Northern defeats Rocky with last-second field goal, 44-41
November 15, 2014, by Bill Bighaus

Rocky Mountain College's chance for a winning football season and a spot in school history slipped through its frozen fingers on a frigid Saturday afternoon at Herb Klindt Field.

Senior Jordan Rueschhoff booted a 20-yard field goal as time expired to lift Montana State Northern over Rocky 44-41 in the final game of the season for the two Frontier Conference schools.

With the temperature in the low teens and piles of snow ringing the field, the Battlin' Bears needed a victory to secure their third consecutive winning season, which would have been a first in Rocky's 66 years of playing football.

Northern, however, was also determined to end its year on a high note, getting 215 yards rushing from sophomore running back Zach McKinley and 379 yards passing and five touchdowns from freshman quarterback Jess Krahn.

"When it came down to it, it was just which team had a little bit more in the end," said the 5-foot-10, 205-pound McKinley, who came into the game as the league's leading rusher. "Somehow we found a way. It was a good win today."

The Lights, 2-8 in the Frontier and 3-8 overall, ended a three-game losing streak by driving 70 yards in the game's final two minutes to set the stage for Rueschhoff's kick.

It was his third field goal on the day.

"Our mentality was (coming into the game), no matter what the conditions and how the other team plays, all we can do is control how we play by executing on offense and getting stops on defense," McKinley said. "Just play as hard as we can was really the mindset -- and it paid off for us."

Northern bolted ahead 10-0 and 24-13. The game was tied 27-all at halftime, and Rocky led 41-34 heading into the fourth quarter.

"We had plenty of chances, but we didn't make it happen," Rocky coach Brian Armstrong said afterward. "I'm disappointed, obviously, for our seniors."

The Bears, who lost their fourth consecutive game, finished at 4-6 in league and 5-6 overall.

Northern and Rocky battled throughout the sunny afternoon in a game that made your head spin. Playing on a field swept clear of snow, the Lights wound up with 632 yards of offense and the Bears 545.

Five of the game's 11 touchdowns came on plays covering 41 to 78 yards.
While McKinley was tough to bring down and Krahn displayed some uncanny accuracy, senior quarterback Bryce Baker also tried his best to make this a frozen moment in Rocky football history.

Baker passed for 270 yards and four touchdowns. He also rushed for 150 yards and two more scores.

Baker helped set up Rocky's first two touchdowns with runs of 58 and 77 yards up the middle.

"Kudos to them," he said of Northern's winning performance. "To sum it all up, I would say we overlooked them, which was silly on our part ..."

"I think coming off three losses we were so ready for a win, and we finally thought it was our time. We just didn't do what had to be done to get the win. We lost to a good team, and that's the way it goes."

Northern's gritty receivers Trevor Baum and Jake Messerly combined for 16 receptions for 347 yards and four touchdowns.

Rocky junior Andre McCullough caught four passes for 134 yards. He had TD receptions of 67, 51 and 10 yards.

Senior Cedric Foster rushed for 116 yards for the Bears.

It was a 6-yard scoring dash by Baker that put Rocky ahead 41-34 with 8:41 left in the third quarter.

The Bears had a chance to add to that four minutes later, but receiver Tyrell McGee had the ball knocked out of his hands for a fumble at the Northern 8 after a 54-yard reception.

Early in the fourth quarter, the Lights drove the ball 87 yards on five plays to knot the game at 41-41. The touchdown came on a 53-yard pass from Krahn to a streaking Messerly at the 11:49 mark.

On the drive for Rueschhoff's winning field goal, the Lights once again turned to the hard running of McKinley, along with the clutch receiving of Baum and Messerly.

"It would have been nice to get in that record book for three consecutive winning seasons, but I truly believe that everything does happen for a reason and we didn't come out today and earn it," Baker said. "At the end of the day we don't deserve it."

"But there's no doubt in my mind that this team will carry on and we'll have three consecutive winning seasons ... maybe in the next three seasons," he added. "I wouldn't be surprised at all."

Billings Gazette website: http://billingsgazette.com/