The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team has reached the halfway point of the 2012 Frontier Conference season. And the Lights have gotten to that mark in first place in the league standings.

However, Northern couldn’t have a tougher start to the final seven games of the season than what it faces Saturday night in Great Falls. The No. 10 Lights start the second half of their Frontier schedule with a trip to the McLaughlin Center Saturday night to take on a surging UGF team.

And if Saturday’s game is anything like the one the Lights and Argos played back on Jan. 7 in Havre, a game Northern held on to win 63-62, it should be another battle. UGF (3-4, 15-7) has won three of its last four games, and two weeks ago, the Argos swept Rocky Mountain College and Carroll College on the road.

“No question, UGF is playing at a really high level right now,” Northern head coach Shawn Huse, who’s Lights are ranked as high in the NAIA Poll as they’ve ever been said. “And with their athleticism and length, they are an extremely tough matchup for anybody. We had our hands full with them the first time we played them and we expect nothing less this time around.”

In the first meeting between the Lights and Argos, Northern had several different moments where it looked like the Lights had control of the game. But UGF’s defense and its size kept the Argos in the fight right to the end. Since that game, UGF has become the highest scoring team in the Frontier, averaging 78 points per outing. That fact sets up yet another game in which Northern’s defense, which allows a stingy 52 points per game, tops in the NAIA is facing a potent offense. Northern will have to contend with plenty of Argos firepower too, including the backcourt tandem of Marcel Towns (6-2) and Melvin Williams (6-2). Together, the duo averages 22 points per game and shoots better than 45 percent from the 3-point-line. Williams also leads the Frontier in assists at just over five per game.

But the scoring threats don’t end there. UGF also gets 11 points and eight rebounds per game from 6-9 center Ken Anderson, while guards Leon Sutton and Miguel Bocachica, along with 6-6 swingman James Holmes combine to average another 23 points per.

“They are so athletic and talented,” Huse said of the Argos. “So you have to be able to guard all of them. And that’s not easy to do. Then, somehow, you have to be able to come down and find ways to get buckets. Their athleticism and length makes them a good defensive team and they really put you in some tough spots with their defense.”

Indeed. UGF may be the top offensive team in the Frontier, but the Argos also get it done on defense. They allow just 64 points per game and are the top team in the Frontier at defending the 3-pointer. They also create turnovers which sets up their fast-paced transition game.

“They are really good at forcing turnovers,” Huse said. “They forced us into 15 in the first half alone at our house. So a big key for us is execution. We have to not only take care of the basketball, but we have to execute and take whatever they give us. Because they are good in both man and zone defense.”

Not only do the Lights need to execute their offense, but they will need to put the ball in the basket at a better clip Saturday night. In wins over Westminster and LC State this past weekend, the Lights scored...
just 53 points in each game. With a great MSU-N defense, it was good enough to win, but there’s no question the Lights want to produce more on the offensive end. In the last two games, Northern has combined to make just six 3-pointers, a season low for any two game stretch this year.

MSU-N is led on offense by Shaun Tatarka, who will likely be playing his last game in his native Great Falls. Tatarka averages 13 points per game, while LaVon Myers, who’s been playing really well of late, averages 11. Devin Jackson and Joe Simpson are each averaging 10 points per outing, while David Maddock gives the Lights eight off the bench. And Northern’s bench will be key. MSU-N and UGF are two of the deepest teams in the league, and the Lights’ bench, particularly Corbin Pearson, Chris Brown and Jordan Harris have all been playing at a high level and will need to again Saturday night.

“It’s a big game for both teams,” Huse said. “We understand we’re going to get UGF’s very best. We’ve gotten everybody’s best punch so far this season. We just have to go in there and make sure we play Northern basketball. We need to play hard and stay focused because this is another tough road game in the Frontier.”

Saturday night’s game will have big implications for both teams. The Argos are tied for second with four other teams in the Frontier, while Northern could pick up a game on UM-Western with a win in Great Falls. It’s especially big for the Lights, who play the next three games on the road, and five of their last seven away from the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse.

Saturday night’s game at McLaughlin Center in Great Falls is set to tip off at 7 p.m. The game can be heard locally on 92.5 KPQX FM or streamed live on the internet at http://www.msun.edu/athletics/.