

Frontier Notebook: Frontier reaches the stretch run

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The halfway point in the Frontier Conference men's and women's basketball seasons have come and gone. Now, the race is really on.

For the Montana State University-Northern men's and women's teams, the race is tightening in different ways.

The Lights are coming off only their second conference loss of the season, a 69-68 setback at the University of Great Falls last Saturday night. Leon Sutton's bank-shot 3-pointer was shocking and it could have done significant damage to the Lights' progress towards repeating as Frontier champions. However, perhaps just as shocking, the UM-Western Bulldogs were swept in dramatic fashion on the road last weekend. The Bulldogs lost an overtime heartbreaker at Westminster last Thursday night, then were soundly beaten at Lewis-Clark State on Saturday night. Prior to the win over Western, the Warriors had won just two conference games.

So what did the damage inflicted by the Argos and Warriors do? Really not much except tighten an already tight Frontier race.

Northern enters this weekend at 6-2 in league play, one half game ahead of Western is 6-3. The Griffins are alone in third at 5-4, while UGF and Carroll are 4-4. LC State got back into the mix with a sweep of Montana Tech. The Warriors are only one half game out of fourth place.

The women's side is different, but Northern's gutsy 59-55 win at UGF Saturday gave the Skylights the boost they needed. MSU-N is alone in fourth place at 4-4, while Westminster (8-1), LC State (7-2) and Rocky Mountain College (6-2) are threatening to make the title race a three-team affair.

The Skylights have a full game lead on Carroll, which is 3-5, while the UM-Western Bulldogs have fallen off the map. Western has lost five in a row to fall to 2-5 in league play.

She's Back

Six weeks turned out to be two for LC State star Jasmine Stohr. Stohr, the reigning Frontier Conference Player of Year missed two weeks with a knee injury but returned this past weekend to help LC easily sweep Western and Tech at home. Despite missing two weeks, Stohr is leading the Frontier in scoring at 19 points per game.

Bombs Away

It may not always look like it, but the MSU-Northern women are the best 3-point shooting team in the NAIA. The Skylights are shooting 38 percent from beyond the arc, which is tops in the Frontier and in the nation.

Northern also has two Top 15 shooters as well. Senior Laramie Schwenke is 13th in the NAIA and first in the Frontier in 3-point percentage. She shoots 41 percent from three, and she's also 13th in the country in 3-pointers made per game at just over three. Junior Nikki Tresch is 15th in the nation in three's at 40.4 percent. Tresch is also 15th in the NAIA in free-throw percentage at 84 percent, while Jordan Bruursema is 19th at 82 percent.

The Lights' Shaun Tatarka is also among the national leaders from long range. Tatarka ranks sixth in the NAIA in 3-pointers made with 70 and seventh in 3-pointers made per game. The Great Falls native is making just over three triples per night.

Huge Weekend

There's no doubt every week in the Frontier Conference is big. But this one really is.

Both Friday and Saturday night, Dillon will be the sight of a pair of monster men's matchups. First up is Friday's much-anticipated showdown between the No. 13 Lights and No. 24 Bulldogs. Northern beat Western 63-55 in Havre back on Jan. 15, but the Lights haven't won a game in Dillon in over two years. And because Friday's game will be so hyped up, the Bulldogs will need to guard against a Saturday night letdown against UGF. The Argos are the hottest team in the Frontier, having won four of their last five, and that includes two on the road. Westminster, which is also trying to keep pace has huge games at Rocky and Carroll this week.

On the women's side, Billings will be the place to be as the top three teams in the league battle for first place in a span of three days. On Thursday night, first-place Westminster comes into the Fortin Center to take on the surging Battlin' Bears, then RMC turns around and hosts second place LC State on Saturday night.