One day after the resignation of former Montana State University-Northern head football coach Mark Samson, the Lights were back on the practice field as they are set to open the 2014 season Aug. 30 against Montana Tech in Butte.

The Lights were led on the field by interim head coach Jake Eldridge in a two-hour session Thursday afternoon.

The team has been alternating between one and two practices a day, but after practicing twice Wednesday, Northern had just one practice that included some 11-on-11 and 7-on-7 drills.

"For the most part, it was really good," Eldridge said. "Right now we're kind of in that lull we go through in every fall camp. The guys are tired, both mentally and physically. They are probably a little more mentally tired than they would be under normal circumstances, but overall, I thought it was a good practice. They worked hard today, and our leaders did, and are doing, a great job of keeping the team going, of keeping them focused. Our older guys showed great leadership today."

Despite the controversy surrounding the program and their embattled head coach, the Lights appeared to be in good spirits and glad to be back on the field as they ran through individual and team drills. In addition to 11-on-11 and a 7-on-7 passing drill, they also ran through a hard-hitting 9-on-7 drill that focused on the run game. This drill pits the offense minus wide receivers against the defensive front seven. It turned out to be the most physical drill of the day, featuring several impressive runs by running backs Zach McKinley, Mario Gabatto and Belt freshman Hunter Croff. Of course, the fired-up Northern defense got in plenty of licks as well in what turned out to be a tough, physical and tiring practice.

And practice is just what the Lights need right now. According to Eldridge, the issues the MSU-N players have been dealing with likely only go away when the team is on the practice field, thinking about their upcoming game with Montana Tech, instead of what has transpired over the last few days.

"That's just it. The practice field is where we can forget about things, it's where we can get out and let everything go for a little while," Eldridge said. "That's what we've tried to emphasize to them the last couple days that we can come out here, both players and coaches, and lose ourselves in the game we love. And for the most part, it's been that way. Practices have been pretty focused and the guys concentrate on football and their jobs while they're out here. The only thing that's different is not hearing coach Samson's voice when it's time to change drills or periods or whatever. So that's been the obvious difference and it's tough. But the kids are doing a great job of focusing and concentrating on what they have to do."

At the end of a very competitive practice, Eldridge added some fun by making the players a proposition. He stipulated that if senior offensive lineman Rostyn Pace could catch a punt then the team would be free from conditioning and meetings that were to be held after practice.
"The coaches were just trying to keep things fun," said senior wide receiver Trevor Baum.

Then, as his entire team looked on, Pace came through in the clutch, successfully fielding the punt as cheering teammates swarmed him, their helmets held high in celebration.

In the end, it was another step forward for a football program that's had a dark cloud hanging over it since Monday, when Samson was officially placed on administrative leave. He officially resigned his position Wednesday amid controversy. "I think everybody is doing a good job of keeping together," Baum said. "We have a game coming up soon against Montana Tech that we have to prepare for, so everything else aside, I think we are doing pretty well."

For the Lights, the season must go on and the next step of the process is Saturday when they hold their first intra-squad scrimmage of fall camp. It will be the first time since the 2003 season that someone other than Samson leads the Northern football team onto the field for a scrimmage, and that fact isn't lost on Eldridge, who played for Samson at Helena Capital and at Northern, before becoming an assistant coach under his long-time mentor.

"You feel torn," Eldridge said. "Half of my mind is on coach Samson and what he and his family are going through. It's something I think about pretty regularly right now. But the other half of my mind is out here with these kids. Knowing we have a job to do, to focus on football and get this team ready for that first game. So it's kind of back and forth throughout the day."

The Lights will return to practice today, and have a planned scrimmage for Saturday at 10 a.m. at the MSU-Northern practice fields.

Note: Havre Daily News sports editor George Ferguson contributed to this report.