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George Ferguson Column: Lights and Skylights do it right on defense

George Ferguson
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When it comes to basketball, I'm a product of my generation – which means I worshiped at the altar of one Michael Jordan. I have always said you'd be hard-pressed to find a bigger Jordan fan than me – even though millions of others would disagree with that statement.

And being a Jordan fan, I grew up loving watching him score at will, loving his high-flying dunks and his unstoppable play with the ball in his hands.

What I didn't appreciate then, and which I do now, is the fact that Jordan is historically known as one of the greatest defenders to ever play the game. For all his scoring titles, for all his 50-point games and for all his defying gravity on offense, Jordan was also voted NBA All-Defensive First Team nine times in his career.

I never appreciated that then, but I've learned to now, and that's why I appreciate how good the Montana State University-Northern Lights and Skylights are on defense.

Watching the Lights play defense is a thing of beauty, if you're someone who appreciates hard work and determination. Because, defense like the Lights play is a total team concept. It isn't based on what one guy does, it's based on every player on the floor doing their one-fifth. That's what hard-nosed man-to-man defense is all about and right now, there is no team better at it than Shawn Huse's Lights.

Northern currently leads the NAIA in scoring defense, allowing just 55 points per game. The Lights finished second in the NAIA in that category a season ago, which means this current group of Lights is perhaps one of the best defensive units the school has ever had.

And for a program, which under Huse, that's always been noted for great defense, that's saying something.

"I was fortunate, playing for Coach Rick Dessing at (Montana Tech) to learn the importance of playing good defense and how defense can create your offense," Huse said. "And I still believe that to this day. As you coach longer, some of your philosophies change and you tweak others, but the importance of defense has never changed for me."

And Huse's teams have always bought in. The Lights, under Huse have taken great pride in shutting opponents down, of holding teams under their scoring average and of setting up their transition game with great, tough defense.

Huse has coached many great defensive teams over the years, but I'm not sure many have ever been on a roll like this current Lights' team has. Take last Saturday for example. The Lights were coming off a bitter loss at Carroll College, one in which they still played tremendous defense. Instead of sulking about the loss, the Lights dug in on the defensive end and held the Frontier's top-scoring team, Rocky Mountain College, to a measly 45 points.

Last Saturday in Billings is a perfect example of what the Lights are all about.

"To be a good defensive team, you have to have guys who take pride in it," Huse said. "You have to have players who aren't afraid to work hard for 40 minutes every night. I've always said, you don't have to be the strongest or the fastest player to play great defense, but you have to have heart and a willingness to work hard these guys (Lights) have that.

“Our guys love to execute defensively, they prepare hard each week to play or man-to-man style of defense and they take it very seriously,” he added. “It hurts them when teams get buckets on them and they take a lot of pride in trying to shut teams down. It’s something that’s really worked well for this team.”

Like the men, the Skylights, under Chris Mouat have been equally as fun to watch on defense.

No matter the roster, Mouat’s teams have always been at or near the top of the Frontier Conference in most defensive categories, and the 2011-12 Skylights are no exception.

Northern started the season 8-0 and the Skylights are currently sitting at 15-4 on the year. You don’t get to an exemplary record like that, playing all the good teams the Skylights have played this season, without playing solid defense.

And the Skylights do just that.

Northern leads the Frontier Conference in scoring defense and is 10th in the NAIA, yielding just 54 points per game. That kind of tenacious defense is a trademark of Mouat’s teams and it’s impressive to watch.

In fact, thanks to the effort of the Skylights on defense, if you combined the average points allowed by the MSU-N men and women this season, it’s under 100 points per game, and that’s extremely impressive.

When I was young, and still thinking I was a basketball player, I never appreciated defense and I never really wanted to work hard at being a good defender. Defensive slides were one of the worst drills in my mind. Oh how I hated them.

Now, through covering MSU-N hoops every year, I have a whole different perspective.