The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team got a huge win when the Lights knocked off the Westminster Griffins on Friday night.

On Saturday night however, the Lights needed one more.

In order to ensure the Lights would tie for the Frontier Conference regular season championship, they had to beat Lewis-Clark State in the regular season finale, and while it took an extra five minutes, the Lights got the job done. Northern claimed its second Frontier regular season title in four years by beating LC State 70-65 in overtime Saturday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

The win capped off a dramatic regular season in which the Lights didn’t return a single starter and had just two players which had ever wore a Lights uniform before the start of the season.

“It’s still that team,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse, who led the Lights to their fifth straight 20-win season said. “It’s still the team with no seniors, no returning starters and a bunch of guys who had never played in this league before. So for this team to gel like they did, to come together so quickly, it’s remarkable. I’m just so proud of them for what they’ve achieved this year, and they deserve all the credit.”

And the Lights basked in the glow of the win with students and fans long after the final horn sounded Saturday night. But the celebration almost didn’t happen.

That’s because the warriors nearly spoiled Northern’s party. LC State stormed back from a 12-point halftime deficit and took a lead midway through the second via 10-2 run. The Warriors led 51-49 with under four minutes to play and the Lights were on the ropes. But a 3-point play and later a putback tip in by junior Joe Simpson gave Northern a 56-52 lead with 1:02 left in regulation and it looked like all was well for the Lights.

However, the Warriors still wouldn’t go away. Shane Miller buried a 3-pointer with :54 left to pull the Warriors within one point and his heroics weren’t done yet. After Devin Jackson got two points on a goal tending call against LC, Miller had one last shot for the warriors and he took advantage. He drove to the basket scored and was fouled and made the ensuing free throw to tie the game at 58-58 and send it into overtime.

But in the extra frame the Lights stood tall. LaVon Myers and Jackson each buried long three’s, giving the Lights their only two field goals in the extra frame, and Northern did enough from the foul line to hold on and claim a share of the Frontier title with Carroll College.

“It’s all of the hard work and dedication back at the beginning of the season,” Jackson said. “Every guy on this team worked very hard at the beginning of the year, and when it came to the overtime tonight, we had our legs. We felt fresh and ready to go. So that hard work paid off tonight.
“Credit LC,” Huse said. “They never quit fighting. They are such a strong, physical and athletic team and they played a great game. But I’m proud of our guys. They really were composed down the stretch and in overtime, especially after we really struggled shooting the ball in the second half. We missed some free throws too, and it with things not going our way, we could have folded. But that’s not what this team is about. This was a gut check game and our guys really gutted it out, and it was a total team effort, and a win I’m really proud of this team for getting.”

A gut check indeed.

The Lights looked like they were ready to blow the warriors out and cruise to the conference championship after a great first half. Northern started the game on fire with Shaun Tatarka sinking shot after shot, as the Lights went on an early 12-2 run and led 20-9 with 11:34 left in the first half. The run was capped by a Jackson’s first three of the night.

“With how things unfolded at the end of the game, our start tonight was big,” Huse said. “Shaun (Tatarka) really got us going, and having that early lead turned out to be huge for us. So that’s something else I’m proud of this team for, coming out ready to play after such an emotional and hard-fought game on Friday night.”

Tatarka hit three trey’s and led four Lights in double figures with 15 points. Myers scored 14 points and Simpson and Jackson chipped in with 12 and 11 points, respectively. Simpson also grabbed seven rebounds as the Lights held a 33-32 edge on the boards against the much taller Warriors.

And with the win, Northern (21-8, 10-4) not only earned a share of the regular season crown, but home-court advantage through at least the conference semifinals. The Lights tied with Carroll at 10-4 but the Saints held a tiebreaker over the Lights for the No. 1 seed in this week’s Frontier playoffs. UM-Western wound up third after losing to Carroll on Saturday night, and Westminster was fourth after a rare road sweep at Northern and UGF.

Now the Lights will prepare for a home game against seventh-seeded Rocky Mountain College on Wednesday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. But for at least a moment, they were more ready to bask in the glow of a remarkable regular season championship.

“I’m just really proud of my team,” Jackson said. “Every guy here worked hard for this, worked hard for it every day, and it paid off tonight.

“This has been a remarkable year so far,” Huse added. “This has been a great group to coach and I’ve really enjoyed being around them this season. They are all very coachable, hard workers, and they really went out and earned this. It’s been a great year so far, and the credit goes to these players and the great coaching staff I have here. I’m just very proud of all of them right now.”