Ryan Gatch was an assistant coach on the 2004 Montana State University-Northern football team. In front of members of the Havre community, Northern alumni, coaches, administrators and the media Monday afternoon, Gatch noted how the MSU-N team he coached for didn't win a single game - until the last one.

Yes, Gatch was part of that historic night at Blue Pony Stadium when a young Northern team, under first-year head coach Mark Samson, knocked off Rocky Mountain College on a chilly Friday night in Havre. It was the Lights' only win that season.

Now Gatch wants to come back to Havre. He wants to be the Lights' next head coach. And while things are radically different now, as Northern has enjoyed its share of success since that 2004 season, but has also endured plenty of hardships, including a tumultuous 3-7 2014 campaign, Gatch insists the job is not a rebuilding process.

"No, no, it's definitely not a rebuilding project," the current head coach of Lead-Deadwood High School in South Dakota, and former All-Conference standout at Dickinson State said. "I think this program has a great foundation. From what I can see, there is a bus load full of really talented football players coming back. I think coach (Jake) Eldridge and his staff did a great job of moving this program forward. I know he has invested a lot into this thing. The support is there, the community is great. I definitely don't think this is a rebuild. No, it's about moving forward."

And Gatch would like to be the man who takes Northern forward. If selected, he'd only be Northern's third head coach since the program was resurrected some 16 years ago. He's the only finalist with any head coaching experience, though not at the collegiate level. He's a native Montanan, having grown up in Colstrip, graduating as a Colt in 1994. He was also a former All-Conference performer for the Dickinson State Blue Hawks, and started his coaching career mentoring under the legendary Hank Biesiot. He had two different stints coaching for Biesiot at DSU and has also worked on staff's at Minot State, Chadron State, Black Hills State and Northern State.

"A lot of different experiences have gotten me to this point," he said. "I've had multiple roles at a lot of different programs. I've coached everything on the defensive side, I've coached the offensive line, I've worked in strength and conditioning and I've been able to be a recruiting coordinator. I've worked for a lot of outstanding coaches. Hank Biesiot has been a huge influence on me. I've been lucky to learn something..."
everywhere I’ve gone. So I have a model. I have a vision now and I’ve been able to form that through a lot of different experiences."

Gatch's vision for Northern includes making sure the current roster stays put. On Monday, he spoke at length about how impressed he was with the players Northern has returning, and what they did on the field this past season. His vision also includes recruiting quality student-athletes, who have their own vision, and that vision is to come to Northern not just to play football, but to get their degree. And, along the way, grow, both on and off the field.

"Our plan is to recruit top-level athletes, and top-level students," Gatch said. "We can do that here. This institution offers kids a chance to be successful, to get a quality education, and for these players to grow into good men, good husbands, good fathers. We want first-class kids here, kids who are good athletically, academically and socially. That's very important. And Northern offers that. We can have those types of kids here, and we can be successful."

As for recruiting, Gatch said it's very important to recruit Montana, including the Hi-Line and north-central Montana. He also said he would look at transfers, whether from four-year programs, or junior colleges, but again, those players have to have a vision of what they want to achieve while at Northern.

"Let's face it, not many NAIA players are going to the National Football League," Gatch, who is 38, married, with one child said. "Not even very many (NCAA) DII players will get there. So the bottom line is, these guys have to come here to get a degree. We want them to be first-class athletes too, and we want them to be successful on the football field. But no matter where they are coming from, they need to have a plan for their future, they need to be here to get their degree.

"I think it's very important to recruit Montana," he continued. "I'm a Montana guy. I played in the first-ever Mon-Dak All-Star Game, I played in the Shrine Game. I know just how special high school football is in Montana. So it's important we go out and recruit this state hard. And it's important to recruit this area. There's a lot of really good programs in this area."

As for what the Lights would look like on the field with Gatch at the controls, he spoke of being able to run the football. About wanting to have a strong running attack, but still being a dynamic offense at the same time. Defensively, which is Gatch's specialty, he said he plans on operating a multiple front defense that can change and adapt to different offensive schemes.

But, as Monday's forum wore on, he continually turned to what kind of players he wants in his program, and that his football teams need to be just as successful in the classroom and the community, as they would be on Saturday afternoon's each fall.

"My goal is to bring people in here and help them grow into successful men," Gatch said. "We want them to have great character, we want them to have great goals and achieve those goals academically. We want them to be champions, not just at MSU-Northern, but champions of the community of Havre. I think we can attract those types of kids here. I think this institution and this program can do that. It already does that, and we can continue that."

And if given the chance to do that, Gatch would like to do it in Havre for a long time. He said that while he and his family enjoy where they're at in South Dakota, a move to Havre would be an upgrade. And even though the football coaching profession has moved him from place to place over 14 years, he says, if given the chance, Havre would happily be his last stop.

"Hopefully forever. That's the truth," Gatch said when asked about how long he'd stay at Northern. "Coaching, it's been a crazy, wild ride. It's been an awesome experience. But I'd stay as long as they would let me. I'd want to be here for a long, long time."

Note: Ryan Gatch is the first of four finalists for the Northern head football job. The second finalist, Kelly Bills, will be interviewed at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday.

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