Frontier Champions
Lights topple Saints for the Frontier title and a trip to Kansas City
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Wednesday, March 9th, 2011

The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team was disappointed when it left Helena with a loss to Carroll College just three weeks ago. However, something inside the Lights’ minds told them they’d be back.

And Northern came back to Helena with a vengeance.

On Tuesday night, in front of a huge Havre contingent at the Carroll College P.E. Center in Helena, the No. 22 Lights took hold of their first Frontier Conference postseason title in 15 years by beating the No. 19 Carroll College Fighting Saints 79-70 in the league’s championship game.

The win, Northern’s first in a title game since 1996 was special enough, but it also guaranteed the Lights a trip to Kansas City and a spot in the 2011 NAIA national tournament, which gets underway March 16. But it isn’t just the automatic bid or the snapping of a long drought of conference championships which had the Lights jubilant after Tuesday night’s win. It was how they did it against the Saints, and how they did at all year long which left everybody on cloud nine in Helena. Northern started the year with just two returning players, no returning starters and no seniors, but managed to put together a 24-8 record, a co-regular season championship, and finally, a Frontier title.

“I’m still amazed even now at how this team came together this season,” Northern’s ninth-year head coach Shawn Huse said. “They really sunk their teeth in from the day they all got here, and they really gelled as one, very unselfish team, and that’s very gratifying. I just couldn’t be more proud of hard this team has worked to get here, and how they have believed in our system and our goals, and you can see the end result of all of that now. This team is very special.

“It’s hard to really put into words how I feel right now,” junior guard Shaun Tatarka added. “It’s an amazing accomplishment. These guys, all of them are like my brothers, and together, with this coaching staff, we have become a big family. And tonight we achieved something together. We were able to come in here, and win a huge game on the road and we did it as one family. It feels great.”

Indeed, the Lights did achieve greatness together in a raucous environment on Tuesday night. Winning on the road is never easy in the Frontier, but a championship game on the road is a whole other story. And when Carroll quickly went up 5-0, the Lights looked like they were in for the fight of their lives. But as Northern has done so many times this season, the Lights took command, their way. MSU-N used a 17-3 run in the first half to lead 22-10 early on, and the Lights never trailed again. Tatarka sparked the run with a deep 3-pointer, one of seven Lights’ bombs on the night. Devin Jackson also hit a trey, and the Lights were off and running. And while Carroll super star Andy Garland had his way to an extent on the inside, scoring 18 first-half points, the Lights never wavered and led 37-28 in a well-played first half.
“It felt like we just wanted it more, and we were so prepared coming in,” Jackson, who is the only returning Light from last year’s squad said. “No disrespect at all to Carroll, they are a great team with great players. But we were really not happy with the way we played the last time we were here, and we had a heart-to-heart in the locker room about that before the game. We just said, we know we have to play better than the last time we were here, and there was no reason why we shouldn’t be able to do that. It’s the championship game and we agreed we were going to just leave it all on the floor, and the result is a championship. We got here because we were really well prepared by our coaches and because we just wanted it a little more than they (Saints) did tonight.”

As much as the Lights did want a league title, and as well as they played in the first half, Carroll wasn’t going down without a fight. Northern opened up a 50-36 lead early in the second stanza, but then the Saints started to heat up and things started to come undone for the Lights at the same time.

Carroll’s Chris McGrath hit back-to-back three’s and three total triples in a ultra-quick 11-2 Saints’ run. And all of a sudden the Lights led just 57-53 with 4:48 to play and the Carroll crowd was in a frenzy. But while the Lights only made seven trey’s on the night, none may have been bigger than the one Tatarka hit just seconds later, which sat the Saints’ fans back down. Tatarka’s three from the corner just after the Saints had cut the lead to four led to a 9-1 Northern run and a double-digit lead with two minutes to go. The run was capped by a Sean Kelly steal and slam dunk which ignited the Northern student section, which came in droves to an away game and really pushed the Lights to a road victory. From there, Tatarka and LaVon Myers iced the game at the free-throw-line and eventually, the Lights were cutting the nets down in Carroll’s gym.

“Yes, we only made seven three’s, but they were all big, big shots at critical times, and we shot a great percentage,” Huse said. “Shaun (Tatarka) really rose to the occasion tonight. He’s a big game player and he really came through when things were on the line. So I thought we played a great game offensively, and you have to to get this far. And we got some huge stops and steals by Joe Simpson and Sean Kelly down the stretch. I thought those things were big keys to us holding off a great Carroll team. They played great and so did we. It was a great championship game, and I’m just really proud of the way our guys fought and persevered under some tough, tough circumstances.”

Northern went 7-of-13 from beyond the arc and shot another high mark from the field, as the Lights went 54 percent for the night. Again, the Lights were balanced as they got key points in the paint from Simpson, Kelly, Ben Mitchell and Chris Brown. Individually, Simpson, who’s been an unstoppable force for the Lights in their three postseason games, finished with a game-high 22 points and a team-high seven rebounds. Tatarka added 20 points and hit four critical triples. Jackson added 10 points, LaVon Myers scored eight, including big free throws in the waning minutes, and Brown gave the Lights eight big points off the bench.

Garland had his trademark double-double for the Saints (23-8), who will also be making the trip to Kansas City via an at-large berth, scoring 20 points and grabbing 14 rebounds, while Byago Diouf finished with 14. And while Carroll’s super star got his numbers, the Lights’ played their trademark defense, forcing the Saints into 15 turnovers while only committing six themselves.

“Give Carroll a ton of credit,” Huse said. “They weren’t going to give it to us, we knew that, we knew we had to come in here and steal one against a great team, and we were able to do it. But they played great and I look forward to both us and them going to Kansas City and taking on the rest of the country.

“But I just think our guys were hungry tonight,” Huse added. “And again, it was a total team effort.

“I think we were able to accomplish this through a great, common mentality, an attitude of team first and having a great coaching staff and a great head coach in coach Huse, who really believes in us,” Mitchell continued. “There’s no egos on this team, even though all of us were the go-to guy at other places so to speak. We gelled as a team right away, and this is the end result. It’s really amazing, and tonight was no different. We came into a tough game against a tough team as one unit and we won a championship that way.”
And together, the Lights are going back to Kansas City, and they are going there on a roll. Northern has won five games in a row heading into the national tournament, where the Lights will find out their first-round opponent on Wednesday evening. But for now, Northern can enjoy the fact that it gets to hang the Frontier Championship banner in the friendly confines of the Armory Gymnasium next fall – something the successful MSU-N men’s program has been waiting a long, long time for.

“This is what I came here for, was to win a championship,” said Simpson, a 6-foot-4 junior from Pittsburg, Calif. “It’s amazing to be able to do it with these guys.

“I think the most gratifying thing is, this is about the entire program,” Huse said. “This championship isn’t about me, our just the guys on our team, it’s about our school, our fans and our community. We are one big family up there and this is a special night for everyone involved, from the amazing fans that were here tonight, to everyone back in Havre. I’m just really happy and excited to be able to share this with the entire Northern family, and I’m just so proud to be a Light.”