Lights secure all-important split at Montana Tech, Western

George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports editor
Monday, January 17th, 2011

After the dust settled on this weekend’s Frontier Conference men’s basketball games, one thing has become quite clear – the league is wide open.

And that’s precisely why this weekend’s road split was very big for the Montana State University-Northern Lights.

Northern captured a hard-fought 67-61 win at Montana Tech on Friday night, before dropping its first league game of the season, a 69-64 loss at UM-Western on Saturday night.

The split left MSU-N at 2-1 in conference play, but just a half game behind Lewis-Clark State for first place. And after just two weeks of league play, none of the eight Frontier men’s teams are unbeaten, and that makes Northern’s win at Tech on Friday night that much more important.

“I’m real pleased that we were able to walk out of their (Orediggers) gym with a win,” Huse said. “I mean, they just beat Westminster on their home floor the week before, and with the style of play they have now, winning at their place was big. And honestly, we are fully aware that anytime you can split on the road in this league, you’ve accomplished something. So we’re pleased that we came home with a win this weekend.”

The style of play Huse referred to is Montana Tech’s slow down offense. The Orediggers implemented a modified four-corner’s offense against the Lights Friday night in Butte, and as a result, the Lights had to fight for everything they got. MSU-N led 32-28 at halftime, and twice pulled away to eight-point leads in the second half. But with the Orediggers hanging onto the ball deep into the shot clock on every possession, they stayed with the Lights to the very end.

But in the end, MSU-N made clutch free throws in the final minute, and also let its defense carry it to a big road victory.

“There just weren’t a lot of possessions in that game,” Huse said. “They use the entire half court to spread the ball and stall until there are just a few seconds on the shot clock, and that made it very tough to get into any kind of flow against them. It was a very effective strategy.

“So we had to adjust to that as we went along,” he added. “But I was real proud of how our kids fought through that. We got some big stops when we needed them. Shaun Tatarka gave us a big surge on offense, and Joe Simpson had a great all-around game, and we found ways to get a win.”

Tatarka scored 19 points, including hitting five 3-pointers against the Diggers’, while Simpson poured in 18 points on 8-of-nine shooting while grabbing a game-high eight rebounds. LaVon Myers added nine points, all on three’s.

But as tough as things were in Friday night’s win in Butte, things got even more difficult in a five-point loss at Western on Saturday. The Bulldogs knocked the Lights out of the Frontier playoffs last March, and they made it two in a row by getting off to a strong start Saturday night in Dillon as they led MSU-N by 11 points at halftime, and Northern could never quite get over that hump.

“I really feel that game was lost in the first half,” Huse said. “We just got off to a real cold start shooting the ball and we dug ourselves a hole we couldn’t get out of, and you can’t do that against good teams like Western.
“I think we played like we’re capable of in the second half and it showed because we did cut the lead to two points at one point,” he added. “But we played below our potential in the first half and that really hurt us.”

Against the Bulldogs, Devin Jackson scored 16 points to lead the Lights, while Chris Brown came off the bench to score 12 points. But 36 percent shooting from the field in the first 20 minutes hurt the Lights chances of making it two road wins on the weekend.

Still, MSU-N sits at 2-1 in league play and 13-5 overall heading into its first two home games of the conference season. The Lights will face rival Carroll College (2-1, 12-4) on Friday night and then host Rocky Mountain College (1-2, 8-11) on Saturday.

“It was a tough trip this weekend,” Huse said. “And we’d of liked to have found a way to win the game against Western. But we know we have to be happy with a split, and now we have to regroup and get ready to play two very good teams at home.”

**Lights 67, Montana Tech 61**

**MSU-N** — Sean Kelly 1-2 1-2 3, Joe Simpson 8-9 2-3 18, Devin Jackson 1-5 0-0 2, Shaun Tatarka 6-12 2-2 19, LaVon Myers 3-8 0-0 9, David Maddock 2-7 0-0 6, Jordan Harris 2-4 0-0 4, Chris Brown 0-0 0-0 0, Ben Mitchell 1-1 4-5 6. Totals 24-48 9-12 67.

**TECH** — Tyree Haynie 6-12 0-0 12, Kellen Hasquet 5-10 7-8 19, A.J. Paine 5-6 2-4 14, Ivan Sljivar 2-8 0-2 4, Dirk Anderson 2-5 2-4 6, Tanner Neumann 2-4 0-1 4, Bryan Bock 0-0 2-2 2, Sam Dembek 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 22-45 13-21 61.


**Western 69, Lights 64**

**MSU-N** — Devin Jackson 5-11 4-5 16, Shaun Tatarka 3-10 0-0 8, LaVon Myers 2-5 1-1 6, Sean Kelly 1-5 2-2 5, Joe Simpson 3-7 0-0 6, Jordan Harris 1-1 0-0 2, David Maddock 2-5 0-0 6, Chris Brown 6-8 0-0 12, Ben Mitchell 1-2 1-2 3. Totals 24-54 8-10 64.

**UM-W** — Tyler Hurley 5-11 5-5 15, Kyle Perry 3-6 4-4 10, Brandon Brown 5-15 4-7 16, Cody Thueringer 7-14 5-6 20, Mark Lussier 0-1 0-0 0, Jared Smithson 1-3 0-0 3, J.C. Isakson 0-0 0-0 0, Gabe Rucker 0-0 0-0 0, Bridger Chambers 0-0 0-0 0, Kyle Erickson 2-2 0-0 5. Totals 23-52 18-22 69.