It's finally time for the Lights to go on
New Northern football era begins Saturday night against Dickinson State
By George Ferguson
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With the hiring of new head coach Aaron Christensen, the Montana State University-Northern football team has had a lot of new surrounding it the last eight-plus months. However, Christensen’s debut game as head coach is against somebody that’s anything but new to the Lights.

After an offseason of conditioning, recruiting and spring drills, and a fast-paced fall camp that started just 15 days ago, the Christensen era officially begins Saturday night against an old foe when the Lights travel to Dickinson, North Dakota, to take on the Dickinson State Blue Hawks. Kickoff is set for 6 p.m. inside the Biesiot Activities Center.

Saturday night’s game is the second of a home-and-home nonconference series between the Blue Hawks and Lights. Last fall, Northern blasted DSU 40-17 at Blue Pony Stadium, one of three wins the Lights tallied in 2014. DSU went on to post a 7-4 mark last season, while finishing 5-1 in the newly formed North Star Athletic Conference, but, in recent years, the Lights have had the Blue Hawks number.

Still, this is a new season, and it’s an early start to the season. And it’s also a new Lights football team, a team that has a new head coach, nearly 40 new players on the roster, and new schemes. So, with any first game, the Lights are going into unchartered territory, no matter how familiar the Blue Hawks might be.

“We don’t know as much about Dickinson because we haven’t seen a lot of film, and because of how early this game is, there isn’t a whole lot to go on,” Christensen said. “But I know they have some of their key players back, they are always a very physical football team, and I know they’ll be a lot more experienced than us. We only have four seniors on our entire team, so a lot of teams are going to be more experienced than us.

“But, no matter who you play, there’s always going to be some adversity in the first game,” he continued. “There’s going to be mistakes and ups and downs. So how we handle those things is going to be very important.”

While the Lights haven’t had a lot of time to get ready for DSU, veteran Blue Hawks head coach Pete Stanton knows a thing or two about Northern, even though the Lights have a new coaching regime. Stanton knows that MSU-N possesses a star running back in Zach McKinley, a big offensive line, and seven returning starters from a defense that dominated the Blue Hawk offense last September in Havre.

“They’ve got a solid defense and maybe as good as we’re going to see. They cause people problems and they certainly caused us a lot of problems a year ago,” Stanton said of the Lights. “He’s (McKinley) one of the best backs in the Frontier, if not the country. He’s a power back, tough and durable. He’s given us problems the last two years.”
Stanton has some talent of his own returning, including running back Riley Moore, and several key defenders, including linebackers Matt McCoy and Thomas Sease, defensive tackle Joe Murdock and defensive back Robert Nawalja. The Blue Hawks have an experienced quarterback as well in Kaler Ray, while Northern’s Jess Krahn is getting his first start as MSU-N’s top signal caller. Krahn started three games as a true freshman at the end of the 2014 season, but that was in relief of the injured Travis Dean. Now, it’s his team to run.

Experience, or lack of experience, though, some things never change when it comes down to winning football games, and there will be several keys to Saturday night’s game, which is the first official college football game in the entire country.

First, both teams will want to establish the run. McKinley rumbled for over 200 yards against the Blue Hawks last season, while DSU went on to allow just 124 yards per game the rest of the year. Blue Hawks averaged 236 yards on the ground last season, and Stanton would like to see more of that against a Northern defense which is certainly built to stop the run.

Perhaps more important than who can run and who can stop who, are some of the intangibles of the game, and it’s those keys that Christensen said will be key to his team getting off to a 1-0 start.

“Special teams is really important in the first game,” he noted. “Because you don’t get to do that live much during practice, it’s kind of an unknown early in the season. So we have to really limit mistakes on special teams. And we have to protect the football. Turnovers are a big key in any game, but especially in that first game of the season. So I think the team who can really limit those kinds of mistakes is going to have a big advantage.”

Certainly, there will be mistakes on both sides, not only because it’s the first game, but both teams have new players at key positions, and, both teams have literally only been preparing for the season for just over three weeks. In fact, it’s still officially summer, and normally, college football teams don’t play for at least another week.

But that isn’t the case for the Lights and Blue Hawks. No, their season begins Saturday night, and Christensen said, for more reasons than one, his team can’t wait for kickoff.

“Anytime you end fall camp and start getting ready for a game, the players are going to be really excited,” he said. “Camp is hard and they’re ready to go against someone else now.

“But this first game is exciting because it’s a new beginning for everybody,” he continued. “Last season is in the past now, it’s a new atmosphere, and I know our guys are really excited to go out and play this game.”

Northern’s season-opening game against the Blue Hawks kicks off at 6 p.m. Saturday night in Dickinson, North Dakota. The Lights will have a bye next week, before hosting Montana Tech Sept. 5 for their home and Frontier Conference opener.

Season Opener
MSU-Northern Lights (0-0) at Dickinson St. Blue Hawks (0-0)
Saturday 6 p.m. at Dickinson, N.D.
Streaming: http://www.msun.edu/athletics
Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM
Twitter: Twitter/Havredaily

Havre Daily News website