Heartache: Silent Night: Orediggers 32, Lights 31
Tech steals a win from Northern on a last second hail Mary pass
By George Ferguson
November 4, 2013

It was supposed to be the perfect ending to a magical day of football in Havre. It was supposed to be the night the Montana State University-Northern Lights put an end to a three-game losing streak against a tough, Frontier Conference rival.

Instead, Saturday night’s game ended in a nightmarish way for the Lights, who watched Montana Tech score on a 36-yard, hail Mary touchdown as time expired. Herman Tapley’s pass to Zack Kinney lifted the Orediggers to a 32-31 victory Saturday night at Blue Pony Stadium, and sent the Lights to their fourth straight loss.

Tech (3-5, 3-5), which rallied from second-half deficits of 28-10 and 31-20, had two cracks at a final touchdown. The first, with just over :13 left was batted away by Northern defenders in the endzone. But that play left one second on the clock, and Tapley threw a high arcing pass that seemingly fell right into Kinney’s arms, completing what was an improbable Oredigger comeback.

"This hurts, it feels really bad," Northern senior captain Orin Johnson said following the devastating loss. "It feels like we beat them (Orediggers) in every aspect tonight. So to lose on a play like that, it’s a tough pill to swallow."

The Lights did seem to dominate for much of the game, especially offensively. Northern racked up 542 yards of offense and 31 first downs. And after the Lights broke a 7-7 tie in the second quarter, they held the lead right up until Tapley’s bomb landed in Kinney’s arms and the Orediggers rushed the field in triumph.

"I’m very proud of the way this team doesn’t quit," Tech head coach Chuck Morrell said. "It has been a difficult season, but at no point has this team ever gotten down or given up. They just keep fighting and that’s what they did tonight.

"All year, our goal has been to have a chance to win in the fourth quarter, and you work on plays like that all the time in practice," he continued. "But rarely do you get the opportunity to execute one in a game. But because this team kept fighting, we had a chance tonight. And Zack went up and made a great play on the ball."

Tech’s final drive started with just over a minute left in the game, and Tapley completed a couple of deep sideline routes to get the ball up to midfield. He also scrambled for a big gain on third down, and the Orediggers benefitted from still having two timeouts left. Still, Northern’s defense stood tall around the 40-yard-line, and when a Tapley pass to the right side went incomplete, there was time for only two more plays, and Tech was out of timeouts. Unfortunately for the Lights, the last play would give the Diggers’ a miracle win.
"I thought (Tapley) played with a lot of composure tonight," Morrell said. "He didn't get rattled at all, he stayed focused on moving on to next play even when things didn't go our way. He gave our receivers some opportunities to run with the ball, and he got a lot of air under that last throw to give Zack a chance."

Like many night games before at Blue Pony Stadium, Saturday night's affair featured plenty of exciting offense. After a quiet first quarter which saw the Lights score on a Zach McKinley touchdown run to lead 7-0, it was pure fireworks from there.

Tech tied the game on short Pat Hansen run early in the second, but Northern responded with two big strikes. On Northern's first full possession of the second quarter, Travis Dean, who started in place of senior Derek Lear, hit on big pass plays to Jake Messerly and Orin Johnson, setting up a 14-yard McKinley TD run. And with just :37 left in the half, the Lights went up 21-7 when Dean threw a beautiful ball up the ride side, hitting Messerly in stride for a 29-yard score.

However, Tech's no-quit attitude was on display, because instead of going down by two TD's at the break, the Diggers' drove down the field and got a Matt Berg field goal as time expired to cut into Northern's lead at 21-10.

But the Lights played at a high level on offense, and they answered Berg's field goal early in the third quarter. McKinley ripped off a 28-yard run right through the middle of the Tech defense, and Johnson capped off the drive with a 13-yard run out of the "wildcat". That left the score at 28-10, and Tech mustered only another Berg field goal the entire third quarter.

However, the fourth quarter, and especially the final two minutes, belonged to the Diggers', who were certainly desperate and hungry for a win. Coming in Tech, the defending Frontier champions, had lost five of their last six games, and they played like a team possessed in the final 15 minutes.

However, the Diggers' quickly cut the lead to 28-20 on the first of three fourth-quarter TD passes by Tapley. And with 14 minutes left in the game, the Diggers' had plenty of time to play catch up. Northern's defense stood tall for a good portion of the period. The Lights stuffed a Tech fourth-down try with just over 10 minutes to go, and a Tyler Craig sack helped stall another Tech drive later on. MSU-N also tacked on a 31-yard Jordan Reueschhoff field goal at the 4-minute mark, making it 31-20 and a two-possession game.

What ensued was a wild finish. The Orediggers' chance to win the game was a result of another Tapley miracle in the endzone. With 2:20 left in the game, Tapley connected with James Roberts on a 30-yard TD pass, one that went right by the out-stretched arms of a Northern defender. And after Northern stopped Tech on a two-point conversion try, the score was left at 31-26. Brandt Montelius then recovered Tech's onside kick attempt, and Northern did what it could to run the clock down on the ensuing possession, but eventually, the Lights had to give the ball back to Tapley, who wound up throwing for 364 yards on a staggering 51 attempts.

"It feels awesome," Morrell said. "Just to see the guys bounce back is something that's really ... my hat's off to the young men in this program. They don't know the word quit."

Dean, McKinley and the entire Northern offense certainly had their way with Tech's defense Saturday night. Playing the entire way, Dean threw for 303 yards and a score, while McKinley rushed for 164 yards on 28 carries. Johnson finished with five catches for 59 yards and 40 yards rushing, while Messerly hauled in three passes for 89 yards and Dylan Woodhall had three catches for 80 yards. Montelius added three grabs for 54 yards.

Not to be outdone though, Tech's offense rolled up 536 yards, including 136 yards on 28 carries for Hansen. Kinney, one of the heroes, caught an astounding 12 passes for 143 yards. Defensively, the Lights got 11 tackles form Victor Fermin and another nine from Kaimi Kanheailua. Craig registered eight stops to go along with Northern's lone sack, while Jordan Van Voast also had eight tackles. Northern didn't come up with any turnovers Saturday night, while the MSU-N offense gave the ball away twice, though only one miscue led directly to Tech points.

Still, the loss was painful for the Lights, who had aspirations of not only beating a rival on Saturday night, but finishing the season with two straight wins at home. Now, Northern will have to spend its bye week regrouping, before closing the season against Rocky Mountain College Nov. 16. Meanwhile, Tech travels to UM-Western this Saturday.
"It's going to be tough to forget this one," Johnson said. "But we have another game, we have to keep on playing. We'll come back and fight against Rocky for sure."

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**First Quarter**
MSU-N - Zach McKinley 1 run (Jordan Rueschhoff kick), 5:27  
Drive: 10 Plays, 80 Yards

**Second Quarter**
MT - Pat Hansen 4 run (Matt Berg kick), 10:07  
Drive: 11 Plays, 85 Yards
MSU-N - McKinley 14 run (Rueschhoff kick), 6:27  
Drive: 8 Plays, 75 Yards
MSU-N - Jake Messerly 29 pass from Travis Dean (Rueschhoff kick), 0:34  
Drive: 13 Plays, 80 Yards
MT - Berg 28 field goal, 0:00  
Drive: 6 Plays, 45 Yards

**Third Quarter**
MSU-N - Orin Johnson 13 run (Rueschhoff kick), 11:12  
Drive: 5 Plays, 80 Yards
MT - Berg 38 field goal, 5:01  
Drive: 6 Plays, 57 Yards

**Fourth Quarter**
MT - James Roberts 16 pass from Herman Tapley (Berg kick), 14:06  
Drive: 13 Plays, 87 Yards
MSU-N - Reueschhoff 31 field goal, 6:01  
Drive: 7 Plays, 57 Yards
MT - Roberts 30 pass from Tapley (Pass failed), 2:20  
Drive: 8 Plays, 80 Yards
MT - Zack Kinney 36 pass from Tapley, 0:00  
Drive: 7 Plays 77 Yards

**INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS**


**TACKLES** - MT: Joe Mitzel 10, Ryan Jones 8, Mike Touzinsky 7, David Meis 6; MSU-N: Victor Fermin 11, Kaimi Kanheailua 9, Tyler Craig 8, Jordan Van Voast 8, Josh Baum 7, Tanner Varner 6.
Attendance: N/A

Weather: 44 degrees and cloudy at kickoff

Frontier Conference Standings

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Saturday
Montana Tech 32, MSU-Northern 31
Eastern Oregon 57, Dickinson State 3
Carroll College 48, Southern Oregon 30
Rocky Mountain 47, UM-Western 10

Saturday, Nov. 9
Rocky Mountain at Carroll College
Eastern Oregon at Southern Oregon
Montana Tech at UM-Western

Saturday, Nov. 16
MSU-Northern vs Rocky Mountain
Carroll College at Dickinson State
Eastern Oregon at UM-Western
Southern Oregon at Montana Tech

Montana State University-Northern running back Zach McKinley, right, races towards a touchdown during Saturday night’s Frontier Conference football game at Blue Pony Stadium. Montana Tech beat the Lights on a last-second hail Mary pass.