Lights ready to brighten the night
Northern looks to get on track against Montana Tech under the lights of Blue Pony Stadium
By George Ferguson
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Over there were two good football teams in desperate need of a win, it would be the Montana State University-Northern Lights and the Montana Tech Orediggers. And one of them is going to get that much-needed win on Saturday night.

The Lights (4-4, 4-4), losers of three straight games, and the Orediggers (2-5, 2-5), who have lost five out of their last six meet Saturday night inside Blue Pony Stadium. Kickoff in Havre is set for a special time of 6:30 p.m. due to Havre High's playoff game against Miles City Saturday afternoon.

And playing under the lights is something Northern has thrived on in the past. Since 2004, the Lights are 5-1 in night games at Blue Pony Stadium, including a rousing Friday night win over Montana Tech back in 2008.

Still, Northern is struggling coming in. Since beating UM-Western back on Sept. 29, and achieving a No. 18 national ranking, things have not gone well for the Lights. MSU-N has lost three straight games, all coming against nationally-ranked opponents in Rocky Mountain College, Southern Oregon and last week's 42-14 home loss to Carroll College. In those three losses the Lights are averaging just 18 points on offense, giving up nearly 500 yards of offense on defense and MSU-N quarterbacks have thrown nine interceptions during that stretch.

Those numbers were a recipe for disaster, and the current losing streak took Northern out of the Frontier Conference title race and any chance of getting into the NAIA playoffs.

"We're not playing good football at all right now," Northern head coach Mark Samson said. "And hopefully, that's something we can turn around in these next two games. These last three games have been very disappointing because we had put ourselves in a pretty good position in this league. But we haven't played as well since, we haven't executed on offense or defense, at least to the level we're capable of. The turnovers have really hurt us, but there are a lot of things we haven't done well. It isn't just one thing.

"But the kids have come back from that Carroll game with a really good attitude," he continued. "They understand we still have plenty of things to play for. We can finish this season in a good way. They are upbeat and I think they are pretty excited for this game. I think they're looking forward to playing a night game at home. That's always kind of exciting and it's something different."

While Northern's struggles have come mid-season, Tech's have been year-long. After winning a share of the Frontier championship last season, a season which included a 21-13 victory over Northern in Butte, the Orediggers, under third-year head coach Chuck Morrell, just haven't been able to duplicate that magic.

A big reason why is inconsistency at the quarterback position. Tech has started three different QB's, and together, they have accounted for just 10 touchdowns all season. Junior college transfer Herman Tapley (6-
(2, 220) started the year, while Brian Schwartzkoph has had his turn as well. Tech finally turned to true freshman Dawson Reardon, who engineered a win over Dickinson State two weeks ago, but Reardon is injured now, and the Diggers' will go back to Tapley, who has 1,149 yards and seven TD's with five interceptions, but is suited to thrive in Tech's speedy, no-huddle spread offense.

The Diggers' have not been quite as good on defense this season, though they still post credible numbers. Tech is third in the Frontier in scoring defense, allowing just 27 points per game. The Orediggers are also fourth in total defense and have been stout against the run, allowing just 168 rushing yards per outing. Tech is also third in the league against the pass, but one area the Orediggers have struggled this season is to get turnovers. Tech is way down in turnover margin this season, as are the Lights, so that could be an interesting factor in the outcome of Saturday night's game.

"I still think they (Orediggers) are a pretty good football team," Samson said. "They have some very good players. I just think, they have had some issues at the quarterback position, and their defense maybe isn't quite at the level they were last season. But they are still a talented football team. They are physical and they play fast on offense. So we know they'll come in here just as hungry for a win as we are."

While the Orediggers are clearly not the same team they were in 2012, they have the same running back, only he's a year older and probably even better. Junior Pat Hansen (5-9, 185) averages 105 yards per game on the ground, and he's already racked up an astounding 3,363 yards and 33 scores in less than three full seasons. Hansen has just four TD's this season, but he'll certainly be the focal point for a Northern defense which is adept at stopping the run. Converted quarterback Clay Cavander (5-9, 170) will also be involved in different ways in Tech's offense, while Alec Bray (5-11, 175) is a stellar outside receiver.

Despite back-to-back lopsided losses, the Lights are still one of the better defenses in the conference, especially against running teams. Northern allows just 116 yards per game on the ground, which is second only to Carroll. And that Northern run defense, led by tackles Weston Mudge and Logan Nathe, as well as ends Tyler Phillips and Tyler Craig, and middle linebacker Kaimi Kanheluia, will be focused on shutting Hansen down Saturday night. Craig has a team-high eight tackles for loss, while Mudge and Nathe each have four. Safeties Josh Baum and Hunter Chandler are also excellent in run support. Baum leads the Lights with 60 stops, while Chandler is right behind with 59.

"He's a really good running back," Samson said of Hansen. "He's had some good games against us in the past. And on defense, we need to get back to being really good fundamentally. We need to play smart, fast, physical defense."

Northern needs to get back to taking care of the ball offensively too. The Lights have been using backup quarterback Travis Dean as of late, as senior starter Derek Lear has really struggled at times. And both will likely see action Saturday night.

Meanwhile, MSU-N's struggles haven't been limited to just the passing game, instead, the Lights' productivity has dipped all around. Freshman running back Zach McKinley still averages 99 yards per game, and he's closing in on a coveted 1,000-yard season. But in Northern's three-game losing streak, McKinley has just 205 yards and one touchdown, and that's something the Lights are hoping to remedy Saturday night. In the air, Northern has still hit the big play on occasion, but the Lights have fallen to the middle of the Frontier in scoring, total offense and pass offense in recent weeks.

"We just have to execute better," Samson said. "It's really that simple. It comes down to executing and making plays, and we haven't been doing a good job of that at all recently. The kids are still working very hard in practice, and hopefully, we turn some of those things around Saturday night. I know this football team, both offensively and defensively, is capable of good things.

And the Lights are certainly still a team capable of lighting up the scoreboard. Even in last week's loss to Carroll, Northern totaled over 400 yards of offense and found success with the big play. And with weapons like McKinley, Orin Johnson, Brandt Montelius, Dylan Woodhall and Jake Messerly, who scored on a 74-yard pass play from Dean last week, the Lights can certainly put a lot of pressure on a Tech defense led by All-Conference linebacker Mike Touzinsky (6-2, 215) and defensive linemen Mike Waldman (6-3, 245) and Jacob Workman (6-0, 240). Touzinsky has a team-high 62 tackles on the season.

So there no question, Saturday night's game will come down to for both teams, execution, something neither the Lights nor Orediggers have done well lately. But for a Northern team with aspirations of
finishing the season with two wins at home, Saturday night's battle with the Orediggers, who the Lights now only play once a season, is one they will be excited and ready for.

"If we have an advantage right now, it's playing at home," Samson said. "And I think having the game at night is something that will have our kids fired up and ready to go. But more so, they'll be fired up and ready because they want to win again. They want to get back to playing like we were a month ago. And they have the opportunity to do that against a team I still believe is a very good football team in Montana Tech."

Saturday night's game between the Lights and Orediggers kicks off at 6:30 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium. The Lights have a bye next week before wrapping up the season Nov. 16 at home against RMC. Tech travels to rival UM-Western next Saturday.

**Night Game Fun**

**Lights (4-4, 4-4) vs Montana Tech (2-5, 2-5)**  
Saturday at 6:30 p.m.  
Blue Pony Stadium

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**Viewing:** http://www.msun.edu/athletics  
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