

Tech, Western next for surging Lights

George Ferguson

Friday, January 13th, 2012

Big games are nothing new to the Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team.

But trying to get back into a rhythm while playing two big games is another story. Yet, that's exactly what the 13th-ranked Lights (15-2, 1-0) will try to do this weekend when they host Montana Tech and UM-Western in a pair of Frontier Conference clashes. The weekend starts tonight when the Lights host the Orediggers at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The 23rd-ranked Bulldogs come to Havre Saturday night after visiting Great Falls tonight.

MSU-N has won 10 straight games coming into a huge weekend of basketball. But it's the last two games in which Northern has seemingly not played its basketball, though the Lights did open Frontier play with a dramatic 63-62 win over UGF last Friday night. In that game, Shaun Tatarka scored 26 points, but as a team, MSU-N shot just 39 percent from the field, and the Lights turned the ball over 15 times in the first half.

"Our main focus this weekend is putting two complete games together," MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. "We feel like we haven't played very well the last two games, so we want to walk off the court this weekend knowing we played two complete games. If we can do that, the rest will fall into place."

Easier said than done given the visiting competition.

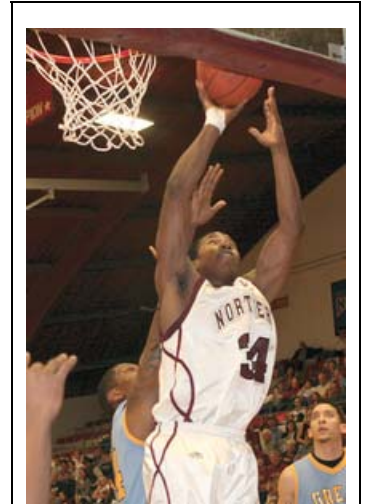
Tonight's game features a Tech (9-4, 1-1) which seems to be much-improved from its last-place finish in the Frontier a year ago. The Orediggers knocked off Westminster College last Friday in Butte and nearly had a chance to beat Lewis-Clark State on Saturday. Tech has also had a good run in the nonconference, and with the Diggers' much-different style of play, they have Northern's full attention tonight.

"All you have to do is look at what they (Orediggers) did last weekend at home," Huse said of his alma mata'. "They are a very capable team. They have a really good group of perimeter players who can all shoot it well. And with their style of play, how patient they are, they are going to give themselves a chance to be in every game.

"So we have to be really patient against them," he added. "We have to stick to playing our game, we have to stay the course. We can't get too high or too low. We know Tech is going to be a big challenge for us and we just have to be really mentally prepared to deal with that."

The Orediggers return guards Tyree Haynie (10 ppg) and A.J. Paine (12 ppg), but the emergence of Adam Greger, who averages 13 points per outing and is third in the Frontier in 3-point shooting, has been key to Tech's success this season. Transfer guard Brian Cummings has added to Tech's stellar perimeter play as well, so Northern guards LaVon Myers, Devin Jackson and David Maddock, along with the red-hot Tatarka will certainly have their hands full tonight.

And they'll have their hands full Saturday night too as the Lights and Bulldogs (14-4, 2-0) renew their rivalry. MSU-N and Western last met in the Frontier semifinals last March, while the two teams split the 2011 regular season, each winning by four points on its home floor.



Montana State University-Northern's Joe Simpson lays in two points during a Frontier Conference men's basketball game against UGF last Friday in Havre. The No. 13 Lights are home to face Montana Tech tonight and UM-Western Saturday night.

And with Western returning from another trip to the NAIA national tournament a year ago, as well as getting off to a great start this season, including sweeping LC State and Westminster last weekend, Saturday's game figures to be a great one.

And not only will the game be great, but that's the word to best describe Western senior star guard Brandon Brown. He's the reigning Frontier MVP and he is averaging 22 points, three steals and three assists per game. He's the focal point of a very deep and talented Bulldog team, and he'll be gunning for the defending Frontier champion Lights tonight.

"He's (Brown) like a star quarterback, like Payton Manning," Huse said. "He has a tremendous impact on everything the team does. He does a lot of things exceptionally well. He can shoot, he can pass and he's extremely quick in transition. But he also has a habit of getting everyone else involved. He makes everyone around him better. That's what star players do. He's just a very talented player."

But the Bulldogs have plenty of great players around Brown, and they're complete. Tyler Hurley (6-6) is a catalyst averaging 14 points and six rebounds per game, while the front line is big with 6-9 Kyle Perry and 6-8 Jake Owsley. Then there's 6-4 senior guard Kyle Erickson, who averages 10 points per game, while 6-3 junior transfer Cedric Clarrington is another difference maker.

"They (Bulldogs) are very solid," Huse said. "Brandon Brown puts a lot of pressure on your defense and that opens things up for all the other good players they have. They have size, athleticism, good speed and a lot of depth. It's like any other night in the Frontier, there just aren't any easy games, and this is no exception.

But Saturday's game might not just be another game. Though there's a long way to go, the Lights and Bulldogs should figure into the Frontier title race right through February and March, so this meeting in Havre is the first step. It's also a showdown between two nationally-ranked teams, who have combined to go to the last four NAIA national tournaments. Yet, the way the Frontier is set up, playing on back-to-back nights, Huse and the Lights can't and won't look any farther ahead than the game they are playing tonight against Montana Tech.

"Saturday has the potential to be a big game. On paper, and for the fans and media, it's already a big game," Huse said. "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 Montana Tech. We're focused on playing a complete game tonight. We can't afford to get caught up in the rankings or the stats or the standings. We just need to make sure we play to complete games this weekend, and that starts with Montana Tech."

Tonight's game between the Lights and Orediggers tips off at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. The showdown between Northern and Western also tips off at 8 on Saturday. The games can be viewed live on the internet at www.msun.edu/athletics.

**MSU-Northern vs Montana Tech and UM-Western
Tonight at 8 p.m.; Saturday at 8 p.m.
MSU-Northern Fieldhouse**

Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM

Streaming: www.msun.edu/athletics

Twitter: www.twitter/havredaily

Lights Probable Starters

G Shaun Tatara, Sr. 14 ppg

G LaVon Myers, 6-2, Sr. 9 ppg

G Devin Jackson, 6-1, Jr., 11 ppg

F Sean Kelly, 6-6, Sr. 6 ppg

F Joe Simpson, 6-4, Sr., 10 ppg, 6 rpg