The Montana State University-Northern football team raced onto the field at Montana Tech’s Alumni Coliseum Saturday night full of energy and emotion. And for a time, that emotion was on the high side, which was incredible considering what the Lights have already been through this season.

But by game’s end, Northern faced the other side of the emotional game of college football as the Lights left Butte with a difficult, 38-24 season-opening loss at the hands of the Montana Tech Orediggers.

What started out as a great night for the Lights, ended with them being outscored 28-7 in the second half, as Tech rebounded from its own season-opening loss last week at the hands of UM-Western.

“It was a tough game,” Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said. “First, you have to give Montana Tech a lot of credit. They kept bouncing back, kept making the big plays when they had to. So we won’t take anything away from them.

“But for us, it was a game where I felt like we would take a big step forward and then two steps back. We played really well at times, and felt like we had control of things. But we also made some mental mistakes on defense and on special teams that helped Tech extend some big drives. Those mistakes really hurt us, so at the end of the night, we felt like with mistakes and penalties, we just shot ourselves in the foot too many times.”

After losing head coach Mark Samson at the start of fall camp, and going through a nearly-month long grind of controversy, the season couldn’t have started any better for the Lights. On the first possession of 2014, Northern methodically marched down the field and scored on a 12-yard Zach McKinley run. The score set the tone for what would become a roller coaster of a game between the Lights and Diggers, much like the one that was played last November at Blue Pony Stadium when Tech snatched a sure win away from the Lights on a last-second hail-mary touchdown.

The Lights would end the first period of the season ahead 7-3, and even after falling behind 10-7, Northern responded with 10 points to close the half. The Lights went back in front when Dean, who threw for a career-high 307 yards, connected on big plays to Jake Messerly and Trevor Baum, the latter of which put Northern back in front when Baum hauled in a 70-yard scoring strike. Another good drive late in the first half ended on a Jordan Reuschhoff 31-yard field goal, and the Lights went into the locker room with a 17-10 lead, and feeling good.

“Offensively, we got off to a great start,” Eldridge said. "The offense executed really well, they made a lot of big plays and there were a lot of bright spots from them, throughout the game but especially in the first half.”

And while the Northern offense stayed productive for much of the game, the second half was a much different story all together. Tech tied the game at 17-17 early in the third period, but the Lights answered when Dean hit Messerly on a 30-yard scoring strike to put his squad back in front 24-17.
The Northern defense, which was stingy for much of the first half, answered the bell, too, pinning Tech deep in its own territory on the ensuing drive. And that’s when everything seemed to change. On fourth down and 20, Tech punter Travis Farewell dropped a low snap, picked up the ball and sprinted to the right for 23 yards and an Oredigger first down. A few plays later, Tech quarterback Andrew Loudenback hit Kolby Kansala over the middle for a 20-yard TD to tie the game. From there, the Diggers never trailed again, and despite battling the whole way through, the Lights were shut out.

"I thought our defense did a lot of things really well," Eldridge said. "Statistically, we held a very good Tech offense down for much of the game. But we made some crucial mistakes at times, and several of those mistakes allowed Tech to extend some drives, and those drives changed the momentum. And once they got the momentum, they kind of took off.

"I think, had we been able to eliminate some of those mistakes in the second half, we could have held on to the momentum, because it definitely shifted a couple of times."

And once it shifted, there was little the Lights could do to get it back. Tech ended the third quarter, and a 21-point barrage, on a Nolan Saraceni 49-yard touchdown run. The Lights were still in the game midway through the fourth, however, especially when Mike McCrary picked off Loudenback, giving Northern a chance to pull even again.

But it wasn’t to be. Instead, Tech’s defense stiffened. The Orediggers kept MSU-N scoreless for the final 27 minutes of the game, while they tacked on an insurance touchdown in the fourth when Loudenback ran the ball in from six yards out.

“When momentum shifts, it can be a killer,” Eldridge said. “And I think that was a big part of the second half. We just made some crucial mistakes that really hurt us, and Tech took advantage of them. But I thought we battled hard all night, I’m proud of the way the kids fought.”

The Northern offense did pile up 425 total yards, while holding Tech to just 317. However, MSU-N committed 11 penalties for 104 yards, and that certainly hurt the Lights, whether on offense, or when Tech was able to sustain drives.

Dean finished the game 22-of-37 with two scores and two interceptions. McKinley had a good night as well, rushing for 88 yards on 19 carries. Baum had a breakout game in what was his first career start at wide receiver. He grabbed seven balls for 146 yards, while Messerly added 87 yards on seven catches. Messerly also had 64 yards on kickoff returns.

Defensively, the Lights stymied Tech’s up-tempo offense at times. Butch Hyder led the Lights with 10 tackles, while Patrick Barnett, Will DeVos and Tyler Craig all had sacks. Barnett was a force, as he wreaked havoc in the Tech backfield all night long. However, when it mattered, the Orediggers rose up. Saracini totaled 131 yards on just 15 carries, as Pat Hansen, Tech’s senior star, left the game with an injury. Loudenback finished the night with 19 completions, 257 yards and three scores, while Alec Bray caught eight balls for 105 yards as Tech improved to 1-1 in the Frontier Conference.

Meanwhile, the Lights fell to an 0-1 start in league play. But they also found out a lot about themselves Saturday night, and those things will go a long way toward what they are trying to achieve this season.

“First, it’s a loss and these kids won’t accept that,” Eldridge said. “I think they felt like they let one get away down there. But that’s good to see that they responded to it positively. They had their heads held high after the game. They know they’ll learn a lot from that game, and they know they will get better. I’m really proud of them. I’m really happy with how they battled hard. They played really well at times and they are very ready to get back to work and get better. This one game won’t define our season.”

Northern will now come back to Havre for its home debut, a nonconference affair with rival Dickinson State Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium. The game is the first of two straight at home for the Lights, who also play Rocky Mountain College Sept. 13.

**Montana Tech 38, Lights 24**

MSU-Northern 7 10 7 0
Montana Tech 3 7 21 7
1st Quarter
MSU-N – Zach McKinley 12 rush (Reuschhoff PAT)
TECH – Matt Berg 21 FG

2nd Quarter
TECH – Andrew Loudenback 17 pass to Alec Bray (Berg PAT)
MSU-N – Travis Dean 70 pass to Trevor Baum (Reuschhoff PAT)
MSU-N – Reuschhoff 31 FG

3rd Quarter
TECH – Loudenback 9 pass to Braxton Lucero (Berg PAT)
MSU-N – Dean 32 pass to Jake Messerly (Reuschhoff PAT)
TECH – Kolby Kansala 20 pass from Loudenback (Berg PAT)
TECH – Nolan Saraceni 49 run (berg PAT)

4th Quarter
TECH – Loudenback 6 run (Berg PAT)

RUSHING – MSU-N, McKinley 19-88, Gobbato 8-12, Baum 2-12, Dean 2-6; TECH, Saraceni 15-131, Farewell 1-23, Winfield 2-4, Hansen 5-(-3), Cavender 1 (-10), Loudenback 5 (-85).


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