Lights take the sting out of Yellowjackets

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Rematches in basketball can always go either way. But in the case of the Montana State University-Northern Lights rematch with Black Hills State, things certainly went the way of the Lights.

Northern suffered a heartbreaking, 3-point loss at Black Hills back in November, but on Wednesday night, the Lights exacted a measure of revenge in dramatic fashion, beating BHSU 83-75 on the first day of the AmericInn Classic at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

“I think the big thing is, we have really gelled even more as a team,” Northern junior forward and reining Frontier Conference Player of the Week Joe Simpson said. “We played a good game the first time we played them (Yellowjackets), but now have come together even more. We really have each other’s backs, as a team and that really helped us tonight.”

And the Lights certainly had to play as one in order to get past the seventh-ranked Yellowjackets, who came to Havre with just two losses on the season.

Northern not only had to play well, but the Lights were forced to stage a dramatic comeback in the second half after falling behind by 12 points with 14 minutes to play.

And a commanding 20-4 run was just what the Lights needed to get the back under their own control. Included in the comeback was two buckets and an emphatic dunk by Simpson which capped the run, as well as back-to-back baskets by both Devin Jackson and Shaun Tatarka.

By the time Simpson finished the dunk the spurt with his dunk off a David Maddock steal, the Lights were back in front 62-56, and for good measure, Maddock added a 3-pointer, followed by a Jordan Harris jumper in the paint which upped Northern’s lead to 67-61 with 5:12 to go in the game.

“Obviously we got hot there during that stretch,” MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. “But the biggest thing was, somehow, we played great defense at just the right time. We managed to play great team defense and force a very good team to miss some shots and miss some free throws, and a lot of that is we played just as good defensively in the first half, and I think what we were doing started to wear them (Jackets) down in the second half, and they missed some shots, which allowed us to really pick things up offensively.

“So I have to give our kids a ton of credit for their effort and energy on the defensive end for 40 minutes tonight,” he added. “It was something I’m very proud of them for, and it was the key to the game I thought.”

Still, as good as the Lights were for much of the second half on both ends of the floor, BHSU was still very much in the game right to the end. The Yellowjackets cut Northern’s lead back to one point at 71-70 on a three by Cain Atkinson, but the Lights had an answer. Tatarka drilled a three to put MSU-N back up by four, and with 2:09, LaVon Myers delivered the knockout blow, hitting a three in the corner that really put the game out of reach.
“We fought hard, we fought together and that really helped us come back,” Simpson said. “We got behind but in the time out, we were in each others faces in a positive way and we just said, whatever happens is going to happen, but we’re not quitting. There was no give up tonight, and we came back together.”

And Northern had to come back right from the start of the second half, because BHSU wrestled the lead away from the Lights at the close of the first half. In the first 20 minutes, the game was seesaw affair with 14 lead changes. Tatarka, Maddock and Devin Jackson all hit big three’s in the first stanza, but a late 8-0 run by the Yellowjackets gave them a 37-35 lead at the break, forcing the Lights to stage their wild, second-half comeback.

And with the Yellowjackets shooting so well from all over the floor, 49 percent from the field, the Lights had to get contributions from everybody. And that’s exactly what happened. Tatarka led four Lights in double digits with 15 points and a perfect 3-of-3 from beyond the arc. Myers added 12 points, Simpson had 11 points and eight rebounds and Jackson chipped in with 10. But the Lights bench had plenty to do with the win as well. Maddock scored nine points and Jordan Harris had eight, while Ben Mitchell gave the Lights big minutes in the paint, scoring seven points and pulling down four rebounds, while playing great defense on the Jackets’ bigs.

Luke Enos led the Yellowjackets (12-3) with a game-high 18 points.

“I thought Ben Mitchell really gave us a spark tonight, when we really needed one,” Huse said. “He and David Maddock really lifted our bench play and that was crucial.

“But really, this was a total team win,” he added. “We were very balanced, shot a good percentage, and I can go around the locker room and pick out things that every guy on this team did to help us win tonight. So I’m really pleased with that. It was just a great team win.”

It was also a signature win for the Lights, who hadn’t beaten a nationally-ranked team all season. Northern is now 9-4 overall and will close nonconference play with a game tonight against Lethbridge.

Today’s action at the AmericInn Classic gets underway with Montana Tech facing off against Black Hills at 4. The Orediggers nipped Lethbridge on Wednesday afternoon. The Lights and Pronghorns will finish things off at 6.