Purple March: Saints 55, Lights 13
Carroll storms past Northern at Blue Pony Stadium
By George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern Lights trotted on to the turf at Blue Pony Stadium hoping to shake off the bitter sting of a brutal loss last week at Eastern Oregon. But, one day after Halloween, the Carroll College Fighting Saints made sure the Lights’ nightmare continued.

The No. 2 Saints, riding a six-game winning streak, marched into Havre and thumped the young Lights, 55-13 Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium. The loss dropped Northern to 1-7 in the Frontier Conference, while Carroll remained tied with Southern Oregon atop the league standings.

Carroll, which has now beaten the Lights eight straight years at Blue Pony Stadium, scored 34 unanswered points, shut Northern out in the second half and held the Lights without a first down for the entire third quarter in a dominant victory.

“We came out in the third quarter, and they hit a big run (on) us; they ended up scoring,” said Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge. “And then we just couldn’t move the ball on offense at all. So it was a really tough third quarter.

“They (Saints) pretty much just out-played (us) in all phases of the game,” he continued. “There’s a reason they are the number two team in the country, and they showed that today. They were very, very good.”

But as good as Carroll was, the Lights didn’t just roll over. The Lights held Carroll to a short Dustin Rinker touchdown in the first quarter, while Garrett Fowler’s interception of CC quarterback Mac Roche fired up the Northern faithful.

However, the Saints quickly asserted themselves early in the second stanza. On the second play of their first drive, Roche hit Anthony Clark on a crossing route, and Clark’s speed turned the short pass into a 58-yard touchdown, and for a brief moment, it looked like the route was on.

But, then it wasn’t.

Northern responded with a great drive, finished off with Jess Krahn throwing a 23-yard TD pass to Jake Messerly. The extra point was blocked, but the Lights were right back in the game, and it was a great throw by Krahn, a true freshman making his first career start, in place of injured starter Travis Dean.

Carroll answered though when the Saints took advantage of a Krahn interception. And two plays later, Rinker’s second TD put the Saints in front 21-6. But, Northern fought back again. The Lights put their best drive of the day together, as Zach McKinley busted off runs of 23 and 18 yards, respectively, setting the Lights up in Carroll territory. Then, McKinley got the call again, and he ran around the left said, then raced to the house on a 14-yard jaunt which brought Northern to 21-13 with just 5:38 until halftime.
The score not only fired up the Northern faithful, but also the Northern defense, and two more times in the quarter, the Lights forced Carroll to punt. But, the Saints had a dagger still to stick in the Lights, and it happened just before the half.

Carroll got the ball back one more time, with 1:04 to go in the half, and Roche threw a 58-yard strike to Clark which set the Saints up with a first-and-goal from the four. Two plays later, Roche scored on a keeper, and instead of a one-possession game, the Lights went into halftime down 28-13, and with Carroll set to receive the opening kickoff of the second half.

“I thought we came out strong, on both sides of the ball,” Eldridge said. “We made some mistakes, but all-in-all, we played pretty well for most of the first half. We got the stops we wanted on defense, and we did make some plays on offense.

“But that score right before the half certainly hurt,” he continued. “And then Carroll just came out and was very good in the third quarter, and we couldn’t get anything going.”

The Lights indeed didn’t get anything going offensively, and a tired Northern defense wore down. Northern didn’t pick up a first down until two minutes into the fourth quarter, while Carroll seemed to score at will.

In the third stanza, Roche threw TD passes to Clark and Kyle Griffith, and he scored another on the ground. Matt Wiest added a 28-yard field goal, and he would put another field goal through the uprights later in the fourth period.

In all, Carroll finished the day racking up 502 yards of offense, with 22 first downs. The Saints rushed for 222 yards, though the Lights did hold Rinker to just 88. He came into the game averaging over 130 yards per outing, and had rushed for over 100 yards four different times against the Lights in his career. But while the Lights limited Rinker, Roche and Clark were spectacular. Roche finished 17-of-24 for 280 yards and three TDs. He also rushed for 33 yards and two more scores. Clark caught seven passes for 143 yards and two scores, and returned three kickoffs for 88 yards.

"It was good," Carroll coach Mike Van Diest said. "We started off a bit slow again this week and had a few bumps in the road, but the second half, I thought, we played extremely well.”

Carroll’s defense played especially well, and was nearly perfect in the final for 40 minutes. Northern only gained 262 yards, while Krahn was sacked four times and completed just 11 passes while throwing three interceptions. But, in his first start, in what looks to be a long and promising career, Eldridge said Krahn played well.

“One of the things that happened is, we fell so far behind, and when that happens, we had to go away from our run game a little bit, because the clock’s against you at that point,” Eldridge said. “So that’s a tough situation for a freshman quarterback to put in. But I thought Jess played well. He did some really good things against a really good, physical defense. I wasn’t disappointed with how he played at all.”

While the lights did have to play catch-up in the second half, one man Carroll couldn’t stop was McKinley. On a rough day for the Northern offense, McKinley barreled his way to 142 yards on 20 carries, and he did against a Carroll defense which was only surrendering 81 yards rushing coming in.

Trevor Baum also caught for passes for 44 yards, while Messerly finished with three catches for 42 yards. Defensively, the Lights got 11 tackles and a sack from Will DeVos. Patrick Barnett also tallied 11 stops, while Tyler Craig had another big game, racking up 10 stops and another sack. Fowler and Kami Kanehailua both intercepted Roche as well.

The loss left Northern at 2-7 overall, with just two games remaining. The Lights will remain at Blue Pony Stadium for this Saturday’s home finale against UM-Western. And Eldridge says he fully expects his young team to fight and bounce back.
“We’ll look at the film, and we’ll learn from our mistakes today,” Eldridge said. “We’ll watch what we did good and build on that. We’re going to keep going, we’ll put this game behind us and we’ll move on to what is senior weekend. We have to go out represent these seniors and get em’ out of here with a win on senior day. So we just have to go back to work and I think we’ll have a good week of practice and be ready to play Western next Saturday.”

Long Day

Lights are 2-7 overall and 1-7 in the Frontier; Next Up: vs UM-Western

Lights Notes: McKinley has now rushed for 1,163 yards this season, which is a new Northern single-season mark. Last week, he broke Northern’s career-touchdown record as well. Carroll has now beaten MSU-N 16 straight times, with Northern’s last, and only win in the modern era, coming back in October of 2006. Craig has 10.5 sacks this season, one short of the MSU-N single-season record. MSU-N and Carroll will play just once again next season, in Helena.