

Lights feel ready for the road

MSU-Northern men return to Carroll tonight

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The Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team hasn't lost a single game since Nov. 5. That's an impressive 11 in a row, which includes a 3-0 start to Frontier Conference play.

The Lights also haven't played a road game since Nov. 19.

Tonight, however, the No. 12 Lights will take their impressive resume' on the road when they visit Carroll College at 7:30 in Helena.

Northern comes into tonight's showdown with Carroll with a 17-2 overall record – the best start the team has gotten off to in MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse's tenure in Havre. The Lights are also the top-ranked defensive team in the country. MSU-N is yielding an NAIA-best 56 points per game.

Awaiting Northern this weekend is tonight's battle with the Fighting Saints, as well as a Saturday trip to steadily-improving Rocky Mountain College. And while the Lights are riding high, Northern head coach Shawn Huse knows nothing will be easy on the road in the Frontier Conference.

"It's definitely a challenge, playing on the road in this league," Huse said.

"But you can't play every game at home, so it's time for us to get on the road and do our part. We feel fortunate because all of our guys are seasoned, they've been through these road games before, they've played in these gyms. So it's by no means easy, but we feel confident we're ready to play on the road."

The Lights will rely heavily on their defense, but Huse would still like to see more consistency on offense. MSU-N's shooting and 3-point shooting percentages are down from last season, but make no mistake, Northern can get hot too. The Lights are led in scoring by Shaun Tatarka's 13 points per game, while Devin Jackson averages 12 and LaVon Myers 10. Joe Simpson is also averaging 10 points and seven rebounds per game.

Tonight's game against Carroll (1-2, 8-7) is a rematch of last year's Frontier championship bout. But the Saints look much different in 2012.

Carroll is without the services of four players, who were either suspended for academic reasons or dismissed from the team. Those four include star guards Nick Jones and Byago Diouf. Diouf was the 2011 Frontier Defensive MVP.

And Carroll has struggled so far in 2011-12 with or without those players. But the Saints still have perhaps the Frontier's best all-round player in senior Andy Garland (6-5). Garland comes into tonight's game averaging 16 points and six rebounds per game. He's also averaged over 18 points for a career which has seen him start every game since the first day he arrived at Carroll.

The Saints also have key players back, like 6-6 Tony Dalton and 6-0 guard Ben Cutler. Cutler has made the biggest improvements, averaging 12 points and shooting better than 40 percent from three. So Huse knows that while Carroll may be shorthanded, nothing else in the Lights/Saints rivalry has changed.



MSU-Northern's Shaun Tatarka lets go of a shot during a Frontier men's game last Saturday in Havre. The Lights visit Carroll tonight and Rocky Mountain College on Saturday night.

"I don't look at them and see a short-handed team or a team that is struggling," Huse said. "I look at them and see a team with four starters and at least two bench players who shared the Frontier Conference regular season championship and got to the Sweet 16 of the NAIA tournament last year.

"I see a team in Carroll that's every bit as good and very similar to the team that had so much success last year," he added. "I see this game as another very tough Frontier Conference opponent and we fully expect Carroll's best on their home floor."

And one tough game on this weekend's road trip will turn into two Saturday night in Billings.

When the Lights visit Rocky on Saturday night at the Fortin Center, Northern will see perhaps the biggest team it will face all season. The Bears (2-1, 9-9) start a front line of 6-7 Matt Fogarty, 6-9 Joel Barndt and 6-9 Sergio Trocha. Fogarty leads the team in scoring at 13 points per game, while Barndt might be the most improved player in the Frontier. Just a sophomore, Barndt leads the league in rebounding at nine per game, while also scoring 11 points per. Trocha led the NAIA in blocked shots a season ago, and he averages 10 points and six rebounds per game.

Rocky is also a dangerous shooting team with lightning quick point guard Anthony Carter and shooter Nile Finney both capable scorers from the perimeter.

"Rocky has been very impressive this season," Huse said. "The key with them is finding a way to defend all their interior players while still trying to keep their guards from shooting over the top. They are very talented, Anthony Carter is a really good point guard and they have of course, very good post players.

"They (Bears) have flown under the radar a little this season," he added. "But not to us. We know how capable they are and we know how difficult of a task it is to go into their gym and get a win. Really, in both these games, we're going to have to play 40 minutes of high-level basketball to be successful."

Northern's first road tests of the Frontier schedule will be followed by two more big home games next weekend against Westminster College and Lewis-Clark State.

Tonight's game between the Lights and Saints in Helena will tip off at 7:30. Saturday night's game at Rocky Mountain College in Billings will also tip off at 7:30. Both games can be heard locally on 92.5 KPQX FM or streamed live at www.msun.edu/athletics.