Lights get back to work in Oregon
Northern ready to stop high-octane Raiders on Saturday
By George Ferguson
October 18, 2013

Surprise, surprise, another road game for the Montana State University-Northern Lights. Only this isn't your ordinary road trip in the Frontier Conference.

On Saturday, the No. 18 Lights will go head-to-head with the streaking Southern Oregon Raiders in Ashland, Ore., with no less than Frontier Conference title and NAIA playoff implications hanging in the balance.

Both Northern (4-2, 4-2) and Southern (3-2, 3-3) come into Saturday's game fresh off of bye weeks, and before that, the two teams played in very different games. The Lights suffered a heartbreaking 23-13 loss at Rocky Mountain College back on Oct. 5, while SOU battered rival Eastern Oregon 59-23 on the same day. Southern's win over EOU was its third straight after starting the year 0-3, and while the Raiders are starting to pile up offensive numbers the way they did when they captured a share of the league title a year ago, Northern has quietly become the best defense in the Frontier.

So, something will have to give when the Lights and Raiders do battle for the only time this season.

"The loss to Rocky really hurt," Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "That was a game that was tough for the kids to swallow because we went in playing really well, and then we didn't play as well as we could have. But now we're going up against the most prolific offense in the country, so we've had to put the Rocky game behind us.

"Let's face it, they (Raiders) are very good offensively, they are putting up huge numbers and any defense has its hands full trying to slow them down," he added. "But I like our attitude right now. We've had a great week of practice. The bye week gave us a chance to get healthy. We're rested, and I really feel like our kids are up for this challenge."

Northern's longest road trip of the season, and its longest in school history isn't the major hurdle facing the Lights, it's SOU quarterback Austin Dodge and his merry band of receivers. Dodge, the reigning Frontier Player of the Year is on another record-setting pace. He leads the NAIA with 2,470 yards and 29 touchdowns. He's also thrown just four interceptions all season, while he averages 417 yards of offense per outing.

And though he lost three 1,000-yard receivers from last year's championship team, new faces have stepped up and are flourishing. Ryan Retzlaff (5-11) and Dylan Young (6-1) are the top two receivers in the league and have combined for over 1,200 yards and 15 touchdowns so far. Matt Retzlaff (5-11) has another 500 yards to his credit, while running backs Zach Marshall and Melvin Mason each average about 70 yards per game on the ground, and are both outstanding receivers out of the backfield. Dodge did lose All-American tight end Clay Sierra to an injury earlier this season, but there's no doubt, SOU is picking up
right where it left off a year ago. The Raiders are averaging 53 points per game and nearly 600 yards of offense, and they've won their last three by an average of nearly 30 points per contest.

"They (Raiders) are a very good offensive team," Samson said. "Saying that is kind of an understatement. You really have to slow them down more than stop them. They put a lot of pressure on your defense, their quarterback can make all the necessary throws and he's got a lot of weapons at his disposal. They're going to get some big plays on you, so you just have to try and keep everything in front of you and minimize those big plays. And a big key is being able to get some turnovers."

Northern got some early breaks in its 2012 meeting with Dodge and the Raiders in Havre. But SOU blitzed the Lights with a touchdown barrage in the second quarter and never looked back in a 64-34 win. But the 2013 MSU-N defense is different, the Lights are different, and they should feel confident going into Saturday's game.

Behind a total team effort, Northern's defense has risen to the top of the Frontier. The Lights allow just 21 points and 298 yards of offense per game. MSU-N is among the top defenses in all of the NAIA against the pass, allowing less than 200 yards per game, and the Lights have forced seven takeaways so far in 2013. And the Lights do it all by committee. David Arteaga and Josh Baum are in the Top 10 in the league in tackles, but the Lights have nine defenders who are among the Top 30 in the Frontier in that category. Tyler Craig and Kaimi Kanehauilia are tied for third in the Frontier with three sacks each, and getting some pressure on Dodge will be critical.

"Our defense has played well," Samson said. "We don't have any guys putting up really big defensive numbers this year, they just all seem to get the job done as a group. I know our defense is looking forward to the challenge this week. They're excited about this game."

Of course, defense is only half the equation against SOU. The Raiders simply try and force teams into shootouts, especially with a young, and inexperienced defensive unit this season. So the MSU-N offense will get plenty of opportunities.

Senior quarterback Derek Lear has thrown for 1,371 yards and eight touchdowns this season, while Orin Johnson is having a great year at wideout. But what will be critical for the Lights' offense Saturday will be the running game, as well as not turning the ball over. The Lights would love nothing more than to have star running back Zach McKinley, along with steadily improving junior Jai Johnson pound the ball on the ground all day and chew up as much clock as possible.

"That's the game plan," Samson said. "We want to run the football and get first downs, we want to take time off the clock and keep their (Raiders) offense off the field. That's the ideal situation. But we understand we have to score too. We have to put points on the board by finishing those drives.

"And we must take care of the football," he continued. "Turnovers really hurt our chances at Rocky, and overall, that's been something we've struggled with at times this season. But against an offense like theirs, you can't give them those kinds of extra possessions. You just can't make those mistakes. So we have been really focused on taking care of the ball."

There's no question that if the Lights execute their plans on both sides of the ball, Saturday's game should be a good one. As good as SOU has been of late, the Raiders aren't invincible, and they nearly played themselves out of the Frontier title picture after season-opening losses to Rocky and UM-Western.

Meanwhile, Northern could play itself right into the thick of the title chase with a road win Saturday. MSU-N is alone in third place in the league standings, is holding a solid national ranking, and has its last three games of the regular season in the friendly confines of Blue Pony Stadium.

Simply put, Saturday's game in Oregon is the biggest test the Lights have faced to date, and a win could propel them to their best season in recent memory.

"It is a big game, for both teams," Samson said. "And one thing we've talked to the kids about this week was, at some point, we have to stop worrying about what they (Raiders) do so much. They are a very good football team, but the best thing we can do is go down there and worry about what we do. If we do the things we want, play fast, physical football and play mistake-free football, we've got a great chance in this game.
"The kids are feeling good about where they're at right now," he continued. "So we just need to take that attitude and confidence into the game and play as hard as we can and as well as we can for all 60 minutes. And we'll see what happens."

Saturday's game between the Lights and Raiders kicks off at 1 p.m. M.S.T. at Raider Stadium in Ashland, Ore.. This is Northern's first trip to SOU in nearly a decade. The Lights are home next Saturday to face Carroll College, while SOU remains home to battle UM-Western.

**Offense vs Defense**

**No. 18 Lights (4-2, 4-2) at Southern Oregon (3-2, 3-3)**  
**Saturday at 1 p.m. in Ashland, Ore.**

**Radio**: 92.5 KPQX FM  
**Viewing**: http://www.msun.edu/athletics  
**Twitter**: Twitter/Havredaily