The Montana State University-Northern football team left everything they had on the field last Saturday against the No. 7 Southern Oregon Raiders. And while the Raiders escaped Havre with a 45-24 win, MSU-N played one of its best games of the season, in spite of what the scoreboard said.

Still, Northern enters its only bye week of the 2014 season at a frustrating 1-4 overall and 0-4 in the Frontier Conference. The bye week comes at a good time for the Lights, who have been going hard since the beginning of August, and who have to travel to league newcomer College of Idaho in two weeks.

The reason the Lights are frustrated with their record entering their week off is simple, Northern is talented enough and has put up good enough numbers to suggest a much better record than that of a 1-4 team.

For example, the Lights are second in the Frontier in total offense, averaging 487 yards per game. That ranks them sixth in the NAIA. MSU-N is second in the league in passing and third in rushing, while sophomore running back Zach McKinley is first in the Frontier and second in the NAIA with 637 yards and an average of 127 yards per game.

Wide receiver Trevor Baum is at the top of the list in all of NAIA football with his 162 receiving yards per game and his total of 810 yards on the season. Baum is second in the country with his 50 receptions, while his 1,010 all-purpose yards also ranks him second in the country. And senior quarterback Travis Dean is second in the Frontier to SOU’s Austin Dodge in pretty much every passing category. Dean is third in all of the NAIA in total offense with 1,585 yards, third in passing with 1,523 yards and eighth in the country in total offense per game, averaging 317 yards every time he steps on the field.

Those are pretty gaudy numbers for an offense, yet the Lights are seventh in the Frontier in scoring and that’s one thing that’s held them back.

Northern, for much of the season, has been every bit as good on defense, except when it comes to scoring. The Lights are allowing 40 points per game, which doesn’t quite match with the defensive numbers they put up throughout a game. Northern is second in the Frontier in total defense, allowing just 357 yards per game. The Lights are also first in the Frontier against the run allowing just 106 yards per game, which also ranks them sixth nationally.

Individually, Tyler Craig leads the NAIA with 6.5 sacks, while Patrick Barnett and Jordan Brusio each have three. And kicker Jordan Rueschhoff is among the top field goal kickers, not only in the Frontier, but in all of NAIA football.
For a team that didn't have many stars or returning All-Conference performers when fall camp began, the Lights have exploded in that area. Now, they just need to do it on the scoreboard.

“We have pretty good players overall on this team,” said senior safety Hunter Chandler, who’s among the league leaders in tackles this season. “I don’t think I’ve ever been on any team that’s 1-4 as good as this one. We are a really good football team, we have a lot of really good football players. We just have to find a way to win some of these games.”

After a much-needed week off, that’s exactly what this talented and explosive Lights’ team will do, go to Caldwell, Idaho looking to win.

**Yotes Running Wild**

When Northern plays its first-ever game at College of Idaho on Oct. 10, the Lights’ stout run defense will be put to the test. But not necessarily by the Yotes’ stable of running backs.

C of I quarterback TeeJay Gordon is one of the top rushers in the Frontier. He’s rushed for 526 yards and nine touchdowns this season, which is more rushing scores than McKinley, Carroll College’s Dustin Rinker or SOU’s Melvin Mason, the top three running backs in the league.

In last week’s triumph over Montana Tech, Gordon ran for 167 yards and two scores, while the Yotes scored six times on the ground. Gordon is a true dual-threat QB and a total offense nightmare for opposing defenses. Gordon averages 200 yards though the air as well and has been efficient, only throwing two interceptions all season long.

College of Idaho, which was picked to finish dead last in its first year of football in nearly four decades, isn’t going to let that happen. The Yotes are 4-1 in the Frontier, one game out of first place and have been an offensive juggernaut so far.

And when Northern comes to town next week, the Yotes will have something else on their side, a big and loud crowd. C of I is averaging close to 5,000 fans at brand new Simplot Stadium, and that total is impressive, with only Carroll College having a larger home attendance average. C of I’s home crowds have been loud and raucous, and it’s no wonder the Yotes are already 2-0 on their home turf.

**Slow Down**

The Frontier Conference got off to a wild start, and in the first quarter of the season, we’ve already seen Carroll lose at Southern Oregon, Rocky Mountain College rise all the way to No. 5 in the NAIA, only to lose back-to-back home games to Carroll and Eastern Oregon. We’ve seen Southern Oregon do what it has always done on offense, but struggle to hold off the Saints, Mountaineers and Lights.

We’ve seen College of Idaho shock everybody with its 4-1 start to the season, while UM-Western continues its roller coaster ride of big wins and head-scratching losses. And I don’t think anyone would think that Northern and Montana Tech have played like teams that have won a combined one game in conference play.

No, the numbers and results don’t lie, the Frontier is easily the most difficult and most exciting league in the NAIA, and there’s a lot of football left.

However, at least for one week, things will quiet down, as Northern, SOU, Rocky and Tech all have byes this weekend. There are still two key matchups in the Frontier, with the biggest being C of I’s home game with Eastern Oregon Saturday. After the Mounties stunned RMC last Saturday on a last-second field goal in Billings, they moved up to No. 17 in the latest NAIA Coaches Poll. And their game with the Yotes, who are receiving votes for the first time ever in the poll, will be a key clash as both teams sit at 2-1 in conference play. Carroll comes out of its bye week and hosts UM-Western, which also had last week off this Saturday in Helena. The Saints should be heavily favored in that game, but the bulldogs have always give the Saints fits in Nelson Stadium.

**Sack Master**
As mentioned above, Northern sophomore Tyler Craig has been a force to be reckoned with so far this season. Craig started for the Lights as a freshman and led the team in sacks, but this season his productivity has sky-rocketed.

Craig, a Great Falls prep standout, has 6.5 sacks to go along with 22 tackles and three tackles for loss. Craig is quickly becoming one of the best pass rushers in the NAIA, and while he's already starting to see more double teams, it hasn't mattered thus far.

“Tyler Craig is a really good football player,” said SOU head coach Craig Howard. “He's really hard to block.”

Craig’s play this season has already made him a candidate for Frontier Defensive Player of the Year, as well as All-Conference and All-American honors. He’s also joining some elite Northern company at defensive end as well. Kino Detrick (2001) and Josh Glahn (2006) hold the record for most sacks in a single season, each with 11.5, while former Lights great Will Andrews holds the Northern record for career sacks with an astounding 29 from 2007-2011. Craig now has 10.5 sacks in his career.

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