

Lights topple LC State, fall to Westminster

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Montana State University-Northern senior Justin Dennis (front) flies in for a dunk during Saturday night's Frontier Conference men's basketball game between the Lights and the Westminster Griffins. The Griffins beat the Lights 68-47, but Northern upended Lewis-Clark State 68-58 on Friday night.

The Montana State University- Northern Lights had a chance to make plenty of headway in the Frontier Conference standings this weekend on their home floor. Instead, the No. 10 Westminster Griffins got in the way of a home sweep by turning back the No. 21 Lights on Saturday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, allowing MSU-N only a weekend split in Havre. MSU-N did beat Lewis-Clark State on Friday night 68-58 behind tenacious defense and timely 3-point shooting. But all-in-all, Saturday's loss to Westminster left the Lights (6-3, 17-7) feeling unsatisfied. "It's disappointing, but we have to continuously remind ourselves, this conference is a marathon and not a sprint," MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. "And I believe our guys will come back from this loss willing to work hard and continue to work towards achieving our goals. This has been a real resilient and hard-working team all year and we won't let this loss keep us down. "But we did have a real big opportunity to take a big step tonight against a really good Westminster team," he added. "And we didn't even come close. And that's disappointing. A 21-point loss at home to anybody is not acceptable to us, not to the coaches, and I know it's not to the guys in our locker room. But we will learn from this and move on." In the 68-47 loss to the Griffins, the Lights ran into a nightmare scenario. Northern shot just 32 percent from the floor and went 4-of-22 from the 3-point-line. And while MSU-N came into the weekend as the No. 2 rated defense in the NAIA, the Griffins executed their offense to near perfection, shooting nearly 50 percent from the floor, making big three's and getting baskets in both transition and in the half court. The Griffins also outrebounded the Lights, and were especially dominant in the first half on the boards. "I don't want to say our effort wasn't there because it was, the guys played hard for 40 minutes," Huse said. "But they (Griffins) certainly hurt us in areas where we have normally been very good. And hats off to them for that. And while we defended them as hard as we could all night, they were clicking on offense and we weren't. Every time we got a good opportunity or a good look, we couldn't knock a shot down, or we'd have a turnover or make a costly mistake. It just felt like it just wasn't our night." But the game didn't start out that way for the Lights as they jumped all over the Griffins in the first four minutes, with Justin

Dennis igniting the MSU-N offense with an early three. But it didn't take Westminster long to regain its composure, and the Griffins ripped off a 14-2 run, coinciding with a five-minute field goal drought by the Lights, eventually leading to a 30-22 Griffin lead at halftime, with only an Eric Tisby trey keeping it from being an even bigger margin. Then, in the second half, the Griffins started strong and never really let the Lights back into the contest. Sophomore guard Michael Stockton scored 12 straight points, including back-to-back three's with his father, NBA Hall of Famer John Stockton, looking on. And from there, the Griffins cruised home to a double-digit win. "Give Westminster credit," Huse said. "For as well as they played offensively, they also were very good on defense. They did a lot to disrupt our offense tonight, but at the same time, we turned it over 20 times and shot the ball very poorly. You can't do that against a team that has been consistently one of the best in our league for a long time now and expect to win."

Dennis was the only Light to reach double figures, scoring 12 points. Clay Greenland added eight points and eight rebounds for the Lights, while Stockton poured in a game-high 24 points for the Griffins (8-1, 18-5). As rough as Saturday night was on the Lights, the weekend was far from a total loss. On Friday night, MSU-N took down a determined Lewis-Clark State team for the second time this season, and for a fifth-straight time in the series. The game was a struggle for both teams for much of the contest because of how well each squad defended the other. The Lights raced out to a 19-9 lead behind a thunderous alley-oop dunk by Andrew Sellars and the hot shooting of freshman guard Devin Jackson. But the Warriors battled back and only trailed 30-28 at intermission. Jackson continued to play well in the second half, and slowly the Lights continued to pull away with a stifling defense and more hot shooting, this time from Dennis and Sellars, who made critical three's in a stretch which allowed the Lights to go ahead 56-47 with less than six minutes to go. Brian Santiago capped off the run with a roaring one-handed dunk, and although the Warriors never went away, MSU-N was able to close them out by going 11-for-12 from the free-throw-line in the final two minutes. "Defensively we really got after them (Warriors)," Huse said. "We really banded together as a team and got it done on both ends of the floor. I was really proud of the way we played together, and we had guys like Devin (Jackson), Justin (Dennis) and Andrew (Sellars) step up and make big shots when we really needed them. "Credit to LC because they came in here and played extremely hard," Huse said. "And they made us work for everything we got on both ends of the floor. But what I really liked is how we responded down the stretch. We were again very composed and we did the things necessary to put the game away at the end. I'm proud of our guys for that." Dennis made three treys and scored a game-high 17 points for the Lights. Sellars added 15 points and a team-high six rebounds, while Jackson came off the bench to score 13 points and nail three long-range shots. As a team, the Lights went 9-of-19 from three and shot 55 percent from the floor. LC State (3-6, 12-11) got a team-high 15 points from Daniel Williams. "A big key to the game was the lift Devin Jackson came in and gave us in the first half," Huse said. "That's really encouraging to see a freshman come in and contribute in a pressure situation like that. It was a total team effort, but he gave us a big spark off the bench. "And we still feel good about where we are in the season despite the loss to Westminster," he added. "We got a split and now we just have to move on and go play well on the road. Again, it's a marathon, not a sprint and our guys will learn from this weekend and continue to move forward. We still like where we are at this point in the season. The Lights head into Friday night's game at the University of Great Falls alone in third place in the Frontier standings.