Lights take aim at vaunted Saints
By George Ferguson
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It may sound strange to some, but playing the Carroll College Fighting Saints might be exactly what the Montana State University-Northern football team needs right now.

Coming off a humbling 70-21 loss at Eastern Oregon last Saturday, the Lights (1-6, 2-6) are faced with the challenge of trying to turn things around against No. 2 Carroll (6-1, 6-1) when the vaunted Saints come to Blue Pony Stadium Saturday afternoon. Kickoff is set for 12 p.m.

And though the task of playing the Saints, who are riding a six-game winning streak, is daunting for the Lights, it might be exactly what they need to put the past behind them. In fact, with how good Carroll is, the Lights don’t have a choice.

“We were very disappointed with what happened last week against Eastern Oregon,” Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said. “The fact is, we got punched right in the mouth and we didn’t respond, at all.

“And it doesn’t get any easier this week. Everyone is very aware of how good Carroll is. They are the cream of the crop in this league,” Eldridge continued. “But I think it’s a good thing that that’s who we play this week. We are faced with no choice but to pick ourselves up and focus on the task at hand. We know it’s a huge task, but the guys are excited about this challenge, and they’ve responded with a great week of practice.”

A good week is exactly what the Lights need. Northern was riding high after beating Montana Tech 37-34 Oct. 18 in Havre. But all that good was derailed last Saturday in Oregon, as the Mountaineers rolled up nearly 600 yards of offense and 70 points on an MSU-N defense that had been more than stout throughout the season.

Offensively, the Lights also suffered setbacks at EOU. Northern lost senior quarterback Travis Dean to a knee injury, and his status for Saturday’s game is questionable at best. Meanwhile, star running back Zach McKinley was held 90 yards below his season average, as Northern rushed for under 200 yards, while true freshman Jess Krahn played well in relief of Dean, but still threw a pair of interceptions.

Now, the Lights must regroup on both sides of the ball, and it won’t be easy against the Saints, who come to Havre on a roll, though they did only slip by Tech 20-12 last Saturday in Butte.

“They’re (Saints) the No. 2 team in the country for a reason,” Eldridge said. “They are good on both sides of the ball, and on special teams. And they’re obviously extremely well coached. We understand that we have a huge challenge in front of us.”

A challenge that includes a current 15-game losing streak against Carroll. In fact, Northern has only beaten the Saints once since football returned to MSU-N in the late 1990s. But each game with Carroll is unique, and Saturday’s tilt will be no different.
The Lights will want to run the ball with McKinley, who’s rushed for 967 yards and 13 touchdowns. Mario Gobatto, who led the Lights in rushing last week, will also get his carries. But Northern, whether it’s with Krahn in his first start, or Dean at the controls, will need to be balanced, too. And the Lights will want to take advantage of speedy receivers Trevor Baum and Jake Messerly when and where they can.

But that’s also easier said than done. Carroll’s stingy defense, led by head coach Mike Van Diest, only allows 18 points and just over 350 yards per game, both tops in the Frontier. The Saints have a star-studded defensive unit, led by senior linebacker Sean Blomquist (5-11, 230), the reigning Frontier Defensive Player of the Year, as well as rush ends Sean Condon (6-3, 250) and Bryan Graupman (6-3, 232), and All-American safety James Dowgin (6-2, 185). The Saints are also big at stopping the run, with veteran tackle Dakota Amy (6-3, 260), and are good in pass defense with Dowgin leading a fast and physical secondary. He has two interceptions this season, while Blomquist has a team-high 48 tackles, four sacks and seven tackles for loss.

"They are Carroll College on defense,” Eldridge said. "They've been great on that side of the ball for decades now. They are physical, they are disciplined and they are fast. They have one of the best linebackers in the country in (Sean) Blomquist and one of the best safeties in the country in (James) Dowgin right behind him. They have playmakers all over the field, and if we thought Eastern (Oregon) was physical with us last week, Carroll is ten times that. They are just the total package on defense.

"But our goals on offense don’t change,” he continued. “We have to be able to run the football effectively. That’s what we want to do, pound it right at them. But we also know we need to be ourselves, and that's to stay balanced and take what they give us. Whether it’s a long drive, moving the chains, or taking shots down the field, we need to be that consistent offense we had been up until last week. That doesn’t change no matter who we’re playing.”

Speaking of offense, Carroll’s is rolling right now. After a slow start to his senior season, shifty running back Dustin Rinker (5-9, 205) comes to Havre on fire. In the last two games, Rinker, who runs behind one of the best offensive lines in all of NAIA football, has rushed for 398 yards and and two scores. He’s averaging a league-best 137 yards per game, and last week, he became Carroll’s all-time leading rusher. He’s also had historically good games against the Lights.

But Carroll’s offense doesn’t start and stop with Rinker and the power run game. First-year starter Mac Roche (6-1, 205) has started to come into his own as a passing threat, and he has the luxury of having one of the fastest and deepest receiver groups in the Frontier. Roche, a former Whitefish Bulldog, has thrown for 1,812 yards and 18 touchdowns, and has only turned the ball over three times all season. His favorite target is senior Anthony Clarke (5-11, 190), but fellow receivers Jared Mayernik (5-11, 185), Kyle Griffith (6-2, 185) and Dylan Simac (6-2, 210) are every bit as dangerous. Carroll averages 38 points and nearly 400 yards of offense per game, and with each week, the Saints have become more and more dynamic on offense. Clarke and Mayernik are also two of the best kick returners in the Frontier.

"Their (Saints) running game is very solid,” Eldridge said. “Rinker is as good they get at running back, and their offensive line and tight ends do a great job for him. But their passing game is solid, too. Their quarterback is having a good first season, and he’s got four absolute weapons to throw, too, led by Anthony Clarke.

“So we know we have our hands full,” he continued. “Carroll’s offense balanced, and the skill players they have are second to none. But we feel like our defense is up to the challenge. They have to be. We have to play really smart, mistake-free football, because that’s what Carroll does so well, they make you pay for your mistakes. But we also have to be physical. We know they’re going to be, and our defense has to respond to that.”

Northern will look to respond with its stout defensive line, led by Tyler Craig’s 9.5 sacks. Will DeVos and Patrick Barnett have been run-stoppers all season long, while Jordan Brusio has had a breakout season. Kami Kanehailua leads the Lights with 62 tackles, while safeties Hunter Chandler and Butch Hyder have combined for 90 more stops, and Malcolm Manuel has two picks.

But it isn’t just the offense and defense of Carroll that Northern must stop, or slow down. The Lights must also play mistake-free football on special teams, because Carroll usually does there too. They will also have
to overcome a painful road trip to EOU, as well as the jitters and doubts that accompany playing the Saints on a big stage. And while Northern has had its struggles this season, the Lights need to know the Saints won’t look past them for one second. Carroll is in the midst of a battle with Southern Oregon for the Frontier title, and with Saturday being the first day of November, it’s officially crunch time around the Frontier.

However, with all that said, MSU-N will come out excited to play the Saints, to play at home, and should be loose and ready to go. At least, that’s what Eldridge is looking for from his bunch, who have shown resiliency all season long.

“Carroll is a great football team, Coach Van Diest is a great coach,” Eldridge said. “We know we have a big challenge in front of us. And hopefully our guys have embraced that challenge. Hopefully we come out and play hard and play physical and play smart. We have to, and I think we will. Our guys are excited about this game. They are excited to play the No. 2 team in the country. It’s a great challenge, but it’s also a great opportunity for our guys to come back and show everyone that we aren’t the team that played Eastern Oregon last week. We don’t have anything to lose right now, and we want to show everybody that we’re still a very good, very tough, very competitive football team. And what better opportunity to do that than this game.”

Saturday’s battle between the Lights and Saints, the only one this season, will kick off at 12 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium. Northern will remain home to face UM-Western next Saturday, while Carroll returns to Helena to host Rocky Mountain College.

**Wanting an Upset**

**MSU-Northern Lights (2-6, 1-6) vs No. Carroll College Fighting Saints (6-1, 6-1)**

**Saturday 12 p.m.**

**Blue Pony Stadium**

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