Game Day Feature: One more time for the quarterback
MSU-Northern's Derek Lear has set records and battled ups and downs in a special career
By Daniel Horton
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It is hard to come up with a name that has become better known in the Frontier Conference then that of Montana State University-Northern quarterback Derek Lear.

And with a lot of NAIA schools bringing in junior college transfers to help propel a program, it is also getting harder and harder to find a four-year starter amongst from the Montana high school ranks. But after redshirting his freshman season, and winning the starting quarterback job outright the next season that is exactly what Lear has been for the Lights, a four-year starter with a long list of big games, accomplishments, and records to go along with it.

But Lear isn’t just one of the better quarterbacks to wear a Lights’ uniform in recent history, he was also a standout football and basketball player at Fairfield High School. And knowing he had a chance to continue either sport at the college level, getting a chance at the starting job at Northern played a major role in landing the quarterback who would eventually carve his name in the MSU-N record books...

“My biggest decision was going to be basketball or football,” Lear said. “And I guess knowing that there was a possibility of starting for four years up here, that was big in my decision. Also, Mickey Miller played up here and I played with him in high school. We pretty much decided to come up here and play where we would actually get a chance to play and play young instead of sitting on a bench somewhere else.

“And we were always successful in high school, so that was in my mind coming up here,” Lear added about being able to find so much collegiate success. “I just wanted to be the best I could be, and I didn’t know I would start for four years, but I knew that was a possibility and I think that made me push myself during my redshirt year.”

After sitting out his first year in Havre as a redshirt, Lear got the opportunity to compete for the starting job against fellow recruit Matt Reyant. But Lear won the starting job outright, and has had turned in a lot of memorable performances ever since.

But if you look hard enough at any athletes’ history, you will find some areas that turn heads for less than positive reasons. And while bright spots and big games mostly highlight Lear’s career, he too has had his share of rough patches. Facing Dickinson State on the road in the first game of the season Lear suffered a knee injury that sidelined him for the following road game against Carroll College. To make things worse, he has also been fighting an injury in this throwing arm all season long, that causes more problems during practice than in games. But it hasn’t just been the injuries this season, Lear will be the first to admit that he has had some tough times on the field as well. His ups and downs resulted in watching Travis Dean take hold of the offense two weeks ago against Montana Tech, as well as limited playing time against Carroll three weeks ago and against Southern Oregon nearly a month ago.
But something that has made Lear so successful over the years is his work ethic and ability to overcome adversity. His on the field issues could always be fixed, and to him it was worse having to sit back and watch his teammates practice and play after his injuries.

“It is tough to go through a season without an injury, but if you do, you are at practice getting in on every rep,” Lear said. “But there were times at practice this year where I was standing on the sideline watching everybody else practice. It takes time coming back from injury to get back on track with your receivers, and that is the biggest thing I have tried to overcome this season with my injuries.

“And after an interception,” Lear added. “It is one of those things where you have to forget about it and move on. But after the game and after some of the weeks go by, you have to look back at what you did wrong and know why those were wrong, as well as look at the positives and know why those were positives. That is what I have been trying to figure out this season as things seem not to be going as well as other years, I have been going back to film and trying to understand why some of those things are happening.”

Even with some ups and downs this year, there is nothing that can overshadow what Lear has been able to accomplish in his career at Northern.

In 2012 he was named Second-Team All-Conference and in 2011 he was named First-Team All-Conference. And to go along with his accolades, Lear also has quite the list of school records. Lear’s records include 32 completions in a game (2011/Eastern Oregon and 2012/Western), 205 completions in a season (2012), 538 completions in a career (not including 2013), 532 passing yards in a game (2012/Western), 2,798 passing yards in a season (2012), 7,125 passing yards in a career (not including 2013), a completion percentage of 84 percent in one game (2011/RMC), 64 percent completion in a season (2011), 62 percent completion in a career (not including 2013), seven touchdown passes in one game (2012/Western), 26 touchdown passes in a season (2012), and 65 touchdown passes in a career (not including 2013).

It may be hard to narrow it down to one memorable moment, but Lear will definitely remember seven touchdown passes in one game against Western.

“No matter what we tried it was working,” He said. “It seemed like everything slowed down, and the only thing I can refer it to was one of my best games in high school basketball. It seemed like the hoop was extra big and everything I put up was going in. And that is how that game was against Western, any ball I put in the air the receivers were there and making a catch.”

Lear has a lot of skills and abilities, but his work ethic got him farther than many athletes would ever imagine. Whether it was his offseason workouts, or his dedication to watching game film, there is no doubt he bettered himself by taking advantage of any and every opportunity. But being a modest player, Lear knows exactly who to credit with not only his success, but the success of the program over the years.

“It is a family up here,” Lear said about playing for the Lights. “Some of our win-loss records haven’t been quite where we would have liked them to be, but the bond that I have had with all of the coaches and players and community was big. And coach Kyle Samson constantly pushed me. Even when I was young he always told me that my time here was going to fly by and asked me how I wanted to be remembered. He pushed me every day to get me to where I am, and I give him and the rest of the coaches all of the credit for earning all of those records and finding success up here. They have been a huge part of that success.
“He’s my guy,” said Orin Johnson, a Northern senior WR who came in with Lear in the same recruiting class. “We’ve always had a great bond, but playing together here, it’s grown even stronger. We have great chemistry. We know what the other is going to do. He’s a great quarterback. We’ve known each other for a long time. It’s been a great bond on and off the field.”

Lear’s success was never easy, and he didn’t take any of it for granted. His Lights never made a run into the postseason, and they never won any conference titles along the way. But if there is one thing that will make this the perfect ending to a great career, it would be a win on Saturday in Lear’s career finale against Rocky Mountain College in Havre.

“The biggest thing is a win,” Lear said. “It would be nice to get all of us seniors on offense a touchdown and that is one of our individual goals. But whether that happens or not, the win is the biggest thing and I would love to end my career on a positive note by knocking Rocky out of the playoff race.”