

## Lights to be tested by Warriors, Griffins

George Ferguson

Friday, January 27th, 2012

When you're the top dog, the Frontier Conference schedule becomes a gauntlet. And this weekend at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse is another obstacle in the gauntlet the Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team is trying to navigate this season.

But the obstacles in Northern's way tonight and Saturday night are formidable. Tonight, the No. 13 Lights take on a vastly-improved Lewis-Clark State squad at 8, then have to turn around and host Frontier power Westminster College on Saturday night.

And while the Lights (18-3, 4-1) are focused on trying to defend their home court, and focused on staying at the top of the Frontier standings, they also are looking to make sure they stay in the moment, especially with only four home games left in the regular season.

"It just seems like the schedule gets tougher and tougher every week," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "And I think we need to understand that we can't worry about how our season is going to turn out. I thought that maybe happened to us last week at Carroll, but in reality, we need to understand that there's a lot of basketball left to be played this season, so we need to make sure we focus on one game at a time and only worry about the things we can control.

"We also need to understand that it's getting close to the end as far as home games go for this great group of seniors," he added. "So we need to be mindful of that and make sure we have fun and enjoy our last few games at home, and that starts with each game we play this weekend."

The Lights will try to enjoy playing at home, especially after a daunting three-day road trip last weekend, which saw Northern fall to Carroll in overtime, then turn around and dismantle Rocky Mountain College in Billings.

In those games, the Lights were hot and cold from the three. Northern launched 43 3-pointers at Carroll with little success, but two days later, went a scintillating 14-of-24 from three at Rocky. The Lights were again balanced on offense, as Devin Jackson, Shaun Tatarka and LaVon Myers all scored in double figures throughout the road trip. And of course, MSU-N was its usual stingy self on defense, as the Lights continue to lead the NAIA in scoring defense.

However, while they are glad to be back home, the Lights know the Warriors and Griffins will do everything they can to make it less than fun for MSU-N this weekend.

LC State (14-6, 2-3), under the direction of first-year head coach Brandon Rinta has really come on strong this season. The Warriors have played a quality schedule and should figure into the Frontier race right to the end.

A big reason why the Warriors are so solid is post play, especially from 6-6 swingman P.J. Bolte. Bolte leads LCSC in scoring at 16 points per game, which is third best in the Frontier. He also pulls down a team-high seven rebounds per and can step out and shoot from the perimeter. The Warriors will play a total of four players on the front line, all of whom stand 6-6, including senior Ray Stout, and juniors Danny Marshall and Nick Fromm. LC State also leads the Frontier in rebounding and is outrebounding league opponents by an average of nine per game.



Montana State University-Northern's Shaun Tatarka (right) launches a 3-pointer during a Frontier men's game against Montana Tech earlier this month. The Lights are home tonight to face Lewis-Clark State and Saturday to host Westminster.

But guard play is key too, and the Warriors have a solid backcourt. Darin Stewart and Donte Archie combine to average 20 points per game for an LCSC team averaging a Frontier-best 80 points per night.

"We got a chance to see them (Warriors) early in the season at their tournament," Huse said. "And I was very impressed. They play very hard for 40 minutes. They really rebound the ball well and they have good size inside. But they also shoot it very well and their guards are quick and can get to the rim.

"They (Warriors) are another example of why I continue to say the schedule gets progressively harder in this league week after week and we know we have our work cut out for us against them."

Same goes for Saturday night.

The Lights and Griffins (14-7, 2-3) have waged some epic battles over the years as two of the most successful teams in the league. And despite having a new head coach in former assistant Adam Hiatt, the Griffins are right back to being a dominant force in the conference.

And a big reason why is 6-7 senior forward Ben Walker. He missed all of last season with an injury, and as a result, Westminster fell short of reaching the NAIA national tournament, which doesn't happen often.

But Walker is back healthy, averaging 13 points and six rebounds for a talented Griffin squad. The offensive catalyst for the Griffins is 6-4 junior Jake Orchard, who scores 17 points per game and shoots better than 45 percent from three. Orchard scored a career-high 30 points in the Griffins' biggest win of the season, a road win over defending Big Sky champion Northern Colorado back in November.

Westminster also returns talented scorers Tanner Gregory and A.J. Reilly among others, as the Griffins are averaging 75 points per game and are one of the top 3-point shooting teams in the league.

"Westminster is so disciplined on both ends of the floor," Huse said. "They are a team, with what they run, that you know you have to concentrate for 40 minutes on both ends, and if you have a lull on either end, they will always make you pay.

"Having Ben Walker back has been a big boost for them," he added. "He's beaten us up pretty badly a few times in the past. But with how talented and disciplined they are, you can't focus on one man out there. You have to work hard to defend them at every position on the floor and you have to stay focused. So again, we understand what we're up against, and that game will be a big test for our guys."

The LC/Westminster weekend is always a big one for the Lights, and with such a veteran team, Northern will certainly be up to the challenge against two more Frontier heavyweights. And as long as the Lights are focused in on each opponent, Huse knows his team will have a chance to close out January with a pair of big wins.

And closing out January is big considering the Lights will play five of their last seven regular season games on the road. Next Saturday, Northern has a rematch with UGF, then trips to Western and Tech before closing out their home schedule with RMC and Carroll at home Feb. 17-18.

"These are two very good opponents," Huse said. "And both games are going to be very physical, very intense and very hard-fought contests. Our focus is making sure we just come out and play Northern basketball in both games, which means executing on both ends, playing as hard as we can and making sure we're playing at a high level. That's what we're focused on. We just want to make sure we can leave the floor each night being able to say we played well and we played Northern basketball."

Tonight's game between the Lights and Warriors is set to tip at 8 in Havre. Saturday's game at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, between the MSU-N and Westminster will also tip at 8 p.m. Both games can be streamed live at [www.msun.edu](http://www.msun.edu).

**No. 13 MSU-Northern vs LC State and Westminster Tonight at 8 p.m.; Saturday at 8 p.m.  
MSU-Northern Fieldhouse**

**Radio:** 92.5 KPOX FM

**Streaming:** [www.msun.edu/athletics](http://www.msun.edu/athletics)

**Twitter:** [www.twitter/havredaily](http://www.twitter/havredaily)

**Lights Probable Starters**

G Shaun Tatara, Sr. 13 ppg

G LaVon Myers, 6-2, Sr. 11 ppg

G Devin Jackson, 6-1, Jr., 12 ppg

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

F Joe Simpson, 6-4, Sr., 9 ppg, 6 rpg