Lights look to halt Saints' march
Northern and Carroll clash Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium
By George Ferguson
October 25, 2013

It will be nearly seven years to the day that the Montana State University-Northern Lights knocked off Carroll College in Blue Pony Stadium when the two rivals meet again. And while seven years doesn't seem like a particularly long period of time to some, it's also been 17 Carroll wins over the Lights since that fateful day in October of 2006.

Now, with a 17-game winning streak against the Lights, the No. 7 Fighting Saints march into Havre Saturday, and un-ranked Northern will look for fate to intervene yet again. The Lights (4-3, 4-3) and Saints (5-1, 6-1) meet Saturday at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium.

And Saturday's game has a similar feel to the last time Northern beat the Saints, as two of the best defenses in the NAIA will go head-to-head. Though Northern lost to Carroll 31-3 back on Sept. 7 in Helena, the Lights' defense was stellar that day, limiting the Saints to their lowest offensive output to date, and holding Carroll star running back Dustin Rinker to just 71 yards.

"Our defense did play well in that game," Samson said. "I think we showed some things in that game that we hadn't ever shown before, and we were able to have some success against their running game that day."

"But we also shot ourselves in the foot too many times offensively," he continued. "We had some turnovers in the redzone and we just didn't execute when we had chances to put points on the board. Unfortunately, that's what has been happening to us the last couple of games too. And so we've really had to take a look in the mirror this week and say, we have to have fix that. We have to start getting it done."

And getting it done on offense will be critical is Northern is to create another lasting memory against the Saints. Carroll allows only 12 points per game, and has star defenders like linebacker Sean Blomquist (5-11, 230), who has 65 tackles and a league-best 11 tackles for loss, defensive ends Sean Condon (6-3, 250) and Bryan Graupman (6-3, 232), who have combined for 6.5 sacks, ball-hawking safeties James Dowgin (6-2, 187) and Matt Upham (5-11, 205) and senior corner mike Siegersma (6-1, 195). Dowgin is tops in the Frontier with four interceptions.

That's a who's-who list of great defenders in the Frontier, and the Lights will have to be as sharp offensively as they have been all season in order to put points on the board. Northern had ripped off a three-game winning streak after losing to Carroll, and was averaging 45 points per game. But since, the Lights have suffered back-to-back losses to Rocky Mountain College and Southern Oregon, and their touchdown output has dwindled in that stretch. But what's hurt Northern the most is turnovers. In its two losses, which knocked the Lights out of the NAIA Top 25, and put them behind in the Frontier title chase, the Lights have thrown seven interceptions and lost two fumbles, while scoring a total of just 41 points in eight quarters on the road.
"Turnovers have hurt us the last couple of games," Samson said. "And last week at Southern Oregon, we played great for three quarters, and just had one miserable quarter. Again, we just didn't execute. We had a couple of drops in the end zone, and we turned the ball over and gave their (Raider) offense too many extra chances.

"That's something we have to get fixed because this game against Carroll is a big one," he continued. "The next three games are all big ones at home. We still have a lot to play for. We have to realize we still can achieve all our goals this season, but offensively, we have got to be much better with our execution and we have to take care of the football."

Despite the turnovers, Northern certainly has the offense to move the ball against even the Saints' vaunted defense, which yields 188 yards passing and just 108 on the ground. Travis Dean played the entire game in Helena, and played quite well, but this time around, Northern has senior starter Derek Lear back under center. And Northern's receivers should play a key role, especially senior leaders Orin Johnson and Brandt Montelius, who have combined for 61 catches and nearly 900 yards on the season. Sophomore Dylan Woodhall is also continuing to improve each week. He is averaging a Frontier best 20 yards per reception.

But for the passing game to really open up, Northern must get things going on the ground. During its win streak, freshman tailback Zach McKinley averaged 131 yards per game, but the Lights have been slowed some in recent weeks. McKinley still averages 103 yards per game, which is third in the Frontier, and he has 755 yards for the season, and he did find some success against a powerful Carroll front seven last time out.

"Their (Carroll) defense is very, very good," Samson said. "They always have been. It's their trademark, and every year they have an outstanding defense. But we feel like we can be pretty good on offense too. We just have to execute and play smart. And we have to put points on the board. When you play against a defense as solid as Carroll's, and against a team like they have, you have to execute when you get scoring chances. You have to put points on the board, or you're playing from behind all day."

Northern's defense is very good too.

In spite of giving up 55 points last week at Southern Oregon, the Lights are still the No. 1 rushing defense in the Frontier, and they are still among the top three in both total defense and pass defense. Senior defensive end Tyler Phillips is having a strong season with three sacks, while senior safety Josh Baum leads the Lights with 51 total tackles.

But now, Northern's defense must quickly shift gears, from SOU's high-flying passing attack, to Carroll's stellar run game. The Saints are No. 1 in the Frontier and ranked nationally in rushing, with Rinker (5-9, 205) leading the way behind one of the biggest offensive lines in Frontier history. Carroll averages 295 up front, and has as many as three potential All-Americans on the line. Meanwhile, Rinker is second in the Frontier averaging 134 yards per game. He's already over 1,000 for the season, and he's got a great threat alongside him in senior quarterback Dakota Stonehouse (6-1, 205), who has rushed for 527 yards on the season, but beat the Lights with his arm last month. Stonehouse threw for three TD's in Carroll's win last month, and he has speedy targets to throw to in Jared Mayernik, Dylan Simac and Anthony Clarke, while Blomquist will also play fullback and has caught several TD's out of the backfield.

Still, as good as Stonehouse is, and as much speed as Carroll has one the edges, the focus for Northern will be stopping the run, just as it did last month in Helena. And that job falls on MSU-N's front, with the likes of Weston Mudge, Logan Nathe, Tyler Craig, and linebackers Jordan Van Voast, Kaimi Kanehailua and David Arteaga.

"We told the guys, we're going from one extreme to the other," Samson said. "Last week, it was all passing, and this week, we're focused on stopping a team that loves to run right at you. We don't expect Carroll to change what they do. And what they want to do is run right at you and let that big offensive line wear you down.

"We know their quarterback can make big plays, especially when he gets out of the pocket, he's really dangerous," he added. "But we also understand, they want to have success running the ball. So we've got to be ready for that. We just have to play very physical defensive football, because they (Saints) are a very physical football team."
Perhaps as big a factors as any in Saturday's game will be momentum and confidence. The Lights have shown this season that when things get rolling, they can be as good as anybody in the Frontier. They also learned that they can have success against Carroll's vaunted offensive attack and can move the ball on what is a tremendous Carroll defense.

And with so much at stake for both teams in this game, confidence and momentum might just decide the outcome. Carroll is in the lead in the race to the Frontier title, but Northern still has some fate of its own. With a win Saturday, the Lights too would be right back in the thick of things, and Northern has two more home games coming to close out the regular season.

"Even if we had one win or were having a really bad season, I don't think it would be hard to get up for this game," Johnson said. "I think we came home from that Carroll game feeling like we played a lot better than the score showed. They (Saints) are a very good team. But we feel like we are a very good team too. We did a lot of things in that game that gave us a lot of confidence.

"It's a big game," Samson said. "Carroll's got a lot to play for right now and so do we. We're not out of this thing. But we have to go out and believe we can get it done on Saturday. We have to have that belief right from the start. We have to play smart, and fast and physical, and get back to doing the things we do well. If we do that, take care of what we can control, then we'll be fine."

Saturday's game between the Lights and Saints will kick off at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium. It's Breast Cancer Awareness Day at Northern and fans are asked to wear pink to the game. Northern is home to host Montana Tech next Saturday night, while Carroll returns home to host Southern Oregon.

**Offense vs Defense**

**Lights (4-3, 4-3) vs No. 7 Carroll (5-1, 6-1)**

Saturday at 1 p.m. in Blue Pony Stadium
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