Game Day Feature: They've always given OJ the ball

MSU-Northern's Orin Johnson, from the proud tradition of Cut Bank, has been one of the most reliable and versatile receivers in Lights history

By George Ferguson
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When it comes to high school football players flooding into the Frontier Conference, you instantly think of schools like Helena Capitol, CMR, Bozeman, Billings West, Polson, Miles, City, the list could go on.

But the Frontier wouldn't be what it is without players from the small schools too, and that rings especially true over the years at Montana State University-Northern. And one of those small programs that's been particularly good to the Lights is Cut Bank High School.

Cut Bank has a strong football tradition that dates back to the powerhouse teams of the late 80's and early 90's, but in modern times, as it relates to the Lights, Cut Bank produced Northern great Orin Johnson, and the Lights are so thankful it did.

Johnson, now in his senior season at Northern, has been one of the most steady and reliable Lights in years. He's basically a four-year starter and has played more downs than any Northern receiver in recent history. And he's leaving behind a legacy that will not be forgotten any time soon, and that legacy all began for him playing for the Purple and Gold Wolves in high school

"That program did so much for me," Johnson said of his high school alma mata. "Coach Schilling was a huge influence on me, not only as an athlete but as a person. The history of our program was important too, I knew about the Kowalski's and all the success of those great teams they had. You learn about that Cut Bank tradition growing up."

Another coach of Johnson's in high school helped pave the way for him to come to Havre too.

"Hugo Anderson, who coached at Northern for a little while," Johnson said. "He came up and helped coach when I was in high school, and he really helped establish that connection with Northern. He was another big influence on me, and it's pretty cool to look back and see how all that worked out."

To say it's worked out for Johnson, and for Northern would be an understatement. After red-shirting in 2009, Johnson has racked up more than 30 catches in each of his four years as a Light. As a freshman, he caught 30 balls for 355 yards and five scores while playing alongside another former Cut Bank great, Matt Stuart.

And it was during that freshman season where Johnson created what was his most memorable touchdown to date, and with that catch, he realized he could be a great player at the Frontier Conference level for years to come.
"We weren't having a great season, but we played a wild game against Western in Havre and it went into overtime," Johnson said. "And I was able to catch the game-winning touchdown. I've had a lot of memorable moments in my Northern career, but that one stands out because it really showed me that I could play at this level. It showed me that the team and the coaches trusted me to make plays. So that was a big one for me."

Actually, the team and the coaches have always trusted Johnson to make plays, and did so upon his arrival from Cut Bank. Originally, Johnson wasn't slated to red-shirt. Instead, the coaches saw the great potential in the 6-0, 200-pound speedster, who was a Class B All-State quarterback, a great basketball player, and an outstanding center fielder for the Tri-County Cardinals back in the day.

However, Johnson did red-shirt in 2009, then hit the ground running the next year. And, due to his superior athleticism, Northern put the ball in his hands early and often. For the last four years, Johnson has played multiple receiver spots, has run the ball as a wildcat QB, has carried the ball out of the backfield and has returned punts and kickoffs. And there's no question, if needed, he could play defense too.

In his sophomore season, he led the Lights with 51 grabs for 457 yards and seven scores. In his junior campaign, he totaled 44 catches for 544 yards and two scores, and all three of those years, he was never the No. 1 receiver in the offense. Those numbers just go to show how reliable, athletic and valuable Johnson truly is. To put it another way, he's one of those players that can do it all, and don't come around very often.

"He (Johnson) has never been a flashy player and really never gained the recognition that I think he has deserved," MSU-N offensive coordinator Kyle Samson said. "But he has been a four-year starter for us and, I always knew as a play caller that we could count on him to make the play, especially in critical situations. He doesn't care at all about stats or individual awards, he's a true team-first player and all he cares about is winning.

"My goal has always been to make in impact wherever I can," Johnson said. "It's been really cool knowing that they (coaches) trust me with the ball, and have always gotten me involved in this offense. I've never cared where they put me, I just make the most out of those opportunities and try to make plays for this team. Until this year, I've never really been the main guy at receiver, and while it's nice to catch the 50-yard touchdown pass, I've always looked at it as, I'll do whatever it takes to help this offense, to help this team win games. That's all I've ever really wanted to do."

And while Johnson has helped the Northern offense a lot in his years, he is the main receiver this season. With three games left, he's already got 42 grabs for a career-high 552 yards. He's scored five touchdowns, and he averages 80 yards per game and an outstanding 13 yards per catch. Once again, Johnson is proving to be as reliable as they come, and it's no coincidence that the Lights are having the best season of his career as a result.

"I've been able to learn from the best," Johnson said. "I have played with a lot of great receivers in my career, guys who were the main target out there. I learned a lot from guys like Matt Stuart and Kyle Johnston, and this year, it's my turn to be in that role. So I've just kind of picked up where they left off, and it's worked out well so far.

"It's great to play in this offense," he continued. "Derek (Lear) and I have a great connection that we developed a long time ago. It is pretty rare to play with same quarterback for four years, and we have developed a pretty deadly connection. It just seems like we're always on the same page. So that's another big part of the reason this season has gone so well for me."

And Johnson's senior season has gone well. But as a whole, his career can't be underestimated. The impact Johnson's athletic ability has had on MSU-N's spread offense can't really be measured in just statistics. For four years, Johnson has made plays for the Lights, and he's touched the ball well over 300 times in nearly 40 games. He's been a team leader, and he's been one of those rare student-athletes that you can just look at and know he represents his team, his school, the community and himself the right way.

Johnson's impact at Northern will be felt for years to come. His impact is unmeasurable, and in essence, that's all he's ever wanted to do. Ever since he came to Northern from the proud tradition of Cut Bank football, all he's ever wanted to do is make an impact.
"OJ (Johnson), in my mind is one of the best all-round players that has ever played in this program. He is one of my favorite players that I have ever coached because of his competitiveness and overall love for the game," Samson said. "He is one of the most competitive people that I have been around and it shows with how he competes each Saturday. He always brings a lot of character and laughter to the offensive room and always has a good joke or two that puts a smile on your face.

"He will always have a special place in my heart with what he has done on and off the field, and especially the way he has treated my family and my son Troy," he continued. "He is a hero to my son Troy and Troy loves to come watch OJ at practice during the week and on game days. He's going to be a tough one to try and replace this offseason and I know I will miss the heck out of him after this season.

"It's been a lot of fun," Johnson said. "It's been an honor to play in this program. I've been lucky. I'm lucky to have had great coaches and influences in high school and up here. I've been lucky to have played with so many really good players. I'm lucky that I've been on the field as much as I have and have made as many plays I have. My goal, from the day I got here was to make an impact somewhere. That's all I wanted to do, wither it was on special teams, or catching passes or running the ball, wherever they wanted me to be, I just wanted to make an impact and help the team. That's all I've ever wanted to do."

OJ, you've accomplished that goal and then some. The impact you've made at Northern will be ever-lasting. Mission accomplished.