George Ferguson Column: A special group of Lights to be honored Saturday

George Ferguson
Thursday, February 16th, 2012

Anytime the Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team plays the Carroll College Fighting Saints, emotions always run high. It’s just that kind of rivalry.

Throw in a night when eight Northern seniors are playing their last regular season game at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, and emotions will likely be off the charts.

This weekend will mark the last time Northern seniors Shaun Tatarka, Joe Simpson, David Maddock, LaVon Myers, Chris Brown, Sean Kelly, Jordan Harris and Ben Mitchell will put on their white Northern jersey’s for a Frontier Conference regular season game.

Though the No. 22 Lights should be at home for at least one playoff game in March, senior night is always a special occasion – and this group of seniors is certainly special.

Together, the Northern senior class has put together an incredible two-year run. As a brand new team a year ago, the Lights went on a magic carpet ride which included a 20-win season, a Frontier Conference regular season co-championship, a Frontier postseason title and a trip to the NAIA national tournament.

Not too bad for a group which pretty much only met each other back in August of 2010.

Fast forward almost two full years and it’s hard to believe the ride is almost over.

And it’s a ride every Northern fan can not only appreciate, but take last memories from.

It’s also a ride that veteran Northern head coach Shawn Huse has enjoyed every step of the way.

“It’s been an absolute pleasure to have these guys in our program,” Huse said. “And not only have they had a lot of success on the basketball court, but they’ve done it off it as well. They are all leaders in classroom and in the community and that means as much more to our program than all the wins and all the national tournaments and everything else that comes with the success.

“And that’s what I’m so impressed with,” he added. “This group has had a lot of success, but it’s the way they’ve done it which has been so special to me.”

And this group of Lights have certainly touched the hearts of Northern fans up and down the Hi-Line. And Huse is right, it’s not just the winning which makes this group so special.

There’s Tatarka, who hails from Great Falls, but he might as well consider Havre his second home because I know the community has embraced him as one of their own. And Havre has done that will all the seniors, and in turn those seniors have embraced the community right back.

I can’t imagine coming to Havre from places like the Bay Area in California, or San Diego or just about anywhere else outside Montana, yet all of the Northern seniors have not only embraced Havre and Northern, which has been their home for the last two years, but they’ve relished their time here. They’ve become part of Havre, part of our everyday lives, they’ve become role models to the community and they’ve done it all with class and character and that’s why this group of seniors will never be forgotten by Northern fans.

And their play on the court won’t be forgotten either.
This last two years, the Lights have played a brand of basketball people love to see – unselfish, team basketball. Northern fans love to watch a team play gritty defense, they love to watch a team that has every player diving for loose ball. They love to watch a team share the basketball and find the open man, and this Northern team, under the guidance of Huse does all those things and more.

Yes, the 3-point barrages are fun to watch too. And yes, Joe Simpson and Sean Kelly’s high-flying dunks bring the house down, but I know, as a reporter and a fan of the game of basketball, I’ve truly appreciated watching this Northern team approach and play the game the right way and this senior class has done that right from the start.

“As good as these seniors have been individually, (many of them came here as the leading scorers from their other colleges), I think what’s been most impressive is how they’ve all become great team guys,” Huse said. “These guys are all tremendously unselfish and everything they do, they do for the betterment of the team. They do it all for the success of the team and the success of the program. As a coach, what more can you ask for than that.”

And under this Northern group, the program has gone to yet another level.

Under Huse, the Lights have always been good, but the success they’ve enjoyed this past two seasons has been truly remarkable.

Though there is a ways to go, Northern is on the hells of reaching the national tournament again this season. Earlier this season, the Lights tied the school record for the highest ranking ever when they reached No. 10 in the NAIA Poll. For much of the last two years, Northern has been the top scoring defense in all of NAIA men’s basketball, and the list goes on.

The accomplishments are staggering and a hefty bulk of those accomplishments are owned to the eight seniors who will be honored before Saturday night’s game against the Saints.

Tatarka, Simpson, Kelly, Myers, Mitchell, Harris, Maddock and Brown have all brought something very special to the Northern program and together, they’ve made the last two years highly memorable. And together, this group, even when gone from Havre and moving on with their lives, of which I have no doubt they’ll all be successful, they will never be forgotten.

“Win or lose, I’ve truly enjoyed coaching this group since day one,” Huse said. “They are great guys to coach, they are all great players and they are a lot of fun to be around. This is a special group and one I’ve enjoyed coaching every day since they’ve been here.”