Rivalry: Lights begin Frontier title defense with Argos
George Ferguson
Friday, January 6th, 2012

Just under 10 months ago, the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team was headed to Kansas City to play in the NAIA national tournament.

Tonight, the journey for a chance to go back there begins for the 19th-ranked Lights when they open defense of the Frontier Conference champion at home against rival UGF. The Lights and Argos tip off at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

Last year was a magical one for the Lights, and the nonconference portion of this season hasn’t been too shabby either. But despite going 13-2 and being picked to repeat as Frontier champions, there will be no easy night’s for the Lights, and the gauntlet that is the Frontier starts with one of their biggest rivals.

“We’re very pleased with where we’re at right now and what we’ve done so far this season,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. “Our guys really are hungry and focused and they feel like they have plenty to prove. And that’s good because our league is as tough as any night in and night out. There aren’t going to be any easy games for anybody and we understand that we have to play our very best every night.”

And despite UGF’s past struggles, Northern will have to be at its very best to send the Argos back to Great Falls with a loss.

UGF (12-3) is off to its best start since the school reinstated basketball over 10 years ago. The Argos, led by sixth-year head coach Steve Silsby were loaded with returnees from last year’s team that made a late surge to finish sixth in the Frontier, but they also loaded up with new talent. And they may just have the deepest team in the league, so don’t be surprised if UGF goes 12-deep tonight against the Lights.

“I think they (Argos) are as deep as they’ve ever been in my opinion,” Huse said. “They have as talented and athletic a team as anybody in the NAIA right now and they are playing very good basketball. They’ve had some great wins this season and they showed they can play with anybody when the came so close to beating the Grizzlies in Missoula. So they have our full attention and respect.”

UGF returned a trio of guards, led by sophomore point guard Marcel Towns, who averages 12 points per game. Also back is all-conference performer Melvin Williams, who’s leading the Frontier in assists, as well as senior guard Leon Sutton. UGF also welcomed back 6-6 swingman L.J. Jones, a two-time all-conference performer who is as athletic a player as anyone in the Frontier.

But the Argos aren’t just guard-oriented. They get good production from a pair of standouts on the front line. James Holmes, a 6-6 forward and Ken Anderson, a 6-8 center, combined to average 18 points and eight rebounds. UGF’s depth is also key. The Argos bring in quality role players like Miguel Bocachica, T.J. Harris and Naren Maynard, as well as Great Falls freshman Reid Tramelli.

As a team, the Argos are explosive on offense. UGF is averaging 78 points per game, are second in the Frontier in 3-point shooting at 40 percent and third in the field goal percentage at just over 48 percent per
game. Across, the board, the Argos are a much better and more dangerous team this season, and the fact the Lights haven’t lost to their rival in over three years won’t mean a whole lot tonight.

“There’s no question we have to play well, we know that,” Huse said. “I don’t think they will do anything different than in years past, but because of all their talent, size and speed, they didn’t have to change anything, they just let their playmakers and athletes make plays and it’s working for them.

“So for us, as always is the case, we are going to have to really fundamentally sound defensively,” he added. “Against such an athletic team like them, you have to play at a very high level on defense for 40 minutes.”

And Northern is capable of doing just that. The Lights once again lead the Frontier in almost every defensive category that matters. The Lights are allowing just over 56 points per game and they are only allowing teams to shoot 40 percent from the floor against them.

But MSU-N isn’t just a good defensive team, the Lights can pour it on on the other end too. The Lights are third in the Frontier in 3-point shooting, but no team in the league can get hot like the Lights can. In last Friday’s thumping of the University of Alberta, the Lights, made seven three’s in an 11-minute span in the first half.

Northern is also balanced and tough to defend too. Senior Shaun Tatarka leads MSU-N in scoring at 13 points per game, but Joe Simpson, David Maddock, LaVon Myers, Devin Jackson and Sean Kelly all average seven or more points each night. Maddock has been a big catalyst for the Lights, averaging 11 points per game and shooting a whopping 47 percent from three off the bench.

The Lights and Argos have had a strong standing rivalry for years, but it’s been one-sided over the last few seasons. Northern swept UGF last season, with both games being very competitive. But this season, the Argos look like a team that could accomplish a lot.

So tonight’s Frontier Conference opener features two bitter rivals, playing good basketball on a collision course for each other, with a lot at stake. Even though it’s only January, UGF is the first team to take a shot at the defending Frontier champs and the Argos will be out to prove their great nonconference run was no mirage. And the Lights are starting a quest to return to the top of the league for another year, and take this season even further than the great run they had last year. In other words, tonight’s game is big.

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Argos is set to tip off at 8 p.m. at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse in Havre. The game can be streamed live at www.msun.edu/athletics and can be heard locally on 92.5 KPQX FM.

**MSU-Northern vs UGF**
Tonight at 6 p.m.
Havre

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Streaming: www.msun.edu/athletics

Twitter: www.twitter/havredaily

**Lights Probable Starters**

G Shaun Tatara, Sr. 13 ppg
G LaVon Myers, 6-2, Sr. 9 ppg
G Devin Jackson, 6-1, Jr., 12 ppg
F Sean Kelly, 6-6, Sr. 6 ppg
F Joe Simpson, 6-4, Sr., 10 ppg, 6 rpg