New-look Lights made big strides
By Chris Peterson
April 21, 2015

It was an interesting spring for the Montana State University-Northern football team. The Lights got to experience head coach Aaron Christensen on the field for the first time, while also seeing players at all different positions compete for playing time under a new coaching staff.

Christensen knows that his team and the program now under his direction has a long way to go but, after weeks of spring practice, a scrimmage and a spring football game, he feels good about the steps taken so far.

"I think that we were able to do everything we set out to do in the spring," Christensen said. "The biggest thing for our offensive guys especially is that we wanted to get them comfortable with the system and I think we did. We were able to play a lot faster (Saturday) then we did in the scrimmage two weeks ago. So things are starting to click a little bit."

Of course learning a new system is going to be important under any coach but it's even more important right now for the Lights, particularly because Northern has three players; Jeff Krahn, Herman Smith and Holden Maki competing for the starting quarterback job. And being able to execute the offense, especially the Lights' no-huddle offense, will be a big part of being the team's signal-caller.

But despite the lack of familiarity in the offense, at times during spring football, all three quarterbacks flashed talent and ability. Krahn is probably the best pure thrower of the group and made big strides with his accuracy as the spring progressed. Smith, who is the best athlete of the group, also improved, especially as a thrower and continued to make plays with his feet throughout the spring. In the actual spring game, Smith rushed for three first downs. Maki may the least-heralded of the three but tossed a total of three touchdown passes in the two spring scrimmages and the offense always looked sharp with him under center.

Yet, Christensen said, despite the fact that Krahn has taken the majority of the first-team reps at this point and has a few starts under his belt from a season ago in which he tossed eight touchdowns and nine interceptions, naming a starter or even labeling Krahn as the leader going into fall camp was premature.

"I think that might be overstating it a bit," Christensen said of calling Krahn his starter going into fall camp. "I think that at times all three of them have played well. They have also had their ups and downs. We have two other quarterbacks coming in and we will give them the chance to be evaluated as well. So we have a long way to go before we are going to name a starter. It probably won't be right before the first game."
Just as Christensen won't be naming a starter at quarterback, he is not going to be naming starters at other positions, either. In fact, Christensen said he will not be releasing a two-deep depth chart until just before the season-opening game at Blue Pony Stadium against Montana Tech Sept. 5.

But even though few players have starting spots locked up at this point, there were still plenty of players who stood out during spring practice and on the offense, no player was more impressive than Mario Gobbato.

Last season, Gobbato rushed for 335 yards as Zach McKinley's backup and while it's unlikely that he could unseat McKinley, who racked up 1,425 yards and 14 touchdowns on the ground a year ago, Gobbato has unquestionably earned himself a bigger role in the backfield.

Gobbato was impressive throughout the spring and capped it off by scoring a total of four touchdowns in the spring game last Saturday at the MSU-N practice field. McKinley, though, was also solid in the spring and scored twice Saturday. The emergence of Gobbato just gives Northern another playmaker in the backfield that can relied upon to give defenses fits.

"We have talked about spring about being physical and running the football and I thought we did that," Christensen said. "We have two good backs and our offensive line has been playing well and that's going to be something we are going to keep doing."

Another player on offense that has carved out a greater role is sophomore tight end to be Kagen Khamaneh, who caught just three passes for 40 yards a season ago. With top receiver Trevor Baum and starting tight end from a season ago John Jansen both graduated, the Lights need someone to step up in the passing and thus far no one has done a better job than Khamaneh.

"He's gotten a lot of reps this spring," Christensen said of Khamaneh. "He has continued to get better every day and he's going to be alright for us."

Not to be overlooked, the Northern defense had its moments throughout the spring as well and played stout defense in both the scrimmage and spring game. While senior Tyler Craig was the top player for the Lights' defense, others such as defensive tackle Pat Jensen, cornerback Malcolm Manuel, linebacker Garet Fowler and defensive back Garrett Jericoff also made their presence felt at one time or another.

"I thought our defense has played well," Christensen said. "I think there have been times when the offense played well and when the defense played well. They are doing a nice job and coming along well. As the head coach you don't want to see one group way ahead of the other, but I think right now, both the offense and defense have had their moments."

The Lights will begin fall camp this August and will open the season at home at Blue Pony Stadium against Montana Tech on Sept. 5.