Bear Claws: Battlin' Bears 32, Lights 18
No. 9 Battlin' Bears outlast Lights in a struggle
By Chris Peterson
September 15, 2014

To defeat the nationally ranked Rocky Mountain College Battlin' Bears, the Montana State University-Northern Lights knew they would have to play a near perfect game. Unfortunately, the Lights did the exact opposite. MSU-Northern made mistake after mistake and missed out on an opportunity to capture a signature win over the No. 9 Bears.

On a picture perfect day at Blue Pony Stadium Saturday, the Lights proved they are capable of hanging with the Bears. But five turnovers and a number of special teams gaffes allowed Rocky to escape with the 32-18 victory.

"When you play a team as good as (Rocky Mountain College), you can't afford to make as many mistakes as we did today," said Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge. "They are a great football team, and we had some opportunities today, but we just made too many mistakes and mental errors. It's too hard to overcome all those things against a team like that."

The game got off to a positive start for Northern after the teams exchanged punts to open. But, the Bears would still be the first to put points on the board. After taking over the ball at the their own 48-yard line, senior quarterback Bryce Baker showed why he may be the best signal caller in the Frontier Conference, converting three times on third and long.

The key play took place when Rocky faced a third-and-six at the Lights' 24. Baker found receiver Ryan Toner for 19 yards to give the Bears a first and goal. Cedric Foster scored on a five-yard touchdown run on the next play, and after a successful two-point conversion RMC led 8-0 midway through the first quarter.

Yet, the MSU-N offense answered. After taking possession of the ball on their own 36-yard line, the Lights went to work. Quarterback Travis Dean completed four straight passes for 41 yards, including an 11-yard completion to tight end John Jansen and a nine-yard pass to running back Zach McKinley that pushed the ball inside the Bears' ten-yard line.

However, the Lights failed to capitalize and the drive stalled at Rocky's five, forcing Northern to settle for a Jordan Rueschhoff field goal that made the score 8-3 with :50 remaining in the first quarter.

"Our defense was on the field a lot today," Rocky head coach Brian Armstrong said. "We did give up some yards, but I thought we did a great job of bending and not breaking."

In the second quarter, after forcing a Rocky punt, the Lights took over at their own 26 and after a 15-yard completion from Dean to Trevor Baum, it appeared that Northern was back in business. But three plays later, Northern committed the first of five turnovers as Dean was picked off by R.J. Taylor, which gave the Bears possession at Northern's 44-yard line.
"We just made too many mental errors," Dean said. "Offensively, we had a lot of silly mistakes and were just not able to finish in the red zone."

The Lights' defense held and forced Rocky to settle for a field goal that stretched the lead to 11-3. On Northern's next possession, Dean drove MSU-N down to the Rocky 40-yard line before the drive stalled and then the Bears made the first of many impact plays on special teams, blocking a punt and giving the offense the ball at the Northern 40.

Ultimately, the Bears were unable to cash in and ended up missing a field goal attempt of their own. That ensured that the score would remain 11-3 at halftime.

Northern got the ball to open the second half and got off to a blistering start when Dean connected with Baum on a spectacular 36-yard catch and run to advance the ball to the Rocky 31-yard line.

But the Lights were penalized on two of the next three plays and were forced to settle for a field goal attempt. But instead of putting points on the board, Rueschhoff never got a chance to kick the ball after a bad snap and Rocky maintained its slight lead.

"It makes it so hard to score when you are getting penalties like that," Eldridge said. "It's like taking one step forward and two steps back."

Rocky drove the ball as far as Northern's 17-yard line on its next possession but a procedure penalty and a sack by Lights defensive end Tyler Craig made the Bears turn it over on downs.

"For the most part we did a good job of keeping their offense in check," Eldridge said. "We didn't give up a lot of big plays and considering how good they are, I thought the defense did a good job."

The lights took over at their own 31-yard line and started feeding the ball to McKinley, who carried it six times for 32 yards on the drive. Yet, the Lights' star back was stuffed for a loss of on a third-and-one at the RMC 11 and in hindsight that failure to convert may have been the turning point.

Northern attempted a field goal but it was blocked and Frank Brown returned it for a touchdown to give the Bears an 18-3 lead with less than two minutes in the third quarter.

Then the Lights' compounded the problem by failing to recover a pooch kick on the kickoff and suddenly the Bears had the football at the MSU-N 30. Three plays later, Baker threw his first and only touchdown pass of the day and just like that, it was 25-3 Bears with less than a minute left in the third.

At that point, many teams would throw in the towel but not the Lights. They marched the ball down to the Rocky one-yard line before McKinley fumbled the ball back to the Bears. With the Bears' offense back against their own goal line, the Northern defense took matters into its own hands, forcing a fumble that was recovered by Malcolm Manuel in the endzone for a score. And after a two-point conversion it was 25-11.

Then, after the MSUN defense forced a quick three-and-out, Dean and the Northern offense went to work. The senior quarterback connected on five straight passes for 46 yards and the Lights' offense found pay dirt when McKinley capped the nine-play 55-yard drive with a three-yard touchdown run and with 9:30 left in the game, and Northern was within seven at 25-18.

The shift in momentum was evident, and as the Lights' defense prepared to go out on the field, the threat of a Northern upset was real. But as great teams do, the Bears responded. Frost, who scored a rushing touchdown in the first quarter broke the spirit of the Lights with an 88-yard kickoff return for a touchdown, foiling MSU-N's comeback and sealing the 32-18 win for Rocky.

"Before we came out our coaches told us to stick with it and that we will pop this (kickoff) open," Foster said. "All game my teammates were telling me that we were going to break one, and they blocked it up right and I once saw the seam, I made a little cut on the kicker and the rest was history."

Indeed the Lights bid for the upset was history.
Despite a solid effort by the Northern defense, Baker was still extremely effective for the Bears, completing 17-of-22 passes for 250 yards and one touchdown.

McKinley led the way for the Lights with 132 rushing yards on 30 carries and a touchdown. Baum also had another big day for Northern with nine receptions for 132 yards. Dean was also solid going 21-of-32 for 221 yards and one interception.

The Bears improved to 3-0 overall and 2-0 in Frontier conference play, while Northern dropped to 1-2 overall and 0-2 in the Frontier. The Lights will try to get their first win in conference play next week when they travel to Dillon to take on Montana-Western.

"In all three phases we have got to be better," Eldridge said. "Mentally, we have to cut down on the errors because that is something we can control. The Physical side of things is where it needs to be, I think the kids are working extremely hard. We just need to get 11 guys executing on offense, defense and special teams. We have to play 60 minutes of football and we have to play mistake-free, especially in this league."

Not Enough

Lights are 1-2 overall and 0-2 in the Frontier; Next Up: at UM-Western

Lights Notes: Northern held the Bears to just 100 yards rushing and over 100 yards under their offensive output for the season. Tucker Dunn paced the MSU-N defense with 10 stops. Craig now has 4.5 sacks on the season, which is tops in the Frontier, while McKinley is averaging 150 yards per game, also tops in the conference. Rocky has now beaten MSU-N four straight times. The two teams will meet again Nov. 15.

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