Lights try it again with a Tech rematch
MSU-Northern, Montana Tech both looking to snap losing streaks
By George Ferguson
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When the Montana State University-Northern football team went to Butte to open the 2014 season, emotions were running high. After all, the Lights had just been through a tumultuous fall camp, a controversy that has been well documented.

And on that night in Butte, emotion didn’t quite carry the Lights through as they lost their season-opener at Montana Tech 38-24.

Now, well over a month, as well as half the season, has passed, yet emotions will again be running high as the Lights (1-4, 1-5) and Orediggers (1-5, 1-5) are set for a rematch. MSU-N and Montana Tech will meet Saturday at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium, with both teams desperate for a victory.

And desperate might be an understatement. The 2014 season has not gone according to plan for the Lights, nor the Diggers, and last weekend was a perfect example of that. The Lights suffered a heartbreaking defeat at College of Idaho when they were stopped on the goal line as time expired while trying to score the game-winning touchdown in a 35-31 loss to the Yotes. Tech felt the same kind of sting last Saturday. The Diggers suffered their fifth straight loss when they watched Rocky Mountain College storm back and beat them in overtime, 45-39.

So, in a season filled with close calls, disappointment and heartbreak, and with two very prideful teams going head-to-head, something will finally have to give Saturday in Havre.

“Our kids haven’t and won’t quit,” Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said. “And that’s really a testament to our senior leaders, and our assistant coaches who work with these guys every day. We’ve been talking about it a lot lately, that while wins are what it’s about, and things like the playoffs aren’t in our future, we can still set the tone for this program with these last games. We can show pride and instill that in the guys who will be coming back next year and the year after that. These guys understand that, and they still feel like we have a lot to play for.”

Northern’s season has been a tale of two stories. On one hand, MSU-N has been one of the most prolific and dynamic offensive teams in the NAIA, averaging 500 yards of total offense per game, while the likes of Zach McKinley leads the Frontier in rushing at 126 yards per outing, senior quarterback Travis Dean throws for 308 yards a game, and senior wide receiver Trevor Baum averages 10 catches and 141 yards per outing. But on the other hand, the Lights are sixth in the Frontier in scoring at 26 points per game and last in the league in turnover margin. Those numbers, no matter how exciting MSU-N’s offense has been, have held the Lights back.
On defense, it’s been the same story. The Lights are second in the Frontier, allowing just 355 yards per game. They lead the league and are fifth in the NAIA against the run, and, they are fourth against the pass. Tyler Craig leads the way with eight sacks, while Jordan Brusio and Patrick Barnett are both having breakout seasons as well. Kami Kanehailua is among the leading tacklers in the Frontier, and in the secondary, Butch Hyder and Malcolm Manuel have really come on of late. Yet, Northern is last in the league, allowing 38 points per game, and again, not creating enough turnovers has hurt as well.

“We’re close,” Eldridge said. “We just can’t seem to get that one big stop in the second half, or that one key score we need. It really is that close. And those are things we’re working hard to correct. We’re still working on the fundamentals, and really finishing.”

Tech has been the opposite of the Lights in that regard. The Orediggers have lost a slew of tough games, but their numbers bear the end result. Despite playing in numerous close games this season, the Diggers are last in the Frontier in scoring (21 ppg), last in total offense (312 ypg) and a mere seventh in rushing (127 ypg). On defense, the Diggers are seventh, allowing 37 points per game, and seventh in total defense, allowing 447 yards per outing.

Still, like Northern, numbers don’t tell the whole story, and Eldridge doesn’t see a Tech team that’s struggled all year. Instead, he sees a team that is talented, fast, physical and will come to Blue Pony Stadium ready for a fight.

“In our conference, you can’t look at a team’s record and say that team is good or bad,” Eldridge said. “In this league, I think every team is good, and we know from experience that Tech is a very good football team. Coach Morrell is a great football coach, and he has that team very prepared every week, and they play extremely hard.

“That offense has a lot of weapons. It’s built on speed and getting the ball out in space, and the quarterback can move around really well, too. But, they will also go with more traditional looks and a power run game, and they have two very good, capable running backs. So they (Orediggers) can really challenge your defense. And for us, that means we’re going to have to play smart, and tackle really well in open space. Those will be big keys for us.”

Tech does indeed have weapons and speed. Senior running back Pat Hansen (5-9, 182) has been one of the most prolific runners in Tech history, and while his numbers are down slightly this season, he is still a game-changer, especially behind a stout offensive line. Hansen has also had to share carries with emerging star Nolan Saraceni (5-9, 195), who gashed the Lights for over 100 yards back in August. Tech also has a slew of speedy wide receivers, led by Alec Bray (5-11, 180), who is a home run threat every time he touches the ball. At quarterback, the Diggers have used both Andrew Loudenback (6-3, 225) and red-shirt freshman Dawson Reardon (6-1, 190) this season. Loudenback started in the opener against the Lights, but Reardon, who is more of a threat to run the ball, has played more as of late, and is listed as the Orediggers’ starter.

Defensively is where things haven’t quite come together for Tech this season. But the Diggers have playmakers there too. Linebacker Mike Touzinsky is a two-time All-Conference performer, and he leads Tech with 47 tackles, one sack and one interception this season. Fellow backer David Meis (6-3, 220) has 46 tackles and a Frontier-best 10 tackles for loss, while safeties Rial Gunlickson (6-1, 190) and Caleb Vance (6-0, 190) are two of the best in the league, and are flanked by two speedy corners in DeAngelo Bell (5-9, 170) and Andre Cornell (6-0, 180), giving Tech a stellar secondary.

“They have a lot of speed on defense,” Eldridge said. “They tackle well, and they play physical football, and that’s what you expect from a Chick Morrell defense. They really fly to the ball and get after you. Again, you can’t look at their record or their stats and really determine what kind of a team they are. Tech has a very good defense, and we know that.”

And that might be where the game is won or lost for the Lights on Saturday. While Northern is certainly looking forward to getting Tech back in Blue Pony Stadium after last season’s crushing loss on an Oredigger last-second Hail Mary pass, as well as this season’s loss in Butte, the Lights are more focused on execution than on revenge.

“We need to continue to get better, and continue to strive for better execution,” Eldridge said. "That's the key for us. I'm very happy with our offense. I think we're really tough to prepare for. You can't say we're..."
just a running team, even though we take a lot of pride in running the football. I think we’ve been pretty balanced all season long. But we need to finish drives, we need to execute and we need to eliminate the turnovers. We have to score, whether it’s a long, 80 or 90-yard drive, or on one big play, we have to score points. And on defense, we need to get the key stops and play smart. We need to get off the field when we have those opportunities. Those are the things that will make us a better football team, and those are things that will lead to wins.”

And wins are what the Lights are after Saturday, and the rest of the season as well. Northern has been an impressive football team in almost every facet, week in and week out, but the Lights have been unable to secure victories. And that’s something Eldridge says the team still wants to, and has time to change.

“This team is very prideful,” he said. “They want to win football games. They want to get better. They want to show everyone that they are a good football team, and that they can beat the top teams in this league. They have continued to work really hard, and I’m proud of them for that.

“I still believe this is a very good football team,” he continued. “And I believe we can win every game we play from here on. We just have to go out and do it. We just have to execute. And hopefully, that starts with this game, at home, against a very good Montana Tech team.”

Saturday’s game between the Lights and Orediggers will kick off at 1 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium. Northern returns to the road to face Eastern Oregon next Saturday. Tech returns home to face arch rival Carroll College next Saturday.

**Redemption Time**
**MSU-Northern Lights (1-5, 0-5) vs Montana Tech Orediggers (1-5, 1-5)**
**Saturday 1 p.m.**
**Blue Pony Stadium**

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