Fall seems like a long time ago, and winter seems like it’s never-ending. And, next fall, which marks the start of the 2014 NAIA football season is a long ways off yet.

Nevertheless, the Montana State University-Northern football team is putting the pads and helmets back on as spring football at MSU-N gets underway. Northern had to delay the start of spring drills due to continuous bad weather, but the Lights have made it through two practices this week, and head coach Mark Samson is excited to have his team outside and working hard.

“We kept having to put off the start of spring,” Samson said. “But at some point, we just had to get outside. We really couldn’t put it off any longer and couldn’t wait for the weather to get better any longer.

“So the first day was good,” he said. “It will take a while to get back into the swing of things, but it was good to get outside and run around and get started.”

Northern enters spring drills with plenty to work on according to Samson. The Lights went 4-6 in the Frontier Conference a year ago, and suffered two tough homes losses, to Montana Tech and to Rocky Mountain College to end the season.

The Lights also suffered key losses to graduation. Gone is four-year starting quarterback Derek Lear, along with four-year starting wide receiver Orin Johnson. MSU-N also lost several key offensive linemen, while the likes of linebacker Jordan Van Voast and safety Josh Baum, both of whom were All-Conference this past season, will be tough to replace on the defensive side of the ball.

The Lights do however, return some key bright spots, including running back Zach McKinley, who went over 1,000 yards as a red-shirt freshman. Also back at running back is sophomore to be Mario Gabatto, so the Lights are strong in the backfield. MSU-N also returns veteran quarterback Travis Dean for his final season. The 2014 campaign will be Dean’s first as the Lights’ full-time starter, but he has plenty of game experience from the last four years. On defense, the Lights return defensive end Tyler Craig, as well as safety/corner/punter Trevor Baum, and safety Hunter Chandler, but as a whole, Northern is pretty inexperienced heading into the spring, on defense and at the wide receiver position.

And that means the main goal of spring ball will be to get experience and get better according to Samson, who enters his 11th season at MSU-N.

“Our biggest goal is just to get the guys we have out there better,” Samson said. “We have a lot of young guys and a lot of guys who haven’t really played much in games, so our job right now is to coach them up and make them better football players. But that goes for the veterans we have, too. There isn’t a player on this team who can’t improve right now, so that’s the main goal. We just want to get out there and make sure we get better both individually and as a team every day.”
If the weather cooperates, the Lights are slated to hold 14 more spring practices, with spring drills concluding April 17. Scrimmages haven’t been scheduled yet, and Samson said, because of a lack of depth at certain positions, his team will conduct spring drills a little differently this season.

“We’re a little thin at different positions,” he said. “So how we go about things this season, we’ll have to get creative and maybe do some things a little differently than we’ve done in the past. But the goal will be the same. We just want to get better, we want to make sure we’re improving every day.”

Northern opens the 2014 season with a road trip to Montana Tech Aug. 30. The Lights’ home opener is set for Sept. 6 against Dickinson State in a nonconference game. MSU-N will play an 11-game schedule in 2014.