When a college football team loses a four-year starting quarterback, a four-year starting wide receiver, and its offensive coordinator, it might be cause for concern.

The Montana State University-Northern football team did lose all of that in the past six months, not to mention its head coach Mark Samson, who resigned not long ago.

But when it comes to offense, the Lights are nowhere near ready to hit the panic button.

It is true that Northern watched as four-year starter Derek Lear, holder of 16 different MSU-N passing records, and a two-time Frontier All-Conference selection graduated. So, too, did Orin Johnson, one of the most prolific possession receivers in Northern history, and as versatile an athlete as the Lights have had in recent years. Also gone is longtime offensive coordinator Kyle Samson, who accepted the head coaching position at Kalispell’s Flathead High School earlier in the summer.

That’s a lot to replace on offense. But again, there’s no panic as the Lights prepare to open the 2014 season Saturday night at Montana Tech.

Perhaps there’s no panic because Northern still is able to boast a veteran quarterback who’s seen everything there is to see in the Frontier Conference. Or because Northern returns a 1,000-yard rusher from a season ago. Or, there’s no cause for concern because the Lights might just have one of the best offensive lines in the Frontier this season. And maybe, just maybe, the Lights are still loaded at wide receiver, and loaded with talent across the board offensively.

“We’re very fortunate,” said Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge. “We have a lot of experienced guys on offense. They know and understand the system. They know the defenses we’ll be facing this season. We haven’t changed anything about what we want to do offensively this season. Maybe some minor tweaks in scheme, but these guys know our system and understand what we’re trying to do offensively. So they feel very comfortable with where they’re at and I feel really good about where they’re at as a group.”

At times, even through a 4-6 season a year ago, the Lights were one of the most explosive offenses in the Frontier Conference. The likes of Lear and Johnson had plenty to do with that. But Northern also found ways to get in its own way on offense a year ago, and while the Lights might be as, or even more explosive this season, they do need to eliminate mistakes which really hurt in several big games a season ago.

The 2013 MSU-N offense averaged 450 total yards and rushed for 233 yards per game. Those are big numbers by all accounts, and the Lights were balanced, too, passing for nearly 220 yards per outing. However, turnovers and scoring would eventually become the Lights’ achilles heel. MSU-N averaged 26 points per game, and for the second season in a row, the Lights were dead last in the conference in giveaways. MSU-N turned the ball over 23 times on offense in 2013.
So, while the Lights have the potential to light up Frontier scoreboards like a pinball machine this season, they also understand that mistakes have to be cut down.

“The key for us on offense is balance and limiting our mental mistakes,” Eldridge said. “We have a ton of talent on this team, we have weapons all over the field. So we need to play smart on offense. We need to take what the defensive gives us and make the plays. We need to eliminate the mental mistakes that just kill drives and scoring chances. If we can do that consistently, and stay balanced consistently, we’re going to be a pretty explosive offense I think.”

Being explosive comes from having playmakers, and the Lights have them all over the field.

This fall, senior quarterback Travis Dean (6-0, 200) will be the unquestioned leader of the Lights’ offense. Dean came to Northern highly-touted out of high school, but lost two different battles for the starting job to Lear. And while he has still seen plenty of meaningful snaps, and meaningful games, including throwing for 906 yards and five touchdowns a year ago, he’s also seen the downside of college football, having suffered not one, but two season-ending injuries during his time at MSU-N.

But with Dean’s experience, and his veteran leadership, Northern hasn’t had to worry about the quarterback position, not back in the spring, or in fall camp. That will come next spring as true freshman Jess Krahn (6-3, 220) and redshirt-freshman J.R. Finai (6-2, 215) mentor under the veteran Dean this season, then compete for the starting job next year.

“We’re extremely lucky to have Travis as our quarterback,” Eldridge said. “He’s been in our system a long time. He’s seen and done it all already. So it’s very comforting to know you have a guy like him under center.

“Travis’ biggest asset is his leadership,” he continued. “He is that type of guy that players just gravitate to and want to follow. He’s a great leader and a great teammate. He also understands our system as well as anybody out there. So I have a lot of confidence that he’s going to make the right decisions when the ball is in his hands. We’re giving him a lot of freedom this year at the line of scrimmage, a lot of room to change plays and take what the defense is giving him. You can do that with a player like Travis because he is so knowledgeable and so smart. So we’re very lucky to go into this season with him as our quarterback.”

And the good fortunes on offense don’t end with Dean.

Back for his sophomore season is tailback Zach McKinley (5-10, 205). McKinley broke out as a red-shirt freshman in 2013, rushing for 1,138 yards and 12 touchdowns while averaging nearly 110 yards per game. And even healthier this fall than he was a year ago, McKinley is ready to challenge Carroll College’s Dustin Rinker for the Frontier rushing title. But Northern doesn’t just have a one-trick pony at tailback either. Sophomore Mario Gabotto (5-8, 185) returns for his second season in the Northern lineup, and he, too, will be called upon to make MSU-N’s rushing attack even that much better.

“Zach has looked really good in camp, just like we expected him to,” Eldridge said, “so we know what we’ve got with him, and so does every other team in the league. He’s just a tremendous football player. But I think people will really see what Mario Gabotto can do this season, too. He’s a really good player and he’s going to show people that this season.”

Of course, having great running backs means teams have a great offensive line, and Northern’s front five might be as good as it gets. The Lights return three-year starter Rostyn Pace (6-3, 270) at one guard, while the monstrous Dylan Murphy (6-6, 310) is back at tackle. The man in the middle, Shomari Burton (6-3, 305) is back for his second season as the starting center, while Zach Bangert (6-1, 280) plays the other guard slot and Pete Morales (6-3, 295) plays the other tackle. Bangert and Morales also have starting experience, while backups like Matt McKeen (6-2, 290) add to Northern’s depth on the offensive line.

“Everything we’ll do offensively starts up front,” Eldridge said. “And we feel like we’ve got a real solid group on the offensive line. We have some returning starters, we have guys who have played a lot of snaps and been in our system for a long time. There’s a lot of experience with that group, and they are very smart, so they can handle a lot. They are going to have a huge impact on our offense this season, and they take a lot off of Travis’ shoulders. That group just goes out and gets the job done.”
Of course, Northern’s receivers will have a big impact, too, especially veterans Jake Messerly (6-1, 195) and Trevor Baum (6-1, 200). Messerly, a true speedster out of Missoula, shined as a true freshman, hauling in 12 catches for 350 yards in 2013. Messerly’s big-play ability was evident right away, as he averaged a whopping 29 yards per catch last season. Baum, who can play all over the field, is making the move to WR after starting at corner for the Lights the last two seasons. The main reason was the loss of leading receivers Johnson and Brandt Montelius. But another was the fact that Baum is one of the most gifted athletes in the Frontier, and the Lights need to have the ball in his hands more often.

"Those guys are going to make plays for us,” Eldridge said. “Jake Messerly is a top-tier receiver in this league in my opinion, and Trevor is just so versatile. So those two are really going to be difficult matchups for any team we face. But I like our depth, too. Nick Luoma has come a long way, and we have some young guys who have really started to step up in camp, so we have some nice weapons out there.”

Luoma (6-2, 215), who once played basketball at Northern, will be key in Northern’s spread offense this season, as will tight end John Jansen (6-3, 240). The senior from Broadview was very reliable in short yardage situations a season ago, and has a chance to be one of the better tight ends in the Frontier this year. Northern will also utilize the speedy Logan Mayernik (5-11, 180), while Jake Criner (5-11, 240) gives the Lights a bruising fullback to work with.

There’s no denying MSU-N’s talent on offense. The Lights have a six-year veteran at quarterback, one of the best running backs in the league, a big and physical offensive line, and a pair of receivers who can fly past any defensive back in the conference. And that’s just for starters. But, again, MSU-N must also find that balance between explosion and being a move-the-chains type of team. Eldridge doesn’t want the Lights to be just one, but both, and balance is the biggest goal for what could be a record-setting MSU-N offense.

“I think we can be as good as we want to be on offense,” Eldridge said. “The sky is the limit for this group. We just need to be consistent and balanced. We need to play smart and make the right plays. Consistency and playing mistake-free football on offense, that’s the key for us. We have the talent, we have the players to put plenty of points on the board. Now they just have to go out and do it every game. They have to go out and do it each series. Execution of what we want to do each time we have the ball, that’s the key. And I feel confident that this group is ready to do that.”

Note: The Havre Daily News is previewing the 2014 Lights all season long. For a complete breakdown of the entire Frontier Conference and more, see Thursday’s HDN. And for a preview of Northern’s season-opening game at Montana Tech, check out Friday’s HDN sports section.

Countdown to Kickoff

3 Days

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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