Lights brace for air raid on Homecoming

By George Ferguson
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There’s a lot of football left in the Frontier Conference season. But it’s safe to say the Montana State University-Northern Lights’ backs are against the wall. And Northern’s next opponent is a team that always has the opposition backed into a corner.

The Lights (0-3, 1-3) return home from a disappointing 50-30 loss last Saturday at UM-Western, and now have to face the NAIA’s best offense as the No. 7 Southern Oregon Raiders come to Havre Saturday for MSU-N’s homecoming game. Kickoff is set for 1 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium.

While the Lights are still in search of their first win in conference play and are playing their second straight Top 10 team at home, interim head coach Jake Eldridge says there is no panic in his bunch. Instead, he says, they are focused, they continue to work hard, and the only thing they are worried about is the next game.

But that game will certainly be a tough one as the Raiders are one of the most lethal football teams in all of the NAIA.

"The guys have done a really good job of focusing on the task at hand, and focusing on every day, just trying to get better in practice," Eldridge said. "And their mind set has been very positive. Even though we're 1-3, we look at what has happened so far, and we could easily be 3-1 or 4-0. If we turn around a couple of things in each one of those games, we're in a different place right now, and the guys understand that, and they are really upbeat. They are working hard.

"But we do have a big test in front of us," he continued. "Southern Oregon is a tremendous football team, they are very talented. Everyone sees the kinds of numbers they put up every week. So we understand we have our work cut out for us."

The Raiders (3-0, 4-0) do put up huge numbers. It's no secret that senior quarterback Austin Dodge (6-3, 210) will go down as one of the most prolific passers in NAIA football history by season’s end. Already this season, Dodge, who is 2-0 in his career against the Lights, has thrown for 1,682 yards and 15 touchdowns, while throwing just three interceptions. Dodge's efficiency has always been his trademark, and though SOU calls on him to hoist the ball up more than 40 times per game, he rarely makes mistakes, and he rarely turns the ball over. And Eldridge says forcing him into a few mistakes is one of the main keys to slowing him down.

"One thing I've seen with him is he rarely gets sacked," Eldridge said. "And they (Raiders) have a very big and very talented offensive line this season. So you have to be able to generate some pressure on him (Dodge), maybe not necessarily with sacks, because their offensive line is very good and he's very mobile in the pocket. But if you can get to him, throw his timing off and disrupt the timing with his receivers, that's one way to at least slow them down a little bit. That's what we hope to do, get some pressure on him.

Montana State University-Northern quarterback Travis Dean throws a pass during a Frontier Conference game against Rocky Mountain College Sept. 13 in Havre. The Lights host No. 7 Southern Oregon in their Homecoming game Saturday at 1 p.m. For more coverage, see the Game Day issue inside today's Havre Daily News.
"And then you have create a couple of turnovers," Eldridge continued. "They (Raiders) are going to get their yards, they are going to score points. No one is going to just go in and shut that offense down. But if you can get some pressure and disrupt things, force a couple of turnovers, you have a chance."

But Northern's defense, which has been rock solid minus a hiccup at Western, is tasked with much more than just stopping Dodge. While the Lights lead the Frontier, allowing just 207 passing yards and 313 total yards of offense per game, they are last in the league, allowing 40 points per outing. And SOU has a bevy of players who seem to find paydirt often, and that's what Northern's defense is charged with slowing down Saturday.

Dodge's receivers are well known. Matt Retzlaff (5-11, 180), Ryan Retzlaff (6-0, 190) and Dylan Young (6-3, 197) are three of the best in the Frontier, and all three went more than 1,000 yards last season and will likely do it again this year. But what makes SOU so dynamic is the fact that the Raiders possess one of the best running backs in the country in junior Melvin Mason (5-11, 205). Despite SOU's pension for throwing the football, Mason averages 120 yards per game and has 600 yards rushing already this season, which is tops in the NAIA. He's already scored eight times in four games, and he has an excellent backup in Keegan Lawrence. Dodge is also good on his feet. He leads the NAIA in total offense, and has rushed for 100 yards on the season. So despite having the best arm in NAIA football, and a fleet-footed corps of receivers, the Raiders are anything but a one-dimensional offense.

And MSU-N's defense will be the latest Frontier team to try to stop that attack. Sophomore Tyler Craig has quickly become one of the best pass rushers in the Frontier, totaling six sacks and three tackles for loss in his first four games. Will DeVos and Patrick Barnett will also be key to clogging up the middle, but the biggest challenge will be on Northern's secondary. A healthy Malcolm Manuel at cornerback will help, while safeties Butch Hyder and Hunter Chandler will be key in helping the Lights not let Dodge beat them over the top.

Interestingly, SOU isn't a one-dimensional team this season either, though Eldridge says everything is predicated off of the Raider offense. SOU is in the middle of the pack statistically in most defense categories, the Raiders have an excellent pass rusher of their own in Daniel Breaux, while linebacker Laurence Calcagno leads the league with 44 stops this season. The Raiders also have an excellent secondary, and as a unit, they are a league-best +5 in turnover margin.

"Their defense is very solid, they are very aggressive," Eldridge said. "They take a lot of chances with blitzes and coverages because they know the offense is going to score points. They bring a lot of pressure and they play very fast and physical. So playing them is a double-edge sword because they are very good on both sides of the ball.

"So we're going to have to play every bit as good on offense, as we have to on defense."

And the Lights are certainly capable of putting points on the board, too. Senior quarterback Travis Dean had a career day, throwing for over 400 yards last week at UM-Western, and he's now thrown for 1,256 yards and seven TDs this season. Dean's two favorite targets, Trevor Baum and Jake Messerly are quickly rivaling the SOU receivers as the most dangerous tandem in the league, while Baum is really breaking out. He leads the Frontier in both receptions and receiving yards, and he's yet to be held under 100 yards in a game this year. Northern will also look to run the football with Zach McKinley, who has 465 yards and five scores, while Mario Gobatto continues to impress in key situations as well.

But racking up big numbers is only half the battle. The Lights need to score, too. Northern is second to SOU in the Frontier in total offense, yet the Lights average just 25 points per game. Turnovers and penalties have hurt the Lights in the redzone, and if they can get that fixed, it will be a huge key to knocking off the Raiders in what will likely be a rain-soaked and windy Blue Pony Stadium, elements that, too, might help the Lights chances.

"Anytime you play a team like Southern Oregon, often times, offense is your best defense," Eldridge said. "We have to move the chains and get yards and keep their offense off the field. I think that goes without saying. But we also have to capitalize on scoring opportunities. We've been moving the ball well all season long, but little things have held us back here and there. The guys have worked really hard to correct those things. But certainly, we know we have to go out and put points on the board on Saturday."
No doubt. The Lights have a huge task ahead of them, and no one in the Frontier, including Carroll College, has figured out how to solve the SOU dilemma yet this season. It’s not an easy one to solve, but Northern is positive in its approach to Saturday's game, and the Lights are excited to take their turn at knocking off a program which is quickly becoming one of the giants in the NAIA.

"The guys are working hard," Eldridge said. "They really are taking it one day at a time. They aren't dwelling on last week and they aren't looking at what might be down the road either. They are very focused. We feel like we kind of gave a few games away that we should have won, so we're very positive about the team we have. And we know we can play at high level. So that's what we're doing, we're focused on going out and executing and playing at a high level against a very good Southern Oregon team on Saturday."

Northern's Homecoming tilt with the seventh-ranked Raiders kicks off at 1 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium Saturday. Both the Lights and Raiders have a bye next week.

**SOU is coming**
MSU-Northern Lights (1-3, 0-3) vs No. 7 Southern Oregon Raiders (4-0, 3-0)
Saturday 1 p.m.
Blue Pony Stadium
Streaming: http://www.msun.edu/athletics
Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM
Twitter: Twitter/Havredaily

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