Lights to be tested by RMC and Carroll

George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern men’s basketball team is in need of a win. There’s just no other way of saying it.

And the Lights are hoping that the friendly confines of the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse, and two nights of their emotional crowds is just what the doctor ordered to get them those wins.

The No. 22 Lights make their final home stand of the regular season, starting with tonight’s game against the Rocky Mountain College Battlin’ Bears at 8 p.m. Northern is back home at a special 7:30 p.m. start time to host rival Carroll College on what figures to be an emotional Saturday Senior Night.

MSU-N (6-4, 20-6) comes into this weekend with a three-game road losing streak, the first such streak the Lights have been on in over three years. Last weekend, Northern was unable to bounce back from its devastating loss at UGF two weeks ago, as the Lights lost at UM-Western and Montana Tech, surrendering first place in the Frontier Conference standings in the process.

In those two road games, Northern’s offense struggles, especially from the outside, and as good as Northern’s defense has been, which still leads the NAIA allowing just 57 points per game, the Lights just couldn’t overcome their shooting woes.

Now, with the final home games upon them, the Lights and head coach Shawn Huse know it’s time to turn things around.

“It’s that time of year,” Huse said. “Every game is big and these two games are certainly that. All we can do is focus on Rocky right now. We can’t worry about senior night or Carroll because we have a very good opponent coming in here on Friday night. So that’s our mind set.

“Obviously, we feel like we need to shoot the ball better and be more effective in our offense,” Huse added. “But more than that, our focus is on just playing well, just playing Northern basketball. That’s what we want to be able to say at the end of each night this weekend, that we played well for 40 minutes.”

Against the Bears (4-6, 11-14) in Billings last month, the Lights played perhaps their most complete game of the Frontier season. Northern shot the lights out literally from the outside and routed the host Bears 73-45. But Rocky still has a formidable group, led by 6-9 center Sergio Trocha, who averages 10 points, seven rebounds and two blocks, and leads the league in the latter two categories. In fact, the Bears’ front line, which also includes 6-9 Joel Barndt and 6-7 Matt Fogarty, who leads the team in scoring at 13 points per game, has the capability of giving MSU-N problems in the post. The Bears also have some good shooting guards including 6-2 Darryl Alexander and 5-9 point guard Anthony Carter among others.

And though the Lights garnered a lop-sided win in Billings, Huse says that has no bearing on tonight’s rematch.

“I look at Rocky and see a team that swept Westminster and LC State on the road, and no other Montana team in our conference has done that,” Huse said. “That’s all I need to know about them. They are as formidable as anybody in our league. And no matter what happened in the first game against them, we
fully expect them to come in ready to play and to give us a battle on our home floor. Our guys understand that they (Bears) are much better than their overall record and they know we’re going to have to play 40 good minutes of basketball against them.”

While the Lights have their work cut out for them tonight, no game on the Northern schedule is as anticipated as Saturday night’s showdown with the Saints (5-5, 12-10). For one, Saturday night is Senior Night, as Shaun Tatarka, Joe Simpson, LaVon Myers, David Maddock, Sean Kelly, Ben Mitchell, Jordan Harris and Chris Brown will all play their last regular season games in Havre.

But honoring the seniors aside, emotions always run high when Carroll comes to town, and Saturday’s game has even more intrigue as the Saints handed Northern its first league loss last month in Helena, a dramatic, come-from-behind, 53-51 overtime victory.

“I think our guys are pretty excited for that game,” Huse said. “Obviously, Carroll gave us our first conference loss and it’s a game we felt like we had plenty of chances to win. It’s also senior night and we expect to have a big crowd so there’s a lot of emotional factors that play into that game.

“But we really need to block all that out and focus on playing well for 40 minutes, because we understand that Carroll is a very good team. They beat us at their place and they have some very talented players. We need to treat that game like we would any other, which is that it’s just another very tough game in the Frontier Conference. We really have to keep or focus for 40 minutes against them and play Northern basketball. That’s the biggest key.”

It was high drama the first time the Lights and Saints hooked up. Carroll overcame a seven-point deficit to force overtime, then won on a running shot by Ben Cutler as time ticked down in OT. Now Carroll comes to Havre perhaps playing even better than it was last month. Andy Garland, Carroll’s dynamic 6-5 leader averages 18 points and seven rebounds per game, while Cutler scores 12 points and shoots better than 44 percent from three. Tony Dalton also averages nine points per for the Saints and a healthy Chase Godecke (6-8) and Chris McGrath (6-2) give the Saints even more weapons to choose from.

So once again the Lights, who are led in scoring by Tatarka at 13 points per game and Devin Jackson at 12 will need to improve offensively if they are to hold serve at home and stay in the conference title race. Simpson also averages 10 points and six rebound for the Lights and Myers as adding 10 points and four assists per night. As a team, Northern is averaging 71 points per night and shooting better than 37 percent from the three. Rocky scores 73 per game and gives up a league-worst 74 points per outing, while the Saints average 71 points per night and give up 72. Carroll is the top 3-point shooting team in the Frontier and is ranked 10th nationally from beyond the arc.

“These are most certainly big games,” Huse said. “This time of year, they always are when you’re trying to get to where we want to go. But right now, things like rankings and conference championships are the furthest thing from our minds. We just want to go out and play well both nights against two good teams. We want our seniors to enjoy these last two regular season home games and we want to walk away from this weekend feeling good about the way we played. That’s our focus right now and I know this time is excited to go out and do that this weekend.”

Tonight’s game between the Lights and RMC tips off at 8 at the MSU-Northern Fieldhouse. Saturday’s game between MSU-N and Carroll has a special start time of 7:30 p.m. with the Northern senior to be honored before the start of the game.

No. 22 MSU-Northern vs RMC and Carroll

Tonight at 8 p.m; Saturday at 7:30 p.m. MSU-Northern Fieldhouse
Radio: 92.5 KPQX FM
Streaming: www.msun.edu/athletics
Twitter: www.twitter/haverdaily
Lights Probable Starters
G Shaun Tatara, Sr. 13 ppg
G LaVon Myers, 6-2, Sr. 10 ppg
G Devin Jackson, 6-1, Jr., 11 ppg
F Sean Kelly, 6-6, Sr. 5 ppg
F Joe Simpson, 6-4, Sr., 10 ppg, 6 rpg