Montana State University-Northern running back Zach McKinley has already had a lot of big games in what has been a short Lights’ career. But what McKinley did Saturday was more than just big, it was special.

In Northern’s 40-17 tromping of the Dickinson State Blue Hawks Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium, McKinley rushed for 209 yards on 23 carries. It was his third 200-yard rushing game of his career, and his second against the Blue Hawks. But McKinley was more than a running back Saturday, he was a scoring machine and an offensive force the Blue Hawks didn’t have an answer for.

The sophomore from Great Falls scored four touchdowns, including one receiving. In all, he caught six passes for 101 yards and accounted for 310 yards of offense for the Lights and was responsible for 24 total points.

Yet, as big a day as McKinley had, and as powerless as the Blue Hawks were trying to defend him, the day was about the team, about the win and about pride.

“I thought today we came together as a team,” McKinley said. “We were really together today. Our o-line was really firing off the ball and that gave me a lot of room to run. We’re all family here at Northern, and it feels so good to come home and get a big, team win like this.”

McKinley also noted that his team, his offense did a much better job of finishing Saturday, than they did in last week’s season-opening loss to Montana Tech in Butte.

And nowhere was that more evident than on McKinley’s 66-yard touchdown run to start the third quarter. Faced with a fourth-and-one play in his own territory, Lights’ interim head coach Jake Eldridge opted to go with McKinley up the middle to pick up the first down rather than punt. Initially, DSU snuffed the play out and stopped McKinley short of the line of scrimmage. But with his heart and determination, McKinley somehow broke free, revered his course got around the edge, than broke a couple more tackles before flying up the DSU sideline for the score.

The play showcased everything McKinley has come to embody as a running back and as a player. And it also summed up the kind of day the Lights were having. In an emotional home-opener, the Lights weren’t going to be denied, and neither was their star running back.

“We were running a blast play, and they (Blue Hawks) knew right where we were running it,” McKinley said of the TD run that put the Lights ahead 34-3. “And I just got lucky and broke a tackle, and then looked to my left, and I saw I had some room. And from there, I just hoped I could keep my after burners going.”

McKinley did, and the Lights ran away from DSU for their first win of the season. And a feel-good win it was. And rather than gloat about his own performance, which was nothing short of remarkable, McKinley,
who is blossoming into one of the best running backs in the Frontier Conference, praised his team for Saturday’s victory instead.

“We put a big emphasis on finishing plays, finishing drives and finishing games this week on practice,” McKinley said. “We felt like we left a lot out there at Tech last week. But this week, we finished, we won on offense and we won on defense all day. It just feels so good to come together as a team and get a great team win like this one.”

Sack Masters

The MSU-N defensive line is making a statement early in the season. And they certainly announced their presence to the Blue Hawks on Saturday.

Unofficially, the Lights had five sacks and eight tackles for loss against a Blue Hawk’s front line that couldn’t handle Northern’s pressure. For the second game in a row, sophomore defensive end Tyler Craig was unblockable, and the result was several vicious hits on DSU’s quarterbacks. Fellow sophomore Jordan Brusio got in the act as well. Seeing extensive time at end, the converted linebacker from Billings twice came off the edge unblocked and leveled DSU QB Thad Lane.

On the interior, Patrick Barnett and Will DeVos also got into the backfield often, and those two were a big reason why DSU gained just 23 positive rushing yards on the afternoon.

“It was good,” Craig said. “As a whole, the defensive line played really well today. We got a lot of pressure on the quarterback, and we just played well together as a unit.”

If the statistics are correct, Craig already has four solo sacks this season, which would easily lead the Frontier Conference after three weeks of play. As a team, the Lights also have 15 tackles for loss in two games, and that means Northern’s defensive line has come out of the gates with their hair on fire.

Catching On

There were a lot of great story lines from Saturday’s dominating win by the Lights. And not to be overshadowed was the performance by senior wide receiver Trevor Baum.

The senior, who started for two years at cornerback before moving to offense this season, caught eight Travis Dean passes for 137 yards. He also caught an early touchdown to give the Lights the lead. Baum’s performance comes on the heels of a seven-catch 146-yard debut last week at Montana Tech.

So there’s no doubt Baum has been a huge factor for Northern’s offense thus far. And he was a game-changer Saturday. Baum went over the middle to make a key third-down catch to keep Northern’s first scoring drive of the game alive. Then, in the second quarter, he made a diving 39-yard grab to keep another scoring drive alive, a drive which put Northern comfortably in front 27-3 at halftime.

And with two games under his belt, Baum, and sophomore teammate Jake Messerly, are quickly becoming one of the most lethal receiving tandems in the Frontier Conference.

Having their number

After a humbling loss to Dickinson State in 2012, the Lights have now won four straight against the Blue Hawks dating back to November of 2012.

Northern lost an early-season game at DSU in September of 2012, but rebounded to blow out the Blue Hawks in the regular season finale that fall.

Since then, MSU-N has won three more against what has been a long-time rival, and Saturday’s win was the second straight blowout in the series. A year ago, Northern and DSU opened the season on a Thursday night in Dickinson, N.D. A Lights’ squad with high expectations struggled to a 14-0 victory that night. But Northern didn’t mess around in the rematch three weeks later in Havre. In the second game of a two-game homestand last September, the Lights thrashed the Blue Hawks 49-24 at Blue Pony Stadium.
Saturday’s game was lopsided as well, and the Blue Hawks, who are now in the Northstar Athletic Conference, will have to wait until next season to get their revenge. The Lights will likely travel to DSU for a nonconference return game next fall. But after that, it isn’t known if the series will continue.