The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team drew the last game of the two-day first round in the 2011 NAIA national men’s tournament. The Lights also drew the Biola Eagles, and the Eagles made sure the last game of the first round was also Northern’s last game of the season.

Despite a heartfelt second half comeback, the No. 19 Lights fell to the No. 13 Biola Eagles 59-48 in a defensive battle Thursday night at the NAIA men’s national tournament inside Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City. The loss was the last of what has been a brilliant season for the Lights, who finished the year at 24-9 and champions of the Frontier Conference.

“I’m very proud of this team,” Lights head coach Shawn Huse said late Thursday night. “But I’m also disappointed because we had a chance to get over the hump tonight and we just couldn’t do it. I know this team is disappointed right now too, and you hope that this game sticks in their craw a little bit for next year, because in spite of everything that happened out there, we had our opportunities.”

Those chances however, were few and far between in a first half which saw the Lights struggle mightily. Ultimately, Northern trailed the Eagles 30-17 at halftime, but the Lights managed just nine points through the first 13 minutes of the contest. Against the No. 2 defense in the NAIA, the Lights failed to score early on and struggled with turnovers, which eventually led to them falling behind by as many as 18 points and shooting just 27 percent from the field in the first 20 minutes. The Lights also committed seven turnovers in the first six minutes of the contest, and they came into Thursday night’s game averaging just six turnovers per game over the course of the last three weeks. Biola scored 13 straight points at one point in the first half and the Lights, conversely went almost nine minutes without a field goal.

And it was those kinds of numbers which hampered MSU-N right from the start.

“They’ve said for a long time that postseason basketball is all about matchups,” Huse said. “And this was a tough matchup for us. They (Eagles) have good size, very good players and they definitely play well together. And they are a team we couldn’t really exploit anything against, we couldn’t seem to get anything on them. They came out and got it going early on, so at the end of the day, you have to give them a lot of credit for how they played and what they did to us.

“But having said that, we had our opportunities,” he added. “This wasn’t a game which went from bad to worse. For everything that happened in the first half, we still found a way to be right there and have a chance in the second half. But at the end of the day, we just made some very uncharacteristic errors, errors that we haven’t been making very often. We made some bad turnovers, we had execution errors and obviously we didn’t shoot the ball as well as we would have liked. We had our opportunities and we didn’t take advantage of them and you can’t do that in a low-possession game against a team like Biola in the postseason. So that’s frustrating, because had we not done those things, we certainly would have had a real shot to get this one.”

And the Lights did have that real shot, at least for a moment. Biola again upped its lead to 16 points early in the second half, as shooting guard Curtis Eatmon and point guard Dwight Gordon did the most damage
for the Eagles by penetrating. The duo combined to score 26 points with Eatmon leading all scorers with 16. However, Northern had fight left in it, and the Lights chipped away via a 12-2 run, cutting the lead all the way down to 43-41 with 5:37 left to play. The run was sparked by a steal and score by Joe Simpson, as well as back-to-back-to-back 3-pointers from LaVon Myers, David Maddock and Shaun Tatarka.

But as great as the run was, that’s where the season ended for the Lights. After cutting the lead to two points, Northern was outscored 16-7 the rest of the way, and five of those seven points didn’t come until the final :11 of the contest. In the end, the Lights went ice cold, a trend teams have seemed to do against Biola all season long.

“There’s a reason they (Eagles) are the second-best defensive team in the country and I think they showed that tonight,” Huse said. “But again, we had our chances, and we just couldn’t get over the hump. And this is tough to swallow because our kids came in here playing very well and they will be the first to tell you they didn’t have their best night by any means. So that’s a tough pill to swallow.”

For the game, the Lights shot just 32 percent from the field and went 6-for-22 from beyond the arc. They also committed 13 turnovers, the most in any of their four postseason games. MSU-N got 13 points from Myers, including two three’s, while Simpson added 10 points and nine rebounds. Maddock and Devin Jackson added eight points apiece. Coming in, the big concern was Biola’s big front line. But the Lights outrebounded the Eagles 33-27, while Biola’s three starting guards combined for 36 points in the defensive slug fest.

And now the Eagles (27-5) are moving on to face LSU-Shreveport in tonight’s second round, while Northern’s magical season is over. And while the Lights certainly didn’t play their best in Kansas City, and suffered a second first-round loss at the national tournament in three years, Huse said nothing will take away the pride he has in his team and what they did this season, and on Thursday night.

“There was no quit in us,” Huse said. “Our kids played with pride all night, just as they have done all season long. They had an off night against a very good team, yet they still found a way to get back in it and have a chance. We just didn’t get over that hump.

“So we’re all disappointed right now, and tonight was frustrating for this team,” he added. “But it doesn’t take away from all the great things these kids have accomplished this year, and I’m very proud of my team for the season they’ve had.”

**Eagles soar, Lights headed home**

**Biola 59, Lights 48**

**MSU-N** — Ben Mitchell 1-1 0-0 2, Chris Brown 1-2 0-0 2, Sean Kelly 0-1 0-0 0, Joe Simpson 5-13 0-0 10, LaVon Myers 4-8 3-4 13, Shaun Tatarka 1-9 2-2 5, Jordan Harris 0-0 0-0 0, Devin Jackson 2-12 3-3 8, David Maddock 3-7 0-0 8. Totals 17-53 8-9 48.

**Biola** — Andrew SCHROEDER 2-4 3-4 7, Elliot TAN 1-2 0-0 2, Josh MILLER 0-4 0-0 0, Nate RAKESTRAW 2-5 4-4 10, Clay MARTIN 1-1 0-0 2, David CLINE 4-7 1-2 9, Curtis EATMON 5-10 6-8 16, Dwight GORDON 4-10 2-2 10, Shane MAHONEY 1-2 0-0 3. Totals 20-45 16-20 59.

Halftime Biola 30-17. 3-pt FG:MSU-N 6-22 (Kelly 0-1, Myers 2-4, Tatarka 1-6, Jackson 1-6, Maddock 2-5), Biola University 3-10 (TAN 0-1, MILLER 0-3, RAKESTRAW 2-4, EATMON 0-1, MAHONEY 1-1). Rebounds: MSU-N 33 (Simpson 9), Biola University 27 (SCHROEDER 11). Fouls MSU-N 20, Biola University 12. Fouled out: Maddock. Technical: none. Assists: MSU-N 6 (Jackson 2), Biola University 7 (GORDON 3). Steals: MSU -N 7 (Tatarka 2), Biola University 4 (RAKESTRAW 1, MARTIN 1, GORDON 1, MAHONEY 1). Turnovers: MSU-N 13, Biola University 10. Attendance: 3716.