Lights send Dawgs' to the pound
Northern advances to Frontier title game after beating UM-Western at home
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In every postseason basketball game, there’s always some tense, nervous moments. And the Montana State University-Northern Lights certainly had their share in their Frontier Conference semifinal game against the UM-Western Bulldogs.

But when it mattered the most, and with a chance at a Frontier championship hanging in the balance, the No. 22 Lights were at their best. Northern defeated the Bulldogs 72-60 in front of a capacity crowd Saturday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, and in the process, advanced to the championship game. The Lights will travel to Carroll College on Tuesday night to play for the Frontier tournament title.

“Any time you’re in a game of this magnitude, I think nerves will play a factor,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "And I thought that’s what hurt us some in the first half. We just weren’t moving like we normally do, and I think nerves maybe played a part in that. We looked tentative at the start.

“But I thought our guys settled in well,” he added. “And down the stretch, we were very poised, and that made a big difference. And now we have a chance to play for a championship, and that’s pretty special. Tonight was a special win for this team, this program and our great fans.”

The Lights weren’t just poised down the stretch, they were dominant.

Northern found a way to lead by one point at halftime, and the first 10 minutes of the second half were just as close. But with the game tied at 46-46 with 10:06 to play, the Lights decided it was time to go.

Western’s defense had done an outstanding job of taking away Northern’s deadly 3-point shooters for the most part as the Lights made just three triples on the night. But Northern had another answer in the form of forwards Joe Simpson, Sean Kelly, Ben Mitchell and Chris Brown. The trio dominated the paint in the final 10 minutes, especially Simpson, who was an unstoppable force against the taller Bulldogs. Simpson scored eight points in a 10-0 Northern run which gave the Lights a 55-48 lead in three minutes. And they weren’t done yet.

Time and time again, the Lights continued to find the open man inside, and while the Bulldogs never quit, when Mitchell put back a shot at the 2:01 mark, the Lights were up 63-53 and headed to the championship game.

In all, MSU-N outscored the Bulldogs 25-10 in the final nine minutes of the contest, and it was the inside game and good free-throw shooting which led the way.

“Everyone keys on our guards,” MSU-N junior Shaun Tatarka said. “I think sometimes teams don’t realize how good our post players are, and tonight they were great. We were able to go inside and it just kept working so we stuck with it. We only play nine guys but we are a very deep team and I don’t think teams realize that sometimes. Maybe we are a little undersized, but our posts are all very good players and they were our biggest weapon tonight.”
And they had to be right from the start, because the Bulldog defense was primed to limit Northern’s shooters. Especially after the Lights hit 12 three’s and lit up Rocky Mountain College for 91 points back on Wednesday. And the strategy worked well in the first 20 minutes, as Northern struggled to find a shooting rhythm. But in a first half which saw 10 lead changes, the Lights didn’t falter. Northern fought hard on both ends of the floor, got a couple big shots from Tatarka and Devin Jackson, and forged a one-point lead at the break.

“We weren’t able to really move the ball around like we are used to early on,” Huse said. “And a lot of that was how well Western played defensively. Give them a lot of credit because they came in here ready for us, and they played a great game. But once we settled in, and we got into a flow, once we got the ball moving, we were able to get our guards open a little more often, and because of that, our inside game really opened up, and that turned out to be the difference in the game.

“So once again, it was a total team effort,” Huse added. “I think you saw us play really unselfish basketball again tonight. Our forwards had a great game, Joe Simpson was a force tonight. But our guards did a great job of being patient and making the right decisions with the ball, and the entire team played tremendous defense all night. I think how well we played on defense might get lost in this a little, but I was extremely proud of how well we defended against such an explosive team. So once again, this was just a total team win and I’m proud of this team for the way they played.”

Simpson led the way with 19 points and four rebounds. Jackson hit two critical three’s and scored 12 points, while Mitchell gave the Lights a great lift off the bench with 10 points and two key offensive rebounds. LaVon Myers also scored 10 points and Tatarka chipped in with nine. Another key stat was the 35-21 edge the Lights had on the boards, against a much-taller Western front line. The Lights also took care of the ball to the tune of just six turnovers. The Bulldogs did get a game-high 20 points by star guard Brandon Brown, while Tyler Hurley added 18.

And with a semifinal win in tow, something the Lights had failed to do the last two seasons, including a one-point loss to the Bulldogs in last year’s semis, Northern is into the Frontier title game for the first time since 2008. And the Lights couldn’t be more excited, even if that means going to vaunted Carroll College.

“This was a huge win for us,” Tatarka said. “Western is a great team and we knew this was going to be a big challenge for us tonight. So to beat a great team like this and have a chance to play for the championship, it means a lot. And we’re looking forward to the opportunity to go to Carroll and play them at their place.

“We haven’t been in this position since we went back to the playoff format,” Huse said. “The last time we were in a championship game it was at the tournament in Butte, so a large majority of our fans didn’t get to see that excitement. Tonight, they got to see and be a part of it, and our crowd was amazing. Probably the loudest, and most energetic crowd I’ve experienced in my years here, and I know the crowd gave us a lot of emotional energy tonight. So to experience a win like this at home, in front of our great fans, and to be moving on to the championship game, it’s very gratifying.”

The Lights (23-8) and No. 19 Saints (22-7) will play for the Frontier championship on Tuesday night at 7 p.m. in Helena. Fans can purchase advanced tickets through Northern or Carroll. The winner of Tuesday night’s game gets the Frontier’s automatic berth to the NAIA national tournament which starts March 16 in Kansas City.

Beating back the Bulldogs
Lights 72, Western 60

UM-W — Kyle Erickson 2-4 1-2 5, Brandon Brown 8-16 2-4 20, Jared Smithson 0-1 2-2 2, JC Isakson 0-0 0-0 0, Gabe Rucker 0-0 0-0 0, Cody Thueringer 4-8 1-3 11, Mark Lussier 0-0 0-0 0, Kyle Perry 1-2 2-2 4, Tyler Hurley 7-14 2-2 18, Bridger Chambers 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 22-45 10-15 60.
Lights head to Frontier title game Tuesday at Carroll College