A 10-game schedule, which started all the way back on Aug. 29 in Dickinson, N.D., is now down to one game. But for the Montana State University-Northern Lights, their last game is now their biggest game.

Saturday, the Lights (4-5, 4-5) will host the No. 11 Rocky Mountain Battlin’ Bears (6-3, 7-3) inside what is expected to be a snowy and cold Blue Pony Stadium. Kickoff is set for noon, with Northern’s nine seniors being honored before the contest.

And though it’s only a regular season finale for both teams, in what has been a dramatic and roller coaster of a year, there’s as much riding on Saturday’s tilt as there has been for either team in quite some time. For the Lights, Saturday is a chance to get to .500, and snap a difficult four-game losing streak in the process. That streak started against RMC back on Oct. 5 when the Bears beat the Lights 23-13 in Billings. And the stakes are even higher for RMC. Saturday’s game is simple, beat Northern and Rocky is going to the NAIA playoffs for the first time in well over a decade.

“It’s a big game for us, and it’s a big game for them,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “For us, we want to play well and get this thing turned around now. We don’t want to wait until next season for that. They (Bears) are playing to get into the playoffs. This is their chance to do that. So I expect they’ll come in here very fired up.”

The Lights are certainly no strangers to big games. Saturday’s bout will be the sixth time this season MSU-N has faced a nationally ranked opponent. The same could be said for RMC, which has three losses on its resume, but only two of them happened on the football field. Rocky was forced to forfeit its Aug. 30 win over Southern Oregon due to the use of an ineligible player, while the Bears have a pair of losses to Carroll College, by a combined nine points. The last RMC loss came just last Saturday when the Bears watched Carroll’s Connor Smith kick a game-winning 38-yard field goal as time expired, sending the Bears to a 37-35 defeat in Helena.

Rocky’s devastating setback at Carroll last Saturday is something Northern can certainly understand. The Lights had a bye last week, but in their last game, they were beaten on a 36-yard Hail Mary touchdown by Montana Tech as time expired back on Nov. 2 at Blue Pony Stadium.

“That was a difficult way to lose a football game,” Samson said. “We played really well for most of that game, but one of the things that really stands out is, we didn’t get any turnovers in that game, and we gave them (Orediggers) two. That has been the one thing this season that has really hurt us. We have turned the ball over way too much, and we’re not getting any on defense. We’re last in the conference in turnover margin. That was the case when we lost at Rocky, too. We turned it over three times and our defense didn’t create any. We’ve got to do a better job with that on Saturday.”

Indeed. The Lights are -13 in the turnover department and have given the ball away a Frontier-worst 21 times this season. RMC on the other hand, takes care of the ball very well. The Bears are +9 in the
turnover department, and that efficiency comes from an outstanding defense and the veteran play of junior quarterback Bryce Baker (6-3, 205).

Baker is having a great season, as he’s thrown for 3,030 yards and 24 touchdowns. He’s also only been intercepted five times on the year, and he’s second only to Southern Oregon’s Austin Dodge in both passing and total offense in the Frontier Conference. Baker has weapons around him, too. He’s well protected by a savvy and big offensive line, while sophomore wide receiver Andre McCullouch (6-1, 195) is one of the best in the NAIA. McCullouch has 61 grabs for 1,051 yards and 11 TDs this season. He averages a whopping 105 yards per game and a staggering 17 yards per catch. Fellow wideout Cole Cattalen (6-1, 185) is also having a big season, while running back Clint Linthicum (5-9, 210) gives the Bears balance out of the backfield.

“They (Bears) aren’t going to change what they do,” Samson said. “They love to throw it, but they’ve shown they can be balanced, too. Their quarterback is a very good football player. He doesn’t make a lot of mistakes. He can hurt you in a number of ways. He’s a really solid football player.”

The Bears, who are the second-best offensive team in the Frontier, may be high-flying, but their defense has been a brick wall for much of the season. Rocky allows only 18 points per game and is tops in the league against the pass, allowing just 197 yards through the air. That’s in large part due to the play of safeties Kyle Mai (5-11, 185) and Corey Bummer (6-0, 200), and the most productive linebacking crew in the Frontier. Rocky’s middle four, led by Travis Bertelsen (5-10, 210) on the outside and Josh Johnson (6-3, 260) in the middle, are a wrecking crew in all phases of the game, while Mai had two INTs against the Lights last month in Billings, while Johnson (80) and Bertelsen (81) have combined for 161 tackles this fall.

Still, as good as the Bears are on both sides of the ball, the Lights had plenty of success on both sides in Billings. Northern’s defense, led by senior linebackers Jordan Van Voast and David Arteaga, as well as leading tackler Josh Baum, held RMC to a season-low 226 yards passing in Billings. Stopping the run was also big for the Lights, and that falls on the likes of senior Logan Nathe and freshman Weston Mudge, while Tyler Craig, who leads the Lights with four sacks, and Tyler Phillips, who has 2.5 sacks to go along with Nathe’s 3.5, will be called upon to keep pressure on the dangerous Baker.

Northern also moved the ball well against the stout RMC defense last month, but three INTs and failed trips into the redzone held MSU-N back. Still, Northern’s offense, led by quarterbacks Derek Lear and Travis Dean, and the emergence of freshman running back Zach McKinley, has proven it can move the ball against anyone. The Lights totaled over 500 yards of offense in their last-second loss to Tech two weeks ago, and with snow and wind predicted, Northern’s running game, which is second only to Carroll, along with the sure hands of receiver Orin Johnson, could be a big advantage Saturday.

"On offense, we definitely need to be able to run the ball," Samson said. "But we also have to score points. Moving the ball and putting up big numbers is fine, but we have to put it in the endzone, and we have to eliminate the mistakes we’ve been making. We have to protect the football when we have it.

“Defensively, we have to just play smart and play physical,” Samson added. "Rocky is a team that’s going to get some big plays. You just have to make sure you limit those big plays and minimize mistakes.”

With so much at stake for the Bears, and with bad weather looming, just like it did when the Bears beat Northern in last season’s regular season finale in Billings, mistakes, or which team can make the least number of them, will likely determine who comes out on top. For Rocky, again, a win means a rare trip to the playoffs, while a win at home would send a brilliant MSU-N senior class out with a victory, and send Northern into the offseason with some positive momentum.

“We need to step up and turn this thing around,” Samson said. "We need to play a really good game, to prove to ourselves and to our fans that we’re a better team than we’ve shown the last month. I believe that’s very important for this football program. We want to end the season in a positive way, because really, next season starts with a game like this.

“So I think our kids will come out fired up and ready to go.”

Saturday’s game between Northern and RMC kicks off at noon at Blue Pony Stadium. As of press time today, The Weather Channel was calling for a high of 36 degrees with light snow showers and winds blowing up to 20 mph.