MSU-N job down to three men
Northern football finalists will be on campus next week
By George Ferguson
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There’s no question, the 2014 season for the Montana State University-Northern football team was a struggle, for everyone involved with the program.

Now however, the MSU-N football program is one step closer to moving in a different direction entirely. Tuesday afternoon, Northern Athletic Director Christian Oberquell announced the three finalists for the head coaching vacancy at MSU-N.

Northern is in search of a new head coach after Mark Samson resigned under pressure at the start of training camp back in August. Former Northern All-American and current defensive coordinator Jake Eldridge was named interim head coach for the season, and while Eldridge applied for the head job, he wasn’t one of the finalists.

Instead, MSU-N will be bringing three somewhat unfamiliar names to Northern for final interviews next week. But all three finalists do have heavy ties to the NAIA, and one finalist, Ryan Gatch, did serve as Northern assistant coach for one season. Gatch is joined by Kelly Bills and Aaron Christensen.

Gatch has an extensive coaching resume, including a one-year stint at MSU-Northern as an assistant coach. Gatch is currently the head coach for the Lead-Deadwood Orediggers in Lead, South Dakota. He’s been the head football coach for the past two seasons. He was hired as head coach after serving two years as offensive line coach at his alma mater, Dickinson State University. Gatch was a standout for the Blue Hawks under legendary head coach Hank Biesiot, and he began his coaching career there as well, serving as an assistant coach from 1998-2001.

In over 14 years of coaching, Gatch has also spent time at Minot State, Black Hills State, Chadron State and Northern State University.

Bills is currently the offensive coordinator at NCAA DIII Willamette University in Oregon. Bills just finished up his second season running the offense and coaching quarterbacks for the Bearcats and head coach Glenn Fowles.

Before going to Willamette, Bills spent five seasons as an assistant at NCAA powerhouse Brigham Young University. While coaching for Bronco Mendenhall at BYU, Bills worked with quarterbacks, running backs and the offensive line.

Bills also played running back for two seasons for the Cougars. He started his collegiate career as a quarterback at Southern Utah University.
Christensen is currently the offensive coordinator and recruiting coordinator at Missouri Valley in Marshall, Missouri. In his time at MVC, the Vikings have won four straight conference championships, and his offenses have been among the most potent in the NAIA.

Before arriving at MVC, Christensen attended Huron University where he played two seasons for now MVC head coach Paul Troth. He was twice named All-Conference at tight end. Following his playing career, Christensen spent two seasons coaching the tight ends at Huron.

Prior to Huron, Christensen played at San Jose City College near his hometown of Hayward, Calif.

As for the next step in the hiring process, all three candidates will be in Havre next week for official interviews, on-campus visits and a public forum. From there, Oberquell, and interim Chancellor Greg Kegel will make the final decision on who will be Northern’s next head coach. Whoever is named will be only the third full-time head coach to lead the Lights since football was reinstated over 16 years ago. The late Walt Currie was the first man to lead the Lights, while Samson took over the program in 2004. He led MSU-N to its only NAIA playoff appearance, when the Lights went 9-3 in 2006.

Gatch will interview Monday, followed by Bills Wednesday and Christensen next Thursday. The public forums for each candidate will be held at 4:30 p.m. on their respective days in the Hensler Auditorium on MSU-N’s campus.