

New Lights try to continue recent success

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The 2008-09 season was a banner year for men's basketball teams in the Frontier Conference. And the Montana State University-Northern Lights were a big part of that. Last season, the Lights went to the NAIA national tournament for the first time in 10 years after going 22-10 overall and 10-4 in the Frontier. Northern, which was ranked nationally for much of the season, wound up in a tie for second in the regular season in the Frontier and made it to the league semifinals for the fourth straight season, losing to eventual NAIA national champion Rocky Mountain College in Billings. MSU-N went on to the national tourney in Kansas City, falling to eventual Final Four team Robert Morris College in overtime in the first round. Still, it was a record-setting season for the Lights, who went 15-2 at home, and piled up a stellar conference record in the process. Last year was also Northern's third straight 20-win season and its fourth in the last six years, a remarkable feat for a team that plays in one of the best basketball leagues in the NAIA. But that was last year, and in college basketball, time always marches on. And as the Lights, under eighth-year head coach Shawn Huse (135-88) prepare for a new season, they will certainly have a new look. Gone from last year's national tourney team is the backcourt tandem of NAIA All-American Chris Johnson and two-time Frontier All-Conference sharp-shooter Travis Noble. Together, Johnson and Noble poured in over 30 points per game last season and they were two of the best 3-point shooters in the entire NAIA. Northern will also miss the leadership and inside presence of two-year starter Clinton Shelton, who was one of the Frontier's top rebounders and shotblockers a year ago. And with junior guard Shaun Tatarka redshirting this season, the Lights will certainly have a new-looking team this season. Still, there is some returning firepower. Senior swingman Andrew Sellars enters his third season as a starter and is coming off a junior campaign in which he averaged nine points, three rebounds and two assists and was one of Northern's top defenders. MSU-N also returns starting forwards Clay Greenland and Walynn Burgess, who combined for 10 points and eight rebounds a year ago. The returning trio will not only be counted on to be catalysts for the Lights' offense this season, but they will also need to provide leadership for a lot of newcomers and inexperienced, but talented players. Northern also returns senior 6-7 forward Brian Santiago, who should give the Lights relief in the front court as well as sophomore shooting guard Mark Payovich. But as mentioned before, the Lights have a lot of new faces, especially in the backcourt, where no matter who starts, it will be new. Transfers Terrell Osborne, Justin Dennis, Devin Jackson and Eric Tisby are all new to the MSU-N lineup, but all are capable scorers and defenders at the guard position. Osborne, Jackson and Dennis are all 6-1 shooting guards capable of being consistent from the perimeter as well as being able to drive to the basket. They are also all rangy and athletic and should provide the Lights with sound perimeter defense. Tisby is a traditional point guard prospect, known as a good passer with plenty of quickness. "We should have good inside-outside balance on offense as well as a strong defense," Huse said. "Our forwards are a very good experienced nucleus for our new (and returning), talented, guards to work with. This team has a lot of new faces playing key roles this season." Northern, which was picked to finish fourth in the Frontier this season, was set to open its schedule this weekend with a game in Canada, but that game was cancelled last month, giving the Lights ample time to gel and

prepare for their season-opening games at Dickinson State and Minot State next week. The Lights have, as always a difficult nonconference schedule, which Huse believes will not only prepare his team for the Frontier season ahead, but will also be instrumental in molding his mix of talented and veteran returnees and talented but inexperienced newcomers into a team capable of making another run to the postseason. The Lights' nonconference schedule includes home-and-home matchups with both DSU and Minot State, as well as two games against a good Eastern Oregon squad. The Lights will also travel to the University of Montana for the third time in four years. "This nonconference season we will need to be patient while working hard and learning on the job," Huse said. "This longer-than-usual stretch of pre-season practicing has been very beneficial for this group, yet there is still some learning to be done that can only happen through experience. "Once again, our nonconference season will supply a variety of styles and competition for us to go against," he added. "Every game will be a learning experience for this team and should prepare us well for what we'll see in league. It may take some time to find our new identity as a team, and learn to do what it takes to win tough games." MSU-N begins its season Nov. 6 at Dickinson State and plays at Minot State the following night. Northern opens its home schedule Nov. 13 against DSU and the rematch with Minot is set for Nov. 14. The Lights will also host the AmericInn Classic Jan. 1-2 and they begin Frontier Conference play Jan. 7 at league favorite Westminster College.