With the season-opening game against Montana Tech just around the corner, the Montana State University-Northern Lights football team took part in its first live scrimmage of the season Saturday at the Northern practice fields.

The scrimmage was controlled and featured the offense playing against the defense in live action and a number of simulated situations. The most exciting action of the day came when the first team offense squared off against the first team defense, but regardless of who was on the field, the play was competitive.

"I think overall, the biggest thing was that we came out here and competed," Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said. "We had good plays and we had bad plays but everyone was flying around. They were attempting to do what they were supposed to do, but they were trying to do it at a 110 miles an hour, which is what you want to see right now."

The scrimmage opened with the starters playing on both offense and defense. On the first drive, it was the defense that came out on top, sacking Travis Dean and forcing a punt despite an early 20-yard completion from Dean to Nick Luoma.

Yet, on the second drive, the offense answered. With the ball on its own 20-yard line, the offense notched the first big play of the day when Zach McKinley ripped off a 50-yard run, pushing the ball down to the 30-yard line of the defense. Three plays later, the drive was capped when Dean found Luoma in the end zone for 19-yard touchdown pass.

The offense was forced to punt again on its next drive but answered on the first team's fourth and final drive of the scrimmage. McKinley finished a three-play, 80-yard drive with a 40-yard touchdown run that saw him cut across the field and break multiple tackles en route to the end zone.

"We have a lot of weapons on the offensive side of the ball just as long as we can get them the football," Eldridge said. "I think Travis has been doing a nice job of commanding those guys and getting people where they have to be, understanding what his coverages are and getting the ball where it needs to go."

In four series, Dean was efficient and effective, completing 5-of-9 passes for 76 yards and a touchdown with no interceptions. McKinley, who rushed for over 1,000 yards as a freshman, racked up 88 yards and a touchdown on just four carries, while Luoma had two receptions for 39 yards and a score.

"(McKinley) is a very good player," Eldridge said. "His work ethic is really what drives him through. He is obviously a very talented player, but he works his tail off day in and day out and he's a hard one to bring down. He had a really great off-season, and we are just beginning to see what kind of player he can be."

Although the offense made some big plays, the defense had its moments as well. Later on in the scrimmage, the Lights practiced situational football, giving the first team offense a chance to convert on
third down against the first team defense. On two attempts at third-and-10, the offense failed to gain a first down, then converted one of two attempts on third-and-five before going four-for-four in short yardage situations.

Overall, the offense, which benefits from more returning players, appeared slightly ahead of a young defense that is still learning and developing.

"Right now we are working in some younger kids of defense but we have leaders at each level," Eldridge said. "We had some injuries in the secondary, but we have some good players back there, and it gave us a chance to get some of our younger guys some experience."

Eldridge, who oversaw his first scrimmage as interim head coach of the Lights following the resignation of former head coach Mark Samson last Wednesday, liked what he saw from his players Saturday, as the attention turned back to football.

"I am definitely pleased," Eldridge said. "There were great plays on both sides of the ball. It was great to see our offense go up and down the field the way that they did. Travis took real control of that first group, and they made the plays when they needed to make them. But the defense came up with good plays as well, so overall, it was a good effort."

The Lights will scrimmage again Friday at 10 a.m. at the Northern practice field ahead of their season-opener Aug. 30 on the road against Montana Tech in Butte.

Montana State University-Northern's Trevor Baum, left, runs by a Lights defender during a scrimmage Saturday morning at the MSU-N practice fields. Saturday's scrimmage was the first of fall camp for the Lights, who are preparing for their season-opening game Aug. 30 at Montana Tech.