

Sweep: Lights close out Warriors, Griffins

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Reaching the halfway point of the Frontier Conference men's basketball season means the Montana State University-Northern Lights will have only two home games in the month of February. That's what made this weekend's home tilts with rivals Lewis-Clark State and Westminster College so big.

And knowing they are going to have to go out on the road, the No. 12 Lights finished the month of January in dramatic fashion. With a dominating win over LC State already in hand, the Lights waged an epic battle with the Griffins, coming out on top 53-50 Saturday night at a jam-packed and loud MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

Northern had to rally from seven points down in the second half in what was another instant classic with Westminster.

"We had to dig deep tonight," Northern senior Sean Kelly, who was key in the comeback said.

"And the crowd was a huge factor. The noise in here was unbelievable. The crowd really pushed us, and as a team, we just had to rely on each other to step up and get the job done."

The Griffins forged ahead by outscoring the Lights 8-3 at the start of the second half, and their defense didn't allow MSU-N to get outside looks at any time in the back-and-forth contest.

But trailing 46-39 with 10:11 to play, the Lights came alive in a myriad of ways.

First, it was redshirt-freshman Corbin Pearson, who would go on to make a pair of critical layups, then it was Shawn Tatarka, who had been struggling to find his jumper all night long. And finally it was Kelly who ignited the Northern faithful with an old-fashioned 3-point play. Tatarka's 3 pointer at the 7:57 mark pulled the Lights to within two, the Pearson tied the game with a bucket. With 4:20 to go, Kelly capped a 10-0 Lights' run with a bucket and a free throw off of an inbounds play and the Northern crowd roared from there. His three points gave the Lights a 49-46 lead.

"It was just one those games where we needed guys to make a play because we never really could get into a rhythm offensively," MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse said. "But I have, and this team has confidence in every single guy we put out there and we know that any one of them can step up and make a play. Tark did it, Corbin did it, Sean Kelly did it, Chris Brown, Joe Simpson, it was just a collection of guys making plays. And that's one of the things I love about this team. They all have so much trust and confidence in each other."

Despite the run, the Griffins weren't going quietly into the night however. After a pair of Devin Jackson free throws on an intentional foul made the score 51-46, the Griffins make a furious charge. Ben Walker and Jordan Hayter scored back-to-back baskets to make the score 51-50 with :07 left in the game. But Tatarka stepped up big again and calmly swished two foul shots to put the Lights back up three with :04 to go. Hayter got a good look at a game-tying three, but it rimmed out and the Lights survived to stay tied with UM-Western atop the Frontier standings.

"That was an intense game," Huse said. "Westminster came in here and played extremely well. Especially defensively. They really took us out of what we wanted to get offensively and you have to give them a lot of credit for that."

"But I thought our guys really showed a lot of maturity and poise down the stretch," he added. "And that's what we've come to expect from this group. Once again, they played like a team with a bunch of veteran guys and they didn't panic when things got out of control a little. Instead, they refocused and found ways to get the job done. I'm really proud of them for that."

The Lights and Griffins went at each other right from the start.

Jackson dropped in a three to give the Lights an early 9-4 edge, but that was just the start of the two teams exchanging blows. By the time the dust settled on a great first half, the Lights held a 30-29 lead.

"Westminster did a great job defending us," Kelly said. "And we knew our forwards were going to have to make some plays in the second half because they really took away a lot of our perimeter game. I think it just came down to staying composed and then executing. Then, a lot of heart and hustle. That's what this team is about. We're never going to quit playing hard, at any point in the game."

On a night in which Northern made just four trey's, and got out-rebounded 30-25, it was once again MSU-N's defense which came up big. The Lights forced the usually-disciplined Griffins into 17 turnovers and held them to just two three's. Tatarka led with 12 points, while Simpson scored 11 and grabbed seven rebounds. LaVon Myers had eight, including a crucial three in the second half, while Kelly scored five points, grabbed five rebounds and took a key charge as Westminster was trying to mount a furious comeback in the closing seconds.

The Griffins (3-4, 15-8) were led by Jake Orchard with 12 and Walker with 10 points and seven rebounds.

"It was a really well-played game by both teams," Huse said. "I thought in the first half, we just kept trading punches and neither team had control. That speaks volumes to how hard both teams played and how well both teams defended.

"I just think at the end of the day, our guys never quit and I'm proud of them for that," he added. "Our effort and intensity was tremendous for 40 minutes tonight. We had some great contributions, had some guys really step up and make big plays and we just really stayed the course. It was a great game and I'm really proud of another gutty effort by our entire team."

Lights stifle Warriors

The MSU-Northern men's basketball team is on an unprecedented roll defensively.

And nowhere was that more evident than Friday night at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse where the Lights shut down the Lewis-Clark State Warriors 53-39.

Northern has the top-ranked scoring defense in the NAIA, but the Warriors came to Havre with an offense averaging 80 points per game. They didn't get half of that against the Lights.

"I think we proved tonight that defense can completely win you games," Northern head coach Shawn Huse said. "Our offense wasn't clicking for sure, and when you score 53 points and make only one of 15 3-pointers, that usually results in a loss for a lot of teams. So I just can't give our guys enough credit for how hard they played and worked on defense tonight."

It was pretty clearly early on that Friday night's game was going to be a defensive slugfest. Through eight minutes of play, the Lights had just a 12-7 lead and Northern would go on to make no three's in the first 20 minutes – a first for MSU-N this season.

But the Lights continued to work on defense, and they found a cushion when two straight LC turnovers led to layups by Joe Simpson and Devin Jackson. Simpson also got a run-out dunk off of a LaVon Myers steal as the Lights led 31-16 at the break.

"We came in well-prepared for this game defensively," Simpson said. "Our game-plan was designed to contest their three-point shooters and we did that well tonight. I just think this team is so well prepared, we can handle any situation defensively we did that tonight."

The Lights hit their first and only triple of the night when Myers buried a bomb on the opening possession of the first half. That gave the Lights their largest lead of the night at 33-16, but the game was never really as close as the score ever indicated because the Lights were so commanding on defense.

LCSC cut the lead to 11 a couple of different times in the half, but Simpson, and fellow post Chris Brown were dominating on the inside, while Jackson scored a couple of nice drives to the hoop. And again, the Lights' defense never gave LCSC a chance to get back into the game.

"We have a lot of great 3-point shooters on this team," Simpson said. "So even when a team takes that away, they still make a difference because it opens up things on the inside and it's our job to convert those opportunities. I thought as a team, we did a great job of that tonight."

Simpson was the only player to reach double figures, as he had a big night, scoring 16 points and grabbing six boards. He was 7-for-11 from the field on a night when the Lights shot 44 percent despite making just one three. Northern also came up big on the boards, out-rebounding the taller Warriors 34-30. Myers finished the game with nine points and Jordan Harris gave the Lights a great boost off the bench. He scored eight points, all in the first half.

"I thought our forwards played great tonight," Huse said. "Give them all the game ball for sure. Our guards made some nice drives to the bucket too, but because of LC's defense, this was a night when we needed our forwards to produce and they all did that. All of our posts did a great job."

The Warriors didn't have a single player reach double digits, as Northern forced them into 16 turnovers, held them to an abysmal 31 percent from the floor and just 3-of-17 from three. Nick Fromm led the way for LCSC (2-5, 13-8) with seven points and four rebounds.

Friday night's win, coupled with Saturday's thriller against Westminster, propelled the Lights to 6-1 in the Frontier and 20-3 in overall. This season is now the seventh time the Light have reached 20 wins under Huse, and it's the fastest the Lights have gotten to 20 in over two decades.

"Just really proud of our guys for playing through a lot tonight," Huse said. "Our offense wasn't clicking and there were some things going on in the game that would cause some teams to lose their focus. But our guys did a great job of fighting through some tough stretches.

"These are two key wins for us," he added. "There's a lot of season left, but we always talk about defending our home court and we did that against two really good teams this weekend."

The Lights will head back out on the road for three straight games, starting with a trip to arch rival UGF next Saturday night in Great Falls.

Lights Notes: Northern has now beaten the Warriors six straight times in Havre. The Lights combined five three's this weekend were the lowest two-game total of the year. Simpson's thunderous dunk against LC State was his fourth straight game in which he's had at least one dunk on his home floor. The Lights out-rebounding the Warriors was a big feat considering LCSC came in beating Frontier teams on the boards by an average of nine per game. MSU-N will get rematches with the Griffins and Warriors on the road on the final weekend of the regular season.

Lights are 6-1 in the Frontier, 20-3 overall; Up next: at UGF Saturday

Lights 53, Lewis-Clark State 39

LCSC — Ray Stout 2-5 3-4 7, Darin Stewart 0-5 0-0 0, Jeray Key 1-3 0-0 2, Spencer Drury 2-3 2-2 7, PJ Bolte 2-7 0-0 5, Danny Marshall 4-5 0-0 8, Donte Archie 3-10 0-0 7, Nick Fromm 1-6 0-0 2, Joey Wayman 0-0 1-2 1, Sean Fischer 0-1 0-0 0, Chris Hepperly 0-1 0-0 0, Kale Schmidt 0-2 0-0 0. Totals 15-48 6-8 39.

MSU-N — David Maddock 1-4 0-0 2, Devin Jackson 2-10 0-0 4, Jordan Harris 4-6 0-0 8, Shaun Tatarka 1-6 2-2 4, LaVon Myers 3-8 2-2 9, Sean Kelly 1-1 0-0 2, Mike LaValley 0-0 0-0 0, Chris Brown 2-3 0-0 4, Joe Simpson 7-11 2-3 16, Ben Mitchell 2-4 0-0 4, Pat Jensen 0-0 0-0 0, Baird Henning 0-0 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 23-53 6-7 53.

Halftime: Northern 30-16. 3-pt FG: LCSC 3-17 (Stewart 0-4, Drury 1-2, Bolte 1-2, Archie 1-5, Fischer 0-1, Hepperly 0-1, Schmidt 0-2), MSU-N 1-15 (Maddock 0-2, Jackson 0-5, Tatarka 0-3, Myers 1-4, Mitchell 0-1). Rebounds: LCSC 30 (TEAM 7, Fromm 7), MSU-N 34 (Tatarka 6, Simpson 6). Fouls LCSC 11, MSU-N 14. Fouled out: none. Technical: Archie.

Lights 53, Westminster 50

WM — Tanner Gregory 1-4 0-0 2, Jordan Bjornberg 0-0 0-0 0, Ben Walker 5-7 0-0 10, Chris Cassity 1-2 0-0 3, Alex Drecksell 3-4 3-5 9, AJ Reilly 3-5 1-1 8, Jake Orchard 5-12 2-3 12, Drew Phillips 1-3 0-0 2, Brad Brown 0-0 0-0 0, Jordan Hayter 2-7 0-1 4. Totals 21-44 6-10 50.

MSU-N — David Maddock 1-2 0-0 2, Devin Jackson 1-8 4-5 7, Jordan Harris 0-0 0-0 0, Shaun Tatarka 4-10 3-3 12, LaVon Myers 3-8 0-0 8, Sean Kelly 2-3 1-1 5, Chris Brown 2-2 0-0 4, Joe Simpson 4-10 3-4 11, Ben Mitchell 0-1 0-0 0, Corbin Pearson 2-4 0-0 4. Totals 19-48 11-13 53.

Halftime: Northern 30-29. 3-pt FG: WM 2-8 (Cassity 1-1, Reilly 1-3, Orchard 0-2, Phillips 0-1, Hayter 0-1), MSU-N 4-11 (Jackson 1-4, Tatarka 1-5, Myers 2-2). Rebounds: WM 31 (Orchard 7), MSU-N 25 (Simpson 7). Fouls WM 14, MSU-N 16. Fouled out: none. Technical: MSU-N Lights Coach.