Frontier Conference Notebook: Bye week was good for the Lights

Frontier's top offense collides with its best defense when Northern visits Southern Oregon Saturday...

By George Ferguson
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If ever a team needed a bye week, it might have been the Montana State University-Northern Lights. MSU-N opened its season all the way back on Aug. 29 in Dickinson, N.D., and played four of its first six on the road.

So even though byes can be somewhat disruptive to a team's momentum, Northern's week off this past week was productive. MSU-N came into its bye week off a tough loss at Rocky Mountain College two weeks ago, and will come out of the bye with its final road trip of the season, a visit to Ashland, Ore., Saturday where the Lights will battle the Frontier Conference's hottest team, the Southern Oregon Raiders.

"I think the bye came at the right time for us," Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "We had a lot of kids banged up, and it gave us a chance to get them healthy. They might not all be 100 percent, but they're close and we're going into this game at full strength. So it was good for us."

A little more redemption will be on the Lights' minds Saturday after SOU dispatched Northern last fall in Havre. The Raiders blitzed the Lights 65-34 last October, and while SOU still has All-American quarterback Austin Dodge, who leads the country in passing and total offense, the Lights are a different defense this season.

Northern allows a mere 21 points per game and is first in the Frontier against the pass, giving up just over 170 yards per game. Conversely, Dodge averages 412 passing yards per outing, and he accounts for 438 yards of offense each game. Dodge's total output per contest is over 100 yards more than the entire Lights' defense gives up. Northern only allows a league-best 298 yards per game so something will have to give in Oregon.

Individual matchups will also play a key role for the Lights. Though SOU lost a trio of 1,000-yard receivers from last year's record-setting offense, Dodge has turned newcomers into statistical stars. SOU's Ryan Retzlaff and Dylan Young are the top two receivers in the Frontier, while Matt Retzlaff isn't far behind. So, Northern defensive backs Tanner Varner, Trevor Baum, Josh Baum, Hunter Chandler and the steadily improving Victor Fermin will be critical in Saturday's showdown. Northern's linebackers will also be key in pass coverage, as SOU loves to throw short routes and turn them into big gains.

Momentum will also play a role in Saturday's game at Raider Stadium. Once again, Southern Oregon is working on a long winning streak, and the Lights are hoping to put an end to it.

SOU has won three straight games, and by huge margins since the Raiders began the season a disappointing 0-3. Last year, the Raiders reeled off six straight wins to end the regular season and capture a share of the Frontier title. In those six wins, SOU won by an average margin of 28 points per game, and with the exception of a three-point win over Carroll College, games were never close.
But again, this isn’t the same Northern team the Raiders saw last October in Havre. The Lights aren’t just tops in the Frontier in almost every defensive category, but they also have a more consistent running game than they did a year ago, which could serve to keep SOU’s offense off the field. And they have an upgraded offensive line, as well as a quick-strike passing attack, led by seniors Derek Lear and Orin Johnson.

**Almost Home**

While the Lights are making their longest road trip in recent school history by traveling to Southern Oregon this week, life on the road is nothing new to MSU-N. The Lights haven’t played a home game since Sept. 23 when they demolished Dickinson State on homecoming. By the time the Lights return home from Ashland, Ore., on Sunday, Northern will have traveled roughly 3,626 miles to play three road games in Dillon, Billings and Ashland.

Northern will be flying to Oregon on Friday, but it’s still a long haul, and the reward will be, the Lights don’t have to leave Havre again for the rest of the regular season. MSU-N plays its final three games at home, starting with a huge rematch with Carroll College next Saturday afternoon. MSU-N also faces Montana Tech Nov. 2, a game which could end up being a night game pending where the Havre Blue Ponies land in the Class A playoffs. And finally, Northern closes the season with a Nov. 16 tilt with Rocky Mountain College in what should be a frosty Blue Pony Stadium.

**Back to Work**

There was just one Frontier Conference game on the slate last Saturday, as Carroll College smashed Dickinson State 42-7 in Helena. The rest of the league had byes, but a full slate of games will be back on the plate this weekend.

And many could be critical to the outcome of the Frontier.

Northern's game with SOU will have lasting implications for both teams. Meanwhile, first-place Rocky has a tough home game with Eastern Oregon, which has crept back into contention with back-to-back wins over nationally-ranked opponents. EOU beat Carroll three weeks ago, then knocked off then No. 24 UM-Western 20-0 two weeks ago in LaGrande, Ore. So Rocky certainly needs to be on upset alert Saturday in Billings.

Carroll, which is tied with RMC for first, needs to be on upset alert as well. The Saints go to Dillon to take on a Western team which has been backed into a corner after losses to Northern and EOU in the last two weeks. The Bulldogs are still for real, still have Sam Rutherford leading the conference in rushing, and can take a big bite out of the Frontier standings by knocking off the Saints Saturday.

Montana Tech meanwhile, has a chance to get its losing streak over with. At Bob Green Field Saturday, the Orediggers host struggling DSU. Tech lost four straight games before last week’s bye, and if the Diggers can get their quarterback problems solved, they should be in for a much better second half of the season. And while it’s probably too late to get back into the title chase, the Diggers’ can salvage their season by starting a winning streak against DSU.

**NAIA Leaders**

Many Frontier stars are making waves on the national level again this season.

At the midway point in the year, SOU's Dodge leads the NAIA in passing, total offense and passer rating. RMC's Bryce Baker is also fifth in total offense and sixth in the country in passing. Running the ball, Western's Rutherford is fourth in the country and Carroll's Dustin Rinker is 10th. SOU's Young and Ryan Retzlaff are second and fifth, respectively in receiving, while RMC's Andre McCullough is sixth.

Defensively, Western linebacker Casey Griffith is fourth in the NAIA in tackles, while EOU's Gary Posten is sixth. Western's Phil Selin is tied for 10th in the NAIA with five sacks.