George Ferguson Column: Basketball fans don't want to miss this one

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If you like college basketball, if you like postseason intensity, then you better not miss Saturday night.

And if you like budding rivalries, then you’re in for even more of a treat if you happen to get to the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse for Saturday night’s Frontier Conference semifinal game between the 22nd-ranked Montana State University-Northern Lights and the UM-Western Bulldogs.

First and foremost, games just don’t come with much more on the line.

Both the Lights (21-8) and Bulldogs (21-8) are fighting to get into the NAIA national tournament which is two weeks away. And Saturday night’s game could have lasting implications on who gets to Kansas City and who starts dreaming about next year.

Ironically, it’s the same situation as it was a year ago with one exception – the Lights are playing on their home floor, a place where they haven’t lost a single game all season long. The last time Northern did that, the Lights went to Kansas City for the first time in nearly a decade.

There are also many other similarities to last year’s semifinal showdown between the Lights and Bulldogs in Dillon, a game Western won 70-69 in the waning seconds. Both teams were thought to be in somewhat of a rebuilding mode this season, as Western lost its starting backcourt and star forward JaRon Brown from a team which went to the NAIA’s big dance a year ago. Northern, same thing. The Lights lost all five starters from a team which likely came within one win of making the national tournament themselves last season.

And the similarities don’t end there. The reason the Lights and Bulldogs are where they are, back in the national tourney hunt again, is because they are both well coached. Steve Keller has turned the Bulldogs back into a national power, much like the early Mark Durham days. And Northern is much the same as the Lights are making their sixth straight appearance in the Frontier semifinals under Shawn Huse, and they just ripped off their fifth straight 20-win regular season.

And as a result of two great teams, having two great seasons at the same time, under two very good head coaches, we, as basketball fans get to witness this rivalry at its highest level – with postseason glory and a chance at a conference championship on the line.

Saturday’s game will likely be another in a great series of clashes in recent years between the programs from Havre and Dillon. Northern and Western have met seven times over the last three seasons and the two charter Frontier Conference members couldn’t be more even. The two split their regular season meetings this year, each winning on their home floor. And they waged three epic battles a year ago, with Northern sweeping the regular season series by scores of 69-59 in Dillon and 79-76 in overtime in Havre. Then, the Bulldogs got the last laugh with their dramatic win in the 2010 semis. And 2009 was no different as the two teams split during the regular season, again each winning on its own home floor.

That brings us back to Saturday night’s game. A great rivalry has developed between Northern and Western. The two teams have great players, great coaching staffs and a healthy respect for each other. They have played memorable games against each other in recent years and this year’s semifinal bout should be no different.
And when the ball is tipped Saturday night in hopefully a sold-out, “Blacked Out” Armory Gymnasium, it’s going to be a battle of epic proportions and it’s one no true college basketball fan, no true Northern fan can afford to miss.