Lights try out new signal callers this spring
Northern football team takes to the field for live action for the first time

By Chris Peterson
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The Montana State University-Northern football team has already undergone a multitude of changes since the start of last season. But, unfortunately for the Lights, the changes are far from over as new head coach Aaron Christensen is overseeing a change at the most important position on the field - quarterback.

Last season, the Lights were fortunate to have senior Travis Dean taking the snaps. He was experienced and for the most part, the coaching staff knew what it was going to get. Now, the Lights have three players competing for a job and none has much, if any, starting experience at the NAIA level, which means that regardless of who wins the race, the starter will be raw and untested.

And while Christensen has said that a starting quarterback will not be determined until the end of fall camp, the repetitions each quarterback is getting in spring practice are tremendously important as all three players get acclimated to a new offensive scheme.

"We have three guys that are all competing there, Jess Krahn, Herman Smith and Holden Maki," Christensen said. "We have three guys that have all been taking reps for us. Basically, everything is new for all those guys, and really we are not going to make a decision on the quarterback position until probably just before the first game. Right now it's just seeing what we can do to get those guys learning the offense and those types of things."

An important part of that learning and development process will come this Saturday when the Lights take the field for their first scrimmage of the season. The scrimmage will feature around 50 plays total according to Christensen and will pit the first-team offense against the first-team defense as well as the second-team offense against the second-team defense as much as possible. It will also be the first time all spring that the quarterbacks will be facing live competition.

"I think that's important," Christensen said about getting the quarterbacks live action. "I think there are a couple of things. We want to see if they are moving the ball, we will have chains, they are not going to get a ton of reps, it will be a shorter type of scrimmage but they will get a chance to move the ball around and do those types of things."

Christensen is also excited to get a chance to see his running backs. Northern was particularly strong in the backfield last season with 1,000-yard rusher Zach McKinley and talented backup Mario Gobbato, but Christensen wants to see his backs and evaluate them against live tackling.

"The other position that you really get to evaluate is running back," Christensen said. "We start going live and let our guys get tackled a little bit, that's when you get to kind of see the running backs break tackles and those types of things."
Even though the Lights have only been practicing for a couple weeks, Christensen said he likes how his team is acclimating to the system and is also pleased with the depth and talent his squad possesses on the offensive line as well as at running back and tight end.

"I think that we lucked into getting a lot of good players," Christensen said. "I think we have a lot of good players on the O-line. We have two tackles with a lot of experience, they both started last year and in the backfield, from top bottom, all are good players. We have some depth at the tight end position also. Those positions, coming in, looking at the depth chart board, those are going to be strengths, we have a little more depth at those positions."

In terms of the defensive side of the ball, Christensen is also optimistic, particularly about the defensive line, which features junior defensive end Tyler Craig, who earned second-team All-Frontier honors a season ago.

"I think we have some really good players on defense," Christensen said. "We have (Tyler Craig) and some other guys that played a lot for us last year. The big thing, the emphasis for the defense is that I want to make sure that we are pursuing and hustling and getting to the ball. That is the main focus of our defense."

The Lights will be taking part in a live, controlled scrimmage Saturday at the MSU-N practice field. This scrimmage will be about 50 plays and will begin at 12 p.m.

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