For the last few seasons, the Montana State University-Northern defense has been somewhat of a Jekyll and Hyde. Take 2013 for example. Northern finished in the middle of the pack in the Frontier in scoring defense, but the Lights weren't balanced enough.

Instead, MSU-N was the second-best run defense in the conference, but was seventh against the pass. And to be a dominant defense, one which won't allow 30 or more points per game, balance is the key.

Entering the 2014 season, which starts Saturday when the Lights travel to Montana Tech, interim head coach, and sixth-year defensive coordinator Jake Eldridge is hoping the balance on defense is there. He's optimistic after three weeks of fall camp because, he says, a lot of players have stepped to the forefront and have really improved.

"I will say, I'm confident in what our defense is capable of doing this season," Eldridge said. "We have a lot of names on this defense that people don't know much about, a lot of guys who haven't really been stars up to this point. But those kids come to work every day with the attitude of wanting to get better. We have a lot of really good football players on this defense, and I'm really happy with how far they've come."

There are, in fact, not many names on the Northern depth chart that fans will recognize when the Lights take the field for the first time this season. But that isn't to say they don't have playmakers. It's just the opposite. The Lights have a good mix of returning veterans, solid newcomers and rising young players who, together, hope to forge a Northern defense which will be balanced, efficient and physical this season.

The Lights may boast just five returning starters on defense, but Eldridge is excited about all his players and says that through fall camp, depth has also been developed.

"Coming into camp, depth on defense was something we were worried about," he said. "But right now, there isn't a big drop-off between our No. 1s and No. 2s. I think we've developed some good depth, and that's because these kids have had a great offseason and a great fall camp. They've worked really hard to get to where they are right now.

"We also have really good leadership, at every level of the defense," he continued. "So as long as they go out there and execute, play hard every play, play to the whistle, and eliminate the mental mistakes as much as possible, I think they have a chance to be a very solid defense this season."

The Lights do have at least one veteran at every level of the defense. On the front line, in Northern's 4-3 defense, MSU-N returns defensive end Tyler Craig (6-2, 230) and Tyler Phillips (6-1, 225). Phillips is a senior and Craig a sophomore, but both players are returning starters, and Craig led the Lights in sacks a season ago. In the interior, Northern will have two new starters in Will DeVos (6-2, 255) and Patrick Barnett (6-2, 265). DeVos is a senior who has seen extensive playing time the last two seasons, while Barnett is a rising sophomore from Billings, who has moved inside from defensive end. Sophomore end Jordan Brusio (5-11, 240) has also converted from linebacker and will see plenty of action this season,
while sophomore tackle Lane Urick (6-1, 285), a former Great Falls prep standout, will be in the mix on the line as well.

"Everything starts with what we do up front," Eldridge said. "And we feel like we have some very good football players up there. We have two defensive ends who have a lot of experience, but I think what really helps us is how much Will DeVos and Patrick Barnett have improved. Those guys give us a lot of versatility with their speed and power. Patrick is our most natural pass rusher, so he can really move around and cause some problems for teams. So I feel really confident about that defensive front right now."

Meanwhile, the Lights have to replace one of the most productive tacklers of the last four seasons in departed linebacker Jordan Van Voast, a former Havre Blue Pony star. But again, MSU-N does have some experience there, especially in the middle with the return of senior Kaimi Kanehailua (6-0, 240). A hard hitter, and a veteran leader, Kanehailua will be called upon to lead Northern's defense in the middle. The Lights are also excited about Colorado-Mesa transfer Tucker Dunn (6-1, 225) on the outside. Eldridge said the sophomore has all the skills a coach could want in an outside linebacker, speed, tackling ability and excellent in pass coverage. On the other side, sophomore Jesse Morales (6-0, 210) will start after gaining some valuable reps as a freshman. Sophomore Justin Fritz (5-11, 220) will also see plenty of action this season, and Belgrade freshman Garrett Fowler (5-10, 205) has had such an impressive fall camp, that the former Class A All-State star has found his way onto the depth chart.

"Jesse Morales is a kid who's really come a long way," Eldridge said. "He's had a great offseason, and he's going to be a real playmaker for us at linebacker. And Tucker Dunn is a name a lot of people don't know right now, but he will be a big part of what we do on defense. He's got great instincts, he can cover, he can tackle, he's just got great attributes as a linebacker."

Of course, Northern's front seven has kept the Lights' defense near the top of the best run-defenses in the conference for many, many years now. But in recent times, the secondary has been much-maligned. Eldridge thinks that has a chance to change this season.

The Lights return starting safety, senior Hunter Chandler (5-10, 190) who was one of the Lights' leading tacklers a year ago. Also back is senior Butch Hyder (5-11, 200). Hyder hasn't been in a true starting role yet, but he's seen the field plenty the last two seasons, and together, he and Chandler give the Lights a veteran safety tandem. On the edges, MSU-N added junior college transfer Malcolm Manuel (5-9, 170), and his impact should be felt immediately. On the other side, senior Mike McCrary (5-10, 175) started several games for the Lights at corner last season, and if Northern's veteran secondary stays healthy, they could be the surprise of the league this season.

"We lost a lot of kids in the secondary from last season," Eldridge, who starred for the Lights as an All-Conference cornerback in his playing days. "But Hunter and Butch have been mainstays for us, and they both are doing a great job. And we added Malcolm Manuel at corner this year. He's going to have a big impact on our secondary because not only is he a very good football player, but he has a lot of versatility. We'll be able to use him in a lot of different ways. We do have a lot of young kids working in the secondary, too, but they're doing a really good job, and I feel really good about where we're at there."

In fact, Eldridge feels very good about a defense that no one around the Frontier is talking about right now. With no returning All-Conference players, and just a handful of full-time starters back, the Lights have a defense that some will likely overlook this season. And that could be a bad mistake, because there's no denying Northern's talent and ability on the defensive side of the ball. Now Eldridge says, the Lights just have to go out and prove it on the field.

"The goal is just to go out and play consistent, fundamental, assignment football every day," he said. "We just have to be consistent in our execution. We want to eliminate the mental mistakes and the big plays that hurt us. We want to make teams have to earn points, earn yards, make them stay in the field and have to try and drive the ball against us.

"We just want to be a physical, consistent tackling, sound defense this season," he added. "I think we have the guys to do that. Now it's time to go out and earn it on the field, and I'm confident that this defense is ready to do that."

**Special Teams**
Another area the Lights have a chance to be extremely sound in this season is special teams. Northern returns kicker/punter Jordan Rueschhoff (6-0, 200) after he had a stellar junior season. Rueschhoff was 5-for-6 with a long of 34 yards on field goal tries last season, while he made 33-of-35 point after attempts. He'll also start at punter this season after senior Trevor Baum handled those duties a year ago.

In the return game, MSU-N must replace the electrifying Orin Johnson, an All-Conference punt returner, but the Lights still have plenty of firepower there. Baum and Jake Messerly will share handling return duties this season, and both have the ability to take kickoffs or punts the distance every time they touch the football.

**Note:** For a full preview of the Montana State University-Northern offense, see Wednesday's Havre Daily News. For a complete breakdown of the 2014 Frontier Conference football season, see Thursday's HDN.

The Montana State University-Northern Lights open their season Saturday night under the lights of Alumni Coliseum at Montana Tech. In Butte, the Lights will try to atone for a last-second loss on a hail-mary pass against the Orediggers under the lights of Blue Pony Stadium last November in Havre. All week long, the Havre Daily News will be previewing the upcoming Lights' football season, and the game at Montana Tech. Fans can also follow the Lights all season with the HDN, with complete pre-game coverage, the Frontier Conference Notebook, the MSU-Northern Game Day, as well as comprehensive postgame stories following each Lights' contest. Fans can also follow the Lights with the HDN on Twitter and at http://www.havredailynews.com.

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