In the first half of Saturday’s battle with nationally-ranked Southern Oregon, it looked like a Montana State University-Northern upset was certainly brewing. Like the rain storms hanging around Blue Pony Stadium early in the game between the Lights and Raiders, an upset was certainly a real possibility.

And while the rains did indeed come, the upset didn’t.

The No. 7 Raiders, behind the confident arm of senior quarterback Austin Dodge and a talented and deep group of receivers, out-scored the Lights 21-7 in the second half, leaving Northern to wonder what might have been.

And there were several key moments that could have certainly changed the outcome of Saturday’s tilt, including a big one right at the end of the first half.

The Lights had gone ahead 17-14 with just over two minutes until halftime, but Dodge answered right back, with a one-minute drive to put SOU up 21-17. But Dodge also left Northern’s offense 1:34 to work with and the Lights took advantage. Northern drove the ball out near midfield, and it looked like the Lights might have the last laugh in the first half, when Travis Dean hit Trevor Baum right up the middle for a 29-yard gain. The play would have given the Lights a first down inside the SOU 20 with almost :50 left in the half. But it was called back on a tough holding penalty, and Northern had to settle for a four-point halftime deficit.

MSU-N also didn’t capitalize on some strong offense, and some timely defense. The Lights didn’t turn the ball over Saturday, but they did turn it over on downs three times, including twice in the second half. SOU would score after holding Northern off on fourth down twice during the game, and those plays turned out to be critical.

The Northern defense also got something few teams do against the Raiders, a Dodge interception. Kaimi Kanehailua’s third-quarter interception was the only turnover of an otherwise clean game, but the MSU-N offense didn’t cash in. And against the Raiders, a team who scores big and scores quick, teams have to take advantage of the few mistakes they make.

And still, even with all the missed opportunities, the Lights certainly put a scare into the Raiders, and they showed how good they can be when they play sound, fundamental football. The MSU-N defense got big stops, held star SOU running back Melvin Mason to just 36 yards, and sacked Dodge twice. The Northern offense ran over the Raider defense all day, and put up some impressive numbers. So there was certainly a lot to like about how the Lights played against their second Top 10 opponent of the season.

And while there isn’t any moral victories in football, Eldridge was proud of his team and had no regrets about the way they played on Homecoming.
“We knew we didn’t have anything to lose today,” Eldridge said. “We’re out here trying to win ball games and we’re not going to sit back and be passive, we’re going to always be aggressive. So we’re going to continue to take chances. And the plays we didn’t quite make today, we’ll keep working hard and those plays will come.”

One for the books

Dodge, the prolific SOU quarterback, who is now 3-0 against the Lights, is on pace to shatter every passing and total offense record in NAIA history. Saturday, in the fourth quarter, he went by two of them.

Dodge’s fourth touchdown of the day, an 18-yard fade route to Dylan Young, broke the NAIA record for career touchdown passes. Dodge, who needed three TDs Saturday to tie, broke former Ohio Dominican star Chris Reisert’s record of 120 career TD passes. Dodge now has 20 TDs this season and 122 for his career.

And by game’s end, Dodge, who threw for 417 yards Saturday, also broke Resiert’s career mark for passing yards. Dodge has now thrown for 13,461 yards in his four years at SOU. He’s also thrown for over 400 yards in each of his three starts against the Lights, and eventually, he’ll break every other NAIA passing record, most of which are held by Reisert or former Carroll College great Tyler Emmert.

“He’s a great quarterback, probably the best one I’ve ever played against,” said MSU-N senior safety Hunter Chandler. “He’s got a great arm, he can throw it 70 yards on a dime, he can fit it in those tight windows. He’s a tall guy, he makes all the throws, he’s got good feet and can evade the rush if he needs to. He’s just got everything you need as a quarterback in order to be successful.

“I think we played him pretty tough today,” Chandler added. “But obviously he made some big plays, and those plays kind of turned the tide for them.”

Thoroughly impressed

The Raiders aren’t short on talent, and veteran head coach Craig Howard is happy to have a team with so much talent and depth. But as Howard boarded the bus above Blue Pony Stadium Saturday afternoon following SOU’s latest triumph in Havre, he couldn’t say enough about the Lights’ team he just beat.

“Northern is a classy bunch, they play hard, they have very good football players,” Howard said. That’s a team that’s a heck of a lot better than a 1-4 record, I promise you.”

Howard was especially impressed with the weapons Northern has on offense, and with how hard the Lights defense. MSU-N racked up nearly 500 yards and 28 first downs against Howard’s defense, while the Lights did what they could on the other side of the ball to limit SOU’s explosive offense, including sacking Dodge on back-to-back plays, forcing four punts, holding the Raiders to a rare field goal try, and intercepting Dodge for only the fourth time all season.

“They (Lights) just have a lot of really good football players,” Howard said. “They have a great running back, Trevor Baum is a great wide receiver, Tyler Craig is a great defensive end. He was hard for us to block all day long. And I’ll say it again, they (Lights) are a lot better football team than their record shows. That’s a really good football team we beat today.” In the first half of Saturday’s battle with nationally-ranked Southern Oregon, it looked like a Montana State University-Northern upset was certainly brewing. Like the rain storms hanging around Blue Pony Stadium early in the game between the Lights and Raiders, an upset was certainly a real possibility.

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