

Thriller: Lights nip talented Argos

Tatarka's magical night helps Northern win a wild Frontier opener

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Monday, January 9th, 2012

There was plenty of hype surrounding Friday night's Frontier Conference men's opener at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

After all, the defending Frontier champion Montana State University-Northern Lights were squaring off against a vastly improved rival in the Great Falls Argos.

And for once, the game itself may have even exceeded the hype.

The No. 19 Lights got a spectacular game-high 26 points from senior Shaun Tatarka, as well as two clutch free throws from senior Joe Simpson, and held off the talented Argos 63-62.

The game, which featured a near capacity crowd in Havre, was wild from start to finish, but Tatarka's magical night, which saw him reach Northern's 1,000-point club, as well as several key defensive stops turned out to be the difference for the Lights.

"It was a great game," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "UGF is as every bit as good as we thought they were and they played great. I thought we weren't very good in the first half, we turned it over too much in the first half, and in the second half we didn't make enough shots.

"But through all of that, Shaun Tatarka did what he does, he just said 'O.K., we're not clicking like we could so I'll take care of things for us tonight.' He knocked down big shots all night and he made big free throws. It was a special night for him and I'm really proud of him and happy that he did what he did tonight, under some really tough circumstances against a really good team.

"The thing about our team is, we have so many great guys who are so unselfish with the ball," Tatarka said. "When one guy has the hot hand, the rest of our guys always work hard to find him, to get him the ball. We weren't clicking tonight like we usually do, but my teammates were finding me and fortunately I was able to have the shots fall. That's the great thing about our team. We have so much depth and we play unselfish basketball."

Things did click for the Lights, at times in the first 20 minutes. Tatarka hit two of his seven 3-pointers in the first five minutes, while LaVon Myers, Devin Jackson and David Maddock also made lone-range bombs. But UGF proved early that its nonconference record was no fluke. The Argos ripped off a 12-1 run late in the first behind three's from Leon Sutton and Reid Tramelli, and the Lights found themselves down 31-30 at the break.

The first half also saw the Argos open the game with a thunderous dunk by James Holmes, who was then whistled for a technical foul for slapping the backboard, as well as Simpson throwing down a fast break dunk, then being called for a technical for celebrating the play.



Montana State University-Northern senior LaVon Myers takes a shot during the first half of Friday night's Frontier Conference men's basketball game between the Lights and the University of Great Falls at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The Lights won 63-62.



MSU-N's Chris Brown (right) battles for a rebound with UGF's Ken Anderson during Friday night's Frontier Conference men's game in Havre.

But those fireworks would be just the tip of the iceberg.

"Great Falls is a great team," Simpson said. "They have great athletes and they came in here and got after us tonight. The first half got a little wild for us and I think we played at their pace too much.

"But we have an experienced team and I think in the second half, we relaxed and tried to keep the game at our pace more. I have to give a lot of love to Great Falls for the way they played. But our guys stayed composed and we didn't let this game get away from us. That experience we all have really helped us tonight."

And the Lights needed every bit of that composure in the final 20 minutes.

The Argos came out on fire in the second half, quickly upping their lead to 37-30. But Tatarka, a former GFH star was just heating up. He followed a Ben Mitchell layup with back-to-back 3-point bombs, then capped off an 11-0 run with another three, which put him over the 1,000-point mark for his career. Myers then made a bucket right after which capped off a 15-3 spurt by the Lights and saw them lead 48-40 with 11 minutes to play.

However, the Argos never went away.

It took nearly eight minutes of work, but with under three to go they found themselves trailing by just two points. But a bucket by Simpson and free throws by Myers and Tatarka, as well as big stops on the other end kept the Lights from losing their lead. A Holmes layup with :20 left cut the lead to 61-60, and an ensuing foul sent Simpson to the line, where he calmly buried two foul shots. There was a wild sequence which ensued after and UGF made a layup at the buzzer, but the Lights did enough to survive and keep a nearly three-year home winning streak intact.

"I just thought of it like practice," Simpson said of his critical free throws. "We practice free throws a lot. I just tried to relax take a deep breath and see them going in because I knew we needed them.

"Free throws were a big part of this game for us," Huse said. "And of course Shaun's big shots. But I also thought the other guys fed off Shaun, relaxed and settled into the game in the second half. I thought we kept our composure really well, and late in the game, I thought the defensive stops we got were as crucial as anything else for us. Our guys really buckled down and got after it defensively."

As a team, Northern shot just 39 percent from the field but went 11-for-28 from three. Huse noted Great Falls' stellar defense as a big reason why the Lights were off as a whole. But Tatarka went 8-for-16 from the floor and 7-for-14 from three, while Myers added 11 points. Simpson chipped in with nine points and five rebounds, and Mitchell, Corbin Pearson, Chris Brown and Jordan Harris all made big plays for the Lights off the bench. Holmes finished with 20 points and five boards for the Argos (0-1, 12-5).

With the win, Northern improved to 14-2 on the season, and the Lights jumped out to a 1-0 mark in Frontier play with home games against Montana Tech and UM-Western coming this Friday and Saturday.

"Every game in the Frontier is huge and you have to find ways to bring your 'A Game' every night or teams will come out and smack you right in the mouth. I don't think we had our 'A Game' tonight but we stayed together and found ways to get it done as a team. So it was big for us to get this one, and hopefully we'll look back on this game and it look at as a big win for us. But we also try not to get too high or too low. There's a long way to go in this league and we are now just going to focus on the two really good teams we have coming in here next week.

"I'm just really proud of our guys," Huse added. "I can't say enough good things about UGF and the way they came in and played us tonight. But, not to take anything away from them, we also didn't play as well as we would have liked, but that's also why I'm so proud of this entire team. They really stick with it tonight, really grinded one out and I'm really happy to be able to say we got this one."

The Lights will host Montana Tech on Friday night and Western on Saturday night.

Game Notes: Tatarka became the just the 17th Lights to reach 1,000 points. For more on his night and career, see above. The Lights haven't lost a Frontier home game since the 2008-09 season. The Argos haven't beaten the Lights since a 74-57 win in February of 2008, a span of seven straight meetings now. Friday's game marked the third straight outing in which the Lights, who've now won nine straight games, have shot better than 40 percent from beyond the arc. The Lights committed a season-high 15 turnovers in the first half, but finished with just 19 for the game.

Lights are 1-0 in Frontier, 15-2 overall; Next up: vs Tech on Friday, vs UM-Western on Saturday

Lights 63, UGF 62

UGF — L.J. Jones 3-5 0-2 6, Naren Maynard 2-2 0-0 4, Marcel Townes 1-8 0-0 2, Melvin Williams 2-8 6-8 11, Leon Sutton 5-7 1-2 12, Miguel Bocachica 0-0 1-2 1, James Holmes 7-10 6-7 20, Reid Tramelli 1-2 0-0 3, Ken Anderson 1-2 1-2 3. Totals 22-44 15-23 62.

MSU-N — David Maddock 1-3 0-0 3, Devin Jackson 1-4 0-0 3, Jordan Harris 1-1 0-0 2, Shaun Tatarka 8-16 3-5 26, LaVon Myers 3-7 3-4 11, Sean Kelly 0-1 0-0 0, Mike LaValley 0-1 0-0 0, Chris Brown 1-3 1-2 3, Joe Simpson 2-8 5-6 9, Ben Mitchell 2-6 0-0 4, Corbin Pearson 1-1 0-0 2. Totals 20-51 12-17 63.

Halftime: UGF 31-30. 3-pt FG: Great Falls 3-10 (Jones 0-1, Townes 0-1, Williams 1-5, Sutton 1-2, Tramelli 1-1), MSU-N 11-28 (Maddock 1-3, Jackson 1-3, Tatarka 7-14, Myers 2-4, Kelly 0-1, LaValley 0-1, Mitchell 0-2). Rebounds: Great Falls 29 (Williams 7), MSU-N 29 (Tatarka 5). Fouls Great Falls 17, MSU-N 21. Fouled out: Simpson. Technical: Holmes, Simpson, MSUN Lights Coach.