Lights eager to finish strong at home
Northern hosts UM-Western in Blue Pony Stadium finale
By George Ferguson
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From the start, the 2014 season has been an emotional one for the Montana State University-Northern Lights. Emotions, both high and low, have seemed to be at the forefront of every Lights' game this fall.

And it will be no different when the lights take the field at Blue Pony Stadium for the final time this season. Northern (2-7, 1-7) will play its emotional senior day game against the UM-Western Bulldogs (5-5, 5-4) Saturday, with kickoff set for 12 p.m. inside Blue Pony Stadium.

Every senior day is filled with emotion, but Saturday will be especially trying for the Lights as they honor 14 seniors spread out over four different recruiting classes.

"We have to go out represent these seniors and get 'em out of here with a win on senior day," Northern interim head coach Jake Eldridge said.

But once the senior ceremony is over, and the game kicks off, the Lights will be trying to do more than honor their senior leaders. MSU-N wants desperately to finish a difficult season on a high note, and the game against Western, which beat MSU-N 50-30 in Dillon back in September, is just one of two chances the Lights have left to end things on a positive note.

Doing that won’t be easy. First, the Bulldogs are a much-improved football team, and they are playing their final game of the season, with a chance to post a winning record and finish as high as third in the Frontier Conference standings. So there’s no doubt head coach B.J. Robertson’s club will come ready to play.

But perhaps just important, the Lights’ offense will have to carry on without senior quarterback Travis Dean, who found out earlier this week he suffered a fracture in his leg two weeks ago at Eastern Oregon. And with Dean out, and with the Lights coming off back-to-back blowout losses at EOU (70-21) and last week against Carroll College (55-13), bouncing back and finishing strong at home against a sound Western team will be a tall order.

Western doesn’t do anything fancy on offense, as the Dawgs average a modest 26 points and 350 yards per game. Western is also only in the middle of pack in the Frontier in both rushing and passing. Yet, the numbers don’t tell the whole story. The Bulldogs have a pair of star running backs in sophomore Sam Rutherford (6-1, 240) and junior Dylan Kramer (5-9, 190). Rutherford has rushed for 900 yards this season, while Kramer has been an excellent change of pace. The Bulldogs also have a very talented offensive line.

In the passing game, Western isn’t flashy either, but senior quarterback Tyler Hulse (6-0, 200) has been steady from start to finish. Hulse has thrown for 1,672 yards and 15 touchdowns, and he is dangerous with his feet, having rushed for 590 yards and seven more scores. So, he’s certainly a dual threat the Lights
have to account for. But where he’s made his biggest contribution is his decision-making. Hulse has only thrown five interceptions this season.

“When you look at them offensively,” Eldridge said of the Bulldogs. “They’re very balanced. They’re a lot like us. They run the ball really well with Rutherford and Kramer and they throw it when they need to. They’re just really steady, and they have a really talented offensive line. But at the end of the day, I think everything centers around how well their quarterback has played. He’s been a steady Eddie for them all season. He throws it when he needs to, he makes big plays with his feet when he needs to, and most importantly, he makes really good decisions. He takes care of the football. So I think he’s been a big key to their success this season, and we have to do a much better job containing him than we did when we played them in Dillon.

And while Northern will certainly counter with a stout running game of its own, led by sophomore Zach McKinley, who is third in all of the NAIA in rushing, as well as sophomore Mario Gobatto, and a stellar offensive line, the Lights won’t have a senior leader at QB like the Bulldogs do. Instead, Northern true freshman Jess Krahn will make his second straight start for the Lights. Krahn only completed 11 passes against Carroll last week, and did throw three interceptions. But the experience he gained, and having two of the best wide receivers in the NAIA in Trevor Baum (74 catches, 1,118 yards) and Jake Messerly (49 catches, 663 yards), should help him play much better this week.

But playing better won’t be as easy as all that because Western boasts one of the best defenses in the Frontier. The Bulldogs lead the league in rushing yards allowed, while also allowing just 28 points and 401 total yards per game. Safety Jess McCloud (6-0, 196) is one of the best in the league, while linebackers Joe Coker (6-0, 215) and A.J. Wilson (6-1, 240) are as good as it gets. The dynamic duo have combined for 128 tackles this season in Western’s 3-4 defense, while McCloud has three INTs. Defensive end Phil Selin (6-2, 240) is the top pass rusher for the Bulldogs, and he led the league in sacks a year ago, and has six more this fall.

“They (Bulldogs) are really good on defense,” Eldridge said. “They are fast and physical. They have really good players. McCloud is as good as it gets on the back end, and their linebacker group is extremely talented. But to me, it all starts up front, and that starts with Phil Selin. He’s a really good football player, and it seems like he’s been around forever. I think he sets the tone for that defense.

“So we’re going to have to be efficient offensively,” he continued. “We have to move the chains, and to do that, we’re going to run the football. We’re going to lean on our running game, and use that to get Jess in the right situations, so that when we do need to throw the football, he’s in a position to make plays where he is comfortable. We’ll take our shots, but we certainly want to control things with our running game.”

While it’s a fact that Western’s defense will play well Saturday, even though the Lights racked up over 600 yards of total offense in Dillon back in September, it’s MSU-N’s defense that has something to prove Saturday, and that side of the ball could be the difference in the game. Northern has surrendered 125 points in the last eight quarters of football, and that’s been a bitter pill to swallow considering MSU-N was leading the Frontier in several defensive categories a month ago.

But as tough as it’s been for the Lights’ defense in recent weeks, they can bounce back. Tyler Craig now has 10 sacks on the season, while seniors Kami Kanehailua, Hunter Chandler and Butch Hyder have combined for 187 tackles on the year, and they, along with defensive tackle Will DeVos, certainly want to make sure the Northern defense gives the Lights every opportunity to pull off a win on senior day.

“The good news is, we haven’t had to motivate them this week,” Eldridge said of his defensive unit. “They’ve talked about it this week. They know they’ve given up way too many points and way too many big plays the last few games. They understand it, and they’re motivated to change it. So I expect them to come out and play with a chip on their shoulder. Western really took it to us last time, and I think our guys have had this game with them circled since that day. I expect them to be ready to go.”

No doubt the Lights will be ready. They and the Bulldogs are playing for pride now, and that will be enough to make Saturday’s game an intense and intriguing matchup. Western wants that coveted winning season, while the Lights want that coveted win on senior day. So certainly something will have to give, and when it’s a Northern/Western game, it’s usually pretty entertaining.
“I think we’ll be ready,” Eldridge said. “Obviously, it’s going to be an emotional day because it’s senior day, and it’s our last home game. But again, it’s also another chance for this team to go out and play the game they love, and an opportunity to go out and play well against a really good Western team.

“That’s what I continue to love about our kids,” he continued. “They play every game with passion, and they play hard to the very end every game. So we’re expecting all of that emotion to carry us through Saturday.”

Saturday’s home finale for Northern against UM-Western will kick off at 12 p.m. at Blue Pony Stadium. The game will mark the end of the season for Western, while MSU-N will wrap up its season next Saturday at Rocky Mountain College.

Senior Day

MSU-Northern Lights (2-7, 1-7) vs UM-Western Bulldogs (5-5, 5-4)
Saturday 12 p.m.
Blue Pony Stadium

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