Get to know Biola: Eagles will be tall and stingy
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At first glance, the Montana State University-Northern Lights and Biola Eagles look like polar opposite basketball teams, and yet they are on a collision course for each other in Kansas City.

But under closer examination, the two teams might look different when it comes to the “eye test” but they also have one, hard-nosed similarity. Both teams use a combination of accurate shooting and tough defense to win games.

The 19th-ranked Lights (24-8) have hung their hat on defense and deadly, accurate 3-point shooting all season long. And while the Eagles aren’t the mad-bombers from the outside that the Lights are, they too rely on defense and accurate shooting to get the job done.

When Northern and Biola take the floor in the first round of the 2011 NAIA national tournament Thursday night in Kansas City, the Lights won’t just be facing one of the tallest and strongest teams they’ve seen all year, they’ll be battling the best defensive team they’ve come up against this season.

Biola (26-7) is ranked second in the NAIA in scoring defense, while the Lights are ranked sixth nationally. The Eagles however, yield just 51 points per game, and allow teams to shoot just 38 percent from the field and a measly 30 percent from beyond the arc. And while Northern is a great defensive team too, Biola’s numbers stand out considering the Lights lead the nation in 3-point shooting and are one of the top field goal shooting teams in the Frontier Conference.

Defense and accuracy are where the similarities end however.

And what jumps out even more to the Lights is Biola’s size. It’s no secret the Lights have succeeded this year despite being the smallest team in the Frontier. But Biola presents new challenges. The Eagles play six players 6-6 or taller and forwards Andrew Schroeder (6-9, 230) and Josh Miller (6-8, 230) really know how to clog the paint. Then there’s swingman Nate Rakestraw, who stands just 6-4 but weighs 230 pounds and is a force inside and out. Rakestraw is a transfer from the University of Arkansas, and in all, the eagles start four former NCAA Division I players. Biola’s guards also have size. Leading scorer and point guard Dwight Gordon stands 6-0 and stellar shooting guard Curtis Eatmon stands 6-3.

And not only do the Eagles have a significant height advantage on the Lights, but they have experience too. Biola plays nine seniors while the Lights play with none. The Eagles have also been to 18 national tournaments, including a “Sweet 16” appearance a year ago.

This year, the Eagles lost just four games in the Golden State Athletic Conference, the NAIA’s premier conference, going 16-4. And two of those losses were to Azusa Pacific, a team the Lights lost to in December. And those total four losses got Biola only a third-place finish in the league behind GSAC powers Concordia and Azusa Pacific. The Eagles are an at-large team and are seeded 13th in this week’s field, as well as ranked 13th heading into Thursday night’s game with Northern.

So the challenges for Northern and head coach Shawn Huse are plenty. Biola will want to slow the game way down and while the Lights have proven they can play that type of game, they also have to figure out how to handle Biola’s size on the interior, as well as figure a way to crack Biola’s defense, which seems to force good shooting teams into a deep freeze.

“We have a tremendous amount of respect for what they (Eagles) have done this season,” Huse said. “They have had a great year. Anytime you can win 16 games in that league, you’re doing things right and
playing well. We know they present some matchup problems for us and they play a much different style than we like to play. So we will have our hands full. But that’s also to be expected when you get to the national tournament. All 32 teams are good, and we feel like we’re ready and capable of playing with and beating anybody on a given night. We just have to go in there and play our best basketball and if you do that, that’s all you can control.”

The Lights and Eagles will square off at 8:45 M.S.T. Thursday night in Kansas City. The winner will meet the winner of 4th-seeded LSU-Shreveport and Life College (Ga.) at 8:45 p.m. M.D.T. in the second round on Saturday night.