Huge game for Lights tonight
Playoff seeding on the line at Westminster, LC State
George Ferguson
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The Montana State University-Northern men's basketball team got its swagger back at home last weekend, winning exciting games against Rocky Mountain and Carroll College.

However, keeping that swagger on the last weekend of the 2012 Frontier Conference regular season won’t be easy.

There will be high stakes involved tonight when the No. 22 Lights (8-4, 22-6) visit the Westminster Griffins at 7:30 p.m. in Salt Lake City. And possibly even higher stakes when the Lights close the regular season at Lewis-Clark State Saturday night in Lewiston, Idaho.

Northern snapped a three-game losing streak with wins over the Bears and Saints at home last week. But the Lights are still a full game behind UM-Western for first in the Frontier heading into the last two games of the year. And what’s more concerning is, the Lights only have a one-game leads on the team awaiting them tonight, the Griffins. To top it all off, Northern has never won in Westminster’s gym.

So tonight’s showdown could very well determine if the Lights can still have shot at a regular season title, or on the other end of the spectrum, it could determine whether the Lights will even have home court advantage through the Frontier semifinals.

Never-the-less, MSU-N head coach Shawn Huse and the Lights aren’t concerned with standings and records tonight — only with playing well against the Griffins (7-5, 19-9). The Lights beat the Griffins 53-50 in a tight game last month in Havre. But since that time the Griffins have continued to play well.

“Always tough to go on the road and play these two teams,” Huse said. “Montana teams just don’t go into Westminster and win often. But we feel like we are capable of winning on the road. Our guys have played well on the road for two years now, so we feel like we always have a chance. But these last two games will certainly be a huge challenge for us.”

The Griffins are trying to chase down the Lights for second in the Frontier, and possibly sneak into the NAIA national tourney picture. Westminster has a great scorers in 6-4 Jake Orchard, who averages 17 points per game. Senior Ben Walker (6-7) will also be a handful for Northern post players Joe Simpson and Sean Kelly. But what the Lights can combat the inside game with is continued good shooting and a deep bench – two things that aided the Lights at home last weekend.

Northern broke out of a shooting slump against Rocky, then exploded for 18 3-pointers last Saturday against Carroll. Junior Devin Jackson averaged 20 points over the two games and made 11 three’s. LaVon Myers and David Maddock also shot the ball well at home a week ago, while Shaun Tatarka leads the Lights in scoring at 13 points per game and is sixth in the NAIA in 3-pointers made per game.

MSU-N’s bench will also play a factor this weekend. Jordan Harris and Corbin Pearson have give the Lights some outstanding bench minutes the last few weeks, as has fellow big men Chris Brown and Ben Mitchell. And with two tough road games, the Lights will need their bench.

“I feel like we’re getting contributions from every player who steps on the floor,” Myers said last weekend. “One through 15, every guy is stepping up and we have really good continuity right now.”
Northern will close the regular season Saturday night at LC State (5-7, 16-10). The Warriors gave the Lights a tough battle last month in Havre, but Northern prevailed by 10 points. Still, LCSC is loaded with big talent, with 6-6 junior P.J. Bolte averaging 15 points per game, which is fourth in the Frontier. The Warriors have a big front line, which will again test the Northern posts.

But the Lights have had success in recent years against the Warriors. Northern has beaten LCSC six straight times and three straight years in Idaho. If the Lights want to hang on to second, or perhaps jump back into first in the Frontier, a fourth straight win in Lewiston will be a must.

But again, Huse is much more concerned, first with tonight’s game, and secondly, on making sure his team plays well.

"We just need to continue to play Northern basketball," Huse said. "We need to go out and play hard and play focused. We want to walk away from this weekend being able to say we played well."

Tonight’s game between the Lights and Griffins will tip off at 7:30 p.m. in Salt Lake. Saturday night’s tilt between Northern and LC State begins at 8:30 p.m. M.S.T. Both games can be heard live in Havre on 92.5 KPQX FM.