There isn't a team in the Frontier Conference that has been able to slow down the Southern Oregon University offense this season. And while the Montana State University-Northern Lights tried as hard as they could, even on Homecoming, they couldn't quite do it either.

The No. 7 Raiders came into a chilly, windy and rainy Blue Pony Stadium, and overcame a valiant effort by the Lights, turning what was a first-half dogfight, into a second-half runaway, and a final score of 45-24 Saturday afternoon.

The win in Havre kept SOU unbeaten on the season, while the Lights slumped to a third straight loss and a fourth loss in the Frontier.

"The kids' effort was really good today," said Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge. "They fought, and they played very, very well, against a very good Southern Oregon team. I've got to take some blame for today, because I put some guys in some bad situations, trying to take some chances today, and they (Raiders) ended up hurting us with those mistakes.

"But the kids played hard, the kids did everything we asked them to do today," he continued. "We just needed some breaks to go our way today, and enough of them didn't. But I'm very happy with the way the kids played and fought today, and I'm very, very proud of them."

SOU head coach Craig Howard was also proud of his Raiders, who, with the exception of a close win against Carroll College earlier in the season, hadn't been challenged as much as the Lights did Saturday. Northern sacked SOU star quarterback Austin Dodge twice, forced several punts and even got a rare Dodge interception. On offense, the Lights racked up nearly 500 yards and held a 17-14 lead late in the first half. Yet, Howard's group was resilient.

"I was proud of the way our guys played today," Howard said. "But I was also very proud of our opponent. Northern is a classy bunch, they play hard, they have very good football players. That's a team that's a heck of a lot better than a 1-4 record, I promise you.

"But I think, in the second half, we did a lot of things better than we did in the first," he continued. "We dropped a lot of passes in the first half, and some of those balls, if we hang onto them, they might have been scores. I thought our offensive line protected (Dodge) much better in the second half, they (Lights) got to him a few times in the first half. And our defense tackled much better in the second half, and those two big stops we got on fourth down were critical. If we don't get those stops, this game might have turned a lot differently. So we feel really good about getting out of here with a win today. It was a very hard-fought football game."
Hard-fought, hard-hitting and explosive is the way to describe Saturday's game, especially in a first half filled with fireworks.

The Lights struck the first blow, after the MSU-N defense set the tone. MSU-N forced a three-and-out right away against Dodge and an SOU offense that comes close to scoring 50 points every single game. Then, on the Lights' second possession of the game, they announced to the Raiders that they were in for a fight even more emphatically.

On just the second play of the second series, sophomore Zach McKinley broke free around the right side of the SOU defense, then outran everybody to the endzone, giving the Lights a quick 7-0 lead. McKinley's TD covered 43 yards as Northern continued its streak of scoring inside the first five minutes of the game in every contest this season.

But, McKinley's run was just part of an intriguing first-half battle, and it would be the Raiders who would stick a dagger in the Lights at the end of each of the first two quarters.

SOU had answered McKinley's TD run with Dodge throwing his first of five TDs on the day, and the first of three to Dylan Young. Then, just before the first quarter ended, and one play after a promising Northern drive stalled in the redzone, Dodge went over the top to Sean McShane for an 81-yard strike. The entire sequence, from when McKinley was stuffed on a fourth-down try, until McShane was in the endzone, took just a matter of seconds and it left SOU up 14-7 at the end of the first period.

But, as they would do all day long, the Lights fought right back. Northern opened the second stanza with a 26-yard Jordan Rueschoff field goal, then a fired-up MSU-N defense forced two straight SOU punts. The second punt was a result of back-to-back plays in which the Lights got to Dodge, as Tyler Craig and Patrick Barnett each got sacks. On Northern's ensuing possession, Travis Deane drilled a 14-yard pass to Jake Messerly to get the Lights rolling again, and a few plays later, McKinley busted off an 18-yard scamper. And what followed was magic as Dean zipped a pass up the right side to Trevor Baum, who had another huge day, and he found the endzone from 26 yards away.

The result was Northern's first and only lead of the day as the Lights led 17-14 with just 2:55 left in the first half, and an excited MSU-N homecoming crowd was roaring.

"I'm not a guy who is much on moral victories," said Northern senior safety Hunter Chandler. "But I do think we played pretty well today. I think they (Raiders) got a better fight than they expected coming in here. We played well at times, offense, defense and special teams, and especially in the first half, I thought we did play pretty well.

"But they (Raiders) did have a couple big plays, that they always have, that kind of break our backs."

And as well as the Lights played, as hard as they fought, one of those backbreakers Chandler spoke of came right after Baum's score, and it set the tone for the rest of the day.

In just over a minute, Dodge, who seemed shaken up just one series before, marched the Raiders right down the field, completing six passes in a row, the last of which went to Keegan Lawrence for a 26-yard score, and just like that, SOU was heading into the locker room with 21-17 advantage.

"It was a real tough first half," Howard said. "But I thought Dodge did a real good job of staying composed, and he made a couple of really big throws, and when we held onto those throws, they were scores. But it really was a hard-fought game, it was a really close game for a long time, 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."

Dodge's big plays in the third quarter forced Northern into catch-up mode, which is something that's tough to do against the Raiders.

Things started off bright in the second half for the Lights when senior linebacker Kami Kanehailua picked off Dodge early on, on a great diving play. But MSU-N failed to cash in on the turnover and was stopped on downs on its ensuing possession. In all, the SOU defense pitched a shutout in what was a defensive third period, while the Raiders got two big plays in the closing minutes to seemingly put the game out of reach.
With 5:18 left in the stanza, Dodge hooked up with Young on a 56-yard touchdown pass, and after the Lights went 3-and-out for the second straight time, Aldrick Rosas nailed a 41-yard field goal to put the Raiders ahead 31-17 heading into the fourth.

Northern didn't go away, however, and the Lights engineered a 17-play drive to get right back into the contest. Dean hit Nick Luoma on a key third-down conversion, and Mario Gobatto picked up another big third down on the ground. And finally, on the type of drive teams love to have against the quick-strike Raiders, McKinley barreled his way into the endzone to pull the Lights to within 31-24 with 9:13 left in the game.

"We're never going to accept losing, obviously," Eldridge said. "But I'm really happy, and really proud of effort today, and the fight in these kids. Offensively, defensively, and special teams, they never quit, they never quit fighting, and they're going to continue to do that. The attitude of this team is great, and they showed a lot of heart again today."

The Lights didn't quit, but what they needed following McKinley's TD plunge was at least one more defensive stop. But Dodge, who is shattering NAIA passing records seemingly every time he hoists the ball up, had other ideas. He took advantage of great field position on SOU's ensuing possession, and in less than two minutes, he had Young in the back of the endzone for yet another back-breaking score. Young's third TD catch of the day put the Raiders back up by two scores and ended any chance of a Northern comeback. For good measure, Dodge would throw a fifth TD later in the period to make the final margin.

And while Northern put up as good a fight as anybody has this season against Dodge and the Raiders, he still managed to throw for 417 yards, while SOU hit its season average in points and total yards. The Northern defense, led by Chandler's nine stops, and seven each by Kanahebailua and Barnett, did limit the Raiders to just 52 yards rushing and held the Frontier's leading rusher, Melvin Mason, to just 33 yards on six carries. However, Young hauled in five catches for 145 yards, while Dodge connected with seven different receivers in all.

"We played pretty well defensively, at times," Chandler said. "But they (Raiders) are a good team and they have a great offense, and we needed to make a few more plays in the third quarter, and we didn't do that. So we just have to keep working hard and make those big plays when we need them. But this team played really hard and gave it everything today, and that's all I can ask."

Offensively, Northern again piled up the yards, but didn't convert on enough scoring opportunities. Still, McKinley had another monster day, rushing for 178 yards on a whopping 38 carries, while the Lights rushed for 278 yards as a team. Gobatto chipped in with 49 yards, while Baum caught 10 balls for 82 yards and Messerly had seven grabs for 62 yards. Dean finished the game 24-of-46 for 187 yards, while Northern racked up 465 yards of offense and 28 first downs. The Lights also dominated the time of possession and only had four penalties in what was an entertaining contest.

But as entertaining as it was, the Lights were left still searching for their first conference win heading into their bye week. Still, Eldridge remains positive and says that if Northern (0-4, 1-4) continues to do what it's supposed to, the wins and the success will come.

"The attitude of this team is great," Eldridge said. "They continue to work hard, they continue to stay positive and upbeat. The kids' effort is there, it's where it needs to be. They just have to keep working hard, and trust and believe in each other, that one of these games, we're going to find a way to get a W."
Northern will have this week off before returning to action Oct. 11 at College of Idaho. The Lights will be back at home to face Montana Tech Oct. 18.

**Explosive Game**

**Lights are 1-4 overall and 0-4 in the Frontier; Next Up: vs Montana Tech Oct. 18**

**Lights Notes**: Northern is now 0-3 against the Raiders since they joined the Frontier. The Raiders have won four times at Blue Pony Stadium dating back to 2004. Craig now has seven sacks in five games this season. McKinley has rushed for more than 100 yards in four of the Lights' five games in 2014. MSU-N had nine more first downs than SOU Saturday, and held the ball for almost 11 more minutes than the Raiders, who's average time of possession per series is under three minutes.

*Havre Daily News website*