Lights storm past Orediggers, Bulldogs

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Coming into this weekend’s Frontier Conference games at home, the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team was giving up a league-best 59 points per game on defense. And to no one's surprise, the Lights held to true to form, holding both Montana Tech and No. 17 UM-Western under 60 points in an impressive conference sweep that vaulted Northern into a first-place tie in the Frontier standings. 

“(I'm) very proud of what we accomplished this weekend,” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. “We were up against two very good teams, and when you play the kind of defense we did this weekend, what it really amounts to is a lot of guys playing with a lot of heart and passion. I’m proud of my team.”

Despite their stellar defensive efforts, the Lights had their hands full on both nights, but especially on Saturday night against the nationally-ranked Bulldogs. Northern and Western fought back and forth throughout the first half, with the Lights taking a 33-32 lead into the locker room thanks to an Andrew Sellars 3-pointer and a Brian Santiago bucket at the buzzer. But it wasn't until midway through the second stanza when the Lights, especially senior guard Justin Dennis, found their groove offensively. With his team clinging to a 54-52 lead with 5:14 to play, Dennis scored the next eight points, including two three's to give Northern an eight-point lead — a lead the Lights wouldn't relinquish thanks to nine made free throws in the final 1:05.

"The key to our offense tonight was our defense,” said Dennis, who scored 19 points on 5-of-8 shooting from three. "We stuck together out there, and our defense really fueled us in the second half. As we got more big stops I just kept gaining confidence, and my teammates had confidence to find me and I was able to make some big shots. “This was a big win for us, it was a good weekend because it’s always big to win on your home court,” he added. "But we also take things one game at a time. The coaches have us really focused on that. So we're going to enjoy these wins, but then we're going to get back to work and get prepared for the next game.”

"Without a doubt, Justin Dennis hit some big shots for us down the stretch. When he gets open and guys are sharing the ball like we were in that stretch, good things are going to happen out there. He really broke it open for us. And you have to credit Andrew Sellars too. What he does for us on defense, diving for loose balls, the hustle plays, he came up really big for us tonight. But again, I think our defense was the catalyst, and that's a credit to every guy on this team. We played hard for 40 minutes and we were able to take a really explosive Western team out of what they were trying to do offensively at times. It was a great game and we're really excited to come away with a win.”

"The Bulldogs came into the game averaging over 80 points per outing, tops in the Frontier. But Northern held Western to 41 percent shooting on the night, and the Bulldogs made just two three's. Star forward JaRon Brown did manage a game-high 25 points for UMW, but it was the Lights' balance on offense, and their stingy defense, which eventually tipped the scale. While Dennis led the way, junior point guard Eric Tisby also hit four three's, including two timely deep shots in the second half on his way to 17 points and eight assists. Santiago came off the bench to score 14 points, his third straight game in double figures, while Sellars had 13 points. Clay Greenland added a game-high 13 boards, including a putback dunk which ignited the Lights in the second half.

Saturday night wasn't the only battle the Lights had on their hands this weekend. While Montana Tech and former MSU-N assistant Nate Larson's team was winless in Frontier play coming into Friday's game, the Orediggers certainly didn't play like it. MSU-N had to scratch and claw for 40 minutes, but found a way to take down the Diggers 63-57. "That's certainly a game that was "That's certainly a game that was "That's certainly a game that was won by our defense," Huse said. "We never really got into any sort of flow offensively, and that's a credit to Tech. They played hard, physical defense and they made life really tough on us offensively. Tech is certainly better than their record shows. I think that's pretty obvious. But again, our guys played with so much heart and intensity, especially on the defensive end, and we found a way to stay in front of them and kind of grind out a win.”

"MSU-N didn't lead Tech until Tisby and Devin Jackson hit back-to-back shots to put the Lights ahead 19-18 at the 7:09 mark of the first half. Then, Dennis hit a three at the buzzer to give the Lights a 33-31 lead at the break. The second half was just as close. But with Northern leading 55-54, Tech made a crucial turnover on an in bounds play with just 1:12 left in the game. The Lights went up 57-54 as a result and Tisby turned the Orediggers over on the next play. That allowed the Lights to make eight straight
free throws inside the final minute, and ultimately put Tech away. "I was proud of our composure down the stretch in both games this weekend," Huse said. "We made smart plays for the most part, and against Tech, guys like Eric Tisby and Brian Santiago and others knocked down big free throws. That's how you win games at the end, and I was proud of the way we played at the end of both games." In the win over the Orediggers, Tisby knocked down 10 free throws on his way to 16 points, while Santiago had a monster game off the bench, scoring 16 points and grabbing five boards. Sellars added a key double-double with 10 points and 11 rebounds, while Walynn Burgess also grabbed eight boards. Tech got 18 points from Dean Colbray, but he did it on just 7-of-21 shooting, and MSU-N's solid defense held the Diggers to just 37 percent shooting on the night and a 5-of-19 performance from beyond the arc. The sweep at home moved the Lights to 4-1 in league play and 16-5 overall. Westminster is 5-1 in the conference and is just a half game ahead of Northern and Rocky Mountain College. The Lights close out the first half of the conference season with games at Carroll College on Thursday night and RMC on Saturday.