The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team returned home from Kansas City and the NAIA men’s national tournament on Sunday afternoon, their magical season over with.

But it will be almost impossible for the Lights, their fans and anyone else who witnessed it, to forget what Northern accomplished this season.

There’s an old adage when it comes to postseason sports, and it goes something like, unless you win your very last game of the year, you’re going to be disappointed. And that may sum up the Lights, as well as 31 other teams which played in the NAIA national tournament this year.

However, Northern’s season cannot and will not be defined by one game, one loss, one play, instead, MSU-N rendered a complete body of work in 2010-11. And as disappointing as their loss to Biola University last Thursday night was to the Lights, they can return to Havre with their heads held high, knowing they put together one of the most productive, entertaining and enjoyable seasons in Northern men’s history.

The top highlights include winning the Frontier Conference postseason championship, tying Carroll for the regular season title, and of course, making the trip to the national tournament, the holy grail for basketball teams at any level. But there was so much more to this Lights’ team.

Northern was made up of a brand new cast of characters, including seven players who logged significant minutes which a year ago, may not have even know where Havre or Northern was. That fact alone makes it remarkable the Lights won 24 games over the last four months. Even the two Lights who have played for veteran head coach Shawn Huse before, were relatively new to the big stage as well. Devin Jackson saw limited action as a freshman a year ago, while Shaun Tatakta redshirted last season.

Add to that, a brutal nonconference schedule which took Northern into tough games against NAIA powers like Robert Morris, Azusa Pacific and Black Hills State, as well as a Frontier Conference made up of balanced, tough, hard-nosed teams and a league where anybody could beat anybody on a given night, and what the Lights achieved this year was even more amazing.

The Lights became a team and a family, on and off the court, but it was more than that. They became a great team, with great players, who helped continue what has been building for the last six years under Huse. MSU-N won 20-plus games for the sixth straight time, went to the Frontier semifinals for the fifth straight year and now has a conference championship for the first time since 1996. It’s been an amazing run, and this year’s team took that run to an even higher level.

And there is no way it’s over yet.

If things stay the same, the Lights will return all nine players from this year’s national tournament team next fall. That’s a scary proposition for the rest of the Frontier because those nine players gained immeasurable experience this year, and there’s no reason why all nine of them won’t be even better players, and the Lights an even better team when the 2011-12 season begins in October.
So while I can fully understand why the Lights would be disappointed with what happened to them against Biola last week, there is so much more to the season they’ve just finished than that glimpse in Kansas City and with what Northern has achieved, I have little doubt that this exact team will get another shot in K.C. next season.

But for now, this last few months is a tribute to what a great ride these Lights took as all on. They kept us on the edge of our seats all year. They made those long winter nights in Havre a little bit warmer with their exciting basketball and more importantly, their amazing personalities. In short, this season at MSU-N will never be forgotten.

And just think, it’s only seven months until they get back on the court to try and do it all over again. With how great this team was this year, and will be next year, I for one, can’t wait.