Lights make progress in first scrum
Northern defense looks sharp in 50-play scrimmage
By Chris Peterson
April 3, 2015

While the Montana State University-Northern football team has been practicing for a couple weeks now, this past Saturday, the Lights took the field for live action in the first controlled scrimmage of spring football.

And even though the defense may have controlled the scrimmage, which lasted around 50 plays, that outcome could easily be foreseen, especially with the offense having to learn a completely new system under new head coach Aaron Christensen.

"Right now I would expect the defense to be ahead of the offense," Christensen said. "That is not unusual for spring ball and then you have our offensive guys having to learn a whole new offense, so it's about what we expected."

Between the first and second team offenses, Northern ran around 50 plays from scrimmage on eight possessions. The first-team offense, which was quarterbacked by sophomore Jess Krahn, who completed 6-of-8 passes for 37 yards, had some difficulties and did not manage to put any points on the board.

However, a big reason for that was the outstanding play of the Lights’ defense, and in particular, junior Tyler Craig, who notched 2.5 sacks in the scrimmage. Last season, Craig earned Second-Team All-Conference honors and was the leader of a defense that looked like it was already in midseason form.

"I was really pleased with the defense," Christensen said. "Obviously, as a head coach you want to see both sides of the ball play well, otherwise you know you are going to have some work to do. But, we expected to see the defense a little ahead of the offense at this point, so that was not a bad thing. They were flying around and that was good to see."

One of the big storylines coming into the scrimmage was the three-way competition at quarterback between Krahn, junior college transfer Herman Smith and Holden Maki, a redshirt freshman from Belt.

Krahn, who started a couple games for the Lights last season was solid in his spring debut. He did take a number of sacks and was unable to put the ball in the end zone but at least avoided mistakes and made it through the scrimmage without turning the ball over.

Smith, the newcomer to the program, completed 5-of-9 passes for 23 yards and also failed to produce any scoring drives but did manage to run for a couple first downs and moved the second-team offense into the red zone on one drive before it stalled.

In fact, the only scores from the offense came with Maki at the helm as the 5-9 signal caller threw a pair of touchdown passes, one that covered 46 yards and another that covered 27 yards to get the offense on the board. When it was over, Maki finished off an impressive day by hitting on 6-of-7 pass attempts for 109 yards and the two touchdowns.
Yet, Maki’s scoring drives came against the second-team defense. The first-team defense, on the other hand, was the most impressive unit of the day. The No. 1 defense registered a total of five sacks and held Northern’s star running back, Zach McKinley, to just 21 rushing yards on seven carries.

“The biggest thing about things like this is that you know you are going to make mistakes,” Christensen said. “We just want them to be going 100 percent when they are making them and I thought we did that. There were some positive things and some negative things that we need to work on, but I thought it was a good start.”

The Lights, who open the 2015 season at home against Montana Tech Sept. 5, have two more weeks of spring ball. The spring season will finish with Northern’s spring game April 18.