Overcoming the obstacles
Northern quarterback Travis Dean gave everything he had to the team he loves
By George Ferguson
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It would be easy for Montana State University-Northern senior quarterback Travis Dean to feel like he got a raw deal. After all, he’s already suffered not one, but two season-ending injuries in his time at MSU-Northern.

And now, just when he was playing the best football of his life, another season-ending injury has derailed the end of his Lights’ career. Dean will miss Northern’s final two games with a fracture in his leg that he suffered at Eastern Oregon two weeks ago. And it doesn’t seem fair that he’ll have to miss his final home game when the Lights host the UM-Western Bulldogs Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium.

But, with all that Dean has endured over his Northern career, a career which started in the fall of 2010, he doesn’t see the injury bug that has befallen him as a negative. In fact, Dean says he is the player he is today because of those fateful knee injuries he suffered in both 2011 and 2012.

“I learned a lot, I really grew as a football player because of all the time I had not being on the field when I was hurt,” Dean, a native of Gilbert, Arizona, said. “I feel like I was able to become a coach while also being a big supporter of the team. I was able to spend way more time learning from the coaches, learning from Kyle Samson, and I was able to spend a lot more time in the film room because I wasn’t able to practice or play those two years.

“I’m not saying it wasn’t hard,” he continued. “It was really hard, and at times, I thought, why am I even doing this? I’m not getting to play at all. I wondered if it was all worth it at times. But when I look back now, those two years really helped me mature as a quarterback, and especially as a leader. During those tough times, I really worked harder, and I think I just kind of naturally progressed into a leadership role with this team, even though I wasn’t playing in games. So, I definitely think those two seasons of not being able to play did actually help me progress and become a better player.”

And Dean has finally been able to show what kind of quarterback he is. Before his injury, he had thrown for 2,107 yards and 10 touchdowns in 2014. He was completing 60 percent of his passes, was second in the Frontier and fourth in the NAIA in passing, and was seventh in the country in total offense. Dean really showed off his skills in a loss at UM-Western back in September, throwing for 404 yards and four touchdowns.

But the injuries are only part of Dean’s football ride at Northern. Out of high school, Dean says that MSU-N was his only offer, and when he arrived on campus, ready for spring drills in 2010, he was set to compete for the starting job with fellow freshman Derek Lear. Lear had red-shirted the season before, and looked to
be the heir-apparent to a Northern position that had struggled to find stability after the great Kyle Samson graduated in 2006.

And after a fierce battle in fall camp, Dean didn’t quite win the job from Lear, but, ironically, because of an injury, Dean would find himself on the field faster than he thought he would. In that season, he was thrust into a starting role against mighty Carroll College, and though things didn’t go the Lights’ way that September day in Havre, Dean realized quickly that he could compete at the NAIA level.

“I learned so much that first season,” Dean said. “When I got here, they (coaches) told me I would have every opportunity to compete with Derek for the job. It was a good battle. I think we pushed each other every day during that fall camp. I think we made each other better every day. But it was also a really humbling experience that season. You get in there, and you were the top dog at your high school. Then, you really find out how good NAIA football is. It’s big boy football at that point, and I had that deer in the headlights look for a while.

“But when I got to play against Carroll, that kind of told me, that if I worked really hard, continued to learn and grow as a quarterback, that I could play on this level. That game didn’t go well. I threw a pick on my first college pass, and we got thumped pretty good that day. But I walked away from that experience realizing that one day, it would be my turn and I needed to be ready.”

But Dean’s turn, as it turned out, would take a lot longer than he ever expected. He would eventually miss the entire 2011 season with a knee injury, while Lear went on to earn All-Conference honors. Dean came back healthy the following spring, and once again was in a competition with Lear for the starting position. But another knee injury ended that spring, and the entire 2012 season. Those were tough times for Dean, who could only watch as Northern went on without him. But it was in those days that he realized the art of patience, and perseverance.

“I was definitely able to turn it into a positive,” Dean said. “I spent a lot of time with Kyle and Derek, and we really worked well together. Derek and I had a great relationship, and honestly, he is one of the best quarterbacks I have ever been around. I look back and realize how lucky I was to get to work with him, and learn from him, and of course, learn from Kyle Samson, who’s one of the greatest to ever play here.

“I also had great support through those times, and that kept me going,” he added. “My teammates, all my coaches, my friends and family, I was able to lean on them, and that support meant so much to me. And I learned patience. I knew that if I stuck with it, my time would come.”

But, as Dean returned to good health, he was still the backup entering the 2013 season. However, that season turned out to be an injury-plagued one for Lear, then a senior, and eventually, the starting job was turned over to Dean. He played in seven games as a junior, throwing for more than 900 yards to go along with five touchdowns. He also played outstanding in Northern’s night game against Montana Tech last November, where he threw for 303 yards in a difficult, last-second loss to the Orediggers.

But, even in defeat, Dean had two bright spots come out of the 2013 season. One, he had stayed healthy almost the whole way, and readied himself for the 2014 season, his last as a Light. And two, he had earned the respect of his teammates. He was now a true leader, on and off the field, and that also set things up for a big 2014.

And, up until the injury, another cruel twist of fate in Dean’s saga, it was a great 2014. Yes, the Lights didn’t win nearly as many games as they hoped, but Dean’s veteran experience, his leadership, and all the adversity he overcame, all served to make him one of the best quarterbacks in the Frontier Conference, and helped to make the Northern offense one of the most dangerous offense’s in the league.

“As an offense, we were young when fall camp started,” Dean said. “So I knew right away it was up to me to kind of get us going. To get us pointed in the right direction. And it was a struggle those first few weeks of practice. It really was. But we knew we had the talent, we knew we had the skill, and by the time we went to Montana Tech, we were ready. And in that game, we showed people they better bring their defense against us. We went up and down the field right away, and we realized just how good we could be.

“And it starts with our offensive line,” he continued. “I’m lucky because I know I have the best offensive line in the conference. Those guys have been phenomenal this season. And then, we know what we have in Zach McKinley, and even Mario Gobatto … two great running backs. Zach is a quarterback’s best friend. You
just hand the ball to him and he takes care of business. And that makes my job so much easier. And we have a great tight end in Josh Jansen, a real experienced guy. And of course, we knew what we had coming back in Jake Messerly, and then Trevor Baum comes out and has a season no one will ever forget. I mean, we have all the talent, all the pieces, and while we've had our share of hiccups, I'm really proud of all of these guys on offense. We've proved that when we do what we're supposed to do, we are very dangerous.”

The Lights have been dangerous, and Dean has been the catalyst. Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said it best at the beginning of the season, that the Lights were fortunate to have a senior quarterback with the experience, knowledge and leadership of a Travis Dean. And with the numbers MSU-N has put up this season, that’s every bit the truth.

“We’re extremely lucky to have Travis as our quarterback,” Eldridge said. “Travis’ biggest asset is his leadership. He is that type of guy that players just gravitate to and want to follow. He’s a great leader and a great teammate.”

Dean is the unquestioned leader of a Lights team, that, like Dean himself, has been through a mountain of adversity this fall. And this Lights’ team has followed their quarterback’s example. They haven’t given up, and they will play to the very end over the next two games.

Dean won’t get that chance. But, in true Travis Dean fashion, he’s not giving up either. Over the last two games of his college career, he’ll be right there on the sidelines, helping freshman quarterback Jess Krahn and the MSU-N coaching staff as best he can. That’s Travis Dean’s legacy at Northern ... the consummate teammate, the consummate leader. Yes, the injuries are part of his story, too. But when he looks back on his career, and when we look back on his career, we’ll likely remember Travis Dean the quarterback, Travis Dean the teammate, Travis Dean the hard worker, Travis Dean the consummate student-athlete, who did everything the right way, and who has handled every bit of adversity with class and dignity.

When we look back, when he looks back, we’ll also remember a Travis Dean with no regrets.

“They (Lights) were the only school in America that gave me a chance,” he said. “No one else thought I was good enough. So, I promised myself a long time ago that I would come here and give them everything I’ve got. And whether that was being a backup quarterback, or starting, or putting in extra time in the weight room or film room, I think that’s exactly what I’ve done.

“Yeah, at times, it’s been really hard to keep going, and it hurts that I can’t be out there with my teammates these last two games,” he continued. “But I never wanted to give up. I love playing football for Northern, and I always wanted to make sure I gave everything I had to this program, to this school, and especially to my teammates and coaches who have always believed in me and supported me. And I’m proud to say, as this football journey comes to end, that I’ve done that. I’ve given it everything I have.”

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