It’s easy to see why Aaron Christensen wants to bring a physical brand of football to Montana State University-Northern. Christensen is a big man and was a physically imposing tight end during his own collegiate playing days.

So, when the current offensive coordinator at NAIA power Missouri Valley College spoke in front of the Havre and Northern community Thursday afternoon, he went back to being physical several times.

But that isn’t the only thing Christensen would bring to MSU-N’s program, he’d also bring a model of success that’s worked well during his time at MVC. He’d bring experiences that have paid dividends during his 10 seasons as a Viking assistant. And he’d bring a working knowledge of high-level NAIA football, and of the Frontier Conference.

"We've won our conference four years in a row, and have been to the playoffs four straight times," Christensen Thursday inside the Hensler Auditorium. "I have a pretty good familiarity with the NAIA and with the Frontier Conference. We played Carroll in the playoffs last year. I played against Carroll when I was at Huron (University). I know the Frontier is one of the top conferences in the NAIA. If you win a Frontier championship, you are going to go deep into the playoffs. You can't say that about every conference in the country."

And make no mistake, Christensen, who played at San Jose City College and Huron, who has coached running backs, wide receivers, the passing game, and who has been MVC’s offensive coordinator the last three years, believes that one day, Northern can compete for a Frontier title, and he says the formula is quite simple.

"Recruit good players, good students with high character," he said. "And coach them up and work really hard. That's all we can do. And that's how I believe you get to be successful."

Of course, getting Northern to that level won’t be easy. Especially since the Lights are coming off a tumultuous 2014 campaign, on and off the field. But again, Christensen was very matter of fact about how he intends to move the program forward, and about how he intends to put the past in the past for good.

"The players who are here right now are in a unique situation," the Hayward, California native said. "They didn't come here to play for me. They lost the coach they came here to play for. So the first thing we have to do is build a trust. And I think if they see how hard we'll work for them, they'll trust us as a staff and work hard in return."
"And coming here, my message to them is simple," he continued. "To get rid of everything that's happened to them, all we're going to do from the very beginning is worry about winning our next game. Not worry about the past or even the future. Just focus on winning the next game we play. In the offseason, we'll recruit as hard as we can and work as hard as we can, but we're going to take out all of the complicated stuff, and just focus on winning the next game that we'll play."

And Christensen knows about winning. He's done plenty of that alongside current MVC head coach Paul Troth, who he also played for at Huron. And he says that winning begins with being physical and with effort.

"Offensively, first, we're going to be a physical football team," he said. "That's very important. Even if we don't play well, we want to be able to say we played more physical than our opponent. Second, we need to be efficient. We put a big emphasis on not beating ourselves, of eliminating the bad plays, turnovers, penalties, sacks and dropped passes. If we're efficient in those area, we are going to win games. And lastly, we have to be balanced. I'm a believer in having a power run game. I like to always have a tight end on the field. But we have to be balanced offensively to be successful.

"Defensively, it starts with the same thing," he continued. "We have to be physical and we have to give a great effort. If we can do that, we can be successful defensively no matter who we play."

Christensen also wants his players to be successful off the field, and especially in the class room and the community. And he says recruiting to Northern is extremely similar to where he's at now. Marshall, Missouri has a population of just 14,000 and MVC's enrollment is just over 1,400. So his recruiting style should work well at Northern.

"The challenges are very similar," he said. "We have to get out and get kids who want to come to a small college, and go to college in a rural environment. We want kids who have good character, who want to succeed academically, who want to come here and get a degree, and help us win football games.

"And I think you have to first recruit your own state," he continued. "We're going to recruit Montana hard. And to do that, you have to be out there, in the high schools, building good relationships with those coaches. So first, we have to recruit the state of Montana, and then you can go elsewhere. As for succeeding academically, with all freshmen, we'll hand them an academic packet when they first get here. It will have all the do's and don'ts to help them succeed on campus. Because that's very important. Those kids need to know we're there for them. We need to show them that we want them to come here and succeed and graduate."

That model has worked well for Christensen in his time at MVC. The Vikings went 9-3, losing to national powerhouse Morningside in the NAIA quarterfinals last month. They ranked 13th among in NAIA teams in total offense, and 12th in passing. They were also in the Top 20 in scoring and rushing. His model has also been successful off the field, and it's one he feels would work well at Northern - a job he'd like to have for years to come.

"I've been at my last school for 10 years," Christensen, who has a wife, Jolene, and three young daughters, said. "I'm not a guy who runs around looking for jobs. I like where I'm at right now. I have it pretty good there. But I want to be a head coach, and I can't do that at Missouri Valley right now. So I would plan on being here for a long time.

"Why Northern?" he continued. "Talking with people here, the school has what it needs to succeed. The program has a strong foundation. There are a lot of really good, talented young players here. The school offers great value to student-athletes. You can get a really good education here at a great value. It has great support from the campus and the community. And I have a familiarity with the NAIA, the Frontier Conference, and with recruiting to a rural area. I know what it takes to succeed in that environment. Those are the reasons that I'm here, and I think we can succeed here."

Note: Christensen is the third of four finalists to interview for the vacant football head coaching position at MSU-Northern. The fourth finalist, MidAmerica Nazarene assistant coach Kyle Kramer will interview today at 4:30 p.m.

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