The Montana State University-Northern Lights, in many ways, are a young football team. A team with a lot of potential for the future.

But, that doesn’t mean the Lights don’t have veterans. In fact, Northern will honor 15 of those veterans Saturday before the Lights face the UM-Western Bulldogs at Blue Pony Stadium.

It’s the home finale for the Lights, which means it’s senior day. And senior day is always an emotional time. But, given what the 14 Northern seniors have been through, this season, and throughout their careers, Saturday will be extra emotional.

“This group has been here a long time,” said Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge. “They have been through the thick and thin of everything. It’s really hard to put into words what this group has meant to Northern football over the years, but I can say, this season, this team has leaned on that group every single day. These seniors have been the biggest reason why we have even had the success that we have had. They have led us through everything from day one.

“And I know every one of these seniors is already successful,” he continued. Maybe we didn’t get them as many wins as we would have liked, but every one of them is a successful football player and more importantly, a successful person. They have done so much for this program, on and off the football field. And this group will be missed greatly, for a lot of reasons, but mostly because of their commitment and dedication to this program. It’s a very special group of young men.”

The group that will be honored Saturday is special. The group is special because it has stuck together, when many others from the recruiting classes of 2010 and 2011 did not. The group, some who have played for four years, others who have played for five, and even six, has a bond that hasn’t been able to be broken.

And that group, with Travis Dean, Trevor Baum, Rostyn Pace, Nick Luoma, Butch Hyder, Hunter Chandler, Jordan Rueschhoff, Michael McCrary, Jacob Criner, Kami Kanehailua, John Jansen, Zach Bangert, Shomari Burton and Will DeVos, deserve the ovation, honor and accolades they’ll get before Saturday’s game.

And that’s because, with those seniors, there’s never been any quit. Every one of them has been dedicated to the Northern football program, the university, the community, all of their coaches, and most importantly, to each other.

It hasn’t been easy. From 2010 through last week’s loss to Carroll College, the Northern senior class has experienced just 17 wins, with 2011 being the best season when the Lights went 5-5. And, at the start of a promising 2014 season, the group lost the only head coach it had ever known when Mark Samson was forced to resign his post after 12 years at the helm.

Right then and there, it would have been easy for this senior class to give up, to walk away, to move on and do other things. But that’s not how this group was brought up. It’s not how they were coached by Samson, and it’s not how they wanted to go out.

Instead, this group has done what it has done from the times when they all came together, whether it was just two years ago when Burton joined the team, or six years ago, when Pace first started playing for the Lights. This group fought, this group worked even harder, this group stayed strong and stayed bonded.
And that’s what makes this group so special. That’s what makes senior day so special to them. And that’s what makes each and every Northern senior in the Class of 2014 a player that should never be forgotten, not by this program, or its fans.

No, this group of Northern seniors has represented the school, the program, the community of Havre and all Northern alumni exactly the way all of us wish every single student-athlete would … with dignity, class, respect and pride.

For this group, it was always about football, always about team, always about dedication, and most importantly, it was always about Northern.

“This is the greatest group of seniors since I’ve been here,” Dean said. “And that’s not meant as a disrespect to any of the other classes because I was lucky enough to play with some great senior classes. But given what this group has been through, everything that has happened, it’s just a special group of guys.

“This group has never seen an actual winning season,” he continued. “But we’ve stuck together. With this group, it’s always been about playing for the love of the game, about playing for Northern. It’s been about playing for each other, and trying to pass that on to the younger guys. In my opinion, every one of these seniors is a true team captain. They are all great leaders. These guys are my best friends. This is the only group I’ve ever been a part of that there is no quit. This group of seniors has always fought to the end, no matter the situation. And I’m proud to have been a part of a group like that. It’s going to be emotional, and really special to walk out onto that field one last time with these guys. I love them all, and they’ll forever be in my heart.”

No one could have summed up these Northern seniors any better than Travis Dean just did. And just like they’re in your heart Travis, all of you will forever be in ours.

I’m sure I speak on behalf of the entire Northern Nations when I say, thank you Northern seniors. We will never forget you.