Kansas City here they come  
**Bonded together like family, the Lights aren’t done yet**  
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From the beginning of October to the day the Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team boards the plane to head to Kansas City for the 2011 NAIA national tournament, there's been one word used to describe why the Lights have been so successful. Family.

And it's an interesting word considering back in August very few of the Lights knew each other. After all, Northern didn't return a single starter to this year's 24-8, Frontier Conference championship team. In fact, only two Lights, sophomore Devin Jackson and junior Shaun Tatarka had ever worn a Northern uniform before MSU-N opened the season with a commanding win over the University of Regina on Oct. 21. But seven new players or not, the Lights were a family right from the start, and it's that togetherness which has helped carry a talented Northern group to a season which goes well beyond just being successful. Under nine-year head coach Shawn Huse, the Lights are successful every year. But going to new heights in 2010-11, this team has left its own historic mark on Northern basketball.

"It's a situation where most of us didn't know anybody coming here," junior guard David Maddock said. "But that's the great thing about basketball, your team becomes your family and we bonded on and off the court real quick. A lot of us were new here, homesick at the beginning, a long way from family and friends, but we were there for each other, and we came together really quick and that's made us that much better on the court."

"I think it's all of the off-the-court stuff we do together which has bonded us so strong on the court," Jackson added. "It's our relationships we have with each other off the court, we go out to eat, hang out, study together, all of that step. With being such a new team, those things were really important and it's made us a really close, strong group when we step out on the floor."

And it didn't take long for the Lights to figure out they weren't just a family on the court. But that they were good too, and dreaming of a Frontier championship and beyond became a reality early in what turned out to be a season the Lights were shooting for. And interestingly, some of Northern's veterans point to several close losses which were key points in the season.

"I think the second week of the season, when we went down and lost a real close game to Black Hills State," Tatarka said. "That was when we realized we had a chance to be a good team. We were disappointed we lost that game, but that was a really good team with all seniors, and we had a chance to beat them. That was a game early in the season, I look back on now and realize we knew we had a chance to be pretty special right there.

"The two games we lost in Las Vegas," Maddock added. "Those were both tough losses, but they were good games and I think we left there hungry, and knowing we could play with and beat anybody. Those games really showed us how good we could be if we kept working hard, and from there, things really started to click for us."

Click indeed. One of the games Northern lost back in November in Sin City was to the No. 1 seed at this week's national tournament, Robert Morris. The Lights led the whole way, but lost in the final seconds. Still, Northern took notice of just how good it could be, and the Lights started to roll shortly after.

MSU-N suffered only one more nonconference loss, a tough, hard-fought game to another top-ranked team, Azusa Pacific, but by January, the Lights were more than ready to take on the Frontier Conference, and perhaps more importantly, they had full come together, as one big family.
“It’s been that mentality, that togetherness all year which has made us so successful now,” junior Ben Mitchell said. “This team is a family. It’s something coach Huse has really stressed from day one. We bonded and we worked hard together, we play for each other, and you see it when we take the court. This is as unselfish a basketball team as I’ve ever been on. Guys really play hard for one another and a bond like that makes us pretty tough for anyone to beat. It’s been really special being a part of this team, and I being so close on and off that court, that’s been something which has carried us all season.”

And it certainly made a difference during conference play. In one of the most balanced Frontier season’s in history, the Lights never lost three games in a row. They won every game they played on their home floor, with highlight moments coming against UM-Western and LC State in close games. The Lights also toppled Westminster for just the third time in 10 years and they beat Carroll handily. Northern had down times to, but the Lights always seemed to bounce back, just as they did following back-to-back road losses to the Warriors and Griffins.

In the end, together, the Lights fought their way to a 10-4 league record and a co-championship with the Saints in the regular season. And their goals they set back in September were becoming a reality.

“The biggest thing is, from day one, everybody on this team has been on the same page,” Jackson said. “Everyone came in here with the same focus and drive. From lifting weights, to conditioning, to going as hard as you can in practice, everyone was on the same page, and that’s really paid off for us now. Again, we gelled really quickly, we became a family really fast and it’s made a big difference for us. Look where we’re at now.”

And where the Lights are now is on their way to Kansas City and a first-round national tournament game with Biola University. But Northern had to stay together and work hard to achieve what it wanted to on its way to one of the most successful season’s in MSU-N history.

After dispatching Rocky Mountain College and UM-Western in the first two rounds of the Frontier playoffs, the Lights had to travel to Carroll College and win on the Saints’ home floor in order to complete their conference masterpiece, and together, they did just that.

“I think the Carroll game was a perfect example of how together we are as a team,” Tatarka said. “And that goes back to the beginning of the season, all the things we did to bond together, to get close, and it’s all paying off now. We are a team. We play hard together, we play for each other, we work hard together and we have each other’s backs. It’s amazing to be a part of this. These guys are like my brothers on and off the court.

“This is what I came here for,” Maddock added. “To win a championship with these guys, and there’s nobody I’d rather do it with. This has been a great run with these guys and it’s not over yet.”

Not over to be sure. The Lights set goals for themselves a long time ago, and so far they’ve met every one. They wanted to be a great team, not a good team and no one could argue they are exactly that. They wanted to win a Frontier Conference championship and go to the national tournament and they’ve done it. Now, they set goals of keeping this ride going for as long as they can. But they also weren’t afraid to reflect on where they’ve been before they get to where they want to go.

“Taking Carroll’s nets home with us, knowing we went in there together and won a conference championship, that will always be a special memory for me,” Tatarka said.

“Just building these relationships and friendships with these guys, that’s what’s been the best part of the this year,” Maddock added. “The winning wouldn’t feel as great if we weren’t all so close, if we weren’t such a family. That’s what this experience is about for me, winning with these guys, playing together as a family.”

And the Lights’ family still has some winning to do. Whether it’s one game or winning a national championship, one thing will remain the same this week inside the old and famed Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City – the Lights will be as close as ever, and they will take the floor, play the games and leave the floor, not just as winners, not just as conference champions, not just as a great and entertaining
basketball team, but as a family. It’s always been that way at Northern and perhaps no team better exemplifies that than this team.

“I think that’s been the one constant above everything in our program,” Huse said. “We care about one another. We treat each other with respect and like we would our own family and that’s important when you’re trying to build a team, but especially this team because of how new they were at the beginning of the season.

“The way this team came together so early, the way they seemed to really bond, it’s something I’m extremely proud of them for,” he added. “They really do play for each other, they really do believe in team-first, family-first. They are all great kids, not just great basketball players, and their character really shows. They’ve done everything the right way and they’ve certainly earned this, they’ve earned where they are right now. And as a coach, having a team like that, it’s the ultimate gratification.”