Off and running: Lights camp is underway
By Chris Peterson
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New Montana State University-Northern head football coach Aaron Christensen has been waiting to get his football team on the field and finally, Thursday evening, he got the chance to do just that.

The Lights, who are just 16 days away from their season-opening game on the road against traditional rival Dickinson State University, took part in their first practice of fall training camp as nearly 100 players were on the field for the opening day of drills.

"I thought it was a good day," Christenson said. "I thought that there was some good and bad, but it's kind of hard because for almost 50 of these kids, it was their first practice with us. So they just don't know enough and still have a lot to learn before they can really compete. We are just trying to get guys lined up and learning skills. Just going through the basics." the fall, but no defensive back is as accomplished as Carroll College's James Dowgin (6-2, 190).

Overall though, it was a productive first day for the Lights, who are coming off a 3-8 season under then interim head coach Jake Eldridge, who has since resumed his duties as defensive coordinator.

Eldridge had his defenders going through drills Thursday, both as an entire defensive unit, then split into positions, with a focus on technique and the recognition of offensive formations. It seems like simple stuff, but even at the collegiate level, strong fundamentals are the key to success.

On the offensive side of the ball, things were about the same. Quarterbacks and receivers worked on route combinations and threw passes against air, while the offensive line worked on footwork and blocking techniques. The running backs, were also given a chance to run and catch the football against air as backs Zach McKinley and Mario Gobatto, routinely looked like two of the better athletes on the field for MSU-N.

One notable player who was in attendance but not in pads was transfer quarterback Herman Smith. Smith is expected to do battle with returning sophomore quarterback Jess Krahn, who actually has some starts under his belt and led the Lights to an upset victory over Rocky Mountain College in the final game of the 2014 season.

Krahn and Smith are likely going to duke it out for the starting quarterback job, according to Christensen, but at this point, he just wants to get every player on the field and on the same page, so he can give each of them an equal opportunity to make an impression on the coaching staff.

However, Smith, who took part in spring practice, has a big advantage on the rest of the newcomers, who have just over a week to go before the Lights first and only scrimmage of fall, which gives them precious little time to get acclimated to the system and make enough of an impact to warrant playing time.
"Right now things are completely wide open," Christenson said. "We anticipate Herman and Jess competing for the quarterback job, but we have so many kids, that we are leaving pretty much everything wide open right now. We could end up redshirting a lot of kids, but if we can get them to stay and to be on the field, that will be a good thing for us."

The Lights ran through individual and team drills in the hour and 45 minute practice, but they weren't padded up and therefore ran plays against air instead of lining up the offense and defense in 11-on-11 action. There was also no 7-on-7 on day one, but that action is soon to come as the Lights will wear the pads tonight during the second of two practices scheduled for today.

MSU-N will practice twice today and Saturday before going back to a single session for Sunday, which will also be in pads. Christensen said he is hoping to get as much work done as possible this weekend, as the final scrimmage of fall camp is set for Aug. 15 at the Northern practice field at 1 p.m. After that, the team will begin preparing for Dickinson State and the chance to earn a spot in the starting lineup may be harder to come by.

"Right now we are just trying to get everybody up to speed and see where they are at," Christensen said. "But, yeah, it's a quick turn around for our first game, so the guys need to take advantage of every opportunity they have to make an impression."

Montana State University-Northern running back Mario Gobatto runs through drills on the first day of Lights football practice Thursday at the MSU-Northern practice fields.