Talented Gobbato doing what it takes
Lights excited for Saturday’s Spring Game
By Chris Peterson
April 21, 2016

The Montana State University-Northern football team has been hard at work this spring and few players have had to put in as much work this past month as Mario Gobbato.

Gobbato is one of the Lights’ veteran players. He has excelled out of the backfield for the past three seasons, backing up starter Zach McKinley. But now, Gobbato’s career is possibly taking a new course, one that leads to the wide receiver position.

Northern is just days away from playing its spring football game, which will take place Saturday at the practice field on the MSU-N campus at noon. For the team, that game will be a culmination of work over the course of five weeks. The offense and defense will compete against each other in live 11-on-11 action.

The two sides will go up and down the field, using down and distance in a game-like atmosphere. There will be some specialty scenarios such as red zone opportunities, but for the most part it will be the offense versus the defense.

“We just want to try and finish strong,” Gobbato said. “I think a lot of guys really took to heart what happened last season. We understand that what happened isn’t acceptable. So we are out here working and doing our best to improve so we can change that.”

While Northern had many issues last season, one spot where the Lights didn’t have any concerns was at running back. With McKinley rushing for over 1,000 yards for the third straight season and Gobbato, who added another 195, running the football was something Northern could hang its hat on.

Yet near the end of last season, depth at the receiver position starting getting so thin that Gobbato, who has always shown above average pass-catching skills out of the backfield, was asked to step in and play, which he did gladly. This spring, he was asked to do it again and, this time, the move might be permanent.

“About halfway through spring ball, I made the switch over to receiver,” Gobbato said. “We were getting a little thin at receiver and needed some bodies, so the coaches came and talked to me about it and I wanted to do it. Anything I can do to help the team and contribute, I want to do.”

For Gobbato, playing wide receiver not only helps the team, it also helps him get the ball in his hands more. Gobbato may be good enough to start for just about anyone in the Frontier at running back, with McKinley, one of the NAIA’s best, back for his senior season, his attempts would be limited. And after showing a penchant for catching the ball, with 15 receptions to his credit last season, he seemed like a natural fit for a move.
The interesting thing is that even though Gobbato may be split out wide or even in the slot, it doesn't necessarily mean he won't be a threat to run. Gobbato has taken the hand-off on numerous end arounds in practice and, many times, the ball is faked to him before it's given to a running back or thrown by the quarterback.

By simply putting Gobbato at receiver, the Lights can confuse defenses and make them account for both McKinkey and Gobbato, instead of just one or the other.

For the most part, Gobbato said he is comfortable with the transition, noting he still has some fundamentals to address.

“It’s been an easy transition for the most part because of playing the position last year and catching the ball,” Gobbato said. “But there are still a lot of things I need to learn. There is a lot of different footwork that I need to get down. The other thing is that blocking as a receiver is much different than blocking as a running back. But I have had a lot of guys helping me, so that’s been a big help.”

Regardless of where he is playing, Gobbato said he has noticed a different attitude among the Lights this year and that’s something he thinks is a good thing.

“I think we brought in some kids that have brought in some more attitude,” Gobbato said. “I think we have a lot more competition. I think guys are really pushing each other and trying to make this team better.”

For the Lights and Gobbato, their chance to show what they have learned and achieved this spring will come Saturday at the spring game and it’s a chance that both he and his teammates are excited about.

“We just want to go out there and compete,” Gobbato said. “We have a lot of guys that have worked really hard in practice and in the offseason and I think that has made a difference. I think we have a different mindset than we did a year ago and hopefully we can end our spring on a high note.”

The action at the Northern Spring game is set to get underway at noon Saturday.