Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium started out as a celebration. It was a celebration of nine Montana State University-Northern seniors who have been an integral part of the program for the last four, and for some, five years.

And though the No. 11 Rocky Mountain Battlin’ Bears did all the celebrating by game’s end, with a 49-28 win over the Lights, on senior day, the seniors still shined bright.

Senior quarterback Derek Lear, who has battled injuries for much of what has been a rough final campaign for the Lights, showed his toughness on Saturday, by running for 50 yards and scoring an early rushing TD. Lear’s dedication to the Lights was never more evident than on the last play of the game Saturday, as he took a scary hit to the head while trying to score what would have been a touchdown that didn’t matter to the final outcome. Lear came up just short on the goal line, and was clearly hurt after the play, but the respect he’s earned around the Frontier Conference was obvious, as, instead of celebrating just making the NAIA playoffs for the first time in over a decade, many RMC players came over to check on the Northern QB.

Northern seniors made key plays all day long. Defensive end Tyler Phillips’ late touchdown was a result of a hard Logan Nathe hit on an RMC quarterback, which caused the fumble that led to Phillips’ jaunt to the endzone. Nathe, a Helena native, had several big hits on the day, while as did senior linebacker Jordan Van Voast. David Arteaga led the Lights in tackles with fellow senior Tanner Varner, while Josh Baum, another senior standout, had a huge day, recording 10 stops and taking a fake punt run, which set up a key Northern score.

On offense, wide receivers Orin Johnson and Brandt Montelius fought their hearts out too. Johnson took some key hits after catches, while Montelius had a quiet day, but he laid a bone-crunching block on an RMC defender to spring Northern running back Zach McKinley on a first-down run.

The Benchmark

The RMC defense is one of the best in the Frontier Conference, if not the NAIA. But that didn’t stop McKinley from having a career day, and capping off a historic season for the Lights.

The red-shirt freshman from Great Falls rushed for 133 yards and two scores in Saturday’s finale, and that put him over the 1,000-yard mark for the season. In all, McKinley finished his first season on the field with 1,094 yards and 12 TD’s, becoming the third Northern running back in the last seven seasons to rush for 1,000 yards. Justin Moe and Stephen Silva are the others.
McKinley’s story is remarkable, considering he spent an entire season rehabbing a serious leg injury, but he took the starting job in fall camp and never let go. He had a career-high 202 yards against Eastern Oregon and, overall, he had five 100-yard games on the season.

“Zach played very well today,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “He ran really hard against a very physical Rocky defense.”

**Rising Stars**

In the final two home games of 2013, MSU-N fans were treated to a glimpse of the future as far as wide receivers go as both red-shirt freshmen Jake Messerly and Dylan Woodhall really came of age.

Saturday, Messerly hauled in a long bomb from Lear that set up Northern’s first score, and in the second quarter, he added a highlight-reel catch on the sideline that kept a Northern dive alive. In all, Messerly caught four balls for 90 yards, and in his final two games, he had 180 yards receiving on just seven grabs, proving he’s a true big-play threat on every down.

Woodhall, playing mostly in the slot, also caught four passes Saturday, and he shows his blazing speed on kick returns, too. Together, the duo had 130 yards receiving against a good Rocky secondary Saturday, and they showed the Northern passing game is in explosive hands for years to come.

**Long Overdue**

With Saturday’s win at Blue Pony Stadium, Rocky locked up its first NAIA playoff berth in 15 seasons. The Bears were last in the playoffs in 1999, and they’ve been agonizingly close the last three seasons.

Saturday marked Rocky’s fourth straight .500 season or better, but with only two losses to Carroll College, and a forfeit to Southern Oregon, the Bears put together a season worthy of an at-large berth. Sunday, RMC found out it will travel to Morningside Saturday. Morningside was the 2012 NAIA runner-up losing to Grand View in the championship game in Rome, Ga.

"The kids were excited, and, of course, I'm happy for the kids," Rocky coach Brian Armstrong said Saturday. "Definitely a lot of hard work by lots of people, some are still here and some have graduated and moved on."