches for 595 yards and six scores this fall. He also averages a whopping 18 yards per catch and is a threat to go the distance every time he touches the ball.

But as good as Baker and the passing game is, Rocky has also proven a capable running team. I last week’s 13-6 win at Montana Tech, the Bears, who bounced back from their home loss to Carroll two weeks ago, kept the ball on the ground, mainly with freshman running back Jade Olson, who rushed for 98 of RMC’s 144 yards.

"Bryce Baker is one of the best players in the league, there’s no doubt,” Samson said. “He can hurt you in a bunch of different ways and he’s having a great season. But Rocky showed they can win in different ways. They ran the ball really well against (Montana) Tech, in a very tough place to play, and they came out with a win. They have a big and physical offensive line, and their offense will certainly be a big test for our defense Saturday.”

Of course, the Lights aren’t a slouch on offense either.

In their last three wins, Northern is averaging 42 points and almost 500 yards of offense per game, while MSU-N is easily the most balanced team in the Frontier right now. On the arm of senior quarterback Derek Lear, and a bevy of great receivers, including Orin Johnson, who’s caught 34 balls for 440 yards and four TD’s, the Lights throw for 237 yards per outing. But on the legs of Zach McKinley, who is averaging 111 yards per contest, and a healthy Jai Johnson, the Lights also rush for nearly 213 yards per contest. And that will make Northern hard to stop, even for a Rocky defense which ranks just behind the Lights in most defensive categories.

RMC is led by the linebacker duo of Josh Johnson (6-3, 260), who has 49 stops this season, and Travis Bertelsen (5-10, 210), who has 44 tackles on the year. Wyatt Johnson (6-4, 240) is a hard-hitting pass rusher with three sacks, while sophomore corner Kyle Mai (5-11, 185) leads an opportunistic Bears’ secondary with two of Rocky’s six INT’s.

"They’re (Bears) a very good defense,” Samson said. “They are fast and physical. They make plays and they create turnovers. It’s going to be a battle for sure. The big thing for us on offense is minimizing mistakes. We have to take care of the football. Against a defense like that, we have to play very smart football on offense. That will be critical for us.”

And Saturday’s game is critical to both the Lights and the Bears, for a number of reasons. Northern would like nothing more than to hold a recently struggling RMC offense, which has scored just 23 points in its last eight quarters of football, to those same types of numbers Saturday. The Lights also want to hold onto first place in the Frontier and add to their longest winning streak and highest national rating in nearly three years. The Bears have the same aspirations. They know a second home loss would be devastating to their Frontier title and playoff hopes, and they want to keep their recent home winning streak of three years against the Lights intact.

So again, there’s a lot at stake in what’s being billed as the NAIA Game of the Week in Billings.

"It’s going to be a tough, hard-fought and physical football game,” Samson said. "These are two teams playing pretty well right now, especially on defense, and that means the team which makes the least amount of mental mistakes will have the edge.

"But we’ve once again had a great week of preparation,” he added. “We’re as healthy as we can be at this point, and the guys are fired up to and try to find a way to win another football game on the road.”

Saturday’s game between Northern and Rocky Mountain College kicks off at 1 p.m. at Herb Klindt Field in Billings. The Lights and Bears both have a bye on Oct. 12.
Game of the Week

No. 19 Lights (4-1, 4-1) at No. 16 RMC (3-1, 4-1)
Saturday at 1 p.m. in Dillon

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Viewing: http://www.msun.edu/athletics

Twitter: Twitter/Havredaily