MSU-N Notebook: Lights deliver a perfect play in the clutch
MSU-Northern Game Day Notebook
By George Ferguson
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For much of the day, whether it was the wind, or relentless pressure from Montana Tech's defense, or it just being one of those days, the passing game wasn't quite clicking for the Montana State University-Northern Lights.

But in the end, it only took one perfect pass, one route, one catch, and the Lights finally grabbed a long-awaited win.

On a blustery, but summer-like day Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium, that pass came from senior quarterback Travis Dean to a wide open Jake Messerly, and the rest was history. Trailing 34-30 to Montana Tech with just over two minutes to go, and probably on their last offensive series of the game, the Lights knew the play they wanted, and it was perfect. Dean lofted an arching pass, into the 20 MPH wind, and running free was Messerly. The result was a 32-yard touchdown, and eventually, a 37-30 Lights' win, their first since they beat Dickinson State 40-17 back on Sept. 6.

And in the moment, Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge knew the play was the right call.

"We had been pounding on that all day, and all week in practice, that we needed to win the one-on-one matchups," Eldridge said. "We just kept after it, and in that situation, we knew we were going to get that matchup. And I knew, if we could just execute, and win that one-on-one matchup, it would pay off. And Travis saw it and made a great throw. It was a tough game, and at times, a lot of breaks didn't go our way. But we executed the play when we needed it the most."

The play looked perfect from start to finish, but, Messerly, who had a huge day with 104 yards receiving and 51 yards in kickoff returns, didn't start it that way. Instead, he actually said he was running the wrong route when he found himself wide open up the seam. But it mattered none.

"To be honest, I actually ran the wrong route," he said. "I was supposed (to go to the) outside the corner, I ended up going inside the corner. I don't know why, but I saw the ball and everything looked so pretty. I caught it and realized I'm in the endzone. Happy man, I guess. But it was a great throw from Travis, and we're a happy bunch right now."

Whether it was the wrong route or not, it was perfect in the end, and so was the throw. And it was a perfect throw from Dean on a less than perfect day. The senior leader, who has been the rock of the Lights every step of the way this season, only completed 13 passes for 186 yards on what was a frustrating day at times, one that included him being stopped short on a QB, fourth-down sneak when he clearly thought he had the one yard he needed.

But while he may have only thrown for 186 yards when he was averaging 307 per game on the season, the only ones that mattered in the end were the last 32 to Messerly. And once again, stats don't tell the whole story, as the Lights' comeback win would not have been possible without their senior quarterback.
"The line gave me some great time to sit back and read it," Dean said of the game-winning TD pass. "Mess (Messerly) one-on-one made a great inside route on them, and it was just daylight. I knew I had to put it on him, and honestly, it was one of the most nerve-racking throws I've ever had to make. Just glad it worked out."

"It's a testament to Travis Dean," Eldridge said. "He's the vocal leader of this team, it all comes back to him. He's the quarterback. And he led us today. And when we needed it the most, he stepped up, in the clutch, and made a really big play."

**Kicking nightmare**

The Lights started off the game with a bang when Zach McKinley raced untouched for 42 yards and an early score. But when Jordan Rueschhoff's PAT was blocked, and eventually returned the other way for a Tech safety, it was obvious that the kicking game was going to be interesting Saturday at windy Blue Pony Stadium.

And it was, as the sequence in the first quarter was only the beginning.

Junior kicker Matt Berg's miss of 30 yards in the final seconds of the game was part of a long, long day for himself, Tech punter Travis Farewell and Rueschhoff too.

Berg came into Saturday's contest having made 5-of-7 field goals including a long of 40 yards this season. That's why his final FG attempt, which would have sent the contest to overtime, was so puzzling, though the snap was bad. But he also missed a 40-yarder earlier in the game, at the same end of the field, with a howling west wind right at his back. Berg also missed a PAT, and had another one blocked on what must have felt like a horrific day.

Meanwhile, punting into the wind was brutal, too. Farewell and Rueschhoff both boomed punts with the wind at their back, but each had a couple of punting disasters. Farewell had one punt into the wind travel only about 15 yards, then bounce backwards another 15 to net nearly zero yards. Rueschhoff had a couple of 20-yarders into the wind as well, but even with the wind, he had trouble on one extra point and a short field goal, which went through but was a low line drive.

But, no matter the troubles, at the end of the day, it was Berg's miscues that had the biggest effect, and because of them, Northern didn't have to face overtime against a Tech team just as hungry for a win as the Lights were.

"You have to execute in all three phases, not just on offense and defense, but special team's too," McKinley said. "We had some big mistakes on special teams too today, but they had a couple more, and we got the win in the end. So that just goes to show you how important special team's plays are in this game."

**All's well that ends well**

It was a special day at Blue Pony Stadium, right from the start. It was Pink Day, in honor of cancer awareness, and on top of that, the announcement, and presentation of a $3.1 million donation to MSU-Northern for the Applied Diesel Technology Program, really got Saturday's game between the Lights and Orediggers off to a special start.

But from there, the game turned into an emotional roller coaster, and it was a ride that wouldn't end in Northern's favor until Berg's kick sailed wide right.

But in the end, it was how it was supposed to be. A big day for Northern in all regards, in fact a big weekend all the way around, one that also saw home games for the MSU-N volleyball and basketball teams, came to an end when the Lights snapped their four-game losing streak, and put to rest the memory of last year's November loss to the Orediggers on a hail mary pass in the closing seconds under the Lights of Blue Pony Stadium.

"It's the best feeling ever," Tyler Craig, who now has 9.5 sacks this season said. "To go to work every week, to put in the hard work and all the hours like we have bee, to have it pay off with a win like this, there's no better feeling."