Lights get a heroic win over Western
George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports editor
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If the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team had a any type of monkey on its back this season, it was the UM-Western Bulldogs.

However, after a thrilling last-second victory over the 19th-ranked Bulldogs Friday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, it’s gone. The No. 25 Lights beat the Bulldogs on a high floating shot by Devin Jackson with just four seconds left in the Friday night’s showdown between the top two teams in the league. Just before Jackson’s shot, Western’s Brandon Brown nailed a cold-blooded 3-pointer to tie the game at 65-65.

But Jackson’s heroics didn’t end the wild affair. The Bulldogs still had a chance with time winding down trailing 67-65, but Brown was called for a travel as time seemed to expire. The ensuing play sent Western head coach Steve Keller into a rage about Northern players possibly leaving the bench too early, and a subsequent technical foul on Keller gave the Lights two more points and a 69-65 win in front of a deafening crowd.

The victory also gave the Lights sole possession of first place in the Frontier, and was fitting considering Western had beaten Northern three of its last four meetings, and did so on a last-second shot in the 2010 Frontier Conference semifinals.

"No doubt that was a big win for," MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. "We’re all human and we certainly wanted to atone for the fact that they beat us like that in the semifinals last year. It’s something that has kind of stuck with this team, so being able to win a game of this magnitude, in the fashion we did is pretty special, and I’m just really proud of the entire team.

"It was a total team win tonight," Northern junior Sean Kelly added. "Western is a great team, they played a great game, and they had a great player have a huge night. But this whole team stuck together and stuck it out and that’s how we found a way to win. Together."

The huge individual game was Brown’s. The 5-10 point guard poured in a game-high 34 points against the Lights, including the shot that almost sent the game into overtime. But Northern was stout defensively everywhere else, and despite Brown’s numbers, the efficient Bulldogs only score 65 points.

And the game as wild throughout. The Lights led 37-36 at the end of a seesaw first half in which Western jumped out early but the Lights responded. Western came out hot again in the second half and led 43-42 with less than 16 minutes to go. From there, neither team gained separation until the final minutes. Jackson drilled a long three to give the Lights the lead back with seven minutes to go, then Kelly hit a critical shot from the baseline to put the Lights ahead three with 1:31 to go.

"Everyone of our guys stepped it up tonight," Huse said. "That’s what has to happen I games like this. Whether it’s rebounding or a loose ball, or just hustling back in transition, you need to do the little things like that to win these close games, and we found out we can do that. You never know how these kids will be until they’re faced with those situations, and they showed us in this game that we are ready, that we’re up to those challenges. I’m just really proud of them."
While Brown went off on the Lights, Northern got a balanced effort on offense. Jackson scored 18 points, while Joe Simpson had a big game, with 18 points and seven rebounds. David Maddock came off the bench to add 11 points and play outstanding defense.

But as big as the win was against the Bulldogs, Kelly was able to keep things in perspective for the Lights.

“We’re excited about this,” Kelly said. “But we know we have plenty of important games left. We have to do what we did tonight. The coaches stress composure and we need that from game-to-game. We need to be composed in every game like we were tonight, because from here on out, every game is going to be a big, important game.”