Lights ready for a Bear assault
Northern plays host to No. 9 Battlin' Bears Saturday
By George Ferguson
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Last Saturday was a special day for the Montana State University-Northern Lights, and their fans. Last Saturday was the day the Lights had worked so hard for, and made all the pain and difficult days of an adversity-filled month worth it.

But, last Saturday's 40-17 thumping of the Dickinson State Blue Hawks is all but a distant memory now. Because now, the Lights have a bear of a challenge in front of them.

Saturday afternoon, Northern welcomes in No. 9 Rocky Mountain College for a big Frontier Conference showdown. Kickoff for the game between the Lights (1-1, 0-1) and the Battlin' Bears (2-0, 1-0) is set for 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium.

Last week, Northern got its first win of 2014, but now, the Lights are in search of their first conference win of the season. And in the process, they'll try and end a three-game losing streak to the Bears, an NAIA playoff team a year ago.

"We have a very good football team coming in here," Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said. "It's going to be a very big challenge for our football team. Rocky is very good, our guys understand that. They are so well coached. Coach Armstrong is a great coach. So we are going to have to be very well-prepared, and we'll have to execute in all three phases in order to have success against them."

The Bears are indeed good. In fact, that's putting it mildly. RMC comes to Havre a perfect 2-0 on the season, and the Bears proved their toughness and resolve when they outlasted UM-Western 37-30 in a double-overtime thriller last Saturday in Dillon. However, Northern brings some momentum into Saturday's latest tilt with RMC. In their win over DSU, the lights got 209 yards rushing from Zach McKinley, as well as four touchdowns. Travis Dean put up another 290 yards through the air, and overall, the MSU-N offense gained almost 600 yards on the day.

And offense, whether it's Northern's, or RMC's, is going to be a big part of Saturday's outcome.

"We're going to do what we do," Eldridge said. "We'll throw in a few tweaks and wrinkles, maybe some formations we haven't shown yet. But overall, we want to stay balanced and stick with what has been working for us. And that's run behind our two big workhorses in McKinley and (Mario Gobbato) and let that open things up for our passing game, so that we can take some shots downfield.

"I also think though, a big key for us this week is going to be John Jansen, our big tight end," he continued. "By now, teams have seen what Jake Messerly and Trevor Baum can do on the outside, so I think that's going to open some things up mid-level, and that's where Jansen can have a huge impact for us. I expect him to have a breakout game this week."
Northern's offense has already broken out. The Lights average nearly 500 yards of offense and 210 on the ground. And they're in the top half of the Frontier in pretty much every offensive category. Meanwhile, RMC's defense has been tested so far. The Bears only returned four starters on defense, led by All-Conference safeties Cory Bummer (6-0, 200) and Kyle Ma (5-11, 190). RMC has mostly new linebackers, but, according to Eldridge, they have a powerful front four that really wreaks havoc against opposing offensive lines. The Bears have also been a bend but don't break defense so far. They allow a league-best 24 points per game, but they also give up 450 total yards and have really struggled against the run thus far, allowing nearly 250 rushing yards per contest.

"Defensively, I think they're great up front," Eldridge said. "They have guys up there that are big, physical and fast. So our offensive line is going to have its hands full with their pass rush this week. Yes, they are breaking in quite a few new guys, especially at linebacker. But overall, they have a fast, athletic defense."

Of course, any team playing the Bears has to concern itself with its own defense. That's because Rocky is as good a team offensively as there is in the NAIA. It all starts with senior quarterback Bryce Baker (6-3, 200), who's thrown for well over 5,000 yards in his career, and run for over 1,000. Baker is a playmaker all by himself, but he's got plenty of help from his friends. Junior WR Andre McCullouch (6-1, 195) is a two-time All-American and potentially the best receiver in the NAIA. And Cole Cattelan (6-1, 190) and Ryan Toner (6-3, 195) are two more senior receivers who give RMC one of the most potent passing attacks in the country. Running backs Jade Olson (5-6, 175) and Frank Brown (5-11, 210) and tight end Kale Vuknoich (6-4, 230) add even more dimensions to an already dangerous RMC offense.

"They're (Bears) very potent offensively," Eldridge said. "It all starts with their quarterback. It seems like he's been there forever. He's a great player and he has weapons on all sides and behind him. Andre McCullouch is a great receiver, he's big and fast, he has strong hands and he runs great routes. They have great playmakers all over the field and very capable running backs. So their offense is a handful."

A handful even for a Northern defense which is playing at a high level right now. The Lights are allowing a league-best 289 yards per game, and are No.2 in the Frontier against the pass and No. 1 against the rush. Sophomore defensive end Tyler Craig already has 3.5 sacks this season, while tackles Patrick Barnett and Will DeVos are among the league leaders in tackles for loss. Yet, against RMC, Eldridge said it will be the play of his linebackers, led by senior Kaimi Kanehailua and sophomore Tucker Dunn, as well as a secondary led by safeties Hunter Chandler and Butch Hyder, which will need to help slow down the powerful RMC offense.

"Rocky is a completely different monster than what we saw against Dickinson or even Tech," Eldridge said. "They get the ball out really quick so that kind of neutralizes the effectiveness of your pass rush. And they like to get the ball into open spaces and gain yards after the catch.

"So this week, it's kind of flipped for us," he continued. "Where we leaned pretty heavily on our defensive line last week, we need our back-end guys to do a good job of keeping the ball in front of them, and making tackles in open space. Rocky is going to get some yards, they're going to move the ball, but you have to really keep everything in front of you and make plays when they come your way. And if you can do that, then maybe it starts to give the front four some more time to get some pressure on the quarterback. So that's a big key for us this week. Just making the plays that are in front of us."

That's not the only key. In any big game, the turnover battle will be critical and so will special teams. The Lights have an outstanding kicker in Jordan Rueschhoff, who is 3-for-3 on field goals this season, while RMC kicker Ryan Steska is a returning All-Conference performer.

But aside from what happens in between the lines, emotion and motivation will also play a key role in a game with the magnitude of Saturday's battle in Havre. And while Eldridge is sticking with the mentality that Saturday is just the third game in what is a long season, it still has big implications for the Lights, who don't want to fall to 0-2 in the Frontier. And it's big for RMC too. The Bears have the early lead in the Frontier race and are playing their third straight road contest. And with home games with Carroll on Sept. 20 and Eastern Oregon Sept. 27 looming, a third road win would go a long way towards Rocky's hopes of reach the Frontier title and a return trip to the NAIA playoffs.

"The guys understand the importance of this game, and they've had a really good week of practice," Eldridge said. "Yes, it's the No. 9 team in the country coming in here, and that maybe serves as some extra motivation to go out and play hard and play well. But we also realize this is only our third game, and that
every single week in the Frontier is like a playoff game anyway. To have any success in this league, you have to play at your best every single week, so for us, this is just another bump in the road, against a very good team, in what we're trying to accomplish this season.

"It is a big bump in the road," he continued. "It's against the No. 9 team in the country and our guys are excited about that. But more so, they're excited to be at home, and have another opportunity to go at and play really well and try and get another win. So they're ready to accept this challenge."

Saturday's game between the Lights and No. 9 Battlin' Bears kicks off at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium. The Lights return to the road to face UM-Western Sept. 20 in Dillon.