It's time to turn on the Lights in K.C.

George Ferguson, Havre Daily News sports editor
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There’s a lot of pageantry, a lot of excitement and even some distractions that come with reaching the NAIA national basketball tournament. For many teams, it’s out of the normal routine in which they are accustomed to.

But tonight in Kansas City, all that will go away for the Montana State University-Northern Lights, and all that’s left is 40 minutes of basketball. The 19th-ranked Lights (24-8) finally open play at the 75th NAIA national tournament tonight at 8:45 M.S.T. against 13th-ranked and 13th-seeded Biola University of California.

The Lights are making their second trip to the national tournament in three years, and like in 2008, they are unseeded entering the first round. In 2008, the Lights were unseeded and lost in overtime to then 8th-seeded Robert Morris. And with a completely new team this time around, the 2011 Frontier Conference champion Lights are hoping for a different result tonight.

“I expect there to be some first-game jitters, I think the guys might be a little awestruck for a moment,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “And that can be a good thing because having those anxious, nervous moments can actually give you energy. But, it can also work against you and you came out not playing as well as you’d like. Hopefully for us, it’s the first and not the latter.”

And while the Lights bring nine first-time national tournament players into tonight’s game, including no seniors and no returning starters from a year ago, Huse has seen his team evolve over the last four months. So on paper, the Lights might not look like a veteran squad, but they certainly are playing like one. Northern is on a seven-game winning streak coming into tonight’s game with Biola, and the Lights won the Frontier title last Tuesday under extremely difficult circumstances – winning the championship on Carroll College’s home floor. So Northern certainly seems to be poised heading into tonight’s game, in spite of its inexperience.

And the long wait to play this week, the Lights are playing the last game of the first round, has also been beneficial according to Huse, and it’s something he has seen as an advantage since MSU-N arrived in Kansas City on Monday.

“Oh think not playing on that first day, and even waiting to play until the second night will be a blessing for us,” he said. “We have had a chance to get down here and really get acclimated to everything. It’s been a busy time the last couple of days, but when the games start, we’ll be able to get into our own routine again. We’ll be able to be in the arena and watch some games, and just get used to everything. And we’ve been able to travel out to Levenworth and practice there, and we’ve gotten in some really good shooting sessions and practices while we’ve been here. So I just think the time slot we drew for when we play our first game was good for us.”

Of course, none of that will matter anymore when the Lights and Eagles tip off tonight. Then, it’s just about basketball. And make no mistake, Biola is a major obstacle for the Lights. The Eagles (26-7) are the third-place team from the always-tough Golden State Athletic Conference and an at-large team in this year’s national tourney. And four of their losses came at the hands of two of the best teams in the country in Azusa Pacific and Concordia College.
Biola also boasts two things the Lights don’t have a lot of – seniors and size. The Eagles average 6-7 across the front line and even University of Arkansas transfer forward Nate Rakestraw is 6-4 and 230 pounds. Biola also plays nine seniors and has a deep bench, while the Lights play just nine total players and have no seniors.

“Biola is a very disciplined team and their at their best when they play the percentages,” Huse said. “Traditionally, they would rather give up the three than anything easy inside, yet they crash the shooters really well and there haven’t been many teams who’ve had much success shooting the ball from the outside against them. So, our biggest concern is finding a way to score points. Offensively, they are going to slow down and want to keep the score low, and I think we’ve proven we can play that style of basketball and be successful at it. But because of their size and how sound they are defensively, we will have to find ways to score, even if it’s not traditionally how we like to do it.”

Defense will play a key factor in tonight’s matchup, although there are offensive stars on both sides. Northern is led by shooters Shaun Tatarka, Devin Jackson, LaVon Myers and David Maddock, while forward Joe Simpson has been on a tear, averaging 18 points and eight rebounds over his last seven games. Meanwhile, Biola’s bigs, Andrew Schroeder (6-9, 230) and Josh Miller (6-8, 230) get a lot of attention, but its guards Dwight Gordon and Curtis Eatmon who lead the Eagles in scoring at 14 and 11 points per game, respectively.

And with so many standouts on offense, the defense that doesn’t crack will likely win tonight. Biola scores just 57 points per game but only gives up 52 and the Eagles are allowing opponents to shoot 38 percent from the floor and a measly 31 percent from three on the season. While the Eagles have the second-ranked defense in the country, the Lights are fifth, so tonight’s game could be an old-fashioned slugfest. And that’s fine with Huse, because this time of year, it doesn’t matter how you win. And through their Frontier playoff run, the Lights have shown they can win in any number of ways.

“We have our hands full,” Huse said. “This is a very good team we’re playing. They are big, strong and physical, and they are so patient and disciplined on both ends of the floor. The good thing for us is though, we have played against that style a lot in our league this season. So what they do won’t be a shock to us, it’s more how they do it is what makes them so good. So this game is going to be a huge challenge for our team, but it’s also one I fully believe we’re up to.

“Our guys want to keep playing, they aren’t satisfied with just making the trip down here,” he added. “They want to play as long as they can, and they know in order to do that, they have to go out and play their best game against Biola. Hopefully, that’s what happens on (Thursday) night.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and the Biola Eagles is scheduled to tip off at 8:45 M.S.T. at the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City. However, games at the national tournament tend to get off schedule, so a later start time is a possibility. The winner of tonight’s game advances to the second round and will face either 4th-seeded LSU-Shreveport or Life College (GA) on Friday night.

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No. 19 MSU-Northern Lights

vs

No. 13 Biola Eagles

Tonight at 8:45 P.M.

in Kansas City
Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Internet: www.naia.org. Individual game can be purchased for $9.95.

Lights (24-8): Key Players: Joe Simpson, 6-4 Jr., 12 ppg, 7 rpg; Devin Jackson, 6-2 So. 13 ppg, 37% 3-point FG; Shaun Tatarka, 6-0 Jr. 14 ppg, 4 apg. Stats to watch: Lights allow teams to shoot just 39 percent from the field and give up just 66 points per game.

Eagles (26-7): Key Players: Dwight Gordon, 6-0, Sr. 14 ppg, 3.2 spg; Nate Rakestraw, 6-4, Sr.; Josh Miller, 6-8 Sr. 9.8 ppg, 7.4 rpg. Stats to watch: Teams shoot just 31 percent from three vs the Eagles. Biola shoots an astounding 59 percent from the field on the season.