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MSU-Northern 2011-12 Men's Basketball Preview

Lights fully loaded for another run

George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team had a dream season which ended just a little less than seven months ago.

That dream included a share of the Frontier Conference regular season championship, a Frontier postseason title, a trip to the NAIA national tournament and yet another 20-win season under veteran head coach Shawn Huse.

But as Northern prepares to begin again, Huse, who has a career mark of 183-105 at Northern pointed out one interesting fact. The Lights enter the 2011-12 season coming off of a loss. MSU-N was ousted in the first round of the NAIA tourney in Kansas City last spring, and that loss to Biola has served to jump-start the most veteran Lights' team in years this fall.

"Last year was a great season for this team, for this program," Huse said. "But one important thing we've g this season, the wins and losses and conference titles and things based on what we did last year.

"On the other side of that though, is the fact that this team is coming into the season off a loss," Huse continued. "It's not the same as a loss last week our jus yesterday, it happened months ago. But it was still a loss and it didn't sit well with these guys. And they've been so excited for this season to start. These guys are very hungry as a team and that's shown up in conditioning and practice. It's been a great team attitude so far."

Montana State University-Northern senior Joe Simpson is one of nine returning players for a Light' basketball team which enters the 2011-12 season fresh off a Frontier Conference championship and an NAIA national tourney appearance.

Team is a word that certainly describes the Lights, who return every player from last year's 24-9 squad. Northern brings back its entire starting lineup, has eight seniors on its roster and boasts four all-conference performers from a year ago.

Junior Devin Jackson (6-1, 12 ppg) and senior Joe Simpson (6-6, 10 ppg, 7 rpg) earned first-team all-conference honors a year ago, while seniors Shaun Tatarka (6-1, 13 ppg) and LaVon Myers (6-2, 11 ppg) were named second team. The balanced Lights also return seniors Sean Kelly (6-6, 4 rpg) David Maddock (6-3, 39% 3-pt), Chris Brown (6-6, 6 ppg), Ben Mitchell (6-4, 5 ppg) and Jordan Harris (6-6, 4 ppg), all of whom had an incredible impact on Northern's run to the national tourney a year ago.

To say the Lights are loaded would be an understatement.

"I think one of the biggest things that really enables to have a lot of success with this group is how balanced we can be," Huse said. "With so many key players we can be very efficient offensively. We have so many guys who contribute big things to the stat sheet each night and the chemistry on this team is great. This group also comes in knowing how we do things. We still hang our hat on playing hard, unselfish team basketball and great all-around effort every night, every minute on the floor. And quality execution on the both ends of the floor. If we do those things again this year, we'll have a chance to be successful."

The Lights not only have as deep a roster as they've had in years, they've added to that depth this season. Redshirt freshmen Corbin Pearson (6-5), Baird Henning (6-6) and Pat Jensen (6-7) will suit up for

Northern this season, as will redshirt sophomore Mike Lavalley (6-0), who played as a true freshman two years ago.

“It will take some time for those guys to work their way into things,” Huse said. “But at the same time, they were there every step of the way last year. They did a great job in practice and paying attention during the games and they know what we expect of them. It’s not like a lot of positions opened up on this team this year, but still, those guys will be ready when their number is called this season, and perhaps more importantly, they’ll be even more ready in the future.”

And being ready is key for all of the Lights. Northern will likely be ranked high when the NAIA preseason poll comes out later this month. The Lights will certainly be picked at or near the top of the Frontier Conference and they’ll need to be ready to get every team’s best shot given what they did a year ago, and given who they return this season.

MSU-N also has a challenging nonconference schedule. The Lights start with a home game, but then play their next 11 away from Havre. Those road games include future Frontier Conference rival Dickinson State in Dillon, two games against Warner Pacific, a matchup with Southern Oregon in Lewiston, Idaho and tough games in California against GSAC powers Menlo College and California Maritime Academy at the end of November. Northern finally gets back to Havre in December for games against the University of Alberta Augustana and Dickinson State, as well as the AmericInn Classic. Conference play begins Jan. 6.

“Our schedule demands that we be on our toes right away,” Huse said. “We go on the road for a lot of tough games in October and November. But those challenges will help make us better, they’ll help make us a stronger team, on and off the floor. But we know anybody is capable of beating anybody on a given night, so we’re going to have to be ready to play every night. Our early schedule will definitely make us have to focus in one game at a time, which is what we’ve always believed. We can’t look ahead to the conference schedule right now, or things like the national tournament or any of that. We have to really just put one foot in front of the other.”

And this Northern team is clearly too veteran to get ahead of itself. The Lights thrived off of not doing that a year ago. But with a season like the 2010-11 year, and with a roster chalked full of great players and great athletes, the Lights are surrounded by high expectations as the new season gets under way.

“Obviously my expectations for this team are high,” Huse said. “I think because of the guys we return, we are holding them to a higher standard at the beginning of the season. This so far has been more review than learning for this team which is beneficial and we’re expecting to see some quality basketball right away, where in years past, especially last year, we needed time to learn, time to grow and gel into the team we became.

“But on the flip side of that, we also know we have our work cut out for us, like always,” he continued. “We have to focus on Northern basketball through good times and bad. If we start thinking too much about wins and losses and championships and things like that, then we are losing sight of what we’re trying to accomplish. Yes, we want to win every time we play, but we’re also here to not just be good basketball players, but be good students and good people off the floor. That’s what our program is about, it’s what we were about last year even more so than the wins and losses and it’s what we’ll strive to be again this season.”