For the third straight week the Montana State University-Northern football team struggled in Frontier Conference play.

And after the Lights suffered a 42-14 loss to the powerhouse Carroll Saints on Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium in Havre, it marked the third straight loss for the Lights as well. The Lights started the 2013 season with a 4-1 record, but have fallen to 4-4 after the three game slide to Rocky Mountain, Southern Oregon, and now Carroll.

A big reason for the recent struggles comes from the offensive side of the ball. Early in the season the Lights showed balance and the ability to make big plays on the ground and through the air.

In two of the last three losses the Lights have scored 14 or fewer points. On Saturday the Lights scored 14 on two Travis Dean touchdown passes, but on a less positive note, Dean earned his opportunity to lead the offense after two early Derek Lear interceptions, including a 45-yard pick six by the Carroll defense. The offense did total nearly 400 yards on a good Carroll defense, but struggled to settle into any rhythm after three thrown interceptions, negative drives, and costly mistakes, it was just too much to once again overcome.

"It just comes down to discipline and kids playing hard," MSU-N Lights head coach Mark Samson said. "One time we had penalty, penalty, penalty, and that doesn't do you any good."

**Freebies**

Turnovers are a momentum killer and ruin any chance of a win by most counts. But giving the ball away to a team as good as the No. 7 ranked Carroll Saints, those turnovers are magnified, and often turned into points.

Starting quarter back Derek Lear had two interceptions in the first quarter. And after coming on in relief, backup quarterback Dean also had a pick on a promising drive.

Lear's first pick came with 5:32 left to play in the first quarter. The Lights were in the red zone, but James Dowgin ended the Lights' threat with a pick at the eight-yard line. The Lights would have tied the contest as they were trailing 7-0. The Saints did punt on the ensuing possession, but Lear's second interception came at the 1:45 mark in the first quarter on the Lights' ensuing possession. This time the result was a 45-yard return and score by the Saints' Sean Blomquist to give the Saints a 14-0 lead.

The two crucial picks were enough to give Dean his chances with the starting offense, but even he found out how tough the opposing defensive pressure was. 3:53 left in the third quarter and a pass in and out of
Dylan Woodhalls hands landed in the hands of the Saints’ Tyson Errnst. Carroll took advantage of the free possession once again, this time scoring three plays later to take a 35-7 lead.

Backwards

Positive momentum is also crucial in the game of football, but so are positive yardage plays and drives. There were several cases on Saturday where the Lights found themselves moving the ball in the wrong direction, enduring any shot at points, as well giving the potent Saints the ball back.

Nine minutes into the second quarter the Lights took over on their own 20-yard line after a missed field goal by the Saints. Zach McKinley gave the Lights a spark with a 29-yard burst up the middle to put the offense near the 50-yard line. It was a great start that quickly went wrong as the Lights then committed offensive pass interference, let Dean get sacked, and got called for a delay of game penalty to put the offense back on their own 20 in a third and 39-yard situation. On third down Dean surprised everybody with a punt in an effort to not give up a turnover or great field position to the Saints.

A similar drive occurred in the third quarter when the Lights trailed 21-7, but marched down to the Saints 26. But knocking on the door to a much needed score, the Lights were called for holding on two straight plays, then gave up another sack for negative seven yards. This time on fourth and 34 on their own 47-yardline, the Lights punted again after a negative drive. This time the Saints turned the opportunity into an 8-yard receiving touchdown by Kyle Griffith on the ensuing possession.

Tipping the Scales

Size and strength are key, looking at the rosters, it easy to see that the Lights' defense is undersized compared to the Saints line, especially up front where the Saints' offensive line averages 295 pounds.

And the Lights' defense faced the Saints' offense on 11 different drives on Saturday. The Saints turned that matchup into five scores. But it is hard to ask a defense to stay on the field for that many drives, several of which ate up serious time from the clock.

"Our defense just isn't designed to go against an offense that is 290 or 295-pounds across the line like Carroll is." Samson said. "We just can't do that, we got worn down and that made it harder and harder to come up with stops."

But the defense battled and did play well throughout. Northern forced four punts by the Saints, as well as forced a missed field goal early on in the second quarter. In all, the MSU-N defense has battled Carroll's vaunted rushing attack well this season. In Helena, and in Havre, Northern's defense never gave up, never quit and made the Saints work for everything they got, and that's a big reason why the MSU-N defense is highly ranked this season and highly regarded.