George Ferguson Column: Lights earn a Frontier title the right way

George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports editor
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If you watch college basketball on ESPN, or the NBA each and every night, you’d hardly know that basketball was invented to be a team sport.

Today’s game features one-on-one basketball more than ever before, and it’s certainly entertaining. I won’t lie, I like high-flying dunks, long 3-pointers and fast-break basketball that is today’s game. It’s fun to watch, there’s no doubt about that.

But in its purest form, the game of basketball is played with passing, strategy and defense, and this year’s Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team certainly does all that, and it’s why they can now call themselves Frontier Conference co-champions for the 2010-11 regular season.

And this weekend at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse was as special as it gets as the Lights knocked off No. 16 Westminster College on Friday night, and Lewis-Clark State in overtime on Saturday night to grab a share of the conference title, and further bolster its NAIA national tournament hopes.

“I’m really proud of my team,” Northern sophomore Devin Jackson, one of only two returning Lights said after Saturday night’s win. “Every guy on this team worked hard to get to this point. And we have a great coach who showed us what it takes to get here, to win. And all of that hard work and dedication at the beginning of the season is paying off now.”

Paying off indeed.

The Lights embody team basketball and they are a shining example of what hard work can do for a team.

It’s true, Northern is one of the top 3-point shooting teams in the country, and Jackson, Shaun Tatarka, LaVon Myers and David Maddock can knock down a triple at any time from any where. But that’s also a product of Huse’s team system on offense, an unselfish brand of basketball where the open man and the best available shot is always the primary focus. It’s something Huse has preached for years, and it works because the Lights have great shooters, and great passers who want to find those shooters. And the numbers don’t lie, because the Lights have now ripped off five straight 20-win seasons.

But perhaps even more important to Northern success is defense and knowing ones role. Two more factors Huse preaches, and two more things that have gotten the Lights to where they are now – on the brink of a second NAIA tournament berth in three years.

Northern plays hard-nosed team defense, with every player exhausting himself for 40 minutes each night. The result – Northern is one of the top field goal defense teams in the country and has been at the top of that list in the Frontier Conference since Huse took over nine years ago.

Then there’s that unselfish play. Guys like Ben Mitchell, Jordan Harris and Chris Brown, along with Maddock and Sean Kelly may have to share minutes, but they always seem to step up big when their number is called. This weekend, it was Mitchell and Brown doing big-time work in the paint, and again, the result is a conference co-championship.

“I’m very proud of the way this team has gelled,” Huse said. “I think one of the biggest things about this team is that they play so unselfishly. They all, to a man, want to help each other, and they all have the same goal. It’s very gratifying to coach a team like that, and I’m proud of every player on this team, and
every one of them has contributed to our success this season. We wouldn’t be where we are without every
guy on this team.”

Indeed. The Lights play for each other, they play to win and they play for the name on the front of their
jersey. And the result has been, a team with almost no returning experience, a team with no seniors, and
so many new faces coming together to be one of the best teams in the Frontier Conference this season.

It’s been unselfish, pure basketball at Northern this year, and for the last several years. Northern
basketball means the game being played the way it was intended to. And these Lights, along with Huse
and his staff deserve all the credit for that, because it’s been a pleasure to witness.

And now it’s on to the postseason.