Round Two: Lights brace for Bulldogs

George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports editor
Friday, March 4th, 2011

The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team played nearly flawless basketball in Wednesday night’s Frontier Conference quarterfinal thrashing of the Rocky Mountain College Bears.

In their 91-68 win, the Lights were better than 50 percent from the field and from the 3-point-line and missed just two free throws all night. Northern also won the rebounding battle, the turnover battle and played hard-nosed defense all night long.

In short, it doesn’t get much better.

But the win didn’t guarantee the No. 22 Lights (21-8) anything but another game, and Saturday night, they’ll be back to square one when they host the UM-Western Bulldogs (21-8) in a semifinal game in Havre. Saturday night’s Frontier semifinal will tip off at 7 p.m. at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse and all that is at stake is a berth in Monday’s conference championship game.

And as well as the Lights (21-8) played on Wednesday night, nine-year head coach Shawn Huse knows his team has to start all over against the Bulldogs.

“It’s great to play as well as we did against Rocky,” Huse said. “But it’s going to take that same kind of effort to keep winning in these playoffs. At this point in the season, every team is very familiar with the other. There aren’t any surprises really, so what playoff games boil down to is who is playing the best basketball on that night. So we understand we need to be just as good, just as focused and just as sharp against Western as we were against Rocky if we’re going to have a chance to advance.”

Being sharp will be just part of the battle as Western presents all kinds of challenges for the Lights. The Bulldogs have been on quite the roll the last two years, having gone to the NAIA national tournament a season ago. And the game which likely pushed the bulldogs to Kansas City was a last-second, 60-59 win over the Lights in Dillon, in last year’s semifinal game. That game also helped keep Northern out of the national tournament.

Now however, the Lights get a rematch with Western and it’s on MSU-N’s home floor. Northern beat the Bulldogs 69-65 at home last month, while Western got the best of the Lights 69-64 back in January in Dillon. And while the Lights earned a season split with Western this year, Huse says his team will likely need to be better than they were in either game if they are going to win on Saturday night.

“In both games, it never felt like we played particularly well on offense,” Huse said. “We just didn’t shoot the ball that well either time we played them. So while we know it’s going to take a heck of an effort defensively, because Western is such an explosive team, we also need to figure out how to be better offensively Saturday than we were the first two times we played them.”

If the Lights continue what they started on Friday, offense won’t be a problem. Against the Bears, Northern made 12 three’s and had five players in double figures, led by LaVon Myers and Shaun Tatarka, who combined for 39 points and nine triples. Joe Simpson also had a big game for the Lights, with 16 points, while MSU-N’s bench came up big as well. David Maddock, Ben Mitchell, Chris Brown and Jordan Harris all played well in stretches Wednesday night.
No, if Northern shows its offensive prowess again on Saturday, winning or losing may come down to how well the Lights defend. Western head coach Steve Keller’s team can be an offensive juggernaut at times, and the Bulldogs are balanced too. Brandon Brown is the catalyst, having led the Frontier in both scoring (19 ppg) and assists (5.7 apg), but he has plenty of help around him. Cody Thueringer is a veteran, inside-out guard and big men Tyler Hurley and Kyle Perry can both be tall in the paint, or step out and shoot.

With so much on the line Saturday night, the winner moving on to the championship game against either Carroll College or Westminster College, and so many offensive stars on the floor at one time, defense, smart play, intensity and a few breaks will likely make or break either team.

“It’s going to be a tremendous challenge for us, it’s going to take another great effort,” Huse said. “We understand how good Western is. We know what they’re capable of. They are a national tournament team from a year ago and they’ve been right there all this season. So it’s going to be a big challenge for our guys. But I also feel like we’re confident and focused. Now we just have to go out and play and we’ll see what happens.”

Saturday night’s semifinal showdown between the Lights and Bulldogs tips off at 7 p.m. in Havre with the winner moving on to the championship round. Northern also has a planned “Black Out” for Saturday’s game, so all fans planning on attending are asked to dress in black. Again, season passes will not be honored for the playoff game. Fans can purchase tickets in advance or at the game.