It's playoff time for the Lights
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The Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team needed two monumental wins this past weekend in order to solidify its standing in the Frontier Conference.

And while Westminster and Lewis-Clark State didn’t stand in Northern’s way when it came to capturing a share of the Frontier’s regular season championship, wins over the powerful Griffins and Warriors were only part of the battle.

Now the No. 22 Lights (21-8) turn their attention to the postseason and Rocky Mountain College. Northern hosts the Battlin’ Bears tonight at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse in the first round of the Frontier Conference playoffs. The Lights come in as the No. 2 seed and co-champions of the Frontier after having swept Westminster and LC State over the weekend.

But while Saturday night was an exciting time for the Lights, as they earned a share of the regular season Frontier championship for the second time in the last four seasons, MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse knew right away there is still work to be done.

“As we’ve seen in this league all season, anybody can beat anybody on a given night,” Huse said. “This as balanced a league as we’ve seen in my opinion and there have been no easy nights this year for anybody. So there is no overlooking any team in this tournament. You’re going to have to be ready to play your best for 40 minutes or you can get beat.”

Truer words have never been spoken. The Frontier was a constant log-jam at the top with Carroll, Northern, Western, Westminster, LC State and UGF all separated by just a game from each other in the final regular season standings. But that means home-court advantage could also play a key role, especially for the Lights who didn’t lose a single game at home this season. The last time the Lights accomplished that feat, they went to the NAIA national tournament. And their hoping the same holds true this season.

But standing in Northern’s way right away is RMC (11-19). The Bears are seeded seventh in the playoffs, and Northern swept them during the regular season. But they won’t be a pushover in Havre tonight, especially considering the Lights only beat them 55-52 back in January in Havre, and the Bears won on Northern’s home floor a year ago.

“We know that Rocky is a very good team,” Huse said. “They played us right down the end up here, and they’ve beaten good teams all season long. So there is no way our guys will be looking ahead, or overlook them. They have great athletes and very capable scorers, so we know just what kind of challenges they present to us, and we know we’ll have to come out ready to play for a full 40 minutes.”

The Bears have a pair of outstanding scoring guards in E.J. Ross and Anthony Carter, but its 6-9 center Sergio Trocha who has given the Lights all they can handle this season. In Havre, Trocha ripped off a 15-point, 10-rebound double-double against the Lights, so Northern’s undersized but powerful front court of Joe Simpson, Sean Kelly, Ben Mitchell and Chris Brown will have to do their best to contain the Bears inside tonight. And while Northern’s outstanding foursome of guards gets plenty of attention defensively,
it’s the aforementioned front court which has been doing plenty of damage on both ends of the floor as of late. Simpson has 11 double-doubles this season, while Mitchell and Kelly have both been outstanding defensively, and both can knock down a perimeter shot. Brown has also come off the bench and been a force on both ends the last two weeks, and the Lights will need that trend to continue in the playoffs.

And in the playoffs, Northern is hoping tonight is just the first step in a successful postseason run. The Lights have home-court advantage through at least the semifinals, and they are hoping to use that as a spring board to a postseason Frontier title, something which has eluded Northern for many years.

But first things first. Rocky is the only thing on Northern’s mind right now. The Lights have been a one-game-at-a-time team all season long and it’s served them well to this points.

“Our guys have done a really good job of staying focused this season,” Huse said. “They’ve been very poised as far as concentrating on what’s in front of them and not worrying about what’s down the road. We have to do the same in this situation because Rocky is a very capable, very dangerous team, so we need to be ready to play them, and nothing else matters at this point.”

Tonight’s Frontier playoff game between the Lights and Bears will tip off at 7 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. If Northern prevails, the Lights will host a semifinal game on Saturday night.