Lights' roll to K.C. went right through Carroll
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Wednesday, March 9th, 2011

A well-oiled machine. A team in every sense of the word. A family. There’s plenty of clichés to go around when you talk about the Montana State University Northern Lights right now.

But one cliché that holds true above all others following Northern emphatic 79-70 win in Tuesday night’s Frontier Conference championship at Carroll College is, the Lights are on a roll. Perhaps they are, in the zone. Whatever the case may be, the Lights are rolling right into Kansas City, and on Tuesday night they rolled right through Carroll. And as a result, MSU-N will get to unroll a conference championship banner for the first time since 1996.

But as hot as the Lights have been as of late, winners of five straight games in which they shot better than 52 percent from the floor in each tilt, as hot as shooters like Shaun Tatarka and Devin Jackson have been from the 3-point-line, as unstoppable as Joe Simpson has been on the inside, he’s averaging 18 points and eight rebounds in Northern’s five-game winning streak – none of it has been easy, and while it may have looked like it at times, Tuesday night’s win wasn’t easy either.

“I think one of the things I’m most proud of when it comes to winning a championship is, this league went up a notch when Westminster and LC State joined in my opinion,” MSU-N head man Shawn Huse said. “Every game, every year is as tough as it gets, and before us, only two other Montana teams have done this, win a conference championship with those two great programs in our league. So to be the third team from Montana to do it, against such great competition all season long, it’s something myself, this team, this entire program can take a lot of pride in.

“And we can certainly take a lot of pride in this win tonight,” he added. “Carroll played exceptionally well, I don’t know if we ever had an answer for them defensively. And they fought us right to the end. But our guys were hungry, they weren’t satisfied with just being in this game, and they proved a lot out there tonight.”

Pride indeed. And the proof is in the final score.

This season Northern did it by winning early, winning often, and especially by taking care of its home court. The Lights went undefeated at home this season, something they did in 2008 when they went to the NAIA’s ‘Big Dance’ as well. But on Tuesday night, the Lights had to close out the Frontier portion of their 2010-11 story on the road. And it wasn’t just any road game, it was at vaunted Carroll College, a team which has battled the Lights for years.

“It took a total team effort tonight,” sophomore Devin Jackson said. “We knew how hard this game was going to be. We knew how good Carroll is and they are very good. But we came in here prepared. We were ready and we really played well as a team. But we’ve done that all year, and you see the results now.

“This is a really unselfish team,” junior Ben Mitchell, one of seven first-year Lights said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been around any group of guys who puts the team first as much as this team does and it’s paid off
for us. We are really well-coached, we are really well prepared and we've worked hard together for this moment all year long. And tonight was no different. We did it together, on both ends of the floor. We've just really gelled as a team.”

And it took that same teamwork the Lights have used all year long in order to get past the Saints on their purple and gold home floor. From Simpson dominating in the post, to Tatarka knocking down timely three’s, from Mitchell and Chris Brown snagging big rebounds, to David Maddock and Jordan Harris’ defense, to Jackson’s leadership, from Sean Kelly’s halo-shattering dunk late in the game, to LaVon Myers unselfish passing and clutch free-throw shooting, the Lights rolled into Helena as a team looking for a coveted conference championship, and they rolled back out of the capitol city as champions of one of the toughest conference’s in all of NAIA basketball. They got off the bus together and they got back on together, but this time, with a trophy in their hands.

“This was a total team effort once again,” Huse said. “This team is so unselfish in the way they play, in the way they have each other’s backs, in the way they have myself and the coaching staff’s backs. We had each other’s backs tonight and it turned out to be a great night and one I’ll never forget.”

But as Northern closed the chapter on the Frontier’s season, standing alone at the top of the conference mountain, the entire story has yet to be written. The Lights are going back to the national tournament, shortly after they scaled the mountain that is Carroll College. And while the Lights’ No. 22 ranking in the most recent NAIA Poll gave them an idea they were in the NAIA tourney win or lose Tuesday night, it was important for the Lights to win in more ways than win, and it obviously felt good to everyone involved with MSU-Northern afterwards.

“We came in knowing we were probably going to Kansas City no matter what,” Tatarka said. “But that wasn’t the only goal. We wanted to win this championship. And now we don’t have to wait, we know we’re in and that feels really good. This whole night, it all feels really good.”