They're coming home
Lights face Blue Hawks in home opener Saturday
By George Ferguson
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For two years in the Frontier Conference, the Dickinson State Blue Hawks struggled to be more than a pushover. Now however, DSU has joined the new Northstar Athletic Conference, and the Blue Hawks are coming to Blue Pony Stadium looking like anything but a pushover.

In what figures to be an emotional home opener, the Montana State University-Northern Lights (0-1) will square off with the Blue Hawks (0-1) Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium. Kickoff is slated for 1 p.m. in what will be the Lights' first home game without embattled head coach Mark Samson.

And while Saturday will be a dramatic and intense day for the Lights, who lost their season-opener, 38-24 last Saturday night at Montana Tech, the only thing the Lights are focused on is the new-look Blue Hawks. DSU has pretty much re-vamped everything under first-year head coach Pete Stanton, who took over after the legendary Hank Biesiot retired after 38 years on the DSU sideline.

And though DSU lost its opener at home last Saturday, 40-21 to Rocky Mountain College, Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge is expecting nothing less than a battle from the Blue Hawks.

"Much improved," Eldridge said of the Blue Hawks. "They have gone to a spread offense, but they still have two really good running backs. They have athletes all over the field, they have speed and size and they have a young quarterback who can sling the ball all over the field. They just look like a completely different football team."

While the Blue Hawks might look different, they have many of the same players on a team that was swept by the Lights a season ago.

On offense, the focus will be on sophomore quarterback Kaler Ray (6-5, 200) and hard-nosed running back Myren Moore (5-9, 200). Ray is a big, athletic quarterback who can throw the ball deep, but can also take off and run, while Moore rushed for nearly 900 yards a season ago, and has an outstanding backup in Jesse Carney (5-10, 185). Ray has a great target to throw to, as well, in 6-5 star J.T. Keith. Keith, a former Miles City prep star finished in the Top 10 in the Frontier in receptions and receiving yards a season ago.

Northern will try to counter DSU’s offense with a defense that debuted well last weekend at Tech. Sophomore Tyler Craig had two sacks, while tackles Will DeVos and Patrick Barnett also got the season off to a good start. Eldridge says, with what DSU will want to do offensively, the defensive line will carry a big burden Saturday. MSU-N’s linebackers will also be key in space and in run support, while safeties Hunter Chandler and Butch Hyder combined for 23 tackles a week ago, and corner Mike McCrary had an interception.
"We're going to need a lot from our defensive line," Eldridge said. "We need to get a good pass rush going and put some pressure on their quarterback. Then we need to stop the run. With spread teams, you also have to make tackles in open space, so our entire defense has got to do that well.

"Dickinson is a dangerous team because of what they have offensively," he continued. "They are going to really spread you out, and they have some big targets to throw to over the top. But at the same time, they have two really big, strong running backs, and they will pound it inside at you. They haven't gone away from that style. So that combination can be very deadly and put a defense on its heels. So we have to really play smart, sound football on the defensive side of the ball."

Offensively, the Lights got off to a great start last Saturday night, scoring 17 points in the first half against Tech. But while they racked up over 400 yards of offense, and senior QB Travis Dean had a huge night throwing to the likes of Trevor Baum and Jake Messerly, Northern managed to put up just seven points in the second half in the loss to the Orediggers. Now, MSU-N, which will look for another big game from sophomore running back Zach McKinley, who runs behind the Lights' huge offensive line, will hope to be a bit more consistent on offense. And the Lights should be well prepared because DSU runs a similar 3-4 defense to what Tech ran last week. Players to watch for the Blue Hawks include linemen Sam Herauf (6-4, 260) and Michael Hernandez (6-5, 290), as well as a talented quartet of linebackers, led by senior Alex Huitzil (5-11, 230).

"Our guys have a good idea of what Dickinson wants to do in that 3-4," Eldridge said. "But they also do a really good job of mixing up their rushes and their coverages. They disguise things really well, and they bring a lot of different blitzes and pass rushers from the linebacker spot. So we've got to be very aware of what they're doing and recognize those things.

"Offensively, I was really happy with how we played last week," he continued. "Our offense did a great job of adjusting to what Tech was doing defensively. And Travis (Dean) does such a great job of getting the offense in the right spots and getting the ball to the right person. So I'm really happy with where our offense is at going into this game. I think they're on the right track."

Indeed. The Lights put up some big numbers against the Orediggers, including a 300-yard passing performance from Dean, a huge night of 145 yards and seven catches by Baum, and 88 yards a score from McKinley. However, the Lights didn't get the win they went to Butte looking for, and now they return to Blue Pony Stadium, trying hard to get into the win column in a nonconference affair against an old rival.

Saturday's game against DSU will be emotional because the team is pressing on without Samson, and it's the first Northern game in 11 years in which he hasn't been on the sidelines at Blue Pony Stadium. It will also be emotional because every home-opener is. But, the Lights are going to harness that emotion and focus on one thing, and one thing only, and that's playing a sound football game, in all three phases, for four quarters.

And if the Lights do that, they should be in good shape by the time the clock hits triple zeros on the Blue Pony Stadium scoreboard.

"We've had a great week of practice," Eldridge said. "The kids didn't hang their heads at all after the Tech game. Instead, they were eager to come back home and grow from the mistakes we made down there. They've really worked hard this week. And they want to go out and play good football Saturday.

"And they are excited to play at home," he continued. "They're excited to get out on their own home turf, to be back in Blue Pony Stadium. They are excited to go out there and show this campus, the community and all the fans what kind of team they are. They are excited to play in front of their home crowd, and they're looking forward to going out there and getting another opportunity to prove themselves."

Saturday's game between Northern and Dickinson State will kick off at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium. It marks the first of two straight home games for the Lights, who also host Rocky Mountain College Sept. 13. Following their game with the Lights, the Blue Hawks will play their first-ever Northstar Athletic Conference game, at Waldorf College Sept. 13.