Lights run wild in spring game
By Chris Peterson
April 20, 2015

Spring football has come and gone for the Montana State University-Northern Lights and as of right now, one thing is clear — the Lights can run the football.

After seeing his offense struggle to move the football two weeks ago in a scrimmage, Northern head football coach Aaron Christensen appeared determined to establish a running game and that’s exactly what his offense did, rushing for 213 yards Saturday at the MSU-N practice field in the Lights Spring Game.

Northern got 121 of those yards from the feet of Mario Gobbato, who stole the show in the spring game, with 151 total yards and four total touchdowns, three rushing and one receiving.

“I have to give the credit to the offensive line,” Gobbato said. “The guys up front did a great job of opening up holes for me and our coaches did a great job of putting us in a position to be successful.”

Christensen has said repeatedly throughout the spring that he wanted to establish a physical running game on offense and that came to fruition Saturday. Gobbato and starting running back Zack McKinley rushed for nearly 200 yards and reached pay dirt in the ground five times as McKinley scored twice late in the scrimmage.

“I think the big thing today was that we were able to just go out and play,” Christensen said. “A couple of weeks ago, too many guys were thinking, not playing. And today that wasn’t as big of an issue. We talk all the time to our guys on offense about being physical and they were able to do that today. It really comes down to the o-line, they did a great job and that makes everything easier when you are able to run.”

The number of rushing touchdowns might be a bit misleading because the offense and defense participated in a number of possessions in which the offense got the ball at the opposing 20-yard line, making it easier to score. But the yardage numbers were still impressive and so were the explosive runs as Gobbato broke off 25 and 40-yard gains. He also caught a screen pass from quarterback Holden Maki and turned it into a 30-yard touchdown.

“Both of us want the chance to run the ball, and I think we can both run it a lot and be successful,” Gobbato said. “It just really depends on the offensive line. But those guys have been doing a great job and working really hard.”

As a whole, the Northern offense looked much more crisp than it did two weeks ago, which is understandable since Christensen has installed a brand new offensive system this spring. And as the offense looked better so did all three signal callers. Maki threw a touchdown pass, while incumbent Jess Krahn made some eye-opening throws and Herman Smith put together some impressive runs.

One player who caught passes from both Krahn and Smith was tight end Kagen Khameneh. The freshman finished with four receptions in the game and made a number of key plays. He hauled in a 25-yard
reception from Smith and later in the red zone drill, nabbed a 15-yard reception in traffic from Krahn to convert a third-and-eight.

"Kagen made some nice plays out there today," Christensen said. "He’s really smooth. He’s going to be a really good player this year for us."

Krahn was solid throughout the scrimmage and was turnover free just like he was two weeks ago. He didn’t throw a lot of passes but was efficient and made multiple conversions on third down. Smith was also solid and rushed for three first downs and for a total of 51 yards. But, as expected Christensen won’t be naming a starter until after fall camp.

“We are not going to name one until we get into the fall,” Christensen said. “It seems like every practice those guys are getting better so it would be overstating it to say anyone is the leader right now.”

While the offense had its moments, the defense also made its fair share of plays, in particular Tyler Craig, who finished with two sacks. Defensive tackle Pat Barnett also notched a couple tackles for loss as did safety Garret Jericoff and linebacker Garett Fowler.

“I thought we did a good job of getting better each and every day,” Craig said of the defense. “And if we can just continue to do that, we will end up right where we need to be.”

All in all, Christensen viewed his spring as Lights’ head coach as a successful one.

“I think spring ball went well,” Christensen said. “We took care of the things we needed to do. We taught the kids how to give good effort. We got better execution. We scrimmaged a couple weeks ago and again today and you could see a big difference in what we did right.”