California Dreamin' at Northern
The adjustments took some time, but the Lights' California boys now call Havre and MSU-N home
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It’s hard to find two states that are as diverse and unique as Montana and California. Sure, they aren’t too far apart on the map, but besides California being the third largest state and Montana being the fourth largest state, do they really have anything in common?

At first glance, the answer is no.

With well over 36 million people filling up the state of California, the Golden State is typically well known for Los Angeles, Hollywood movies, warm weather, beaches, shopping and traffic. And an outside look at Montana, with less than a million folks populating the state, would typically warrant the assumption of cowboys, Wrangler Jeans, farms, big trucks and hunting and majestic mountains.

But like many things, you have to look deeper. And though the hustle and bustle of California doesn’t quite match the Big Sky country of Montana on the surface, one thing that both states do have very much in common is the game of basketball.

Joe Simpson, LaVon Myers, Chris Brown, Sean Kelly and Jordan Harris are all juniors on the Montana State University-Northern Lights basketball team. And with all five players being natives to different parts California, they have quickly realized that the lifestyle change from California to Montana is somewhat of an acquired taste.

Yet, all five of them have come together with the rest of what was a brand new Lights team back in the fall, and have put together a magical season in Montana — one that is culminating with a trip to the NAIA national tournament this week in Kansas City.

Myers, a 6-2 guard from Compton, wasn’t sure what to expect. Coming from a town that has over 93,000 people to Havre, a town with less than 10,000, it was a definite change of scenery.

"I was like wow,” Myers said. “I had to ask myself why did I come here? But once the season started everything got better. When I first got out here everything looked empty and small and me being a city guy, it looked a lot different. Once me and my teammates got close it was ok.”

Myers and Brown even played 12 miles, and less than 20 minutes away from each other in junior college. Myers played at Compton Community College and Brown played at Long Beach City College, and Brown knew just what Myers was thinking when they arrived in Havre.

"I knew LaVon (Myers) before,” Brown said. “So I knew it was big shock for both of us. But I thought we might as well get used to it because we are here for basketball and school, and for things people back home don’t really get to accomplish. A lot of guys went off to college that we looked up to and came back after just a semester, and we were like ‘what’s going on’. Us making it out here is a big thing, and for us to graduate would be big for me and him and our families too.”
It didn’t take long for the California crew to latch on to the small-town feel of Havre life. They have become a tight-knit group and have been able to overcome the geographical differences and become successful in the classroom as well as on the court under head coach Shawn Huse.

This year’s Lights program recorded 24-8 record and grabbed a Frontier Conference championship. Now headed to the national tournament, the Lights’ standout players from California are being propelled from the things that made them nervous to begin with, including the small town feel, the school and differences in the game to enjoying everything Montana, Havre and Northern have to offer.

“The talent is different,” Brown said, a 6-6 junior from Long Beach, Calif. “Back home it’s a lot of up and down, get out and go. Here it’s a lot of slowing down and outside shooters. It’s really different, and I personally like to get up and go and press, but we all bought into the coaches’ (Huse) system and that’s why we have accomplished so much.

“I think being out here you can focus more on playing and even doing school work,” Simpson added, a 6-4 junior from Los Medanos Community College. “Especially being out here and not knowing anybody, I think that’s why we bonded even more. We got so close off the court it showed on the court, and even though it isn’t the city life, it’s all right and it feels more peaceful than back home.”

Kelly, a 6-6 junior from Grover Beach, Calif. found comfort in the people and family atmosphere of Havre.

“It’s the people,” Kelly said. “And we all came from junior colleges and you don’t really have that family feeling. We all became a family, not only on the court, but off the court. This is my family right here, they are going to be my family for the rest of my life, and that’s a connection you don’t really make at the (junior college) level.”

And once the Lights started finding good success this season, the transition to life in Montana was easy.

Harris came from Oxnard Calif., and played his freshman and sophomore seasons at Ventura Community College in Ventura. Still a massive city compared to cities in Montana, but Harris found the support to be similar as he transitioned to a new school and town.

“Ventura has similar fans and the tradition was similar to here in Havre,” Harris said. “But still, the biggest difference was just the environment from there to here.

“My first two years (at Los Medanos),” Simpson added. “They didn’t really recruit outside of the area so I still had a really good fan base. But coming out here I thought it was still physical. I felt like people were still banging and I liked that the most.”

On the campus of MSU-N and around town, the Lights are celebrities. They have a town of 9,000-plus fans backing them and are well taken care of whether it be by coaches, fans or host families. The Lights have had the support of the community all season long, and will continue to get it this week while they attend the national tournament in Kansas City. And it doesn’t even matter that the Lights open up tournament play against a very tough Biola University out of, ironically, California, the Lights are just ready to play.

“We are excited about every opportunity we get to play,” Myers said. “It doesn’t really matter where they are from, we have a task and need to stay focused on the task at hand and move out of the first round. With the preparation we have right now, we will be ready.

"It’s exciting to see how the town and everybody is behind us and supporting us after winning the regular season and the conference tournament. We are just happy to be in this situation and get a chance to keep playing."