MSU-N men back after a long break

George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports editor
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It’s been three full weeks since the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team has been on the court. And since the No. 25 Lights suffered a pair of heartbreaking losses in Las Vegas the last time out, three weeks may have seemed like an eternity.

But tonight and Saturday, the Lights (4-3) will finally get their chance to get back to their winning ways after suffering losses to nationally-ranked Robert Morris of Illinois and Vanguard University by a combined five points in Las Vegas. Northern is in Camrose, Alberta for a pair of nonconference games against Augustana College tonight at 7 and Saturday at 3 p.m.

And while the Lights have been anxious to get back to game action of such difficult losses last month, veteran MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said the layoff had its positives. In actuality, Northern wasn’t supposed to have a three-week break, but Montana Tech cancelled a tournament in which the Lights were to play two games, so Northern had to make the best of the situation.

“The time off was very good for us from an academic standpoint,” Huse said. “We had been on the road a lot and this is crunch time in the semester so it really gave us a chance to get our homework done, get midterms done and really catch up on things in school.

“The rest was good for us too,” he added. “But the down side is, we can’t expect to be as sharp as we were before this break when we go to Canada. There will certainly be some game rust. But that’s why these games come at a perfect time for us. We need these games to get back into a rhythm on the court and get back into game shape.”

And while Northern isn’t overlooking either tilt with Augustana, the Lights have a trip to the Lewis-Clark State Tournament coming up next weekend, one in which they’ll face the No. 1 team in NAIA Division I, Azusa Pacific. So Huse admits, the two games against Augustana will prove very beneficial.

“We know we’re going to have to play well to win both games up there,” Huse said. “We are by no means taking this trip lightly. But we do need these games to get the rust off and had we had to go play Azusa this week, that would have been pretty difficult. It still will be. But these games will certainly help us prepare for that trip to LC State. And hopefully we go up there and get back to form and come away with two wins in the process.”

The Lights have never lost to Augustana, but the team is still somewhat of an unknown. So MSU-N will have to rely on its skill and what it does best to overcome any challenges it will face in Canada.

Coming into this weekend, Northern has three players averaging in double figures, led by junior guard Shaun Tatarka, who averages 14 points and five assists per game. Sophomore guard Devin Jackson is scoring 13 points per game, while LaVon Myers chips in with 12 points and is the Lights’ top 3-point shooter. Junior Joe Simpson averages nine points and leads the Lights in rebounding with just over eight boards per game.
MSU-N’s two games against Augustana will be followed up by games against Azusa next Friday and Portland Bible College next Saturday in Lewiston, Idaho. The Lights next play at home Dec. 21-22 against Concordia University of Alberta and The King’s College from Edmonton.