Bear of a Day: Bear Pawed: Rocky 49, Northern 28
Battlin' Bears bring Lights' season to a difficult end
By George Ferguson
November 18, 2013

It was cold, it was dark and it was dreary. A classic November football day in Havre. But the Montana State University-Northern Lights didn’t start out that way. Instead, they started out on fire.

However, the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears made sure the day ended as dreary as it looked. Northern scored on its opening possession of Saturday’s senior day finale, but the No. 11 Bears went on to blast the Lights 49-28 at Blue Pony Stadium. The win clinched a playoff berth for RMC (8-3), while the Lights ended their season at 4-6 and in a tie for fifth place in the Frontier standings. RMC will travel to Morningside for the first round of the playoffs Saturday.

Though the final score ended up being lopsided, the Lights sure didn’t play like that early on.

MSU-N’s defense forced a quick RMC three-and-out to start the game, and the Lights’ offense took little time to get going. Playing in his final game of his career, Northern senior quarterback Derek Lear threw a 53-yard strike to Jake Messerly which set the Lights up with a first-and-goal from the seven-yard-line. Two plays later, Lear ran it in from six yards out and, just four minutes in, the Lights were ahead of the Bears 7-0. Northern’s defense forced another short Rocky series and, overall, the Lights really limited the Bears and star QB Bryce Baker through the first 15 minutes. RMC did get in on a Jade Olson run just before the quarter ended, but MSU-N was right where it needed to be at 7-7 after the first period.

“We started off great,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “And for three quarters, we played pretty consistently. But the story of our season is, we go into these lulls and we just can’t fight our way out of them, and that’s what happened to us today. We just didn’t respond when we really needed to.”

The first lull came in the second stanza, and RMC took advantage. Northern’s defense continued to play well early on, but the MSU-N offense went cold. Northern missed a great opportunity inside Rocky territory midway through the quarter, and after the Lights turned it over on downs, RMC exploded. The Bears went on a three-minute, 13-play march, capped off by a Baker screen pass to Olson, giving RMC a 14-7 lead with 1:27 to go. Then, just two plays later, Lear was picked off by Chris Music in Northern territory and the Bears would add a 24-yard pass from Baker to Olson with only :26 left in the half, going up 21-7.

“Again, I thought we played well in stretches today,” Samson said. “But turnovers have been something that keeps hurting us this season, and they did again today. They scored off both turnovers, and that was a big difference.”

Northern answered the bell out of halftime and was still in good shape as a result. On the Lights’ opening drive of the half, they stalled early, but senior safety Josh Baum took a direct snap on a fake punt attempt and raced 48 yards to the RMC one-yard-line, setting up a Zach McKinley TD that pulled the Lights to within 21-14 with 10:38 left in the third.
From there, however, things unraveled for good. Rocky struck twice in less than two minutes to push the lead to 35-14. The first score came when Baker threw a short TD pass with 8:31 left in the quarter, then Lear’s second interception led to a 40-yard strike from Baker to Cole Cattelan. And though MSU-N put together a great drive near the third, which resulted in another short McKinley TD run, the RMC offense was in high gear by that point, and the Bears immediately answered McKinley’s TD with one of their own, making the score 42-21 at the end of the third quarter. Northern would add a 54-yard score by Tyler Phillips on a fumble recovery in the fourth, but it was too-little-too-late.

“They’re (Bears) very good,” Samson said. “Offensively, they did what they wanted to do against us. They played very well offensively, and they scored quickly, which is what they want. Defensively, they are a very physical football team. I thought we left some opportunities to score on the field today, but they played very well on defense, too. They came in here and played a very good game.”

In a game which was dominated by offense, the Bears put up staggering numbers. They totaled 639 yards, with Baker throwing for a whopping 529 yards and five TD’s on a stellar 38-of-48 performance. RMC also didn’t turn the ball over once while running 79 plays. Andre McCullouch had a huge day with nine catches for 165 yards and one score while Cattelan caught five passes for 105 yards and a score. The MSU-N defense, led by Tanner Varner and David Arteaga, each with 11 tackles, and Baum, who recorded 10 stops, did hold the Bears to 110 yards on the ground. Arteaga, another MSU-N senior playing his last game, had a sack, while fellow senior Logan Nathe forced the fumble that Phillips returned for a score.

“I thought the kids did a solid job,” RMC head coach Brian Armstrong said. "I'm proud of the effort. There are still things we can do better, but we'll take it."

Offensively, Northern once again piled up yards, but turnovers and missed opportunities held the Lights back. MSU-N gained 463 yards of offense, led by a huge day from McKinley. The freshman back from Great Falls rushed for 133 yards on 21 carries, while Lear scrambled for 50 more. In his last game of a record-setting career, Lear threw for 198 yards, while Messerly caught four balls for 90 yards and Dylan Woodhall had four grabs for 40 yards. Also playing in his last game, Northern great Orin Johnson caught six passes for 45 yards.

But the story of the day belonged to the Bears and their high-powered offense. RMC celebrated the win knowing the playoffs await for the first time in 15 years. Meanwhile, Northern finished the season with five straight losses after starting the year 4-1.

“Today kind of summed up our season,” Samson said. “We played pretty good football at times, but not consistently enough. We turned the ball over too much and we didn’t get enough turnovers on defense. That’s kind of how it went for us this year.

“It’s disappointing,” he added. “I know these guys wanted to go out with a win, send our seniors out with a win, but it just didn’t happen, and Rocky played very well. They’re a big part of that. It was a tough season, and we know we have a lot of work to do before next year.”

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<th>Rocky</th>
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**First quarter**

MSU-N - Derek Lear 6 run (Jordan Rueschhoff kick), 11:03
Drive: 8 Plays, 89 Yards

RMC - Jade Olson 9 run (Ryan Steska kick), 3:10
Drive: 10 Plays, 66 Yards

**Second quarter**

RMC - Olson 11 pass from Bryce Baker (Steska kick), 1:27
Drive: 8 Plays, 89 Yards

RMC - Olson 21 pass from Baker (Steska kick), 0:26
Drive: 3 Plays, 45 Yards
Third quarter

MSU-N - Zach McKinley 1 run (Rueschhoff kick), 10:38
Drive: 9 Plays, 71 Yards

RMC - Baker 8 touchdown pass (Steska kick), 8:31
Drive: 10 Plays, 78 Yards

RMC - Cole Cattelan 40 pass from Baker (Steska kick), 7:01
Drive: 4 Plays, 54 Yards

MSU-N - McKinley 1 run (Rueschhoff kick), 2:46
Drive: 10 Plays, 72 Yards

RMC - Andre McCullouch 21 pass from Baker (Steska kick), 0:58
Drive: 4 Plays, 61 Yards

Fourth quarter

RMC - Clint Linthicum 1 run (Steska kick), 6:36
Drive: 12 Plays, 75 Yards

MSU-N - Tyler Phillips 54 yard fumble return (Rueschhoff kick), 3:23
Drive: 0 Plays, 0 Yards

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<th>First downs</th>
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| Rushes-yards | 31-110 | 45-265 |
| Passing      | 38-48-0 | 18-34-2 |
| Passing yards| 529    | 198    |
| Total yards  | 639    | 463    |
| Punts-avg.   | 4-34.0 | 4-35.0 |
| Fumbles-lost | 2-1    | 0-0    |
| Penalties-yards | 5-36 | 3-33 |

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS


Attendance: N/A

Weather: 35 degrees, cloudy at kickoff
Frontier Conference Standings (Final)

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Saturday
Rocky Mountain 49, MSU-Northern 28
Carroll College 48, Dickinson State 3
Eastern Oregon 42, UM-Western 20
Southern Oregon 31, Montana Tech 10

Saturday, Nov. 23
NAIA Playoffs

Carroll College vs Georgetown
Rocky Mountain at Morningside