Lights battle Bulldogs for first place
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The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team has been hovering at or near the top of the Frontier Conference standings all season long.

Tonight, the Lights get a chance to take the lead in the league all on their own. Tonight at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, the No. 25 Lights host the No. 19 UM-Western Bulldogs with first place in the Frontier on the line. Northern also plays host to upstart Montana Tech on Saturday night.

“The Western game is a big game,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “But so is every game for every team in our league the next three weeks. It’s like everybody is playing for something right now, so while this is a big game for us, and Western, Saturday night against Tech will be just as big.”

The Lights (5-3, 16-7) and Bulldogs (6-3, 18-6) have developed quite the rivalry as of late, and they’ll renew it tonight. Last year, the two teams met three times, with Western taking the Lights down in the final matchup, the Frontier Conference semifinals. The Bulldogs also got the better of the Lights last month in Dillon, so now it’s Northern’s turn to reverse that role.

And both teams come into tonight’s game playing well. Western got through a tough stretch of home games against Westminster and Lewis-Clark State unscathed, with the Lights thumped UGF last Saturday, and broke out of a shooting slump in the process, as they hit 12 3-pointers against the Argos.

Coming into this weekend, Northern is still among the top 10 teams in the NAIA in 3-point shooting, and guards Shaun Tatarka, LaVon Myers, Devin Jackson and David Maddock are all dangerous marksmen from the outside. But if the Lights are to beat the Bulldogs, it will be because of Northern’s usually stingy defense. The Lights are among the nation’s leaders in field goal defense and they’ll have to do another great job tonight against the high-powered Bulldogs.

Western is one of the leading field goal percentage teams in the country, and they have a scoring point guard in Brandon Brown, who leads the league in points per game at 19 and assists per game at five. But Brown has a host of offensive weapons around him, including 6-3 Cody Thueringer and 6-5 Tyler Hurley, a University of Montana transfer. Western is a balanced team with size and strength, but the Bulldogs can also shoot the ball well from the perimeter, so Northern’s defense will have its hands full tonight.

“They (Bulldogs) are a smart, experienced team,” Huse said. “They don’t turn the ball over much and they are patient offensively. They are a really tough matchup for us. They have a great point guard, but they have so many other weapons, so they are just a really tough team to defend.

“Getting off to a better start than we did in Dillon will certainly help us,” he added. “But even then, we know what they’re capable of so we’re going to have to be ready to step up to the challenge.”

And things won’t get any easier for the Lights on Saturday night.
Montana Tech (4-5, 6-16) has just six wins on the season, but four of them have come in conference play, and they are the only team to sweep Westminster in a season series in the last five years. The Orediggers also made the Lights play down to the wire in Northern’s close win last month in Butte.

“Again, a very patient offensive team,” Huse said of the Orediggers. “They like to mil the clock until they get the shot they want. They make you play a lot of defense. So for us, being ready to play good, 35-second defense will be the key. We have to be ready to be patient ourselves, because they don’t make a lot of mistakes and they don’t give you many extra possessions. We played well against it the last time we faced them and hopefully we can do the same this time around.

The Orediggers bring the reining conference player of the week to Havre in point guard Tyree Haynie, but it’s Tech’s size which presents challenges. Tech has 6-7 forwards Kellan Hasquet, Ivan Sljivar and Dirk Anderson, all of whom play big, but can step out and shoot from the perimeter. So once again, defense will be at a premium for the Lights, who are battling to stay in the Frontier title race.

Tonight’s game between Northern and Western tips off at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Lights and Orediggers also tip off at 8 Saturday night in Havre.