Leader of the Lights
In nine years at MSU-Northern Shawn Huse has achieved greatness the right way
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Tuesday, March 16th, 2011

Consistency. That's a word which is firmly entrenched in Montana State University-Northern head coach Shawn Huse's vocabulary. He preaches it to his players and assistant coaches. He lives by it in all things, and he means it.

But over the last nine years in Havre, that word could also best describe Huse and his coaching tenure at Northern. In essence, since the day Huse arrived in Havre, almost a decade ago, the Lights, the program and everything surrounding MSU-Northern basketball has been very consistent, and that's a credit to the kind of meticulous, dedicated and honorable coach Huse is, and has always been.

Huse has honed his craft with one of the most successful Frontier Conference men's basketball programs in the history of the league. The Northern men have always won, they've always been a source of success and pride in Havre, and Huse has not only continued that trend in his nine years here, he's taken it to another level, as he has his Lights in the NAIA national tournament for the second time in just the last three years.

And as you would expect, consistency in all things is what Huse takes the most pride in when talking about what he's accomplished at MSU-N.

"I think the one constant is, we've been able to really maintain a level of consistency here," Huse said. "And that's really a credit to all of the great players I've had in my time here. I've been blessed through working as hard as I have in recruiting to be able to get some great players here, not only that but also great kids. We've always had great student-athletes who do things the right way, and that's very gratifying when you have people in the community tell you how much they like your kids and what great people they are, not just great players.

"Then, I also think we have always maintained a great family atmosphere here," he added. "Our teams have always played together, played very unselfishly and played hard for each other. I think you see that when you watch us. So all of those things add up to being a very strong team on the court, where team-first is always the focus. And when you put all of those things together, I think you are able to be very consistent, and we've been able to do that over the years, and it's something I'm very proud of."

Consistent at its very definition. That's the Lights under Huse. Since he took over the program in 2002, the Lights have won 183 games for an average of 20 per year. Huse also has a 73-53 record in a much-different Frontier Conference than the one he played in when he was a star guard at Montana Tech from 1991 to 1995. Northern has finished fourth or better in the league five times under Huse, went to five semifinal games, two conference championship games, and just this year, he got his first Frontier postseason title. It doesn't get much more consistent than that.
But like any coach, Huse came from a coaching tree, where he learned his trade under many greats in the business. The former Missoula Big Sky standout started his coaching career as an assistant coach at Frenchtown High School after graduating from Tech in 1995. He was also a Big Sky assistant for a time before returning to Tech to coach under Rick Dessing, the man he played for as an Oredigger. After moving on to be an assistant at NCAA DII-power University of Nebraska-Kearney, Huse finally landed his first head coaching gig at Northern, and he’s been winning here ever since. And looking back, he says several people were instrumental in his success along the way.

“Tom Cropp at (Nebraska) Kearney for sure,” Huse said. “He was a great teacher and mentor to me. And it’s everything he stands for, I just have so much respect for him. The respect he has for his players, his staff, for the administration, the fans there, and vice versa, it was just an incredible opportunity to learn from him. He is a man who was drafted in three different sports coming out of an NAIA school. He’s done it all, and I learned so much from him in the time I was there, that I’m not sure where I’d be right now if I hadn’t of gotten that opportunity to sit next to him during that time.

“Of course, Rick Dessing is another one,” he added. “He got me in the door, gave me my start in college coaching. And many of the things that make us (Lights) very good now are things he instilled in me while I played for and coached under him.”

And Huse could give a long list of coaches who have influenced him over the years, including Duke legend Mike Krzyzewski. But there is one more coach who has stood out to him over the years, and he also happens to be his older brother. Brad Huse, the current head coach of the Montana State Bobcats has been a heavy influence on his younger brother’s career, and like many older/younger brother relationships, the coaching relationship the two Huse’s have is a special one.

“Obviously, Brad is someone I’ve looked up to for a very long time,” Shawn Huse said. “He’s been someone I’ve always been able to go to, to lean on for advice, for help and for anything I’ve ever needed as I’ve continued my career. He’s someone I’ve always had a tremendous amount of respect for in our profession, not just because he’s my brother, but because of what kind of coach he is. I’ve always admired him as a colleague, and he’s been a great influence on me, personally and professionally.

“I think now that I have been at this longer, the neat thing is, now it’s more of a give and take relationship,” he added. “I think he can come to me with things, and really not many days go by that we don’t communicate about basketball. It’s really special to be able to have a colleague in this profession that is also a brother you’re so close with. Our relationship means a lot to me and I value it very, very much.”

And even when Huse was younger, and just starting out in his profession, his older brother did, and still holds their relationship in just as high of regard.

“Watching what Shawn has done at Northern, it’s been very impressive,” Brad Huse said. “I think the biggest thing that stands out is just that level of consistency he’s been able to maintain there. He’s been relentless in recruiting and working hard to make that program successful, and he’s done a tremendous job in making the program into a consistent winner. His work ethic and his dedication to his program, his players and to his profession is something I’ve always admired about him.

“And I do think that we have a great relationship as colleagues in our profession,” he added. “He is someone I can go to about our program, someone I can talk to. I value his opinion very much on what we’re doing here, and although we aren’t able to watch each other’s games as much as we’d like, I do ask him to watch our games when he can because I do value his opinion very much. I just have a tremendous amount of respect for him as a coach, and it has nothing to do with the fact that he’s my brother. So our relationship, both in basketball and away from basketball is very special and it’s not something all coaches are able to experience, so I’m very thankful that we have this together.”

And with a wealth of experience and plenty of great coaches who have helped him along the way, the Lights are certainly thriving under Shawn Huse. But like many coaches aspire to do, Huse is living his life exactly how he always dreamed he would. He is a successful basketball coach, a teacher and mentor to young men, he runs a highly respectable program in which his players don’t just win, but are good
students who graduate and are active members in the community and positive role models for Havre’s youth. And now he has a family of his own, which means things are really starting to come full circle.

“I have learned so much from coach Huse,” Northern junior Shaun Tatarka said. “I’ve never played for any coach that’s like him in any sport. He just teaches so much about the game of basketball, and in a way where his players really grasp and understand him. He’s so organized, and as a player, you really appreciate that. You always know what’s going on, where you’re supposed to be and maybe most important, where you stand. I have just learned so much from him in my time here.

“He’s not just teaching me basketball,” junior David Maddock added. “The things I learn from him on and off the court every day are going to help me the rest of my life. Everything I learn from him are things I can apply to my own life, now and when I’m done playing basketball. That means a lot to me to be able play for a coach like that.”

And just like Huse is helping others to be their best, he has that same kind of support system in his life. His older brothers and parents mean the world to him, he says he couldn’t be happier to have great assistant coaches in Larry Brazzle and Travis Noble, and he always comments about how important the support of the Northern fans, the faculty and administration and the community of Havre has been to him during his time in Havre.

But perhaps most importantly is the support he gets at home. Huse married his wife Stephanie the year he got the job at Northern and said she inspired him to have the confidence to do well in his interview at MSU-N. Together, the Huse’s have a daughter, Molly, age 6 and a son, Matthew, age 3. And his family has been his backbone and his inspiration every step of the way during his incredible journey with the Lights.

“I could never talk about my career without talking about Steph,” Huse said. “She’s so amazing to me. What she does for me, how she supports me and our program, and what a great mother to our kids she is, she’s just an inspiration to me. She and those two kids are everything to me. They are my world and all of the wins, the successes as a coach, they certainly wouldn’t be the same if I didn’t have my family to share in it. I’m just very blessed to have them in my life.”

And with what Huse has done in nine incredible years at Northern, he certainly has had a lot to share with his family and friends and he’s helped bring Havre and Northern some amazing moments. He has his MSU-N program reaching new heights with this year’s Frontier Conference championship and a second national tournament berth. And though his profession is a stressful one at times, Huse is grounded and is comfortable in where he is a coach, as a husband, a father, a man and where his program has been, where it is now and what direction it’s headed in.

“I’m very proud of the where we’re at right now as a program, I’m very proud of what we’ve achieved in nine years here,” Huse said. “And I’m very excited about what our teams have done over the years, especially recently. I’ve always said, I believe you really can have everything as a coach. You can have a team which wins, which plays at a high level on the court, with good kids who are respected members of the community and good students in the classroom. I’ve always believed you can have that if you strive for it, if you believe in doing things the right way, and that’s how I’ve always approached this profession.

“And I think us winning the conference championship this year, that really put a stamp on that,” he added. “I think knowing that we’ve been able to be consistently successful, while having great, high character kids and being a program the community can be proud of, that’s what’s most gratifying to me as a coach. Championships and national tournament appearances mean a lot, but knowing that we are succeeding on and off the court and doing it the right way, that’s something I’m very proud of and it certainly makes me feel like my career so far has been one I can look at and feel very gratified about.”