Lights lay it all on the line at home
Plenty at stake with Westminster and LC State in town
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There have been many big Frontier Conference men’s basketball games at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse over the years.

But none may be bigger than the next two for the Montana State University-Northern Lights. Tonight at 8, the Lights play host to No. 16 Westminster College, one of three teams the Lights are currently tied with for first place in the Frontier Conference. Northern also faces Lewis-Clark State in a regular season finale Saturday night at 8 p.m.

And in those two games, all that’s at stake is a possible regular season conference championship, home-court advantage in next week’s Frontier playoffs and a chance at an at-large berth in the NAIA national tournament. But what will happen in regards to Northern’s postseason future isn’t entirely in the Lights’ hands. They are also tied with Carroll College and UM-Western for first, with all four teams sitting at 8-4 with two games to go.

So while there is plenty of early March Madness on the last weekend in February around the Frontier this weekend, the Lights (19-8) are worrying only about what they can control — the next two home games.

“Games don’t get much bigger than this,” Huse said. “We understand there is a lot on the line for a lot of teams this weekend. But we have to block all that stuff out. We’re in no position to worry about even next week, let alone talk about the national tournament or any of that stuff. What we are concerned with is trying to put two solid game plans together for two very good opponents and then trying to go out and execute those game plans.

“We can’t concern ourselves with anything else,” he added. “Because we haven’t even proven we can play with these two teams for two full halves. Westminster really put it on us pretty good at their place, especially in the second half. And Lewis-Clark did the same to us at their place in the first half. So right now, we have to prove we can play for two full halves against these teams. Nothing else matters.”

And the Griffins (8-4, 20-6) did hand the Lights perhaps their worst loss of the season last month in Salt Lake City. The final score read 55-44, but Huse and the Lights felt like they took one on the chin that night. And that win sent the Griffins on a tear, and they have a chance to come in and steal the Frontier title in Havre, even after an uncharacteristic slow start to the conference season.

“They (Griffins) are playing very well right now,” Huse said. “Really, nothing has changed there. They are an experienced, disciplined and patient team, and they really make you defend for a full 40 minutes. We are certainly going to have to be ready to defend them, but at the same time, they are a great defensive team, so we have to be just as ready to handle their defense. We have to make shots, and execute very well. You just have to play very smart basketball against them, because they just don’t make mistakes.”

The Griffins are poised, disciplined and experienced. But they’re not just a system team either. They have a senior star in point guard Michael Stockton, the son of NBA Hall of Famer John Stockton. The young Stockton has exploded his senior year, not only running the Westminster offense, but scoring as well. He comes to Havre averaging almost 19 points per game and he shoots better than 42 percent from beyond the arc. And Stockton isn’t alone. Sophomore Jake Orchard (6-4) plays much bigger than he is, and averages almost 15 points and six boards per game, while 6-6 Tanner Gregory has filled in nicely in the middle.
But as talented as the Griffins are, Northern can match it on both ends. The Lights are ranked among the NAIA's top 10 in 3-point shooting, with Devin Jackson (14 ppg), Shaun Tatarka (14 ppg), LaVon Myers (12 ppg) and David Maddock (7 ppg) all having great seasons from the outside. On defense, Northern is second in the Frontier in field goal defense and in the top 15 nationally.

And the Lights won’t just need that shooting and defense with so much at stake tonight. Because win or lose tonight, there’s just as much on the line Saturday night when the Warriors (5-7, 15-10) come calling. LC State beat Northern 70-61 last month in Lewiston, Idaho, and while the Lights recovered nicely from that road sweep against the Griffins and Warriors, LC and former Northern head coach Tim Walker would like nothing more than to come to Havre and spoil MSU-N’s postseason party Saturday night.

“They (Warriors) are big, physical and very athletic,” Huse said. “They have us outsized at almost every position. And they really get after you on the glass. So our interior defense will be critical against them. But they aren’t just a big team, they shoot it well, they are quick and they defend. They are very talented. So we’re going to have to come out energized and ready to play, and we have to prove that we can play with them for 40 minutes.”

The Warriors are paced by returning veterans in the paint, Alex King (6-6) and Andrew Packwood (6-8). Joining them this year is 6-9 center Donta Roberts, so LC has one of the most formidable front courts in the Frontier. And with experienced guards Jared Giamonna and Derek Gianukakis, LC has the firepower to upset the Lights in Havre Saturday night.

And that’s what Northern is trying to avoid this weekend. The Lights are playing for a lot more than they will think about over the course of the next two nights. It’s about next week and about mid-March where Northern would love to be playing in Kansas City. But in order for any of that to happen, the Lights have to take care of business at home, and that’s easier said than done against the likes of the Griffins and Warriors.

But MSU-N hasn’t looked ahead all season. The Lights have been poised and focused on each task at hand, and Huse says that’s exactly how they’ll approach the final two games of what has been a wild Frontier regular season.

“We have to be that way,” Huse said. “We have to stay in the moment, play one game at a time. They may be cliché’s, but it’s very true and our guys have done a great job with that all season long. And that’s how we’re looking at these next two games.

“Both games are great challenges, both teams coming in here are very, very good,” Huse added. “But our guys believe in themselves, believe they can do this. And now we just have to go out there and prove ourselves. Play our best and see what happens when the weekend is all over with.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Griffins tips off at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. Saturday night’s regular season finale with LC State also tips off at 8 p.m. in Havre.