

Frontier Notebook: Big games in Havre, Great Falls

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It's been noted that every night in the Frontier Conference is a big one during the basketball season. Montana State University-Northern head coaches Shawn Huse and Chris Mouat preach that religiously.

But there's big games and then there's big games, and that's what could happen Saturday night in Havre when the UM-Western Bulldogs visit the Skylights and Lights.

Both the Northern men and women have developed a serious rivalry with the Bulldogs and that rivalry has really manifested itself in recent years. On the women's side, Western has had Northern's number as of late, including a playoff win in Havre two years ago. This Saturday's Northern-Western women's game will feature two teams trying to gain respect in the NAIA. Western is 11-4 overall and 1-1 in the conference and was close to cracking the NAIA Top 25 this week. The Skylights (14-1, 1-0) should have been in the Top 25 a long time ago, and they'll try to get there this weekend.

Then there's the men's rivalry. Northern's hold a 5-3 advantage over the Bulldogs over the last three seasons, but the rivalry has extended beyond the regular season in each of the past two years. In 2010, the Bulldogs were swept by the Lights during the regular season, only to rebound and beat Northern 60-59 in the Frontier semifinals. That game sent Western to the NAIA national tournament and probably kept Northern at home.

Last season, the rivalry amped up a notch. The Bulldogs won 69-64 in Dillon first, then the Lights won a 69-65 in Havre. The rubber match was back in Havre in the Frontier semis where the Lights beat the Bulldogs 72-60 in front of a raucous Armory Gymnasium.

Now the two teams are set to meet in the first of what could be three meetings again this season. The Lights come into the weekend home stand with Montana Tech and Western ranked No. 13 in the NAIA, while the Bulldogs are ranked No. 23 nationally. The game will mark the fifth time in the last eight meetings that both teams are nationally ranked.

And while there's a long way to go in the Frontier season, there's plenty at stake when Northern and Western meet, including a chance at a regular season Frontier title and potential home-court advantage in the Frontier playoffs.

However, Northern head coach Shawn Huse points out that in order for Saturday to be the showdown of the season thus far, both teams need to win on Friday night. The Lights host a very good Montana Tech team while Western visits the dangerous Great Falls Argos.

"We're not thinking about anything but Montana Tech," Huse said. "We just don't look ahead. On paper, yes, Saturday has the potential to be a pretty big game, but it won't be if us and Western don't win on Friday and given who we're both playing, that's no easy task. So we're solely focused on Friday night right now."

One for the books

MSU-N senior Shaun Tatarka reached a major milestone last Friday when he joined Northern's illustrious 1,000-point club. Tatarka became the fifth player under Huse to reach the prestigious plateau. Current MSU-N assistant coach Travis Noble did so in just two years, scoring 1,006 points, while Andrew Sellars

finished his career with 1,050 points and Delvaughn Tinned also did in just two years, finishing his career with 1,060 points. Larry Morinia scored 1,374 points in three seasons with the Lights.

The other members of the club, at least since records were kept, are Deon Jones (1990-94), Sam Tucker (1987-91), Danny Murphy (1985-89), Nate Achenbach (1985-89), Kevin Owens (1994-98), John Briney (1992-96), Tony Coleman (1973-77), Larry Winters (1977-81), Lance Wasson (1989-93), Glen Ellis (1961-64), Ty Ridgeway (1995-97) and Tim VanderMars (1982-86).

A stunning start

The Frontier Conference is loaded with good basketball teams and it figures to be a dogfight on both sides all season long. But there were a few stunning surprises in the opening weekend of play.

But the biggest shocker was likely then No. 4 Lewis-Clark State's 73-53 loss against the Western women in Dillon. Western is a great club, but the margin of victory in which the Warriors were beaten was more than surprising.

On the men's side, the shocker had to belong to Westminster. The Griffins came into the weekend ranked 10th in the nation but were sent back to Salt Lake City with an 0-2 conference mark. Westminster lost at Tech on Friday night and again at Western on Saturday.

Turmoil at Carroll College didn't stop the Saints from a surprising men's victory at Rocky Mountain College last weekend. The Saints announced four players would be suspended due to various academic reasons or disciplinary issues, including 2011 Frontier Defensive Player of the Year Byago Diouf, but Carroll went on the road and beat the Battlin' Bears 72-69 anyway.

Carroll's Green is out

Carroll senior guard Alysha Green has suffered a season-ending knee injury, which will certainly leave a big hole in a Saints' team which has struggled the past two years. Green went down in last week's game at RMC and an MRI revealed she has a torn ACL and meniscus. Green was averaging 15 points per game and is one of the top 3-point shooters in the Frontier Conference.

Defensive in Havre

If defensive wins championships, both the MSU-Northern basketball teams are off to a good start.

The Lights are not only the top defensive team in the Frontier Conference, but their stingy 57 points per game allowed is second in the entire NAIA right now. And the Skylights aren't too far behind. The Northern women also lead the Frontier in scoring defense, as they are giving up a measly 53 points per outing. The Skylights are ranked eighth nationally in that category.

The Lights finished among the NAIA leaders in field goal defense last season.